



Spring 2015

# Liberation Through Domination: BDSM Culture and Submissive-Role Women

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# Liberation Through Domination: BDSM Culture and Submissive-Role Women

## **Abstract**

The alternative sexual practices of bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism (BDSM) are practiced by people all over the world. In this paper, I will examine the experiences of five submissive-role women in the Netherlands and five in south-central Pennsylvania, focusing specifically on how their involvement with the BDSM community and BDSM culture influences their self-perspective. I will begin my analysis by exploring anthropological perspectives of BDSM and their usefulness in studying sexual counterculture, followed by a consideration of feminist critiques of BDSM and societal barriers faced by women in the community. I will then address the norms and values of the BDSM community and their positive effects in the lives of submissive women, concluding with a comparative analysis of my two fieldsites and a discussion about improvements that can be made within the communities.

## **Keywords**

ethnography, sexuality, BDSM, gender, counter-culture

## **Disciplines**

Anthropology | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Women's Studies

## **Comments**

Anthropology Honors Thesis

Liberation Through Domination: BDSM Culture and Submissive-Role Women

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Senior Honors Thesis in Anthropology

Gettysburg College

Spring 2015

## **Introduction**

The alternative sexual practices of bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism (BDSM) are practiced by people all over the world. Whether or not the practitioners apply the BDSM acronym to their activities, a common thread exists in the form of constructed power play between two or more individuals. BDSM as a sexual realm is often misrepresented in mainstream depictions; it is presented and perceived as deviant, perverted, and violent in media and pornography consumed by the general public.<sup>i</sup> BDSM as a form of counter-culture lends itself to the formation of communities who enjoy it and who desire a space where they can be surrounded by like-minded individuals and free of the judgment they often face from the wider “vanilla”<sup>ii</sup> population.

In this paper, I will examine the experiences of five submissive-role women in the Netherlands and five in south-central Pennsylvania, focusing specifically on how their involvement with the BDSM community and BDSM culture influences their self-perspective. I have chosen to analyze BDSM through the lens of submissive-role women’s experiences to gain perspective on how they interact with BDSM culture on the ground. I use “submissive,” or the colloquially abbreviated “sub,” as catchall terms for various identities that denote a relinquishment of power in the course of a scene to a dominant partner. I will begin my analysis by exploring anthropological perspectives of BDSM and their usefulness in studying sexual counterculture, followed by a consideration of feminist critiques of BDSM and societal barriers faced by women in the community. I will then address the norms and values of the BDSM community and their positive effects in the lives of submissive women, concluding with a comparative analysis of my two fieldsites and a discussion about improvements that can be made within the communities.

## **The Anthropology of BDSM**

Anthropology is useful in exploring BDSM culture because it pursues an emic perspective of the lifestyle and can provide a holistic view of its social, political, and emotional implications on both collective and individual levels. An anthropological approach to BDSM culture can produce insights that counter societal stigma and misconceptions about submissive women while also allowing for critical analysis of the faults and detriments of the community. Anthropological works focused specifically on BDSM are scarce but available. Past research on BDSM existed primarily in the field of psychology with some variation (See Kraft-Ebbing 1886, 1912; Ellis 1927, 1938; Weinberg 1978; Weinberg and Falk 1980; Kamel 1980; Moser 1998; Graham Scott 1983). Anthropological research specifically on BDSM communities and culture is only recently visible, arising most notably in the recent publications of three full-length ethnographies.

*The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion: Deconstructing Sadomasochism* by Andrea Beckmann was the first of these ethnographies on BDSM. Beckmann approaches sadomasochism as a site for the “postmodernization of intimacy,” which takes in and transforms wider social and cultural phenomena and meanings (2009:1). Her focus on the lived, sadomasochistic body and its interplay with sexual ethics influenced my perspective of BDSM as a sexual lifestyle that does not and cannot exist in a vacuum. Rather, BDSM must be understood as both an agent and an object in its societal implications. Additionally, Beckmann discusses the “social censure” of BDSM (2009:73). This analysis spurred my interest in how submissive women may experience societal stigma.

*Playing On the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy* by Staci Newmahr (2011) was a second ethnography of BDSM published soon after Beckmann's work. Newmahr focuses on an anonymous American public-play community, and her discussion of the reciprocal societal influence of the performance of sexual deviance informed my understanding of community play parties as a space of subversion of broader social norms. Similarly to Beckmann, Newmahr theorizes of the sadomasochistic body as a "subject, object, and method" that allows for the reconstruction of meaning (2011:15). This concept informed my own eventual understanding of the submissive body as a site of personal transformation and growth.

The third and most recent ethnography of BDSM, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* by Margot Weiss (2011), is an in-depth look at the pansexual BDSM community in the San Francisco Bay Area. By presenting data gleaned through a combination of interviews and participant-observation, Weiss explicates the collective rules, regulations, and techniques typically employed by BDSM practitioners. Her critical analysis of BDSM in relation to consumerism and American imperialism provided insight into the flaws and deficits of the BDSM community, especially in terms of the negative societal implications of BDSM play. These criticisms assisted in evaluating BDSM culture and theorizing improvements that can be made within the community.

To conduct a successful study of BDSM culture, as with any anthropological study, cultural relativism is critical.<sup>iii</sup> Unconventional sexual practices may shock or disgust someone not familiar with kink, but an anthropologist must take care to remain as unbiased as possible and gain a emic perspective of BDSM culture without judgment or preconceptions. Zussman and Pierce note the importance of this in their study of shifts of consciousness during BDSM play, asserting that prior anthropological sources depict "religious practices of mutilation, flailing, or

sodomy among far-off peoples, imploring the reader or audience to invoke tolerance born of cultural relativism and sensitivity,” and demonstrate “hypocrisy of stigmatizing and diagnosing [BDSM] ecstatic practices as pathological while condoning similar practices among native peoples” (2008:34). The concept of cultural relativism that has become so central to the study of anthropology cannot be selectively applied.

The importance of cultural relativism becomes even more apparent if one considers the origins of the anthropological term “fetish.” Modern conceptions of fetish define it as an attraction to a specific object or material, part of the body, or physical characteristic. Fetish is present in the BDSM community, most visibly in the sexual connotations of leather and latex objects and clothing used by participants. However, fetishism has anthropological roots in ethnocentrism, imperialism, and racism. The term was originally applied to unfamiliar African religious practices and relics that were feared by European colonizers and represented “a misunderstanding, undervaluing, or denigration by one culture of the rituals and practices of another” (Gamman and Makinen 1994:16). It was also present in “the earliest fetish discourse concerned with witchcraft and the control of female sexuality” (Pietz 1985:6). The vestiges of these origins are still apparent in societal reception of fetishism, as sexual fetishes are repugnant to many who are unfamiliar with them. Being that female sexuality has been historically suppressed, fetishes become increasingly threatening when it is a woman who displays them.

## **Methodology**

It is difficult to ascertain the parameters of the BDSM communities informing my research, as they are entities representing a shared geographical location and common cultural experience that determines “insider” from “outsider” (Newmahr 2011:41). In the Netherlands,

the BDSM community was composed of practitioners from the neighboring cities of Amsterdam and Utrecht. The community in this location was more tangible due to the accessibility of BDSM events in the urban environment and numerous opportunities for members to meet one another. In Pennsylvania, the community is more diffuse and based upon shared experience and location as opposed to extensive familiarity between members.

According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), a community has four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Each of these elements is met in these two communities. Membership requires an interest in and at least rudimentary knowledge of BDSM practices; influence exists in the community's ability to put on events, and individual influence increases with experience level and number of years in the scene; the integration and fulfillment of needs is central to the BDSM community, which exists as a space for the enactment of sexual desires; and a shared emotional connection is forged by interaction, sexual and sensual involvement, and a collective interest in combatting damaging stereotypes of the community. However, these elements vary somewhat from one community to the next, and I hope to nuance them through the knowledge and insights I have gained from individual women involved in these communities.

My exploration of how BDSM culture is experienced by submissive-role women was done primarily through ten formal interviews. The ten women interviewed were between the ages of eighteen and fifty-three; half resided in south-central Pennsylvania, and half in the Amsterdam-Utrecht metropolitan area in the Netherlands. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling and snowball sampling<sup>iv</sup>. Three women volunteered for interviews based on previous, in-person interactions with me and knowledge of my research. One woman was referred to my study by a friend I had interviewed. Six women were recruited via Fetlife.com, an

online social media website for kink-oriented individuals. On this site, I created an account, put a short recruitment message on my page, and sent messages to several dozen submissive-identified women in the area asking them to read the message and contact me if they were willing to meet for an interview.<sup>v</sup>

Written consent was presented to the Dutch participants<sup>vi</sup>, and verbal consent was acquired from those in Pennsylvania.<sup>vii</sup> The switch from written to verbal consent was simply an increased safeguard to protect participants' identities. Interview locations were varied: a participant's office in an insurance firm, the outdoor terrace of a bar, a coffee shop, my college campus, the home of a participant. The idea behind these locations was to find a secure place where the participants felt comfortable discussing personal and occasionally explicit material. Participants were asked a standard set of questions, as well as any follow-up questions warranted by the topics covered in each interview.<sup>viii</sup> Interviews ran between one and two hours.

Some participant observation was carried out in Utrecht, where I volunteered at a local BDSM shop and community hub creating resource sheets and writing articles for their Facebook page. This participation was useful in networking within the BDSM community and learning the key concepts behind BDSM from my coworkers. My request to conduct participant observation at a local BDSM community hub for my research in Pennsylvania was denied by the anthropology department on the basis of safety concerns. I found this disappointing, as I agree with the perspective that "the anthropologist thinks too much and experiences too little" (Zussman and Pierce 2008:20). I believe my inability to carry out participant observation has prevented me from gaining some important experiential insights into the BDSM community in this area and limited my access to interview participants, but it also allowed me to focus more on

my interviews and gain a valuable perspective of local BDSM culture based on the individualized experiences of my five Pennsylvanian participants.

My ten participants came from varied backgrounds, lifestyles, and opinions. Each woman provided me with valuable insights and realizations about the culture of BDSM and I draw on all ten of these interviews in my analysis. Thus, I find it prudent to provide some information on each participants for my readers to reference back to as a participant is mentioned or quoted in the course of the paper.

- **Sanne** is a 41-year-old switch<sup>ix</sup> from North Holland who primarily serves in the submissive role. She has been involved in BDSM for eight or nine years in both casual and long-term relationships, and is currently in a committed relationship.
- **Lily** is an 18-year-old student from Utrecht with predominantly submissive tendencies. She began exploring BDSM two years ago and incorporates it in her monogamous relationship with her fiancé.
- **Mila** is a 23-year-old brat<sup>x</sup> from Utrecht. She occasionally switches roles but serves as a submissive the majority of the time. Mila is a model and became involved with BDSM after a bondage photo shoot several years ago. She is very active in her local community.
- **Lesley** is a 27-year-old switch. She prefers a submissive role but is interested in trying other roles as well. Lesley is an American immigrant and has lived in Amsterdam for a few years, where she mostly practices BDSM in intimate relationships settings.
- **Marije** is a 53-year-old submissive from Amsterdam. She has been involved in BDSM for eight years and was introduced to it by a partner. Marije has participated in BDSM in intimate and casual relationships alike and is active in the online BDSM community.
- **Carmen** is a 20-year-old submissive. She attends college in south-central Pennsylvania and is in a 24/7 BDSM relationship with her partner of the same age. Carmen recently discovered her love of BDSM through online research and is passionate about sharing reputable resources with others interested in exploring BDSM.
- **Heather** is a 31-year-old woman who identifies as a bottom.<sup>xi</sup> She is a single mother attending college in south-central Pennsylvania. Heather is very open to family and

friends about her interest in BDSM, proudly displaying a bumper sticker on her car and incorporating research on BDSM into her own schoolwork.

- **Ashley** is a 22-year-old submissive. She discovered BDSM recently and practices it in her relationship with her 50-year-old partner, whom she calls “Daddy” in reference to his protective and nurturing characteristics. Ashley recently graduated from a school in south-central Pennsylvania and is pursuing a graduate degree at the same institution.
- **Kate** is a 33-year-old submissive with notable experience in dominant roles. She has been involved in BDSM for four years and engages in BDSM with her fiancé and some of their friends. She works and attends school in south-central Pennsylvania.
- **Ruby** is a 29-year-old submissive woman from south-central Pennsylvania. She is a working single mother. Over the past eight years, she has practiced BDSM with male partners in past relationships and with close friends, some of whom she is responsible for bringing into the lifestyle.

### **The “Bad Feminist” Paradox**

My first topic of conversation with my participants was the simple question of “what does ‘submissive’ mean to you?” Even this common identity yielded variations among individuals. After setting her up with a blueberry bagel and a cup of tea, Ashley and I settled down in my dining room to begin the interview. Perky, fresh-faced, and seemingly excited to have someone her age interested in hearing what she had to say about the world of BDSM, Ashley delved into the complexities of her submissive identity.

I think one interesting thing about it is people think that if you say that you’re one thing, that’s very boxed, and that’s not how it is...I categorize myself as submissive, but I’m also, depending on how I am that night, I want to be a slave, or I want to be a baby. So that’s kind of – it changes. Again, how you characterize it, it’s really different. Because I might say “I’m submissive,” and someone

might look at me and say “That’s not how I categorize my submissive experience.” It’s very personal; it’s about how you feel about the term. [Interview with Ashley, 22, PA, 1/14/15]

Evidently, there are contentions even within the BDSM community about what constitutes a submissive identity. Ashley’s explanation of her own identity demonstrated the ambiguities produced by such an umbrella term. Any involvement in BDSM “is simultaneously an orientation or identity, a craft, a practice, and a community or social scene” (Weiss 2011:10). Labels are complex and deeply individualized. However, like Ashley, all of my participants emphasized the importance of their identity matching their feelings on a personal level, although some women felt their identity was more fluid than others.

Despite the significant volume of work positing the natural origins of submissive behavior<sup>xii</sup>, submissive women often find themselves criticized for their desires – especially by the feminist community. The anthology *Against Sadomasochism* (1982) was a direct affront on BDSM that shamed submissive women and implied that they hold back the feminist movement. In one essay, Bat-Ami Bar On argues “the eroticization of violence or domination, and of pain or powerlessness, is at the core of sadomasochism,” and likens BDSM acts to rape (1982:75). This is a problematic critique, as it likens nonconsensual sexual assault to consensually and carefully negotiated sexual practices; it is dismissing and minimizing of nonconsensual traumas by comparing them to presumably consensual and pleasurable interactions between partners. However, this viewpoint that sex cannot be violent and violence cannot be sex (MacKinnon 1989; Russell 1989) is a common trend among radical feminist critics of BDSM, though actual submissive women express their disagreement, asserting that “nonconsensual is so fundamentally destructive and horrifying, and consensual in my life is so fundamentally

constructive and wonderful that it's not a comfortable connection to draw" (Weiss 2011:227). Newmahr also backs this in her ethnography, stating "there is, as SM researchers and practitioners have long insisted, an important distinction between victimization and consensual engagement in performances of victimization" (2009:114). Thus, it is important not to conflate sexual assault with consensual non-consent, and fantasy-fulfilling activities with genuine beliefs and desires.

I have a friend who has a 1950s household fetish. She likes to cook and clean and stay in the house and her partner works. But she gets angry when people have 1950s attitudes. It is her choice and it is not okay unless it is. It's all about the choice. She has a right to change her mind. Choice is what makes it all possible.

[Interview with Mila, 23, NL, 5/3/14]

Although she considered herself submissive, Mila was a figure that commanded respect. Six feet tall with red hair and an impressive wardrobe of black leather, she had me meet her at a hip and bluesy bar for our interview. She considered herself a staunch feminist, so her acceptance of 1950s household play was at first surprising. Seeing as agency and choice are central tenets of feminist ideology, a strong argument can be made that feminism and BDSM – even BDSM based on constructed gendered inequalities – can actually be quite compatible. BDSM encourages women to pursue their sexual interests in any way they like, as long as it is physically and mentally safe and all involved can give informed consent. This encouragement was reflected in my interviews.

To me, BDSM is really exploring myself. . .Feminism is the same.  
Its about me empowering myself. . . I think I kind of keep them

separate, because if I think about it too much I start to get really confused. . .But I am really aware of it and I am really conscious of it, but I don't really talk about it that much because that's always people's first question: "Aren't you a feminist? You aren't supposed to be doing that!" [Interview with Lesley, 27, NL, 5/5/14]

Lesley's desire to dodge patronizing comments about her validity as a feminist was evident through the relative secrecy in which she practiced BDSM. I met Lesley early in my semester in the Netherlands, but did not find out she was involved in the local BDSM scene until it was mentioned to me by a friend, who recommended I ask her for an interview. Having moved to Amsterdam from the United States, Lesley was educated in feminist and gender studies and had seemingly clicked with the liberal climate of the city. However, even she was subject to unprompted admonitions for her sexual preferences.

Despite the majority of my informants feeling little self-originating conflict over the compatibility of feminism with their submissive desires, several cited external criticism as a cause of internalized shame. Ashley shared this sentiment in her interview, saying "sometimes I think, these are the desires I have, and I know I don't feel bad about them, but I feel guilty because I'm told to feel guilty about it. . .that causes a lot of discomfort or cognitive dissonance for women in the community" (Interview with Ashley, 22, PA, 1/14/15). Being met with a culture of disapproval from the feminist community and beyond is detrimental to submissive women, who are essentially faced with the decision of continuing to be shamed for liking BDSM or suppressing their desires to placate critics. Encouraging the latter removes the agency and choice women have in freely pursuing their sexual interests in a healthy way.

Having acknowledged the attacks on agency and sexual exploration that occasionally appear outside the BDSM community, it becomes crucial to analyze the ways in which social norms inside the BDSM community can serve as a foil. Along with encouraging healthy sexual exploration, BDSM often serves to challenge and confront oppressive and repressive aspects of mainstream culture. A BDSM scene “mirrors, mocks, relives, and reviles the everyday imbalances of what we tend to call the ‘dominant’ culture” (Zussman and Pierce 2008:16), can “simultaneously draw on and disavow their social referents” (Weiss 2011:17), and generally reflect real-life power imbalances in a detached way or in the form of social commentary and transgression. To highlight the masochistic elements of clown entrée and other subversive performances, Kenneth Little points out the ability to “emphasize grotesque inversions of hierarchical power relations and directly assault the icons of social respectability. . .serv[ing] as idioms for thinking about the real world” (1993:119). This evidences how BDSM scenes can be a form of subversive performance; by reenacting and exaggerating inequalities that are present in daily life, BDSM play can call attention to the inherent power imbalances created by mainstream cultural norms. Weiss acknowledges this as well in her ethnography, citing the example of an African-American woman who enjoyed master-slave race play despite being criticized for perpetuating racist behavior. Weiss interrogates the motivations of this woman’s involvement in race play, asserting that the discomfort felt by onlookers “can, she hopes, force an audience to become emotionally involved in a social, political, and collective way; can allow the disruptive forces of the social to erupt in the privatized scene” (2011:218). This use of a race play scene to stimulate critical thought about social justice demonstrates how BDSM can manifest as subversive performance.

## **Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones, But Whips and Chains Can Get Me Fired**

Given a lacking mainstream understanding of BDSM, it is no surprise that stigma surrounding the lifestyle has remained strong. The BDSM lifestyle has seen increased representation as of late, but it is not always accurate. Analyses of mainstream BDSM commercial pornography conclude it is not “well-produced or informative,” and BDSM veterans urge those with an interest in BDSM to inform themselves through “reading sex manuals, watching erotic videos, taking massage classes, and embarking on road trips to fetish shops” (Califia 2000:179, 239).<sup>xiii</sup> Meanwhile, in the world of fiction, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series by E.L. James has exploded in popularity. The novel has a female protagonist named Anastasia, who comes to be interested in BDSM after being introduced to it by her rich and handsome partner, Christian. This book series sold millions of copies, drastically increased BDSM visibility, and revealed to countless women their own interest in sadomasochism; however, the overarching message was that Christian’s affinity for BDSM was the result of being psychologically damaged by adolescent sexual abuse, and the series concluded with his renouncement of the BDSM lifestyle in order to marry Anastasia. This pathologizing view, combined with author’s apparent failure to do any research into even the most basic safety precautions needed to prevent serious injury during play, made for a popular representation of BDSM that did not quite hit the mark.

In the absence of widely accessible and informative materials on BDSM, a stigma remains for those who practice it. Gayle Rubin addresses this stigma as it pertains to all individuals considered to be sexually deviant. She argues that modern Western society functions based on a hierarchy of sexual value. Heterosexual, marital, reproductive couples reign, while transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, and sex workers are at the bottom. Those

with high sexual value are rewarded with “certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits,” while “extreme and punitive stigma maintains some sexual behaviours as low status and is an effective sanction against those who engage in them” (Rubin 1984:151). This stigma is encountered by many in the scene and has very real effects on their lives.

In the Netherlands, individuals are very unlikely to run into legal trouble for their involvement in BDSM. However, Mila shared with me two notable exceptions. One, BDSM play parties could be considered activities involving prostitution. Sex work is legal but regulated in the Netherlands, and all activities involving prostitution require municipal licensing, a lack of which could land the partygoers in legal trouble. Two, safety regulations sanctioned by the Fire Marshall ban any bondage that takes the longer than thirty seconds to undo. I was unable to confirm either of these exceptions or find instances that resulted in legal disputes, but they appeared to be considered valid concerns in the Dutch BDSM community, serving almost as a Foucaultian panopticon for community regulation.

In comparison with Dutch participants, the Pennsylvanian women I interviewed seemed more troubled by stigmatization. Fear of the punitive consequences of stigma result in an individual modifying the way they move through the world to avoid being identified as part of a stigmatized group (Goffman 1963). Conscious pressure from stigma affects how BDSM participants go about their daily lives and engage with those around them. Ashley, seeking to selectively hide her involvement in BDSM, told her father she was travelling to Gettysburg to interview with me for my research on women leaders at universities. Kate felt similar pressure to hide her lifestyle from her parents, among other concerns.

It affects your job. Most of the time if your boss finds out that you're in the lifestyle, you could get fired from it. Which to me makes no sense, because what you do in your home life, as long as you're not bringing it into work and dealing with it at work, it's not a big deal.

[Interview with Kate, 33, PA, 1/16/15]

Kate was the only participant I interviewed at a private residence. Although I planned with a friend to ensure my safety, I was still rattled when my GPS announced that I had arrived at my destination and I looked out the window to find a small trailer home with a pit bull chained outside. My own prejudice was soon revealed when I was welcomed in by the very kind and considerate Kate, who offered me a glass of chocolate milk and was not threatening in the slightest. She was, however, economically disadvantaged, and her concerns over losing her job were undoubtedly affected by her financial situation. This fear was not unfounded; in 2001, “the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF) reported that it responded to 461 complaints regarding child custody or divorce proceedings in which SM was an issue, and 392 cases of job discrimination based on SM practices” (Weiss 2011:69). Although this study is somewhat outdated, anti-discrimination laws do not protect private sexual practices. Thus, public knowledge of involvement in BDSM activities can leave a person vulnerable to job termination and can be used against them in custody battles. Kate referred me to her friend Ruby for an interview, and I found she shared some similar concerns.

Ruby and I planned to meet at a café in her town, and after a series of confused texts to try and locate each other, a cheerful woman with a warm voice and a dazzling smile joined me at my table. I learned that Ruby is a nurse and a single mother, and although she seemed less

concerned than some of the other women about her involvement in the lifestyle becoming public, she still had some concerns.

For the most part, I'm pretty open. I mean, it's not something I advertise. Like, the other PTO moms don't know about it, we don't sit at soccer practice and talk about it. But my family knows, my friends know – my close friends. I don't hide it. . .my biggest worry would be my ex-husband, if he wanted to use that in a custody thing, he could. But he also has dabbled himself, so I don't think he would.

[Interview with Ruby, 29, PA, 1/28/15]

Along with potential discrimination in employment and custody cases, getting “outed” as a BDSM practitioner can have other legal affects. According to the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (2010), several Americans involved in consensual BDSM have found themselves tangled in court disputes and general confusion over the legality of their actions (See *Commonwealth v. Appleby*, 402 N.E.2d 1052 [Mass. 1980]; *State v. Jovanovic*, 263 A.D.2d 182 [N.Y. 1999]; *State v. Bvocik*, 781 N.W.2d 719 [Wisc. App. 2010]). This is largely due to grey areas in laws dealing with abuse, assault, kidnapping, or other activities for which BDSM could potentially be construed.

To safeguard against the risks associated with BDSM stigma, a common practice in kink communities is the assumption of a pseudonym. Most individuals adopt “scene names” to protect their true identities, especially if they have online profiles and pictures. This creates an interesting situation where individuals can become very well known within their local community, but no one actually knows their real name. I only know a few of my informants' actual names; most went by a fake name or did not share their names with me at all. The more

active a person is in their local BDSM community and the larger online presence they have, the more likely they are to have a pseudonym. Very visible members of the community – for example, those who teach classes or offer professional sexual services – often adopt an entirely unique BDSM persona. This practice offers extra protection and builds on the theatrical, self-constructed nature of BDSM.

### **Safe, Sane, and Consensual: The Hardcore Values of the BDSM Community**

Efforts to combat the stigma of BDSM must begin first with correcting misrepresentations of the community. As with any group, the BDSM community has a collective sense of the fundamental values underlying their lifestyle. These values are summed up as “Safe, Sane, and Consensual,” the oft-repeated motto of the community at large. Safety is a huge concern; not surprising, considering the danger inherent in BDSM activities. Thus, familiarizing oneself with the proper safety practices expected of all who participate in the lifestyle is the first step in joining the community. “Learning to play is an integral part of becoming” a BDSM participant, and “the community as a whole shares responsibility for recruitment, education, and supervision of SM play. . .the emphasis on safety is a source of pride and of status” (Newmahr 2009:84-86). This expectation was reflected in both of the communities I studied, and many resources are available to individuals interested in learning how to engage in BDSM safely.

There’s an actual community where people ask each other questions.

It’s a lot of beginners posting questions or specific things about their relationship. . .Every once in a while it’ll be a sub being like, “Hey, my dom did this thing and I’m not so sure about it,” and everyone

will be like “Yeah, no, that’s not BDSM, that’s abuse, please leave that person. [Interview with Carmen, 20, PA, 12/4/14]

Carmen is a young and spunky college student who wore an inconspicuous “day collar” necklace to symbolize her pervasive Dom/sub relationship with her boyfriend. Although she had no qualms about discussing her involvement in BDSM with me in earshot of several other people in a restaurant, she was not very open about it with her friends on campus. She explained that she knew few others who were familiar with the lifestyle, and thus received her BDSM education on the internet, where she found a consistent emphasis on safety. Safety is a crucial concern for the community because it is a large part of what separates BDSM from abuse. Failing to play safely with a partner puts them at risk of serious injury or death and this endangerment is unacceptable in the community.

Many BDSM clubs or play venues have individuals designated to monitor the safety of partygoers.<sup>xiv</sup> Ruby described these individuals to me in the context of a popular play area for the BDSM community in south-central Pennsylvania, explaining that “they dress in neon yellow, so they stick out, you know them right away. And if a scene’s getting pretty intense, they kind of hang out, they just watch. . .it’s all about safety” (Interview with Ruby, 29, PA, 1/28/15). She noted that most parties and venues have attendees sign consent forms before events, agreeing to abide by the group’s safety procedures. These rules generally prohibit alcohol and drug use, require the use of condoms and other protective barriers and the prompt cleanup of bodily fluids, and demand freely and enthusiastically given consent for all interactions.

Safety also becomes of special importance for individuals getting to know a potential partner online. Each one of my informants had specific precautions she took and advised others to take when meeting new partners.

When I went to this past event and at the dinner, this one guy offered to be my safe call. . . say I found someone on Fet[life.com], I like this person and I want to meet with them, but you're kind of screwed if you go alone and you don't know them, so you have a safe call, which is a person who you tell exactly where you're going, the name of the person, the address, the closest police station, all that information. And then you say, "If I don't call you or text you by 8 o'clock or 10 o'clock with these exact words, then call please. And that's just a way that someone else in the community is looking out for you and your safety. [Interview with Ashley, 22, PA, 1/14/15]

Ruby advocated for a similar procedure, chastising me for going to interview Kate on my own. This was a reasonable critique, and I learned quickly why she found safety so important. A few years back, she became interested in a man she had met online, but wanted to be safe about getting to know him. She asked her friend for help, and he invited her to an event BDSM meet-up event. When the man she had been talking to online showed up at the event, her friend pointed him out and let her decide on her own if she wanted to go up and introduce herself.

I was like "Oh my God." He just immediately gave you this creepy vibe. . .he came up beside me and said "Why don't you come over to my van for a minute?" And I was like "No, that's okay!" [laughs] And then [my friend] must have saw that and he came over right away and started talking to him, and then he quickly made his leave, and he of course drove a creepy rape van. Everything that you should

be afraid of. That was terrible, he was so creepy. [Interview with Ruby, 29, PA, 1/28/15]

Ruby followed up this story by giving me a quick and much appreciated lesson in self-defense: “The base of your hand, under the nose, in and up. . .or fingers in the corner of their eyes!” The emphasis on safety exists for a reason, as some of the members of the community can be just as dangerous as unsafe play.

Despite dangers originating from within the group, both communities I studied seemed to have a good system of self-regulation and internal policing, especially in protection of submissive women in the scene. Many times, women can find out about a potential partner before even meeting them by asking around the community. “Red-flagging” is a common practice to differentiate “individuals who are inconsiderate, insensitive, prone to playing when they are intoxicated, or unsafe for other reasons,” which has “controlled access to the community so that ‘the abusive idiot’ wouldn’t be let in the door” (Califia 2000:172). Ruby attested to this behavior, explaining red-flagging as “mostly by word of mouth. . .if it was known in the community that someone was unsafe or just a creeper, they would make it known. They would definitely be like, ‘Hey, watch out for this person’” (Interview, 29, PA, 1/28/15). This tendency to look out for one another, especially for the more vulnerable members of the community, builds a sense of closeness while also preventing potentially dangerous individuals from infiltrating the group.

Another standard safety practice was the establishment of safe words. A safe word is a designated word that will only be spoken if one of the participants wants to stop a scene. The most common safe word system referenced by my informants was the “stoplight system.” In this framework, saying “red” alerts one’s partner that the scene needs to stop; usually this occurs if a

person becomes uncomfortable or injured. Saying “yellow” indicates a person wants their partner to slow down or switch to a different activity. “Green” conveys that a person is fine with the progression of the scene and would like it to continue, and is usually used in response to the partner checking in with the person to see if everything is okay. The simplicity, clarity, and universality of this system makes it a popular choice in the community and serves an important purpose of protecting submissives.

I interviewed Marije at her workplace, an insurance firm on the outskirts of Amsterdam not far from where my host family lived. The interior of the building was sleek and elegant, and she retrieved me from the lobby in her designer pantsuit to bring me up to her office, where she informed me of her mid-life discovery of BDSM, shared with me her favorite aspects of the submissive role, and provided me with some gentle, maternal warnings about BDSM safety.

You can't handle the scene – that's why you trust your dominant with your life. It's a dangerous situation because you don't know what's happening anymore, because you're just in heaven. Spaced out. I never took pills or drugs or anything, but I imagine you could compare the feeling. Everything is okay. You're just happy, enjoying. And it's even difficult for your dominant to reach you, talking or touching. So that puts a big, big responsibility with the person who is your play partner at that moment. [Interview with Marije, 53, NL, 5/5/14]

What Marije describes here is what I came to learn is called “subspace.” Subspace is a universally acknowledged shift of consciousness among submissives. Submissives may enter subspace during intense scenes and consequently lose touch with what is going on around them.

Safe words must be simple and easy to remember because it can often become difficult for a sub to think and respond effectively. Even then, there are dangers, as I learned in my first interview. I interviewed Sanne via Skype, as she was visiting with her “sweetheart” in Belgium at the time but still eager to give me an informative first look at the submissive experience.

I explored different mind states with people. It is possible in different scenes to go so far into the submissive headspace that you lose communication. It is not that there wasn't a safe word, but I would not have been capable of communication. . .you have to trust your partner to make the best decisions if you cannot communicate in subspace. [Interview with Sanne, 41, NL, 5/1/14]

Evidently, subspace poses some danger in limiting the consciousness and communication skills of submissives. This is where the “sane” in “Safe, Sane, and Consensual” becomes relevant. In the context of the BDSM community, “‘sane’ is understood as having full awareness of the risks involved; activities are considered sane when participants are informed of the risks and in full control of their faculties when making the decision to take them” (Newmahr 2009:147). On one hand, subspace thrusts the sanity of the submissive into a grey area; they are certainly not in full control of their faculties. However, BDSM scenes are expected to be fully negotiated prior to beginning, so it is during this pre-scene negotiation that the requirement for aware and informed consent comes in. As long as an individual is in a fully functional state of mind when they make the decision to participate in a scene and accept all the risks it entails – including the possibility of entering subspace – the interaction can be considered sane. I anticipated that this potential loss of control in subspace would be frightening for my informants, but I actually found it was

commonly seen as something desirable – a state of existence women sought to attain again and again.

Marije’s likening of subspace to the effects of euphoric drugs must have been accurate, as I heard the same sentiment many times in my interviews.

**Lisa:** Can you talk about subspace and what that feels like?

**Ruby:** [Laughs] Well, I don’t – it’s – the only thing I can think of is if you’ve ever done drugs, and you just feel so relaxed, and you just feel so content and like everything’s okay. You just feel fabulous.

**Lisa:** That’s a good alternative to drugs, then.

**Ruby:** It is! An endorphin rush, definitely. It’s just – I mean, it definitely is, because you figure every nerve ending is stimulated, and it’s – I can’t even explain!

**Lisa:** I think your smile is saying a lot.

**Ruby:** It’s – I mean, it’s – yeah. And that in itself is addicting. It’s amazing. [Interview with Ruby, 29, PA, 1/28/15]

While the euphoric effects of subspace were repeatedly emphasized, so were the risks. An individual in subspace is generally disassociated from their surroundings and must be eased out of this state by their partner at the conclusion of the scene. This concluding interaction is called “aftercare.” Aftercare can take on a variety of forms depending on the preference of the individual receiving it.

Say there’s a really intense scene, like a degrading scene where he tells me I’m a piece of shit, you know what I mean? Or that I did

something wrong, I hadn't seen him for a week or whatever, and he decided for every hour I was gone he would beat me once with a paddle. . but then right after, he would say "You're so beautiful, I love you the way you are," things like that, just very sweet things that build up your confidence. . .he always cuddles me and tells me how beautiful I am and we have a lot of sweet talk afterwards.

[Interview with Ashley, 22, PA, 1/14/15]

Ashley's affinity for aftercare in the form of cuddling is common, though other women shared that they also enjoy drinking hot tea, taking baths, getting massages, and wrapping up in blankets and sleeping as aftercare. Regardless of the activity, "it is crucial that all who participated in the scene participate in the aftercare, because you need to follow it through from beginning to end" (Interview with Lesley, 27, NL, 5/5/14). Aftercare is an important step in the safety process for both the emotional and physical wellbeing of the submissive; it provides an opportunity to balance out emotions and endorphin levels and care for any bruises or cuts sustained during the scene.

With the "safe" and "sane" addressed, we now turn to the concept of "consent." This is perhaps the most central theme underlying BDSM; I often heard the sentiment that what is not consensual is not BDSM. Thus, "the defining characteristic of BDSM is the consensual exchange of power in an erotic context" (Buenting 2003:40). Consent neutralizes the actions that take place in BDSM encounters; behavior that would be considered violent or abusive in another context becomes acceptable because it is done in a consensual context. It is in consent that many submissive women find empowerment.

You are the boss. When you have a respectful dominant, the dominant will stop when you say ‘stop.’ So who’s the boss? It’s the sub. It does give me some powerful feelings – I get what I want, and I also give pleasure. So it's always a two-way thing. . .in the end, the sub does have power. I am sure. One day the sub can say, “I’m out. I’m leaving.” [Interview with Marije, 53, NL, 5/5/14]

Despite the constructed illusion of power imbalance, the submissive partner still maintains control in the scene by virtue of the fact that their consent dictates what can and cannot happen. This power is present in scene negotiation, but can also arise in the middle of play, “through verbal and vocal responses. . .tops, almost without exception, say that the reaction of the bottom is a prime motivation and objective” in navigating a scene (Newmahr 2011:77). A good dominant will never make their submissive do something they do not want to do. Essentially, it is up to the sub to decide what they are and are not okay doing with their partner.

I know that it seems, like from the outside or on the superficial level, it seems like there might be a conflict between the two, but I don't really think there is. Like my boyfriend says, “I’m not the dominant in our relationship because I’m the guy, I’m the dominant in the relationship because those are the desires I have, and they happen to match the desires you have, and we like each other.” And I’m not submissive because I’m female, I’m submissive because I have those desires in a particular context that give me fulfillment on many levels. [Interview with Sanne, 41, NL, 5/1/14]

Consent was consistently cited as the main mediator between submissive play and female empowerment for the women I interviewed who identified strongly as both submissive and feminist. This consent proved to themselves and others that BDSM was not disempowering, but rather an active choice in pursuit of personal fulfillment. Consent is held in such high esteem throughout the BDSM community, and there is a zero tolerance policy for violating standards of consent.

### **Love In the Time of Nipple Torture: The Benefits of BDSM Relationships**

The values and practices of the BDSM community – safety and consent, communication and negotiation, respect – are all designed to encourage healthy partner interactions. Given that the majority of my informants incorporated BDSM into current or previous long-term relationships, I found it necessary to interrogate the ways in which they have found BDSM culture to positively influence these relationships. My informants generally believed a BDSM lifestyle was conducive to healthy relationships and had seen profound benefits within their own partnerships. Communication is an unavoidable part of safe, sane, and consensual BDSM; partners have no choice but to talk to each other, sharing desires, fantasies, and limits, negotiating a scene beforehand, and debriefing it afterwards.

You both have to agree on the things you do, because if one doesn't agree, then it's not good. I know he doesn't want to inflict pain on me when I don't want it. So you have to talk about it. Communication is so important. We talk about it so much, not only about what we're going to do at the time, but things we want to do, things we want to explore, our fantasies. That's nice – to talk about

the things you don't usually talk about with someone else.

[Interview with Lily, 18, NL, 5/6/14]

I was surprised to hear Lily had a fiancé, as she was only eighteen years old and in her first year of university. As eager to tell me about her love for BDSM as she was to dig for details about my own personal life, Lily was friendly, likeable, and notably mature for her age. Lily attributed the success of her relationship with her fiancé partly to their excellent communication skills, which she notes were honed by the extensive discussion required by their sexual practices. Often, individuals interested in exploring BDSM will fill out surveys or checklists to learn more about their own desires and the desires of their partner. These resources lay out every sexual and sensual act imaginable, and couples are encouraged to go through the list and discuss at length their results and compatibility. Although this could occur in any relationship, it is a process typically practiced in the context of a BDSM relationship, as “empathy is more crucial in consensual ‘SM’ than in ‘ordinary sex’ as consensual ‘SM’ depends directly on the communication between the partners as it otherwise would not work out” (Beckmann 2009:89). This open and immediate communication of fantasies and desires can bode well for a relationship; this is at least true for Carmen, who told me, “I know that we definitely have healthy relationship practices and he’s told me that this is the healthiest relationship he’s been in because we have such open communication and he hadn’t had that with other partners” (Interview, 20, PA, 12/4/14).

In listening to my informants discuss love and the dynamics of their relationships, I was struck by the depth of the connection the women felt with their partners. I heard that dominants could tell by the inflection of a submissive’s voice if their protests were genuine or not, or by the tensing of a particular body part if they were impacting too hard. Meanwhile, submissives could

tell by the look in a dominant's eye if they were about to be in some serious trouble. Such a deep connection creates a high degree of trust that did not go unnoticed: "I'm not going to let someone hold a knife to me if I don't feel that I can one hundred percent trust them" (Interview with Carmen, 20, PA, 12/4/14). Trusting a partner with your life requires a great deal of responsibility but yields great reward as well. Despite the image of freewheeling sexuality and casual encounters abound that may come to mind when envisioning the culture surrounding any alternative sexuality, monogamous couples make up a significant portion of the BDSM community.

### **The Impacts of Impact: Personal Growth Via BDSM**

In addition to relationship benefits, women shared with me stories of the personal pleasure they get out of their involvement in BDSM. The physical aspects of pleasure are fairly obvious, and arose mostly during discussion of subspace. Interestingly, women seemed more excited to talk to me about the mental and emotional side of BDSM. One common misconception about BDSM culture that informants were quick to point out to me is the belief that BDSM is all about sex. While it is admittedly a significant factor for many, sex and BDSM are not inseparable for everyone. What needs to be differentiated is the "sexual" from the "sensual." It is fair to say that BDSM is always sensual; that is, it pleases the physical body and the senses. However, it is not always sexual. In fact, many clubs and play parties restrict sexual intercourse and other sexually intimate activities to private rooms, while others ban them entirely. It is relatively common for people in the scene to play with people to whom they have no sexual attraction, because the purpose of the encounter is not sex (Newmahr 2009:68). Thus,

while BDSM is often equated with sex and physical pleasures, an emic perspective reveals that there are many benefits beyond it in the mental and emotional spheres.

When asked what they found to be the greatest appeal of the submissive role, most women spoke in terms of responsibility and dependence.

When you top, you're the one who's monitoring both your well-being more. When you bottom, you're more free to go with the flow, let yourself go physically. . . in many ways, the experience of bottoming or taking the submissive role means you can shift who has responsibility for what things. Since you're giving the other person license to play with your body and mind a little bit, it means they're also getting the responsibility for what they're doing. When you top, there's more that you're the driver, so you have to have your eye on the road for both of you. When you bottom, you're riding shotgun, you have a different task. [Interview with Sanne, 41, NL, 5/1/14]

According to Sanne, the relinquishment of responsibility and decision-making is an advantage of the submissive role. Dominant partners get to enjoy feelings of power and control, but are hindered in a way by the necessity to pay close attention to their actions and not “lose themselves in the moment,” as such a lapse could be dangerous. This is why shifts of consciousness occur far more in submissives than dominants; doms must stay alert and attentive throughout the encounter because their submissive partner is trusting them to avoid causing unwanted pain or injury.

Giving up control and responsibility was especially appealing to women who did not get opportunities to do this in their daily lives. Although some of the women – like soft-spoken Marije – were admittedly more passive in real life, most of the others I spoke with were “alpha females” outside of a BDSM context.

I think people have a misconception that women who are in these roles have emotional issues or need to be abused or things like that. I’m a strong woman, I was a trustee at my university, I graduated early, I was salutatorian at my graduating class in high school. I feel like I’m doing well for myself, I’m confident, I’m strong. So I don’t think that’s it. [Interview with Ashley, 22, PA, 1/14/15]

Anti-BDSM arguments (See On 1982; Russell 1982) are often premised on the idea that submissive women are brainwashed into assuming an inferior role and end up perpetuating their own subjugation. However, for Ashley and my other informants who felt similarly, taking on a submissive role with a partner was actually a welcome break from a usually hectic life.

While women in submissive roles may seek the relaxing and mind-clearing benefits of BDSM, many are also drawn to BDSM activities to feel and process intense emotions. “The capacity of the ‘lived body’ to overcome traumatic experiences of the past through consensual ‘SM’” is well known and experienced by many individuals in the lifestyle (Beckmann 2009:94). Utilizing BDSM to trigger catharsis can allow women to release and process heavy emotions that cannot be felt through other mediums. For Kate, it was both the relinquishment of control and the subsequent emotional catharsis that hooked her into BDSM and has taken her on an intense yet rewarding journey within herself.

At first, I was kind of leery of doing certain things, like being blindfolded or handcuffed, because it brought back memories. . .it has helped me to get over my fears of things that happened. . .when I was younger, because I was abused and I had no control over it, so it's kind of helped me to lose myself in a sense that I don't have to feel like I always have control over everything. Because I didn't have control then, because I was two. . .So as I've gotten older, I've always been like, well since I didn't have control there, I have to have control here and over different aspects of my life. . .I still haven't quite given up total and complete control, but I have learned to give up some. So I think it's helped me to grow as an individual.

[Interview with Kate, 33, PA, 1/16/15]

After hearing Kate's story, I asked her if she saw giving up complete control as a goal for herself that she hopes to reach one day, to which she applied affirmatively. Kate discussed this experience in the context of her relationship with her fiancé, whom she expressed much gratitude, love, and trust towards, and noted that this sadomasochistic catharsis had not only helped her grow as an individual, but that it helped the two of them grow as a couple as well. Thus, it is not far off to say that BDSM can serve as a "transformative experience" (Zussman and Pierce 2008:34). The stereotype that all submissive women have been abused in their past is inaccurate and meant to be disparaging; however, for many women that are survivors of abuse, BDSM is not a damaging pathological response to their trauma, but rather a way of working through it productively. For example, a survivor of sexual assault may find pleasure in playing out a scene of consensual non-consent – i.e., a rape fantasy. While this could be written off as a

perverse desire caused by internalized trauma, that may not be the case. Such a scene can actually be a healthy way of processing and overcoming trauma because it can allow that woman to rebuild and relive the experience – except this time, it is on her own terms. This can neutralize the fear and power held by the memory and allow a woman to regain control over her experience.

Weiss makes note of the emotional and mental impacts of BDSM in her ethnography, highlighting a motivation she calls “mastery of the self” (2011:87). This may be applied to Kate’s scenario of overcoming her need for control, but is also very relevant in other contexts. I was surprised that several of my participants did not like safe words. This tended to be for two reasons. The first, and most obvious, is that women with long-term partners no longer felt that safe words were necessary in their relationship, as they had come to know and read each other so well that safe words became irrelevant. The second is essentially the desire for self-mastery.

I find strength in being able to take it. Like, there’s something about looking back at him when he’s paddling and being like “Really? Hit me harder, damnit!” Or seeing him sweat when he’s paddling me and being like “That’s right!” It’s a sense of pride for me, and that’s where the strength element comes in, I feel really strong when I’m doing it. [Interview with Ashley, 22, PA, 1/14/15]

A desire to test and overcome one’s physical limits is a large part of BDSM culture. While individuals in the scene typically do not compare pain thresholds and seek to best one another, there is a decidedly strong sense of self-competition, and this is evident in Ashley’s statement. She felt as though “calling red” was a sign of defeat. As Newmahr states in her ethnography, “players who ‘stretch’ their limits emerge from play with a sense of having triumphed over

adversity. In this situation, players. . .having previously cast a limit as a source of fear, discomfort, or anxiety, overcome this concern within and through play, and frame this experience as an accomplishment” (2009:94). This speaks well to how women may use BDSM for self-improvement, emotional and mental catharsis, and a general sense of personal progress and success.

### **Urban v. Rural**

At the outset of my research, I anticipated that few local BDSM communities would maintain the same norms and practices dictated by idealized BDSM culture at large. However, there was a surprising amount of consistency between the two communities I studied, the three ethnographies by Backmann (2009), Newmahr (2011), and Weiss (2011), and other literature about the universalized rules and expectations of the wider world of BDSM (Califia 2000; Zussman and Pierce 2008). These consistencies – the sacredness of consent, methods of negotiation, and safety precautions such as safe words and red-flagging – were apparent in both the Dutch and Pennsylvanian contexts. Although four of my five Dutch participants spoke English as a second language, they still used the same terminology as my American participants in reference to various BDSM identities and practices. However, there were also notable differences between these two communities.

The Amsterdam-Utrecht area is very urban, and population density is incredibly high. That means more BDSM enthusiasts are in closer proximity to one another. This allowed for a more vibrant community; parties and other events were closer to home and more accessible, and community members in that area had a much bigger pool of potential partners available to them. Amsterdam is arguably one of the most liberal cities in the world, and due to a severe housing

deficit and an influx of hopeful residents, both Amsterdam and Utrecht can be quite expensive places to live. All of these factors meant that the average member of the BDSM community was (1) involved in the local scene or at least had the opportunity to be, (2) financially stable enough to live and work in a desirable location, and (3) situated in an environment that ranged from tolerant to accepting. There were exceptions to some of these points – for example, Lily was attending university and without a job at the time, so living on a student budget limited her involvement in the scene.

While barriers to community involvement did exist in the Dutch context, they were referenced on only a few occasions in my interviews, and most of the time participants had not faced these barriers themselves, but rather were musing that they may be potential barriers faced by others in the scene. In contrast, each of my American participants spoke at length to me about the barriers they personally face in this area. South-central Pennsylvania is a largely rural region; it is predominantly socially conservative, and while the BDSM community has a presence in more populous areas, such as Chambersburg and Shippensburg, events and meet-ups were few and far between. Because of this, my informants considered themselves familiar or occasionally involved with the local BDSM community, but none considered herself an active participant.

I don't know that there really is much of a local community around here. I mean, there's been kind of munches<sup>xv</sup> and meet-ups and stuff like that, but I've never really gone to any of them. And for me, it's like, if you practice this, it doesn't really change the fact that most people around here are very rural thinkers. So I don't even know if having this in common would be enough for me to want to hang out with these people. [Interview with Heather, 31, PA, 12/6/14]

For Heather, the alienation she felt from others in the community was primarily ideological. I was impressed with Heather's knowledge of sexual politics and gender identities, and she was the only one of my American participants to acknowledge that there are more than two genders. She did not feel as though many individuals in the surrounding community would share her progressive worldview, and this was enough to prevent her from making any significant efforts to get involved in the local scene. She noted that the efforts she did make revealed the scarcity of activity in the area, telling me, "Good luck finding a BDSM club. They're mostly private and it's mostly by invitation and you gotta know people or the fees are ridiculous. It's not easy" (Interview with Heather, 31, PA, 12/6/14). While I did find a BDSM community hub and play space within an hour of Gettysburg, the vast majority of their play parties and events carried a price tag of twenty dollars or more. The venue was open to the public, but had no online presence anywhere but Fetlife, so while all of my informants had some general knowledge of its existence, only a couple had actually been there themselves. The discretion in publicity and location likely limits the club's popularity, but is a necessary precaution in such a conservative region. In contrast, the BDSM shop I worked at in Utrecht had a very visible public presence, keeping an active Facebook page, advertising for the local events that were often held on the premises, and flying a large leather pride flag in front of the shop.

Financial concerns were prominent in my interviews with other women as well. Kate shared that she was working while also attending school part-time, and she often had childcare responsibilities as well. She cited a lack of disposable income as a major barrier to connecting with the local community, as well as a necessarily busy work schedule preventing her from having much free time.

When I first started and they were talking about floggers and crops and paddles, I was like “Okay, what’s all that? That stuff is so expensive.” But they were like, “Oh, you could use stuff in your kitchen. You could use a wooden spoon. . .I have a little red cutting board, you could even use that as a paddle. So it’s not stuff that you necessarily have to go out. . .you could use clothespins as nipple clamps. It’s the same thing. . .I had to have some work done, some of our piping froze under the house, and so we were at the hardware store getting heat tape to put on the new pipes underneath, and saw rope. It’s inexpensive, it’s like eighty-eight cents a yard. . .if you go with stuff like that, it’s not expensive. [Interview with Kate, 33, PA, 1/16/15]

These do-it-yourself props, which also included telephone cord and industrial size rolls of Saran wrap, were a thrifty and innovative way of exploring BDSM on a budget, and were especially useful for my rural participants. Learning these tips and tricks and sharing them with others in the community was an effective way of making the lifestyle more accessible to those living below the poverty line.

As a college student in the area, Carmen echoed Heather in attributing the lack of a cohesive local community to location, as well as to conservative ideology, although she found the latter to be part and parcel of larger narrow-minded American views on sexuality.

I’m not from the area and it’s a lot more conservative than I’m used to at home, so like at home – I’m from the liberal northeast – I would feel a little more comfortable going to Manchester or Boston and

exploring that, but in Gettysburg I'm a little more hesitant because I don't know the climate of that here as much . . . You don't see as many clubs and stuff in America, part of that is because we're big and spread out, but I think part of it is also because sexuality in general is so taboo, it's like even more taboo if you're different from the norm. [Interview with Carmen, 20, PA, 12/4/14]

Traditional American cultural norms may discourage sex positivity, and while this is less prevalent in the country's more liberal or youthful cities, Carmen's hesitancy to explore the local community was rooted in her very reasonable belief that this region is more likely than not to be hostile towards those straying from the sexual status quo. This relates as well to the demographics of the community in the area.

There's a lot of older people. There's not very many young people our age. The people at the dinner are really open and respectful, but I guess for me it's been difficult to find people that I connect with just because of the age thing. [Interview with Ashley, 22, PA, 1/14/15]

I found this sentiment interesting, considering Ashley is twenty-two and her partner, Paul, is fifty. However, it seemed the difference lay in "old" versus "new" ideology. Ashley shared that when she was browsing my interview guide with Paul prior to meeting with me, he asked her how she would answer my question, "Are you a feminist?" She told him that she of course was, and he replied, "You better tell her that I wouldn't date anyone who wasn't a feminist!" (Interview with Ashley, 22, PA, 1/14/15). Paul is of an older generation, but he does not appear

to have the stereotypical mindset of that generation. Thus, the issue again becomes the conservative ideology expected of those who reside in rural south-central Pennsylvania.

### **Towards Kinkier Horizons: The Future of BDSM Culture**

Few of my informants had difficulty reconciling their ideology with their participation in BDSM, and all were enthusiastic in extolling the benefits of BDSM in their lives. However, concerns about the trends in BDSM culture at large did arise and are critical to address.

A lot of [Master/slave relationships] fall into that gray zone of abuse.

I think a lot of them wouldn't follow the lifestyle pattern, a lot of them are probably more that category of harm, where they're not healthy relationships, these aren't people that are going to function normally. They aren't – that's the hard part about this lifestyle - if something causes you distress. . .you probably need therapy more than you need BDSM. [Interview with Heather, 31, PA, 12/6/14]

Master/slave relationships are contentious in BDSM, as they require a 24/7 lifestyle wherein the partner in the slave role completely and totally relinquishes power to their dominant partner. I was unable to secure an interview with a slave, as they typically must yield to their Master in all decision-making, and I anticipated that few Masters would want their slaves giving me a tell-all of their relationships and discussing feminism with me. I did contact a few slaves, but only heard back from one – who told me I was rude in my approach and that I should have contacted her Master first for permission to talk to her. I was embarrassed, realizing that this was a pretty obvious protocol that I should have followed.

The controversy that arises over Master/slave relationships lies in the possibility of someone who has surrendered all power to make decisions over their own lives to lose their sense of agency completely and, subsequently, their ability to exit the relationship should they find it is no longer healthy for them. Weiss notes that BDSM should be strategic yet fluid, and “the ability to reverse social power – in play – is critical to the celebration of such play as transgressive” (2011:156). A Master/slave relationship necessitates an unwavering and unchallenged power dynamic. While an individual may consent to such a relationship at the outset, this relinquishment of power strips them of their right to revoke consent. Consent should always be freely and enthusiastically given, and 24/7 Master/slave relationships can quickly become abusive if a partner’s consent or withdrawal of consent is no longer meaningful. At this point, the relationship is no longer a construction of power, but a real power imbalance that can put the submissive partner in danger.

The best way to improve BDSM while still allowing the individuals who practice it autonomy over their own personal lives is to encourage members of the community to look out for one another. Abuse does happen, and some people do get into BDSM for the wrong reasons.

It’s mainly male dominant people, who in some way can’t get a nice girlfriend. There are many men I’ve heard of who really abuse women, hold them for days, stop them from using their phone, don’t give them proper care, like food or water or clothing. . .I have met many women online and in real life. . .who have had bad things in their life – beaten, abused sexually or physically, or bossed around at school. They. . .have bad – how do you call it? A negative picture of themselves. And I see many of these kinds of women, and they

want to be taken care of, they look for Mr. Right, but he doesn't exist because in a way these women always attract the wrong men who go too far, who don't respect their wishes and their boundaries, because they never say no. [Interview with Marije, 53, NL, 5/5/14]

Low self-esteem can have damaging effects for both men and women when it is a reason for their involvement in BDSM. Women with a poor self-image are vulnerable to being taken advantage of by partners who do not have their best interests in mind, and men who think lowly of themselves may become involved in an attempt to feel powerful over someone else to elevate their own self-esteem. Encouraging an active feminist discourse in the BDSM scene can help address both these issues. Women who can learn how to practice BDSM in a healthy and feminist-friendly way can come to see it as something empowering or be better equipped to identify why they may be seeking out BDSM relationships for the wrong reasons. A feminist discourse will also further the BDSM community's goals of purging dangerous and undesirable players, especially dominant male partners, from the group.

A final area of concern in BDSM culture is the incorporation of more controversial activities, such as race play, historical trauma play, and age play. According to Weiss, "the politics of such play is centrally about publics and privates: what can be done in private, in semiprivate ('inside the community'), or in public" (2011:207). It is important not to maintain an all-or-nothing mindset when analyzing BDSM. In a perfect world, a blanket statement could be made that all BDSM is okay as long as it is consensual; however, BDSM does not exist in a vacuum, and historical and cultural context is important when evaluating the acceptability of different forms of BDSM. While I am of the opinion that private, fully consensual activity should not be of public concern, I argue in accordance with Weiss that differentiations should be

made based on setting. Forms of BDSM play that rely on specific, realistic, and potentially triggering traumas – such as slave auction scenes, Holocaust narratives, and exchanges involving incest or child abuse – should be regulated in semipublic settings to protect bystanders. This regulation can be at the discretion of those who own or manage the space, as long as all in attendance are aware of the house rules before making the decision to enter the space.

## **Conclusion**

BDSM culture is typically summed up by the “Safe, Sane, and Consensual” motto. Submissive-role women have special ways of navigating the BDSM community in a way that is consistent with these themes and with the feminist movement. Intense focuses on safety, consent, respect between partners, and personal growth and fulfillment can lead to self-empowerment and subversion of inequalities in mainstream society. Access to a local community is geographically dependent, and compatibility in that community depends on a woman’s age, personal ideologies, and financial means. Many submissive women find BDSM does not conflict with their sense of self-worth, but actually bolsters it through sexual liberation and confidence that comes with fulfilling sexual and romantic relationships and improved communication skills. Masochistic experiences can serve as a site of personal transformation for submissive women, encouraging self-improvement and the synthesis of intense emotions. Essentially, BDSM is at once collective and personal, reproduction and subversion, pain and pleasure.

BDSM culture is not perfect, and the experiences of these ten women are in no way representative of all submissive women. However, benefits of BDSM are visible through anthropological study of how a BDSM lifestyle influences an individual’s relationship with others in the community, the “vanilla” population, and their own sense of self. Ethnographic

research is an effective method of challenging current understandings of sexuality. Incorporating anthropological theory with analysis of individualized, emic testimony can demonstrate the ways that alternative sexualities are not just divergent identities and practices, but sites of rich culture, politics, and socialization. Anthropological validation and acknowledgment of more forms of sexual expression will allow for an open dialogue about sexuality and combat society's continued fixation on "normal genital sexuality" (Beckmann 2009:87). This perspective that the most valid form of sexuality is conventional heterosexual intercourse lends itself to a heterosexist and homophobic worldview. Exploring sexual diversity through a cultural and personal lens is key to reaching a more nuanced understanding of sexuality that does not pathologize or stigmatize sexual difference. Additionally, it lends itself to a larger discourse on the complexities of female sexuality that is long overdue.

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<sup>i</sup> While BDSM practices have been a part of human sexuality for eons, the origins of the term can be found in the late eighteenth century with the writing of Marquis De Sade. De Sade was an author whose affinity for giving pain in a sensual context was evident in his writing and who inspired the term “sadism,” which characterizes his particular brand of sexuality. The work of Leopold van Sacher-Masoch was soon to follow in the mid-nineteenth century and was heavily laden with the consideration of pain as pleasure, the concept behind the term “masochism.”

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Despite the increased visibility of sadomasochistic practices that accompanied the popularity of these authors' works, BDSM continues to be seen as a form of abnormal or pathologized sexuality.

ii "Vanilla" is a term often used in BDSM culture to describe an individual who does not incorporate any kink into their sexual practices. Conversely, those who *do* enjoy kink refer to themselves as "chocolate" or simply "in the lifestyle."

iii Cultural relativism dictates that one should seek to understand the culture of others from the perspective of that culture, without any biases or preconceptions borne of one's own culture. This term was coined by social theorist Alain Locke and popularized in an anthropological context in analysis of the work of Franz Boas after his death.

iv Possible limitations of these sampling methods are a selection of interview participants who are significantly more opinionated than the average submissive woman. Women who consider themselves feminists or proponents of gender equality were likely more willing to contact me to discuss feminism's role in their lives than women who did not consider themselves feminists or relate with the feminist movement. Snowball sampling occurred when Kate referred Ruby to me for an interview, as the two are close friends. A potential implication of this is that Kate and Ruby share many similar opinions and experiences, which can limit the diversity of my participants.

v My recruitment message was as follows: Hello! I am a student at Gettysburg College and I'm writing my senior thesis this spring about the BDSM culture and the experiences of women involved in it. I'm hoping to learn about the community and the people within it as much as possible!

vi You are invited to take part in an interview about personal opinion and experience in relation to feminism and submissive BDSM practices. The interview will take between one and two hours. Results of this study will be used for academic purposes only. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and any individual who participates can choose to withdraw at any time. Data will be kept in secure, password-protected digital files. Complete anonymity is guaranteed in the final report, and names will be changed to protect the identities of the participants. If you have read the above, understand its contents, agree to participate in this study, and confirm that you are eighteen years of age or older, please sign below.

vii You are invited to take part in an interview about your personal opinions and experiences as a woman involved in BDSM with experience in submissive roles. This interview will take between one and two hours. Results of this study will be used for academic purposes and participation is completely voluntary. Any individual who participates can choose to withdraw at any time. Data will be kept anonymous and in secure computer files with no duplicates. Anonymity is ensured and names will be changed in all data records to protect the identities of participants. If you understand the information I have just provided, would like to participate in this study, and can confirm that you are eighteen years of age or older, please express to me now that you choose to give informed consent to become a research participant.

viii (1) How long have you been involved in BDSM? (2) How did you become involved? (3) To what extent do you incorporate BDSM into your own lifestyle? (4) What is your role within the

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BDSM community? (5) Do you exclusively perform this role? (6) How involved are you in the BDSM community in this area? (7) Can you tell me more about the community, i.e. its social norms, expectations, key features, etc.? (8) How do you define feminism? (8a) Do you identify as a feminist? (9) Have your views on gender equality shaped your participation in the BDSM scene? (10) How do you see your belief in gender equality and participation in BDSM in relation to one another? (11) Have you seen any gendered differences in the BDSM community? (12) What are some precautions commonly taken in the BDSM community to encourage safe and positive experiences? (12a) Which do you do yourself? (13) How do you describe your interaction with play partners before, during, after, and completely outside of a scene? (14) Do you have any specific instances in which you felt your ideals affected your participation in BDSM or vice versa? (15) Is there anything else you would like to tell me about? (16) Is there anything you would like to ask me?

<sup>ix</sup> In the BDSM community, someone who identifies as a switch alternates between the dominant and submissive roles, though not necessarily at an equal frequency. An individual may also alternate roles not out of preference, but at the request of a partner. In this case, they may be referred to as a “service” switch.

<sup>x</sup> A brat is a BDSM identity under the submissive umbrella. As the name implies, brats are typically playful, sassy, and somewhat immature in their partner interactions. Brats may behave in a disobedient and antagonistic way before eventually yielding to their dom. Brats are often associated with the discipline side of BDSM.

<sup>xi</sup> A bottom is a BDSM identity usually considered to be under the submissive umbrella. The term is somewhat ambiguous and varies based on personal definitions. My informant who identified as a bottom differentiated this role from a standard submissive role in that, although she is submissive during play, she plans the scene and tells her partner beforehand exactly what she would like to happen. Thus, she is not traditionally submissive, but is the “bottom” half of the power exchange during play.

<sup>xii</sup> A common theme in my discussion of submissive identities with participants was that although they did not often consider their desires “normal,” they did see their submissive tendencies as a natural, inherent part of themselves. Determined in demeanor and self-assured in speech, Heather shared with me her thought on the BDSM psyche from her position as a psychology student and a lover of the lifestyle. Biological explanations of submissive inclinations have yielded interesting and varied results. Freud (1927;1949) attributed these inclinations to a “castration complex” yielding an attraction to aggression; an experiment by Handwerker and Crosbie (1982) chalked them up to differences in height between men and women; biologist Eve Jozifkova (2013) cites a need for an adaptive mechanism of sexual selection as an explanation. Women who understood an attraction to BDSM as biological or animalistic phenomenon tended to express a belief that these inclinations were not necessarily normal, but not unnatural either.

<sup>xiii</sup> One example of a good resource for individuals interested in learning about submissive BDSM is *The New Bottoming Book* by Janet Hardy and Dossie Easton, two BDSM veterans. This book was given to me by my supervisor on my first day working at the BDSM shop in Utrecht. Having revealed to her that I was just beginning my research and knew hardly anything

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about BDSM, she advised me that this book was a good introduction to all the basics; she also recommended I read *The New Topping Book*, its dominant counterpart.

<sup>xiv</sup> Weiss (2011) makes note of The Dungeon Monitors Association, an organization that trains and educates members of the BDSM community on how to effectively patrol parties and events to ensure play is carried out in a safe and consensual manner.

<sup>xv</sup> Munches are social events prevalent in BDSM culture worldwide. Typically, they consist of members of the local community meeting up for lunch or dinner on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly basis. Munches were organized in both communities I studied.