

Sadism and Masochism: Sociological Perspectives

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Sadism and masochism are two varieties of sexual behavior of which description and analysis have been largely lacking in the professional literature. Sadomasochism has generally been described only by psychiatrists; consequently, the social aspects of this behavior have been almost completely ignored. Sadomasochism has been of interest to the legal profession and the lay public only when some highly publicized crime with sadomasochistic overtones has occurred. Examples of these instances include the infamous English "Moors" murders,¹ the sexual mutilation and killing of William Velten in New Mexico in 1974,² and the so-called "trash bag murders" which were recently uncovered in California.³ Sociologists of deviance have largely neglected sadomasochistic ("S & M") behavior. Some recent basic texts in the sociology of sexual behavior do devote a few paragraphs or pages to this behavior,^{4,5,6} but their observations are neither systematic nor theoretical. A recent paper⁷ attempts a more systematic overview of the S&M subculture, but it lacks any theoretical organization. Journalists^{8,9} have also examined the sadomasochistic subculture, but their work, too, is largely descriptive and usually confined to reporting events at an S&M organization such as the Till Eulenspiegel Society in New York City.

Although attempts to theoretically organize and explain sadomasochism as a social phenomenon have not been made by sociologists, sociological literature and theory do provide a number of helpful starting points. There is, for example, a large literature on subcultural deviance which might be explored. Frame analysis, role theory, interactionist, phenomenological, and ethnomethodological perspectives might be profitably used to gain some insight into the social world of sadists and masochists. This paper represents a tentative attempt to apply some of the current theoretical perspectives in sociology to a study of the social organization of consensual sexual violence.

Our data include fully transcribed interviews with participants in the S&M scene, including "amateurs" and professional "dominatrices," materials from S&M magazines, literature and flyers from sadomasochistic organizations, and so forth. The S&M world includes professional and non-professional segments and both "straight" and "gay" subworlds.¹⁰ Members of this world, however, may not necessarily perceive themselves along these lines. There are blendings and blurrings and crossings over from one part of this world to another. Advertisers in S&M contact publications often make a point of their "flexibility," "versatility," or "bisexuality."

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There are two central features of the sadomasochistic world. The first is that much of this behavior occurs within a subcultural context. This is not surprising, since by its very nature, participation in this behavior requires at least two individuals, and necessitates some degree of social organization in order to be consummated. It is, of course, not uncommon for individuals to engage in solitary autoerotic sadomasochism, sometimes with tragic results.¹¹ A second feature of the sadomasochistic world is that this social organization is "framed"¹² in terms of fantasy, as a kind of theatrical production. Fantasy and theatricality are reflected, for example, in the roles available to players, their relations to one another, the kinds of scenes that are enacted, and the argot of the group.

The S&M Subculture

Deviant subcultures form, according to Albert K. Cohen,¹³ when individuals with common problems of adjustment come into communicative interaction with one another. The subculture, as a system of beliefs and values generated through this interaction, serves to help the individuals solve these problems. Although Cohen's work was concerned with delinquent youths, his ideas are applicable to other sorts of subcultures. People with sadomasochistic interests, like individuals with other nonmodal desires such as gays,¹⁴ often recognize these needs quite early but are unable to act upon them, for they do not know that a world of their "own"¹⁵ exists. They often feel isolated and "sick." Often their exposure to other sadists and masochists is fortuitous, as illustrated in the following conversation between an interviewer (I) and a respondent (R):

I: Okay, you were going to talk a little about S&M.

R: Yeah, I'm not really sure where to start. I've found I really enjoyed it and always had fantasies about it. It's really good. What are some of the things you'd like to know about?

I: Well, for example, how did you first start thinking that you were interested in S&M and how did you eventually act out on it and so on?

R: Okay. Well, my fantasies, ever since early childhood, have always been masochistic. . . . And then, when I was developing a gay identity, my fantasies changed only a little. And I never really acted upon it, until I came onto somebody in [city] who was a sadist. And he was really an interesting person. He opened up a very fancy restaurant. . . . There's a gay community council in [city], and they held some of their meetings over in his restaurant. And I decided that I wanted to attend one. . . . and also the restaurant manager was there and we just got to talking, you know. . . . And after everybody left, he just started talking to me and he just kind of closed off a part of the restaurant, and we just started having sex there and then we went into his office and more over there and then we went down to his room where he seemed to store dishes and stuff, it was completely closed off, and it got real heavy in there. And he treated me really special, I thought, giving me free food after that and giving me a ride home with somebody else. But after

that I didn't see him because some of his friends seemed to have nicknames like "Godfather" and so forth.

I: Did you get into an S&M scene with him then?

R: Right.

I: What did you do? Did he tie you up? Did he initiate it or did you or what?

R: He did.

I: What did he do?

R: He didn't have any equipment or anything. There was a lot of slapping and he wanted me to masturbate in front of him and he wanted me to talk to his cock.

I: And then what happened? You said you didn't see him again?

R: Right. Afterwards, I really felt kind of elated and kind of like laughing and he said, "You're amazing!" Like he was completely flabbergasted by it.

I: Why, because you enjoyed it?

R: Yeah. I think that was it.

Other respondents met people interested in S&M through already established sadomasochistic organizations:

I: Can you tell me about [your first sadomasochistic act] and how it happened and so on?

R: Well, there's this place in New York called the Eulenspiegel Society, I don't know whether you ever heard of it, it's kind of a place where all people, they call it sexual minority people, go, people with sadomasochistic behavior or gay people go there, straight people, bisexuals, some transvestites, a kind of real liberal place. And I met this guy there and he said he was interested in getting together in this act, this sadomasochistic thing. And I said, "Yeah, I'd like to try it." And, we went to his house, apartment in New York and I've always had fantasies around that area. . . . but with this guy, I didn't get into it at all. I mean, you know, the fact of being tied up and getting hit with a belt. I just, I don't know, I thought I could get into it, but once it happened I just didn't get into it at all. I didn't like being fucked up the ass either. It hurt me.

I: Did you reciprocate? Did you do it to him?

R: No.

Some people discover the S&M world through other, related, deviant worlds. A professional dominatrix, for example, told the researcher that she had learned about sadomasochism through contacts with customers in a brothel:

I: How did you decide that you were going to specialize in S&M?

R: Well, I decided that because when I went into the houses to work I saw that that entailed more money. And it was interesting to me. Like, the first time I ever did it, like I took over the house and I was shooting so much drug, I was spending so much money on drug, I

would be up one minute and I'd be back down on the streets the next minute. Then I'd fall into something else. And I was working in this house. The house was a very good house. This is how I first found out about *Screw* magazine. They were advertising out of *Screw* magazine and one day a guy came in and he needed somebody to do a dominance session with him. And I didn't know what to do. And one of the girls just said to me, "Well, here's some material" and told me what to do and I went up there and I took it from there and it was just something that came naturally to me.

I: What did he want you to do, do you remember?

R: It was a bondage session and a verbal humiliation session with whips.

I: What do you do during verbal humiliation sessions?

R: Well, you know, some guys just don't like anything else except to be verbally humiliated. You tell them that they're disgusting, you know, "You dirty son of a bitch." And "You're this. And you're a pervert and look how ugly you are." All kinds of the worst things that you can think about somebody just to verbally humiliate them. You know, like maybe stand on their heads. Or stand on them and you're talking to them and just make them feel as low as you can. You know, having them on the ground. Just stepping on somebody's head like that. People pay for it.

The other side of the professional S&M scene is reported by a man whose first sadomasochistic acts were with a prostitute:

R: This is a hangup [I had] with girls, because what I really was into was kind of a sadomasochistic thing, you know, and when I was young I really felt I could never talk to any girls about that. But then when I tried a few sexual acts with prostitutes and that, in that way, it was kind of enjoyable although there was no intercourse because it was more money. And so it was just kind of a scene with just masturbation.

I: And how did you feel about these experiences?

R: I really enjoyed them, but I felt guilty about it. Deep inside there was a lot of guilt. But I really enjoyed it.

I: Why did you go to the prostitutes, then?

R: Why?

I: Yeah.

R: I don't know. I guess just because I figured that a girl wouldn't. I don't know, a regular girl would be kind of turned off by, you know, fantasy called "abnormal" or "deviant."

Novices in sadomasochism may also attempt to make contacts through S&M magazines, sometimes advertising themselves as beginners, "New and into bondage," "New to these adventures but not turned off," and so forth.

Once subcultures are formed, they provide their members with techniques for engaging in certain kinds of behavior and with ideologies, "motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes"¹⁶ which serve to normalize and even

to elevate the individual's needs and behavior. In the case of S&M, techniques are taught not only through personal contact, but through letters and stories appearing in sadomasochistic publications. Some advertisers in contact magazines, in fact, offer to "train" and "dominate" respondents by mail. Numerous companies produce and advertise an endless variety of devices, costumes, and paraphernalia used in the "training" of S&M devotees.

The development of apologias, attitudes, and ideologies supportive of S&M appears to be more important than the dissemination of specific techniques for restraining people and inducing pain and discomfort. Statements of sadomasochistic organizations serve to justify and celebrate the activities of their members. For example, a Eulenspiegel flyer says:

What is S&M? Does the phrase conjure up vague visions of DeSade or Torquemada, or perhaps at best *The Story of O*? The subject has always been cloaked in fear and speculation, largely because of the shroud of ignorance born of traditional sexual taboos.

The *Eulenspiegel Society* is an organization devoted to shedding light and joy on this neglected area of sexual fulfillment. Eulenspiegel is not in any sense a sex club or swingers' organization, but a discussion and consciousness-raising group that explores the cultural and psychological nature of *sexual dominance and submission*, sadism and masochism. It is the aim of this organization to promote better understanding and self-awareness of these drives so that they may be enjoyed as a part of a full sex life, rather than set aside out of fear or guilt.

Malibu Publications, which publishes the magazine *Amazon*, displays a similar rationale for sadomasochistic behavior in a flyer advertising their magazine:

As the name indicates this is a contact magazine devoted exclusively to devotees of S&M/B&D. It was launched just over a year ago in context with the philosophy that inasmuch as every human being harbors masochistic and/or sadistic tendencies, why not bring S&M/B&D out of the "closet" by tastefully presenting the subject as the normal sexual indulgence it really is. AMAZON has achieved this! It provides the average person with a publication that reveals S&M/B&D as a normal form of sexual activity and alleviates any feelings of guilt and/or perversion arising from long held misconceptions.

These statements fall into the general category of what have been called "accounts," "linguistic device(s) employed whenever an action is subjected to valiative inquiry."¹⁷ More specifically, accounts are statements "made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior. . . . An account is not called for when people engage in routine, common-sense behavior in a cultural environment that recognizes that behavior as such."¹⁷ The kinds of accounts presented here are illustrative of what Scott and Lyman call "justifications." "Justifications are accounts in which one accepts

responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it.”¹⁷ In particular, one type of justification explicitly used in these apologies, is a device that Scott and Lyman term “self-fulfillment.”¹⁷ That is, the writers of these statements do not simply normalize sadomasochistic behavior for the initiated; instead, they attempt to enlighten outsiders about the “joys” of this behavior. Thus, the importance of these accounts is that they are not merely concocted by individual, isolated actors. They are, instead, socially produced, taught, reinforced, and continually reaffirmed by members of a given subculture or group. The group thereby does for the individual what he cannot do for himself. It provides him with external justifications for his desires and behavior. In a word, the subculture *normalizes* his orientation for him. Some of these accounts, more accurately, are “techniques of neutralization,” similar in function and often in tone to those produced by gangs of delinquent youths.¹⁸

These sorts of apologies represent what Abraham Kaplan has called “reconstructed logic” in contrast with what he terms “logic-in-use.”¹⁹ Reconstructed logic is an *ex post facto* idealization rather than an accurate description of participants’ motives as ongoingly displayed in actual S&M situations (logic-in-use). Compare, for example, the Eulenspiegel statement with journalistic descriptions of actual Eulenspiegel meetings and events,^{8,9} or, for instance, with the statement of one participant, a professional dominatrix:

Well, eventually I just, they were just business to me. I really didn’t care for them at all. They were just money. It was just like getting in there and getting out of there. It was just a business, that’s all. I hated them, especially when I got into the S&M thing, you know. Then I took out all my frustrations on them. I was very brutal.

Fantasy and the Theatrical Frame

It is impossible to attempt to develop an understanding of the sadomasochistic subculture without examining the place of fantasy and theatricality in this world. The S&M scene is a fantasy world and can be most effectively understood in that light. Here we can profitably draw from the insights of Erving Goffman, especially with reference to his work on frame analysis.¹² Frameworks, according to Goffman, are perspectives or “schemata of interpretation” which, when applied by an individual to events, renders “what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful. . . . each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms.”¹⁶ The kinds of frameworks with which we are concerned here are social frameworks. The theater is an example of one sort of social frame. Goffman notes that the primary frameworks of a particular social group are a central element of its culture.¹² These frameworks are imbedded within the language of the group.¹⁷ The language itself provides rules for their application within specific contexts, as well as defining particular roles, identities, and relationships within these contexts. The special argot of S&M works in this way.

Related to Goffman's discussion of frameworks is his concept of "keys" and "keying." A "key," according to Goffman, is "the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else. The process of transcription can be called keying."¹² An example of keying would be something which appears to be fighting but has been transformed into play by the "combatants." Participants in the activity are consciously aware of the systematic alteration that is going on.

S&M activity appears to fall within what Goffman calls the "theatrical frame." Within this frame, various sorts of keyings are used by the participants: those which transform what might appear to an outsider to be violence into make-believe or a kind of play-like behavior, those which set limits, those which affect role switchings and the dominance order, and so on. An important aspect of any dramatic scripting, such as those which occur during a sadomasochistic episode, is that unlike the situation in the real, everyday world where a certain degree of uncertainty obtains, participants in this activity have the opportunity to " 'play the world backwards,' that is, to arrange now for some things to work out later that ordinarily would be out of anyone's control and a matter of fate or chance." "In the case of make-believe," as Goffman puts it, "the individual can arrange to script what is to come, unwinding his own reel."¹² This is exactly what occurs in the S&M world. Participants interact within a particular (theatrical) frame, collaboratively setting specific limits to the scene. This limit setting is critical, as a respondent indicates:

Usually, sometimes, when you have a new client, what I used to do was I used to sit down and I would talk to them first and find out exactly what they wanted. Because sometimes you can get into a session with somebody and get very brutal and that's not what they want. There's heavy dominance and there's light dominance and there's play acting, roles, all different kinds. So the best thing to do is to sit down and talk to somebody first, initially.

Devotees of S&M frequently indicate that it is the masochist who controls the interaction in a sadomasochistic episode. That is, he sets the limits by keying this activity as make-believe, something which is to be understood as not the "real thing." A male masochist, who defines himself as "bisexual," explains how he works out limits with his partner:

I: Someone tells me that in an S&M situation it's really the masochist who has all the control.

R: Uh huh.

I: Is that true?

R: Could be. I just read in [publication] that there's maybe no such difference as between passive and aggressive partners. That you can never be entirely passive or aggressive. . . . And, if I didn't want him to do something, I'd let him know. And he'd have to stop right there, because there's also, like, limits.

- I: Is there a kind of understanding between S&M people, that you set out limits? You set these limits out before, or -----?
- R: Before. Before each act. He liked to press me to do heavier and heavier things. But, uh, you definitely have to have a limit, before you go further. So, if I don't like it, you're not going to go on.
- I: Are there certain things that you don't do?
- R: Um huh. Yes.
- I: Like what?
- R: I really don't like being pissed on. Even though there's actually no pain involved. And, he wanted to stick pins in me. But he just gets near me with a pin and I jump ten feet.

An interesting phenomenon in the sadomasochistic world is what appears to be an overrepresentation of "dominant" women and "submissive" men. In a content analysis of two issues each of *Latent Image* and *Amazon*, popular S&M contact publications, the preferences (either "dominant" or "aggressive," or "submissive" or "passive") of advertisers who indicated an orientation were distributed as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
SELF-CHARACTERIZATIONS AS "DOMINANT" OR "SUBMISSIVE"
BY ADVERTISERS IN S&M CONTACT MAGAZINES

Magazine, Issue	Males N=201		Females N=480		Both Dom- inant	Couples N=93		
	Dom- inant	Submis- sive	Dom- inant	Submis- sive		Female Dom- inant / Male Submis- sive	Male Dom- inant / Female Submis- sive	Both Submis- sive
<i>Latent Image</i> , No. 11	8	27	39	5	2	9	6	2
<i>Latent Image</i> , No. 12	16	14	46	3	3	3	9	2
<i>Amazon</i> , No. 4	24	45	105	28	8	1	6	3
<i>Amazon</i> , No. 6	23	44	207	47	16	5	13	5
TOTAL	71	130	397	83	29	18	34	12

In the large proportion of cases, "submissive" women sought other women or couples. This was also true for couples in which the woman was the submissive partner. Some of the submissive women who advertised appear to really be half of a couple. In any event, it does not seem to be the case that "submissive" women seek out dominant men. As a recent text in "sex and human life" observes, "it is commonly the case that sadistic men cannot find a masochistic female partner."⁶

The presence of high proportions of dominant women and submissive men in a society in which men are supposed to be aggressive and women are defined as passive presents an interesting paradox which may be resolved by referring to the theatrical frame. Goffman observes that "frequent role switching occurs during play, resulting in a mixing up of the dominance order found among the players during occasions of literal activity."¹² Within a fantasy scene, traditional sex roles may be reversed without threatening the participants, if it is defined as "just make-believe." Roles are reversed,

however, only in the sense that an individual who is “really” an adult male finds himself subservient to another who is “really” a female. But since the interactants are frequently acting out roles different from the ones which they “normally” occupy, very often the dominance order of the “real world” is sustained. That is, in the “real” world, some people (*e.g.*, adults) have rights over others (*e.g.*, children) where such rights include the administration of certain forms of corporal punishment, violence, and the like. Traditionally, males have such rights over females, hence, women’s complaints at being “treated like children,” and so forth. In a recent paper, for example, West and Zimmerman²⁰ find that there are “striking similarities between the pattern of interruptions in male-female interchanges and those observed in the adult-child transactions” and interpret this to mean that “females have an analogous status to children in certain conversational situations [which] implies that the female has restricted rights to speak and may be ignored or interrupted at will.”²⁰

Much S&M activity follows general social-organizational patternings, so that when the relations are “reversed” (*e.g.*, when the man gets beaten, degraded, etc.) metaphors like “governess”/“child,” “mistress”/“slave,” “teacher”/“pupil” and so forth are used to invoke a conventional patterning anyway. A dominatrix, when asked why she thought men had developed their particular interests, answered in terms of their childhood backgrounds, and pointed out that they often took child-like roles within the S&M interaction:

I: Have you ever tried to figure out why some of these people are into some of the things they’re into?

R: Well, I didn’t have to figure it out. I’ve asked them. A lot of them have talked to me about it. A lot of it stems from the way their mothers were, experiences they’ve had in childhood. A lot of it stems from, you know, things that have happened to them when they were kids. Something that impressed them when they were a child and it stayed with them for the rest of their lives. I had one guy that, I guess, his mother was on his back all the time. Another guy used to watch the spankings, and another guy that used to come in and I used to have to play his big sister and I’d stand in the bathroom while he would take something of mine, pretending that he was taking it out of the drawer and I’d have to come in and say to him, “What are you doing?” you know, and we’d go through the whole act. . . . I used to have a guy that used to come in, he used to like to put on diapers and play like you’re a baby and you’re supposed to pee on yourself or in a diaper, and things like that.

Some males who take the submissive role do so only when they are dressed as women. Others pretend to be dogs, horses, or other animals. S&M contact magazines are filled with ads from male transvestites and others who wish to participate in sadomasochistic activities in roles other than that of adult male, and from women who sustain these kinds of fantasies:

GODDESS ADRENA COMMANDS all humble & obedient servants to

beg for application into her male DOG TRAINING classes. *Beg* to be my lap dog douche bag mouth & crawl beneath me always!

All bad boys int. in spanking, B&D, S&M, female domination or enemas write to Queen Linda, Glendale.

Well trained Dominant and exotic TV arranging for "Dude" ranch with fully equipped stables, dungeon, leather garments, etc. All dominant fems invited to participate. Male "Studs" must qualify through series of private training sessions. For further details & photos, write. San Francisco.

White male, 30, Bi-sexual, wishes to meet attractive, dominant woman or T.V. Couples OK if she is dominant. Dress me in frilly, silky, women's things and I will be your FR. maid or sisterly companion. Also enjoy leather & rubber. Lasting relationship possible. No professionals. Send photo & phone. Can & will travel, particularly to the N.E.

Men who are submissive would appear to be able to reconcile these needs with the societal pressures on males to be active, dominant, and superordinate to women by donning a special role within an S&M episode. Thus, it is the actor as a "child" ("slave," "female maid," "dog," etc.) who is being beaten, degraded, humiliated, and so forth, and not the person in his "actual social identity"¹⁵ as an adult male. By taking a role which is not "really" his "own," the individual reinforces the definition of the situation as "play," "makebelieve," "fantasy," and the like. This enables him to segregate the S&M situation from his everyday life. Professional prostitutes and dominatrixes often point out the apparent ease and rapidity with which clients can slip in and out of these roles.²¹ A good deal of this has to do with keying of the activity. Specialized argot and terminology serves to cue the activity in and out for the participant. Fantasies, of course, are expressed in terms of this language as is apparent from some of the contact ads presented above. It is important to note that fantasies are not unique, private, and idiosyncratic, but instead, involve *culturally general* resources — typifications of persons, of typical actions and situations, and so forth. Fantasies are part of the culture.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper represents an initial attempt to provide a theoretical structure for the sociological study of sadomasochism. Sadomasochistic behavior, like human behavior in general, is most fully understood within a social context. To understand "what is going on" within an S&M episode, one must know something about the culture of the group and how it defines and categorizes people and behavior. This is where frame analysis is helpful. Frames are central components of the culture of the group, through which its members interpret the world. To a great extent the frame itself is structured by the language of the groups, which serves to explain to its members what is happening and to justify their desires, motives, and behavior. Frames tell people what is and what is not proper, acceptable, and possible within their

world. They define and categorize for their members situations, settings, scenes, identities, roles, and relationships.

When people join sadomasochistic groups, or any other kind of group, they are taught not only frames, but also the conceptual tools or "keys" for defining, applying, transforming, and limiting them.

Frame analysis helps make sense of findings that might otherwise be difficult to explain. For example, the apparently puzzling existence in the S&M subculture of "dominant" women and "submissive" men when the larger society to which these individuals also belong prescribes aggressiveness for males and passivity for females may be explained in terms of makebelieve, fantasy, and the theatrical frame. Lack of generalization into the larger world of roles and relationships developed within the sadomasochistic subworld is explained in terms of how behavior is "keyed."

A number of areas that have not been fully developed here could be profitably explored. For example, although we have attended to the structuring and limiting of S&M frames, we have not explored misframings, miskeyings, breaking frame, and other errors and their consequences for interactants. Hollander,²² for instance, provides an example in which an S&M episode was miskeyed with disastrous results. Another issue for further exploration involves the ways in which the language of S&M structures the relations between participants in that world by building in notions of activity and passivity and tying these to particular roles in the interaction. The specific identities of people as "dominant" or "submissive," the ways in which they arrive at a recognition of these self-identities, and the stability of these orientations await investigation.

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