SEXUALITIES

Abstract Plummer (1995) argues that we are living in a time of 'new sexual stories'. This, combined with arguments that we are seeing the advent of the 'sexual citizen', who refuses to be marginalized on account of his or her sexuality, produces new sexual subjectivities that demand recognition and respect. In this article, we report on an investigation of a sexual story that is not new in itself but one that is yet to be fully explicated. This story is one involving dominance and submission. A hermeneutic phenomenological analysis (Ricoeur, 1981) of World Wide Web sites concerned with sadomasochism was conducted to examine the discursive resources drawn on in this paradoxical world. The findings are discussed in relation to the 'transformation of intimacy' (Giddens, 1992) and rise of the 'sexual citizen' in late modernity.

Keywords hermeneutic phenomenology, sadomasochism, sexual stories, World Wide Web

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A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Investigation of the Construction of Sadomasochistic Identities

Plummer (1995) argues that we are living in an age of new sexual stories. Sexual stories are not merely the productions of individual *storytellers*, but rely on *coaxers, coercers, consumers, readers* and *audiences*. However, perhaps the most important requirement is an interactive social world in which the story is received and reproduced. As Plummer states, 'tellings cannot be heard in isolation from hearings, readings, consumings. When can a story be heard, and most especially, how is it heard? A voice with no listener is silence' (1995: 25). So stories 'have their time' and tell of the rise of 'life politics' (Giddens, 1991). It is difficult to imagine the coming-out story of today being elaborated in the 1950s, and stories of child sex abuse were completely ignored just 20 years ago. Plummer (1995) notes

that at the turn of the Millennium, there is a cluster of narratives around the theme of sadomasochism, and conjectures that perhaps this constitutes the rise of a new sexual story.

   In this article we examine the elaboration of this narrative, highlighting issues it raises about human sexuality and interpersonal relationships in late modernity. Our aims are threefold. First, to look at evidence for a transformation of intimacy and the rise of the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992). Second, to explore resistance to this story within the context of developments in sexual citizenship (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Evans, 1993; Richardson, 1998, 2000; Weeks, 1998) and arguments about institutionalized sadomasochistic power structures (Chancer, 1992). Finally, we explicate the development of this sexual story through a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis (Ricoeur, 1981) of World Wide Web sites concerned with dominance and submission. It is still relatively unusual to present the analysis of Web-based text; most sex research, and to our knowledge all SM research, is based on the analysis of interview data. However, we believe that Web material offers an untapped textual resource for researchers concerned with the discursive construction of new sexual identities. Despite the beginnings of a transformation of intimacy, sexual identities are, for many people, still a very private affair – only expressed in intimate relationships or safe social networks. The Web offers a degree of anonymity that encourages the expression of the most intimate aspects of sexual life. Furthermore, we believe – following Ricoeur (1981) – that the privileged status of the interview in providing a window to the psyche is mistaken and that the myriad textual sources available all provide valuable information about human nature and therefore warrant social scientific analysis.

The social context of sexual stories

Giddens (1991) argues that in late modernity we are witnessing the evolution of the politics of emancipation into life politics. Plummer (1995: 147) describes the components of life politics: 'a radical, pluralistic, democratic, contingent, participatory politics of human life-choices and differences'. He sees one axis of this new politics in issues of gender and sexuality and the creation of 'intimate citizenship'. For Giddens (1992), this elaboration of new sexualities has been made possible by new technologies that have freed sexuality from its intimate relationship to reproduction. For most women, sexual pleasure has traditionally been linked to reproduction and an inevitable fear of multiple pregnancies, disease and ultimately, death. Through feminist arguments and technological innovation the conditions have emerged in the last 40 years in the West for a break in the link between sexuality and death.[1] This has led, he

claims, to a transformation of intimacy in late modernity. One consequence of this is the emergence of 'plastic sexuality' – sexuality with a focus on pleasure rather than on either reproduction or romantic love. We now have the possibility of relationships based on negotiation, equality and confluent love. Giddens (1992) links this with the rise of the 'pure relationship', and it marks a radical shift away from those traditional relationships based on patriarchal power and inequality. Pure relationships are complex negotiated affairs with open and explicit recognition of each person's desires. They are entered into freely and are abandoned if they do not satisfy the participants' needs. However, Giddens does not propose that the pure relationship is the norm in the intimate lives of most people in late modern societies. He cites lesbian and gay relationships as examples that demonstrate some of the qualities of the pure relationship. He argues that same-sex relationships avoid many of the structural power inequalities that can go unchallenged in heterosexual relationships. Sadomasochistic relationships may also provide a possible prototype of the pure relationship.

The notion of the citizen has existed within sociological/socio-political theory for some time now (Bell and Binnie, 2000). However, Evans' (1993) work on sexual citizenship is widely regarded as the work that moved citizenship studies into the realm of sexuality. Since Evans (1993), the notion of the sexual citizen has gained widespread currency and now demands theoretical attention. In this article we concentrate on the work of Giddens (1992), Plummer (1995) and Weeks (1998) and the formulation of sexual/intimate citizenship developed therein. For Plummer (1995), the development of intimate citizenship entails the recognition of the pluralism of the late modern world. The emergence of new sexual stories brings with it a new attitude to the 'other', who would previously have been either assimilated, ostracized, even destroyed.

Weeks (1998) identifies three themes which he sees contributing to the development of the sexual citizen: (1) the democratization of relationships, (2) the emergence of new sexual subjectivities, and (3) the development of new sexual stories. The democratization of relationships, as discussed earlier, arises in the context of the transformation of intimacy and increasing autonomy within relationships (Giddens, 1992). With this autonomy come 'experiments in living' (Giddens, 1992), transgressive moments providing challenges to normative expectations about sexual subjectivities. The rise of new sexual subjectivities serves to undermine traditional notions of the self and traditional sexual identities. It brings to the fore issues that were previously obfuscated through structural inequalities and the expression of power. We see the development of the 'artist of the self' and an 'aesthetics of living' (Foucault, 1988, cited in Weeks, 1998). With this post- or late-modern shift towards the cultural

creation of new sexual identities comes a need for new sexual stories to make sense of past, present and future living. Identities in this context are understood as stories, or discourses, which both allow and limit the possibilities for sexual expression.

Weeks (1995) argues that all new sexual movements are characterized by two moments; transgression and citizenship. The transgressive moment consists of inventive challenges to institutions and traditions that have sought to exclude this sexual 'other'. These challenges stem from the creation of new sexual subjectivities, which transgress the norms of hegemonic heterosexuality. However, this challenge is not simply an attack but also a call for recognition and respect and with this a demand for rights. This becomes the second moment, of citizenship, a transformation of the 'other' and a new sense of belonging. For with belonging comes the other side to citizenship, responsibility to and respect for other individuals and the wider community. Weeks (1995) argues that both moments are necessary for each other. Without the transgressive challenge any call for citizenship is likely to be unheard but transgression alone cannot provide the recognition, respect and rights being fought for.

While there has been criticism of Weeks' arguments about the politics of sexual citizenship (Bell and Binnie, 2000), particularly concerning the perceived conservative (assimilationist) move from transgression to citizenship, we believe that Weeks' arguments, if properly conceived, need not be so regressive. Gamson (1995) has articulated the dilemma perfectly with regard to the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender versus queer debate, concluding that the communities need to engage with *both* identity movements and queer politics if they are to realize political success. There is no doubt that if Weeks' (1998) position is conceived as a movement from raising awareness, through transgression, to rights and responsibilities, through citizenship, then there are legitimate political concerns about the conservatism of such a political strategy. However, we understand Weeks' moments in a dialectical relationship, as Weeks (1998) himself argues, both being necessary for the other. This dialectical relationship is akin to the relationship between ideology and utopia advocated by Ricoeur (1986), in which ideology is that aspect of the social imaginary concerned with identity preservation and utopia is that aspect concerned with rupture, novelty and difference. If the first of these two moments is seen as a utopian mechanism for challenging and extending the (frequently conservative) ideological responsibilities that result from rights claims politics, through the act of transgression, then we have the potential for a radical queer politics of citizenship.

Tales of dominance and submission

All stories must have 'their time' to be heard and we argue (along with several others including Giddens, Weeks and Plummer) that the start of the 21st century is a time for stories of dominance and submission. Sadomasochism can be seen in:

- Film (e.g. *Blue Velvet*, *9 ½ Weeks*, *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down*, *Wild At Heart*, *Quills*, *Sasayaki* [*Moonlight Whispers*])
- Television (e.g. *Twin Peaks*, Calvin Klein Advertisements, *League of Gentlemen*, *Coupling*, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* and numerous 'late-night' documentaries)
- Music (from The Velvet Underground and REM to Twisted Sister, and from Robbie Williams, and Kylie Minogue, to Eminem and Marilyn Manson)
- Literature (e.g. *Coming to Power*, *Consensual Sadomasochism*, *Leatherfolk*, *Leathermen Speak Out: An Anthology on Leathersex Vol. 2*, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, *Screw the Roses, Send me the Thorns*, *SM101*, *The Topping Book: Or, Getting Good at Being Bad*)

and so on: stories of sadomasochism are everywhere. Academic attention has also turned to S/M. Although there has been academic interest in this topic for many years, this has been principally medical or psychotherapeutic concern with cause and treatment (see Taylor, 1997, for a review). More recently, academic writers have recognized the role that sadomasochism may have in enabling us to understand more about sexual life in late-modernity (Giddens, 1992; Plummer, 1995; Weeks, 1998). In addition, there appears to be increasing public awareness of sadomasochism (see Chancer, 1992; Ehrenreich, 1986, for further discussion of these issues).

Furthermore, a strain of the feminist movement has endorsed S/M identities (starting with the lesbian S/M movement *Samois* in the early 1980s and developing through the work of Pat Califia, Susie Bright, Camille Paglia and others writing today). This is important for S/M has been a key battleground within the feminist movement with some feminist writers condemning sadomasochistic practices for their role in (re)producing oppressive patriarchal practices. However, the writers just mentioned have recognized and argued for a distinction between consensual sadomasochism within egalitarian ('pure'?) sexual female/female, male/male and female/male relationships based on mutual trust and non-consensual violent (in its broadest sense) experiences within unequal and often abusive relationships.

The challenge of sadomasochism

Although the start of the 21st century may be considered to be a time for stories of dominance and submission there is still substantial opposition to

this sexual story. 'Operation Spanner' in the UK and the imprisonment of adult gay men engaging in consensual S/M sex is one clear example of institutional resistance. Mr James Rant, QC (the trial judge in the Operation Spanner case) stated that the defendants had to be 'protected' from themselves and that it was the role of the law and courts to draw 'the line between what is acceptable in a civilized society and what is not'. Furthermore, in later legislative discussions (Law Commission Consultation Paper No. 134 on Criminal Law: Consent and Offences Against the Person) it was argued that 'it is not enough to rely simply on the right of self-determination of the victim to do what he likes with his own body' (12.4, p.40). Other more recent cases in the UK and US further demonstrate the considerable resistance that exists to this sexual story. For instance, the recent case of the 'slavemaster' in the US, who allegedly used S/M chat rooms on the internet to lure his victims to their deaths, has been used by the media to demonstrate the problem of sadomasochism and blur the boundaries between consensual sexual acts between adults and non-consensual acts of violence perpetrated on others.

However, opposition is also apparent from arenas other than the legal. There is a long and continuing tradition of the pathologizing of sado-masochism by the medical and psychotherapeutic professions. Historically (since 1886 at least – Von Krafft-Ebing, 1886), psycho-medical perspectives on S/M have been concerned with understanding it as psycho-pathology. Originally (but all too often today) studies of S/M were concerned with extreme (invariably) non-consensual acts. Psychological analyses of these non-consensual acts were then applied to consensual sadomasochistic sexual acts. Sexual sadism and masochism are still classified as psychiatric disorders within both the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (1994 – DSM IV) and the International Classification of Diseases (World Health Organization, 1992 – ICD-10). Furthermore, like homosexuality some 20 years ago, sado-masochistic sex is considered alongside rape and child sexual abuse as individual sexual pathology. S/M practitioners may find themselves under scrutiny from either the mental health system or judicial system (for offences against the person or aiding and abetting assault) when engaging in consensual sexual acts.

Socially constructing sadomasochism

Taylor (1997) and Taylor and Ussher (2001) present research which explores the discursive construction of sadomasochism. Taylor (1997) provides an excellent review and critique of traditional psycho-medical approaches used to theorize S/M. Taylor further presents a brief overview of a discourse analysis of his interviews with 24 S/M devotees. Taylor and Ussher (2001) build on this and present a more thorough analysis of the

text generated by the S/M devotees they interviewed. They present four definitional discourses (consensuality, unequable balance of power, sexual arousal and compatibility of definition) for S/M and a number of discursive constructions of S/M including S/M: as dissidence, as pleasure, as escapism, as transcendence, as learned behaviour, as intra-psychic, as pathological and as inexplicable. Whilst this work is to be welcomed and our findings build on and expand several arguments first explicated by Taylor and Ussher, our analysis provides some challenges to this work which we discuss throughout the article. More recently, Beckman (2001) has also added to the literature exploring the social construction of S/M. Through participant observation and informal interviews with S/M devotees Beckman (2001) identifies five discourses/'motivations' for engaging in S/M practice including: S/M as an alternative to 'normal genital sexuality', as 'safer sex', as an exploration of the lived body, as a possibility to transgress gay and lesbian stereotypes of sexuality, and as a possibility to experience the transformative possibilities of the lived body. The work of Taylor, Taylor and Ussher, and Beckman is groundbreaking and provides a first move away from the traditional essentialist theorizing of sadomasochism and the presentation of important empirical data on this under-researched topic. Our findings will provide support for the main discursive constructions described by Taylor and Ussher (2001) and Beckman (2001) and the rejection of an essentialist notion of sexual identity.[2] In addition, we aim to further theorize S/M through an analysis of the nuances present in this sexual story and an attempt to understand the resistance to such a story of sexual citizenship in late modernity.

Analysis

Our analysis comes from material garnered from a systematic search of the World Wide Web sustained over a period of two years. We believe that the Web offers an untapped resource for the analysis of text, particularly that concerned with sexual stories. As Gill (1998: 15, cited in Beckman, 2001) states 'Having a Web site changed their lives . . . The Web now gives . . . the anonymity to explore the dark side.' We used three search engines (Yahoo, Excite and Google) and a very wide variety of search terms in order to identify sites concerned with sadomasochism in its broadest sense. The terms were: BDSM (B/D), body modification (piercing), bondage, birching, chastisement, caning (cane), discipline, dominance (dominant, domination, dominatrix, dominatrice), erotic power exchange (EPE, power exchange), flagellation, fetish (fetishist), kinky sex (kink), masochism (masochist), master (mistress), obedience, piggy play (piggy boy, piggy girl), pony play (pony boy, pony girl), punishment (punish, punisher), puppy play (puppy boy, puppy girl),

restraint (restrain), sadism (sado, sadist), sadomasochism (sado-masochist), slave (slave training), S/M (SM, S&M), spanking (spank, spanker), submission (submissive), tawse (tawses, tawse stories). It is accepted that this list is not exhaustive but it was thought that this encom-passed the most widely used terms in S/M communities. In addition, links from sites identified were followed to other sites until a particular thread was exhausted. This has been shown to be an effective strategy in searching the Web for information (Ackermann and Hartman, 2000). A large amount of material was discarded at this initial stage (mostly commercial pornography sites displaying advertisements for magazines, books and videos) as it simply presented pictorial advertisements for pornographic videos and books. This material, while undoubtedly worthy of analysis in its own right, has minimal textual commentary with the (limited) text simply stating how 'good' or 'explicit' the content of their products. Visual texts (which were mostly commercial pornography sites) were excluded from this analysis for a number of reasons. While there has been tremendous growth in visual sociology in recent years, the lack of genuine analytic procedures relating to the analysis of images remains a problem (Flick, 2002). Instead, it is necessary to rely on the application of hermeneutic procedures from textual analyses (with the need to trans-form or describe images as text prior to analysis, Denzin, 1989). The complications inherent in such an analysis practically precluded such work from this study. However, even when these sites were excluded our search generated an enormous amount (in excess of 100,000 words) of text. The text collected came from a very wide variety of sites. This included material from: personal accounts, support networks, health education sources, lesbian and gay resources, lifestyle magazines, fictional writing, quasi-academic writing, academic writing and pornographic writing. The text concerned heterosexual, homosexual, male and female S/M practices and lifestyles and we did not seek to make any distinctions on these grounds in our analysis.[3] Details of the sites used for quotations are given in the *Webliography* (Stein, 1999) at the end of this article. No claims could be made for this (or anyone else's) Web-based material being representative of some population as the Web is a *practically* infinite and constantly changing resource (Ackerman and Hartman, 2000). However, this is not a problem for this study as we seek to explore and re-present the hermeneutic phenomenological structure of S/M practice/lifestyles whilst resisting claims that this is the only way that these things may appear to a reader. The principal sampling strategy employed in this study was to maximize variation, rather than maximize the quantity, of text in line with the strategies of phenomenological research outlined elsewhere (Polkinghorne, 1989). The principal analytic strategy was to uncover meaning through intensive reading whilst engaging with the processes of

epoché and *imaginative variation* (Moustakas, 1994). A persuasive account can then be produced of the meaning of the text in its appearing to the reader for other readers to interrogate and judge. Our analysis will have done its work if other readers find the accounts resonate with and/or expand their own understandings of this phenomenon.

Our analysis principally draws on the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur (1981), 'His work provides a theoretical position that recognizes the embodied being-in-the-world of human beings that is beyond and pre-exists language, *and* an interpretative understanding of human nature through language' (Langdridge, 2003). As Langdridge (2003) argues, neither of these two elements is unique in itself. Existential phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Sartre, 1995) recognizes the embodied nature of humanity while certain strands of discourse analysis demonstrate an interpretative understanding of people through their use of language (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987). However, these positions traditionally have been opposed or, at the very least, seen to be incompatible.

Ricoeur identifies two methods, in a dialectical relationship, that may be employed when attempting to understand meaning in text: a *demythologizing* (or empathic) element and a *demystifying* (or suspicious) element. Demythologizing is the process of empathic engagement with a text where we seek to identify the meaning through a 'fusion of the horizons' of reader and text. We engage with the text bringing our *pre-understanding* (Heidegger, 1962) into play with the meaning inherent in the text. The demystifying moment is one of suspicion, where we seek to identify the meaning hidden beneath the surface for here the real significance of a text is never immediate and transparent (Ricoeur, 1970). A hermeneutic of suspicion may come from many sources including psychoanalysis and Marxism. However, Langdridge (2003) argues that a better hermeneutic comes from work in discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1993) and/or other discursively oriented approaches in psychology that draw on speech-act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). With all of these discursive approaches to psychology the purpose is not to understand the meaning in text, as one might do in an empathic phenomenological analysis, but to uncover the function, construction and variation of the text. Langdridge (2003) argues that using a hermeneutic of this kind in conjunction with an existential phenomenological analysis enables the researcher simultaneously to capture the phenomenological meaning of the text while recognizing the variability and ambiguity of language use.

Ricoeur makes a further distinction between spoken and written discourse. Here we see the word *text* used to indicate any discourse fixed in writing. This distinction is important, for in writing we see text

detached from the conditions of spoken word – *distantiation*. There is no longer a human agent with whom one can engage dialogically. Instead, the text enters the world of other texts and transcends the conditions of its own production. The here and now of two speakers engaged in dialogue is lost with the consequent loss of *ostensive reference*, that is, loss of the temporarily agreed reference within the dialogue to a world beyond language. This is clearly important for the analysis of text from the World Wide Web, for here we witness distanciation as we cannot identify authorial intention but must instead rely on understanding as the 'fusion of the horizons' of the reader and text. The motivation of the author of the text becomes unimportant as we rely on the application of hermeneutics to understanding meaning, as the text is distanced from the author and enters the world of other texts. This is not to say that we do not recognize a world beyond or pre-existing the text, but only that we cannot (analytically) go behind the text to infer authorial intention (see Langdridge, 2003, for more on the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur).

Two principal discursive themes emerged from our analysis. These were concerned with (i) rejecting pathology and (ii) explicitly negotiating consent. The discursive theme concerned with rejecting pathology demonstrates rejection of perceived psychological objections to S/M including: (1) The belief that S/M is the product of childhood trauma and (2) The argument that S/M practitioners cannot form satisfactory relationships. Furthermore, this discourse acts to identify resistance to the psycho-medical discourse used to subjugate dissident sexualities through the use of a notion of pluralistic sexuality. In addition, we argue that this discourse operates amongst some to set norms, extend a notion of 'vanilla' sexuality and function as a form of 'surveillance' (Foucault, 1981, 1985). The consensual discourse is concerned with explicit contracts (oral and written) which set the psychological boundaries for good sex. In addition, we argue that these contracts offer up a challenge to institutionalized power inequalities through parody and provide an example of one element of the 'pure relationship' in action. It is important to be clear that we are not arguing that the identification of these themes is new. S/M communities have engaged with these ideas for some considerable time. We aim to explore these themes in detail, identifying consistency, variation and both the demystifying and demythologizing moments. We also want to locate these discursive themes within the context of the 'pure relationship' and development of the sexual citizen in late modernity. Finally, we seek to identify the *specific* sources of resistance to these discursive themes while simultaneously recognizing how they can serve to forge a new social movement and illuminate important aspects of sexual politics in late modernity.

Rejecting pathology and gaining citizenship

This discourse is primarily concerned with the rejection of a number of perceived misconceptions about sadomasochistic identities. Foucault (1976) argued that language is used to subjugate dissident sexualities. Desires are transformed into discourses (religion, medicine and so on) so that they can be controlled. The aim is to consolidate and promote sexual hegemony (patriarchal vanilla heterosexual monogamy). Psychiatric diagnoses serve not to describe and explain but construct and control sexuality for the service of political and economic imperatives.

One of the primary concerns of S/M writers is with dispelling the myth that people become interested in S/M through childhood trauma or psychopathology. In the following extract we see a discourse that attempts to undermine the psycho-medical discourse of pathology principally propounded by the medical and psychotherapeutic professions. The text rejects the opinion of the 'expert' but does not dismiss it out of hand. Instead, when engaging a demystifying hermeneutic, we see the use of a disclaimer ('Although helping professionals may have good intentions . . .') in order to construct an account that is critical while working to ameliorate the direct effect of that criticism. Furthermore, by invoking a scientific discourse in defence of S/M ('But for now, that proof does not exist and to attribute perversions to any one cause is, at best, misguided.') the text functions to undermine the psycho-medical discourse that seeks to pathologize S/M practices.

> Without impugning their sincerity, those who offer a miracle cure for one's sexual nature generally do more harm than good. Although helping professionals may have good intentions, on questions of taboo sex, they often are just as misinformed as everyone else . . . This doesn't rule out the possibility that science may one day find a genetic cause or a predisposition in some individuals to be kinky; or that we may learn much more about the cause and effect relationship between early childhood experiences and sexual orientation. But for now, that proof does not exist and to attribute perversions to any one cause is, at best, misguided. (Brame, 2001)

This excerpt is unusual in that it involves discussion of the cause of sadomasochism. Exceptional text, such as this, is often of great value in a hermeneutic analysis as it articulates a minority position opening up the possibility of understanding the dominant (silent) discourse. We found very little text concerned with S/M identities where the search for cause (or causes) was a central concern (which can be contrasted with early – circa 1970s – discourses of homosexuality). There was text, similar to this extract from Brame, which straightforwardly rejected the psycho-medical causal discourse but very little that demonstrated a desire *to identify* a cause (or causes) of S/M sexuality. There are a number of reasons why this may be the case. Firstly, the extension (rather than outright rejection) of the

'natural' (vanilla) may produce less need to search for, and cling on to, causes. Secondly, the increasingly public nature of sexual identities (and development of new methods of communication, such as the Internet) enables people to seek out others with similar interests. This will reduce individual isolation that may lead to self-analysis and provide sympathetic social networks willing to exchange sexual stories. In addition, the increasing academic interest in sexuality and, most importantly, public access to such academic material (invariably through the Web) may provide a mechanism for S/M communities to directly resist the psycho-medical expert discourse in a way that was not available to early lesbian and gay activists. Finally, the lack of a discourse concerning the causal origins of S/M may be important through the *active* refusal of S/M communities to articulate such a discourse.[4]

Our analysis differs from that of both Taylor and Ussher (2001) and Beckman (2001) here; they present an argument for S/M devotees exploring the causes of their own sexuality. Our differences with this argument are subtle and may simply stem from the different sources of data we analysed: interviews and the Web. However, it should be noted that Taylor and Ussher do not report the questions they asked[5] to prompt the extracts they quote although Beckman does, stating that she asked about the causes and motivations. Questions about the causes of dissident sexualities are quite likely to produce accounts reproducing dominant psycho-medical discourses of individual pathology and this should be borne in mind in future research.

Extending the norm   A further aspect of the discursive theme concerned with rejecting pathological explanations can be seen to be concerned with establishing norms for sexual practice around, for instance, safety and risk management. The accounts examined operate to delimit the nature of sexual activity that is (socio/psycho-logically) acceptable within S/M communities. What they highlight are the radical differences that exist within different S/M communities. We see (now) dissident communities with very few limits pushing almost all-possible sexual boundaries with scant regard to or explicit rejection of 'safe, sane and consensual' play. This is in contrast to the dominant position of those engaged in 'kinky' S/M play which must always be 'safe, sane and consensual' and yet others who seem to move very little beyond vanilla sexuality and seek to locate their practices firmly within a more traditional view of sexuality.[6] Indeed, we see subscription to 'safe, sane and consensual' practice as *the* key condition for membership of the broader (public) S/M community.

The dominant communities advocating S/M within a 'safe, sane and consensual' framework emphasize the extension rather than outright rejection of vanilla sexuality in an attempt to present S/M as just another

'natural' sexual variation. The 'buying-in' of an essentialist notion such as 'natural' speaks to the ongoing debate in lesbian and gay politics between the essentialist and constructionist positions (Bell and Binnie, 2000). We see here that at least one group within the broader S/M community, like some groups within the lesbian and gay community, is ready to accept an essentialist position on sexuality rather than subscribing to queer theory's constructionist critique (Seidman, 1996). Many S/M practitioners and communities advocate a notion of pluralistic sexuality in which 'kinky' S/M practices may be incorporated into more widely understood vanilla sex.

> There are – or can be – elements of domination and submission in this. Different couples will show this to a greater or lesser extent. Indeed, there can be elements of domination in 'vanilla' sex. Does it matter who goes on top? Who initiates an encounter? To some, these demonstrate the balance of power in a relationship. To others, that is incidental. For most couples, bondage is an addition to 'vanilla' sex, rather than a replacement. (Mycroft, 2001)

> Using electricity for erotic stimulation is far from common practice within the S&M community. The usual devices are: Violet Wands, Telaxacisors, cattle prods (dangerous!), and magnetos. The equipment must be carefully checked to make sure it is in working order and the operator, experienced. Dangers of burns and accidental electrical stimulation of the heart make this a practice worth staying away from. (S&M Practices: Safety and Risk Management, 2000)

Contrast this restrictive account of electro-play with this one for bondage:

> Perhaps the most common practice found in S&M activity, bondage comes in many forms and is perhaps the most risk free in terms of HIV transmission. In terms of accepted community standards, bondage is a fairly common movie and television theme. (S&M Practices: Safety and Risk Management, 2000)

Or for an even more conservative position that provides no challenge to vanilla sexuality:

> This is Scarlett Hill, a small, passionate enterprise founded by spanking devotees and supported since by equally nice, normal, like-minded adults around the world . . . Contrary to popular myth we don't have horns or horns and we come in all shapes, sizes, ages, occupations, races, sexes, political affiliations, etc. (Scarlett Hill, 2000)

These extracts illustrate the development of the notion of pluralistic sexuality where sadomasochistic sexual practice is seen as an extension of vanilla sexuality rather than an outright rejection of it. We see talk of incorporating S/M practices into one's vanilla sexual life '. . . who have decided to incorporate "kinky" practices into their erotic lives'. Here 'kinky' operates to invoke a playful motif moving the reader beyond vanilla sexuality in a gradual fashion rather than marking an abrupt departure

from normative sexual practices. In the penultimate paragraph there is reference to 'accepted community standards' and talk of S/M in film and television. We do not see a transgressive oppositional identity invoked here, but instead a call for acceptance. This is a clear attempt to position S/M practice as an aspect of sexuality that is undoubtedly 'safe, sane and consensual', not pathological at all, and therefore worthy of respectful sexual citizenship.

It is worth considering the potential success of this attempt at a claim for citizenship. For, as Plummer (1995) states, there needs to be an inter-active social world ready to hear a sexual story and this may well not be the case with the story of S/M. The story is certainly being told and encouraged through the media. However, it is clear that policy makers and enforcers are not ready to hear this story. Operation Spanner is testament to that. While many sexual citizens may be 'embraced' by the state, the S/M sexual citizen is one that is just *too sexual*, too transgressive of norma-tive sexual expectations, to warrant citizenship. And this rejection comes no matter what responsibilities (such as safe, sane and consensual practice) are adopted by the community. For, as Bell and Binnie (2001) argue, when discussing the conservative gay agenda of authors such as Bawer and Sullivan, the conservative element in sexual citizenship invariably margin-alizes the sexual/erotic, instead emphasizing love, tenderness, responsi-bility and care. It is perhaps not surprising then, that the call for citizenship from some S/M communities is not being heard when the call is one that necessarily foregrounds the sexual/erotic.

Transgressing the norm   However within other texts we witness an attempt to present S/M as a significant transgressive oppositional identity. This is in line with Taylor and Ussher (2001) who argue that S/M is '. . . positioned . . . as oppositional, not so much to patriarchy but to what many devotees referred to as "vanilla sex"' (2001: 303). Within these aspects of S/M communities we do not see the attempt to locate S/M practice as an extension of vanilla sexuality. Instead, there is outright rejection of vanilla sexuality and no attempt to engage with explanatory psycho-medical discourses. S/M practitioners often invoke a spiritual discourse of new primitivism (as seen in the writings of Fakir Musafar) and/or a historical (reminiscent) discourse of earlier less repressive times. And through use of this discursive theme S/M practitioners may find a route into citizenship through the role of this discourse in ameliorating the sexual in S/M practice. This broadly transgressive discursive theme is clearly in opposition not only to the discourse of hegemonic vanilla sexu-ality but also to the discourse of S/M as a kinky playful extension of vanilla sexuality so dominant in S/M communities today. Resistance to this more challenging discourse can be seen from within S/M communities and

there is clearly an ongoing battle between the two positions. The following quotations are from reviews of 'The Q Letters' by Sir John in which the S/M master Sir John (in)famously recounts 25 years of his sadomasochistic sexual history that frequently challenge any straightforward notion of S/M as 'safe, sane and consensual' play.

Contrast:

> The Q letters is quite possibly the worst written and most unrealistic presentation of S/M in a non-fiction form I have ever encountered. From the first lovingly written vignette describing his first rape to the seemingly endless parade of emotionally unstable self destructive women that grovel at his feet, the Q letters reads more like a disturbed adolescent's wet dreams than a serious presentation of the S/M lifestyle. (TheMadMagi@Yahoo.com, 1999)

With:

> It is possible to complain about how 'Sir John' (yes it's a silly name) played with 'emotionally damaged' or self-destructive woman and thus condemn the book for that reason. This misses the point of the book. It is a memoir. Certainly by the cosseted standards of the late [18]90s/early [19]00s the author was 'unsafe', both physically and emotionally. But this was before the internet, Madonna, and confessional talk TV; and long before the current 'safe, sane and consensual' mantra worked it way into dogma. (Harris, 2001)

Our analysis demonstrates the complex and contradictory nature of S/M communities in which some elements seek to merely extend 'everyday' sexuality whilst others seek to provide an alternative that challenges and confronts. The text demonstrates some rather passive calls for acceptance within the wider sexual community. However, there are also elements that function in a transgressive way (Weeks, 1995), challenging hegemonic vanilla sexuality. With the call for acceptance we see an early move within sections of these communities to the second moment described by Weeks of a desire for citizenship. This may be of political concern for S/M devotees seeking greater recognition, respect and rights. Smith (1992) identifies two discourses of identity within queer politics: the responsible homosexual and dangerous gayness. She argues that these two identities have been produced through homophobic legislation in order to work with, rather than against, discourses within lesbian and gay communities. The attempt is to encourage self-surveillance and demonize anyone who transgresses the expectations of the white, middle-class, male heterosexual community. In the foregoing text we can see evidence of the responsible homosexual (or in this case responsible sexual citizen) operating within S/M communities. There is self-surveillance (Foucault, 1976) and a reaction against the dangerous (or *dissident* sexual citizen, Bell and Binnie, 2001) S/M discourse. As Smith (1992) points out, the danger of the discourse of the responsible homosexual is that it acts to oppress the

community from within, bringing a right-wing discourse to the heart of the gay community. It is therefore important that the second movement towards full sexual citizenship described by Weeks (1995) must include a move within society towards the discourse of the transgressors rather than a move from the transgressors (be they queer or S/M activists) to a discourse of responsibility and self-surveillance. There is clearly a section within the broader S/M community engaged in this transgressive moment although which voice will be heard, if any, is as yet unknown.

Explicitly negotiating consent

Sadomasochistic sex, unlike most other forms of sexual activity, invariably draws on explicit (rather than implicit) contracts between participants. Here our analysis supports the work of Taylor and Ussher (2001), who first explicated this discourse, by theorizing (1) how this discourse offers an example of one element of the pure relationship, and (2) the relationship of this discourse to resistance to sadomasochism. As Taylor and Ussher point out '. . . boundaries of consent were negotiable and often shifted during a session.' (2001: 298). The pure relationship involves explicit negotiation, especially that concerning power within the relationship. We can see examples of this within the text we analysed. Practitioners emphasized the consensual negotiated nature of their sexual practices and relationships. Furthermore, S/M communities, through their invocation of the 'safe, sane and consensual' mantra, emphasize not the *desirability* but the *necesity* of open communication within sadomasochistic relationships. Within this discourse we see an example of one element of the pure relationship and information for how this can be successfully managed within a relationship.

> Probably the most important concept in erotic power exchange is the concept of negotiation. Partners negotiate about their fantasies, feelings, needs, dreams, barriers and hidden desires. This is not the 'if I give this I get that' type of negotiation. The objective is to exchange your feelings, barriers and fantasies in an open and honest way. The partners try to establish where they meet, how much common ground they can cover and what are absolute 'no go' areas. In fact there is no other relationship that requires so much communication. Both partners, dominant as well as submissive, share an equal responsibility towards themselves and each other. (Fetish Information Exchange, 2002)

Interestingly, it is in this notion of explicit contracting that we can begin to discern the roots of resistance to S/M. Threats to institutionalized power inequalities can be seen to emerge with the elaboration of explicit contracts. In the extract following ('Contract of Submission') sadomasochistic practitioners can be seen to parody the traditional marriage ceremony that the first wave of feminists so vehemently challenged. If one engages in the process of imaginative variation and replaces 'The Master'

with husband and 'the slave' with wife the resemblance to traditional marriage ceremonies is astonishing. Replace the 'she/her' with 'he/him' and vice versa and see how it further attacks this institution. It is no wonder that there is resistance to such power play when it seeks to offer a challenge to such powerful institutions.

Contract of Submission

I, DT, henceforth referred to as 'The Master', and I, RG, henceforth referred to as 'the slave' enter into this agreement of our own free wills. The slave grants to the Master ownership and use of her body and mind, and promises to obey all instructions given to her by her Master or his appointed agent, without hesitation or complaint and to submit to all his demands willingly. The slave will wholeheartedly seek the pleasure and well-being of her Master above all other considerations, and renounces the right to her own pleasure, comfort or gratification except insofar as the Master permits or desires it. In addition, the slave will strive diligently to re-mould herself in accordance with the desires of her Master and will seek always how to better please him. She renounces all rights to privacy or concealment, and undertakes to answer truthfully and completely all questions put to her by her Master. It is understood that any failure on the part of the slave to comply fully with the desires of her Master shall be regarded as sufficient cause for possibly severe punishment. In return, the Master promises to love and cherish his slave, taking all necessary precautions to safeguard her mental and physical well-being and ensure her general state of happiness. (Contract of Submission, 2001)

One aspect of the rhetorical force of irony is to make a point more strongly than it could be made in straightforward discourse. But another use of the trope (Hutcheon, 1994) is to increase the play of ambiguity; a way of 'having one's cake and eating it'. Ironical humour allows the consideration of a veiled possibility that is shielded by some other manifest meaning. Parody has been a powerful weapon in the queer activist's arsenal. In the context of drag as parody, Irigary argues that to be a mimic is to 'assume the feminine role deliberately . . . so as to make 'visible', by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible . . .' (Irigary, 1985: 76, cited in Tyler, 1991). Here we see S/M playing with power, at an individual and structural level and successfully undermining 'what was supposed to remain invisible'.

Self-surveillance, discussed earlier, may provide an explanation for 'internal' resistance, as members of S/M communities internalize wider negative societal views and police themselves and others within their communities. Resistance to the erotic amongst the sexual citizen may provide an explanation for societal 'distaste' of S/M identities. However, Chancer (1992) provides yet another, very convincing and not incompatible, explanation for why there is specific 'external' institutional resistance to sadomasochistic sex play. Chancer (1992) argues that society

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is riddled with oppressive sadomasochistic structures (organized along patriarchal and capitalistic lines) that produce a culture steeped in dominance and submission. Through an analysis of personal relationships, schools and the workplace she gives numerous examples of oppressive sadomasochistic relations. Chancer (1992) is clear to mark out the differences between liberating S/M play and institutionalized oppressive S/M structures. For Chancer the distinction rests with understanding the highly structured and fixed positions of sadist and masochist within institutionalized sadomasochistic relationships. Within these relationships the roles are fixed and based on *conditions* of power which cannot be challenged without the risk of dire consequences. In contrast, S/M play is understood within the context of a consensual relationship in which dynamic power relationships may be explored within *limits* that are always open to challenge and change. Paradoxically, she argues that sadomasochistic sex play may serve to undermine institutional 'sadomasochism' by *playing* with issues of power, dominance and submission. Sadomasochistic sex play may therefore highlight and challenge structural inequalities based on dominance and submission. The story of S/M produces resistance as it makes visible previously invisible institutionalized power inequalities. By attacking powerful institutions, like marriage, through playful parody this aspect of the story of S/M can be seen as a battleground for the transformation of intimacy.

Conclusions

New sexual stories tell us much about society and the story of sadomasochism is no exception. Discourses of sexual dominance and submission certainly illustrate elements of a 'sexual story' in the making. Sadomasochistic practices are a good example of plastic sexuality, entered into entirely because of the pleasure they afford. The emphasis on safety and the clear negotiation of the nature of 'play' makes explicit elements of the 'pure relationship'. Paradoxically, the stress on equality, mutual respect and understanding of the other is more explicit in sadomasochistic than in vanilla sexuality, where participants are expected to know the needs of the other intuitively. This is a world where nothing is as it appears at first glance, and the code of 'play' is used to separate real from fantasy interactions. As a play has a backstage area in which actors shed their roles, so the S/M play has a meta level where players stand back from the characterizations adopted for the purpose of sexual excitement. Negotiation and confluence are made explicit in the elaborated 'consensual' discourse.

Our analysis draws on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur through a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of Web-based text. The benefit of this approach is that, unlike most social constructionist methods such as

discursive psychology (Edwards, 1997; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), the text reveals a world beyond itself. S/M practice is embodied and to deny or ignore this is to miss a crucial element of the phenomenon. However, while existential phenomenological psychology recognizes the embodied nature of humanity and incorporates this into any analysis most phenomenological methods take language at face value rarely seeking to uncover hidden meaning. We believe the hermeneutic phenomenological approach advocated by Langdridge (2003) and employed in this article provides a possible way beyond these problems.

Our analysis highlights the cruelty, pain and humiliation that is essential to stories of dominance and submission, and with this the first transgressive moment that Weeks (1998) identifies is upon us. Stories of S/M break boundaries, as the taboo topic of sexual violence is placed centre-stage. The second moment – the claim for citizenship – can be discerned in discursive themes rejecting pathology and invoking an extension rather than rejection of vanilla sexuality. But the necessity to rebut this psychopathological reading perhaps indicates one internalized aspect of resistance to this new sexual story. Proclaiming 'there's nothing wrong with me!' acknowledges the power of an accusation, an internalized dialogue in which steadfast defence is necessary. This can be understood in terms of Foucault's notion of surveillance; the exercise of disciplinary power in which individuals critically survey their own intentions. And of course, the existence of accusation is not imaginary. There is external resistance to the S/M story that is real enough. This may be partly due to misunderstanding, but our analysis suggests a more active and problematic resistance. It lends support to arguments about resistance to the sexual amongst sexual citizens and also Chancer's (1992) contention that stories of dominance and submission parody power relationships in society, by drawing attention to them. S/M play underlines the fact that people can get sexual pleasure from the infliction of pain and the humiliation of others. This leaves us all with the uncomfortable worry that some in 'legitimate' authority might restrain, beat and punish for their own gratification. If this analysis is correct, then paradoxically, this aspect of sexual citizenship is likely to be accepted only in the most civilized of societies.

Notes

1. As Giddens (1992) correctly notes the emergence of HIV/AIDS provides a new link between sex and death. However, although HIV/AIDS re-introduces a link between sex and death it does not represent a return to the past as it does not discriminate between the sexes. This is not to say that HIV/AIDS affects all sections of society in equal measure. There is no doubt that HIV/AIDS has a disproportional impact on already oppressed communities (gay men, intravenous drug users and so on). However, the

impact is not gendered in the same way and therefore does not represent a return to the past with a simple and pervasive link between sex and death for women.

2. It is worth noting that our analysis begun before the publication of Taylor and Ussher's 2001 article in *Sexualities*. Our analysis thus provides independent support for the main constructions they presented for understanding sadomasochistic sexual identities.

3. In this analysis we did not specifically separate lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender S/M material from heterosexual S/M material. We acknowledge that this fails to recognize the intersection of sexuality and S/M practice but felt it appropriate within an initial analysis of this kind. However, it is important that future work recognizes and explores the important role that sexual orientation may have within the S/M communities.

4. Thanks to Dr Paul Flowers for this insightful suggestion.

5. In a private communication Taylor and Ussher state that they did ask about the perceived causes of S/M as this was both a practical and theoretical concern of the researchers and therefore their study.

6. Vanilla sex (or sexuality) is that which is understood by S/M practitioners as non-S/M 'conventional' sex. We adopt the use of this term throughout this article both in recognition of its use by S/M communities and also because it facilitates discussion of S/M and 'conventional' sex without recourse to terms that may pathologize or stigmatize either position. We recognize that some S/M practitioners may describe vanilla sex in a negative way but a large number of S/M practitioners and other communities (for instance, the wider lesbian and gay community) use this term without any pejorative meaning.

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