

**THE POWER THAT BINDS:
QUESTIONING NORMATIVE DOMINATION IN CONSENSUAL
SADOMASOCHISTIC RELATIONSHIPS IN ROMANIA**

BY
IULIA VĂCĂROIU

Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Supervisors: Professor Jean-Louis Fabiani
 Professor Daniel Monterescu

Budapest, Hungary
2013

ABSTRACT

Despite widespread mediatisation, consensual sadomasochism is still a taboo for mainstream society because it plays at the limits of pleasure, pain and sexuality. Within this thesis I trace past these limits and reveal how practitioners of BDSM discursively enforce a non-hierarchical interchange of power, contesting the mainstream's conventional ideas of domination. Throughout history, civilization has imposed itself through fear, and by doing so has always constructed its domain on an unsteady foundation, one prone to revolutions. In my research on practitioners of consensual sadomasochism in Romania, I show how these individuals question civilization's normative domination and manage to reach mainstream society's goal to control the body. By rationalizing the practice, creating a community, and enforcing power through contract and play rather than conflict, BDSM eliminates the need for revolting against the authoritarian figure as it leaves room for its practitioners to name their dominants on their own terms. In short, although one individual within a rapport is the dominant, the other is not implicitly powerless. However, perhaps the best answer to how this equilibrium of domination is maintained lies in a play session's temporality. Power works within SM's confines of consensuality because all play must eventually come to an end.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply thankful to Professor Jean-Louis Fabiani for his patience and guidance throughout the making of this thesis. His advice and encouragement were the glue between my paragraphs, helping me stitch theories together and directing me in my research. I am positive that without his help I would have gotten lost along the way more than once. I am also indebted to Professor Daniel Monterescu, who not only dispensed valuable advice, ideas and moral support in my final weeks of writing but also helped me in approaching my subject from perspectives that I had not considered previously. I am grateful as well for the candidness and trust that all my interviewees demonstrated in discussing their private lives, qualities that my research could not have done without in the context of my chosen topic. Lastly, I would like to thank one of CEU's unsung heroes, Thomas Rooney, who's guidance in the field of academic writing proved essential in making this thesis come to life and stand on its own.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1. Insight into the Practice.....	2
1.1 Definitions and Research Questions	4
Chapter 2. Conceptual Framework.....	6
2.1 Civilization and Somatic Power.....	6
2.2 A Commodification of Sexuality	9
2.3 Authenticity vs. Simulacrum	13
2.4 Negotiating domination, desire and death drives.....	15
Chapter 3. Methodology	18
3.1 In-Depth Interviews	20
3.2 Discourse Analysis.....	22
Chapter 4. Research and Analysis	23
4.1 Cogito ergo Sum BDSM.....	24
4.1.1 <i>Confronting the mainstream</i>	29
4.1.2 <i>A capitalist rationale</i>	31
4.1.3 <i>Coffee, Tea, Shibari: On the Collective Nature of SM</i>	33
4.2 Feel for the Game.....	37
4.2.1 <i>Playing at Danger</i>	38
4.2.2 <i>The Stage: Gender and TPE</i>	41
Concluding Remarks.....	45
References:	49

INTRODUCTION

It was the 1st of May 2013 in Bucharest, Romania. Labour Day promised empty streets. Half of the city's population left their dusty neighbourhoods for the seaside or for picnics; the other half decided to get partially tanned by strolling through the parks. Already some weeks into my fieldwork, I was oblivious to the national holiday. My only interest was that I had scheduled an interview for 3 PM that day.

I met Velia¹ (23 years old) through another interviewee. We had spoken on Facebook a little bit, and then on the phone. I was a bit surprised by her voice, which had perhaps the sweetest tonality I've ever heard. Her appearance matched it: petite and all smiles. We met, shook hands, and started walking. We decided to go the nearest park and sit on the grass there and talk. When we arrived the park was bustling with activity despite half of Bucharest's population being away on their short vacation. We switched to English so that our conversation maintain some degree of invisibility, but despite this, our discussion still seemed exposed due to the context. You wouldn't expect two girls sitting on the grass on a sunny day to talk about sadomasochism. I've been studying the topic for two years now, and the situation still seemed comical to me. However, like any decent contemporary sitcom, the contrast between context and subject grew even more throughout the interview while Velia, smiling and giggling, explained how she is currently fascinated with flaying². Children in the background were running around enjoying the first taste of summer while she described in detail the kind of special scalpel needed in order to flay someone, and how the act should be performed. Velia's innocent demeanour, the park, sadomasochism - I couldn't help but laugh at the combination.

¹ In order to maintain the anonymity of my interviewees, all names given here are fictional.

² Flaying = peeling skin off; skinning.

“It’s always the quiet ones” sounds like a perfectly fitting moral to that story, but it also has some social undertones. Media’s portrayal of contemporary sadomasochism is rather gruesome and dark, and because of this unilateral perspective, practitioners also receive a bad image. There is, however, much more depth to this praxis than first meets the eye.

CHAPTER 1. INSIGHT INTO THE PRACTICE

From pathology to taboo to widespread mediatisation, sadomasochism has been debated from so many angles that it is easy to lose sight of its metamorphosis throughout history. Studying each age and its perspective on the subject leaves the impression that the practice has not changed and that only our understanding of it has shifted. It is true that the present decade is the most tolerant of sexuality in recent history, but historical perspectives are perhaps the weakest tool in understanding contemporary sadomasochism. Take for example the Freudian theory of natural masculine aggression (Freud [1920] 2005; 1962), which is often transmuted into an issue of gender, a question of domination over women. Freud often invites those who wish to challenge this claim to stand in front of history before attempting to do so and expect to be opposed. However, history, although being a perfect tool for tracing the roots of norms, does not always provide an accurate web of meaning for all cases. In the case of contemporary sadomasochism, power and powerlessness are redefined, and their relation to gender reconstructed on a more equal footing, and this is exactly what this thesis aims to explore.

Sadomasochism today is very different from the stories of the Marquis de Sade ([1791] 2009) and von Sacher-Masoch ([1870] 2009), and crucially different from the acts of the Roman Emperors Caligula and Nero, known for their violent behaviour and cruel actions. History is thus an improper prism through which to debate the praxis presently. Classical

work on the subject is outdated as well since most of the literature has treated it as something purely pathological (Krafft-Ebing [1886] 2008, Stekel [1929] 2010, Ellis [1933] 2008), whereas contemporary sadomasochism shies away from instinctual behaviour in its very discourse. Modern research has outlined several new theories, particularly with the practice's newfound presence within the media. From dozens of erotic books to pop and rock songs to movies and TV shows, sadomasochism has gained a foothold in popular culture, ripping itself from the stigma of pathology. The problem, however, with this widespread mediatisation is that it ends up treating the practice as a simple kink activity (Newmahr 2011, 2010). This innocent perspective, although perhaps not as harmful as the pathological theories of the past, still takes from the complexity of the praxis, its strict rules, its community, and not in the least from the diversity of acquired skills necessary to become a practitioner (Newmahr 2010).

These two tendencies, although highly different, have one aspect in common – the fact that both treat sadomasochism as something entirely individual. Nevertheless, the practice has a communal nature. Historically, SM has always presented itself as a collective practice, whether through the existence of special clubs or bordellos or through the erotic literature of the 17th and 18th centuries (Weinberg 1987:50-51). In my research as well, I have found several informal and even formal networks of practitioners tied through means of virtual social networks and forums. Although there is no physical space that brings these practitioners together, they do form a community or, using Victor Turner's ([1969] 1991) concept, a "communitas". Using this term, practitioners of consensual SM are defined as a group by sharing the following: "a feeling of homogeneity, equality, camaraderie, and lack of hierarchy", particularly visible, DeMello writes, in groups defined by a liminal phase (DeMello 2000:23). This idea of liminality fits perfectly into the current state of contemporary sadomasochistic practice because, although still being regarded as deviant behaviour, its presence within the media is clearly bridging the way to the mainstream world.

1.1 DEFINITIONS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Before moving on, it is crucial to define the practice within the context of this research. “Consensual sadomasochism” (from here on abbreviated as SM), represents “activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use, among two or more people, of pain, power, perceptions about power, or any combination thereof, for sensory or erotic pleasure.” (Newmahr, 2010:315, 2011:18).

In this definition lie the main reasons why the classic psychological literature on the subject is rendered obsolete in contemporary research. Firstly, today’s sadomasochistic practice is consensual. Whatever ignores that aspect is considered rape or mental violation, the same way it is outside the practice. Secondly, consensual sadomasochism requires the conscious acceptance of all parties involved in its activities. In this line, two of the most important rules among SM communities are known under the acronyms of SSC, which stands for “safe, sane and consensual”, and RACK, which means “risk-aware consensual kink”. Hence, every practitioner needs to be aware of the physical and mental dangers involved in SM if he/she is to be considered a part of that community. Thirdly, the practice is not necessarily sexual. Contemporary consensual SM is often referred to as BDSM, which is a triple acronym for “bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadomasochism”. Practitioners can be involved in one, two or all three of these aspects, and their *scenes* (as their play sessions are called) can simply involve psychological play, thus dismissing any sort of physicality, or just play for the sake of sensory perceptions. This, of course, does not mean that the practice has no erotic value, just that it cannot be reduced to sexual prelude alone.

Newmahr’s definition attempts to bring a more mainstream approach in studying sadomasochism, transporting it from the study of the pathological to the study of a contractual

practice. Power relationships become here a case of consensus rather than conflict since all parties involved in any SM rapport are supposed to give their consent beforehand. Domination and submission are thus negotiated openly, revealing a highly reflexive group of practitioners. This contract or, better phrased, open negotiation leads to my first research question: how does consensual sadomasochism question normative domination? Closely related, my second research question asks: how are power relationships in BDSM affected by gender?³

While perhaps initially a strange question, this latter one is closely embedded in the practice's structure. BDSM is a praxis of contrasting individuals and each rapport, whether it is made up of two people or more, has to have (at least) one person as dominator and one as submissive. Male dominators are referred to as "doms", whereas female dominators are known as "domme" or "dominatrix"⁴; both are also known as "tops". Both male and female submissives are referred to as "subs" or "bottoms". Apart from these roles, the BDSM typology of practitioners also includes "switches", which is a title that easily reflects the types of rapports which can be expected to involve these individuals. Switches change between the roles of dom/domme and sub, either by preference or depending on the role their partner wishes to adopt. They achieve the same level of pleasure in pursuing either role, but are usually prone more towards one or the other.

Considering this typology, within the practice of BDSM, gender-based power stereotypes are overcome. The man is no longer the natural aggressor, the woman no longer

³ I do not presume that my conclusions will act as a universal answer to these questions. I have done my research on Romanian practitioners of SM solely, so I am bound by geographic and cultural limits to only speak so far as my fieldwork permits me.

⁴ More often, however, in the Romanian community the title "domina" is used to refer to female dominators.

the weaker sex. My thesis aims to delve further into this aspect, as well as the contractual nature of consensual sadomasochism and its simulacrum of power.

CHAPTER 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Overall, the last two to three decades have witnessed significant changes in the socio-anthropological study of sexuality, a field that had been far too limited by psychiatric works, religious movements, and a moralising society. Michel Foucault ([1976] 1978) argued that sexuality cannot possibly be restricted to a naturalised meaning in contemporary Western society. By separating the sexual act from its role of reproduction, Foucault attacked the Freudian notion of repression and tried to show how society was trying to create docile bodies, disciplined by an excessive need for civilization ([1976] 1978:139, 141). As reflexive as ever, modern man sees through this societal domination, but by questioning it, enforces it, the same way he does with other social constructs such as “power” and “gender”. Practitioners of consensual sadomasochism, however, do not aim to confront these notions, merely to adapt them to the practice. In the *History of Sexuality* ([1976] 1978), Foucault believed that power does not necessarily have to mean repression, and that sexuality, weaving through the social body, created productive power relationships, a fitting notion within the study of this praxis.

2.1 CIVILIZATION AND SOMATIC POWER

When looking at the expanding mediatization of SM, one wonders how this turn towards conventionalizing formerly considered perversions affects society. Could it be considered a part of the civilizing process?

Historically and culturally, sexuality is undergoing significant changes. Elias ([1994] 2000) writes about how the sexual drive, ever since the late Middle Ages, has been institutionalized and placed under strict control (153). Using feelings of shame and fear, the civilizing process has embedded a divide between the public and private spheres of human existence, turning sexuality into such a habitual taboo that we hardly even perceive it anymore (160). The reasons behind this control are simple: civilization implies discipline, which, in its own turn, means the “control of inner drives, control that to be effective has to be internal” (Giddens 1992:18). In proceeding so, the civilizing process has created docile citizens, who do not act on whims or desires. In Freudian terms, the *pleasure principle* is overcome by the *reality principle*, which is not so much an exterior imposition as it is an inner drive for self-preservation within society (Freud [1920] 1995:10). It can be said thus that the civilizing process has been internalized.

“Docile” is, on the other hand, a misleading term as it seems to state that all self-reflexion on the part of the individual is absent. The inhabitants of this civilization might not be aware that their society’s values are internalized methods of civilizing control, but this does not equal total conformity, at least not in practice. Moreover, making sexuality a subject of discussion, whether it was for the sake of repressing it or not, gave it a dense reality. As Giddens states, “sex is not driven underground in modern civilization. On the contrary, it comes to be continually discussed and investigated” (Giddens 1992:19). Perversions as well, by being catalogued as such, were suddenly made into objects of analysis and given a degree of visibility that they had never had before. The repressive civilizing process produces a paradox in the end because it aims to create docile bodies, but offers them too much information to even hope for docility. When a subject becomes debatable, it is suddenly open to revolutionary ideas.

All this, however, does not mean that modern civilization exerts no power. Although its scope is limited because of the paradox it creates, there is still an obvious attempt at control over individuals. Foucault develops one particular machine of power extensively, namely *biopower* and the closely related ‘anatomy-politics of the human body’ ([1976] 1978:139). Bryan Turner ([1992] 2002) in a more recent approach on this type of control exerted by modern civilization, which has been transported to contemporary times as well, names it “the somatic society”, which is body control-obsessed. However, rather than discussing it as an autonomous machine, Turner delves into the micro areas, the docile and not-so docile entities that uphold this obsession with controlling the body and that ultimately fail to achieve their scopes. Whether he writes about medical techniques and technologies, feminist discourse defending individual control over their own bodies or the realization of one’s imminent demise, the somatic society cannot achieve its goal as it has no power over death or entropy (Turner [1992] 2002).

However, where civilization has failed to gain control over the body, consensual sadomasochism has achieved that somatic power within its own society through somewhat unusual, yet obvious means: the contract. Be it written, verbal or merely implied, the contract of a contemporary SM rapport settles in detail the type of power relationship that can be expected. Both dominant and submissive have to agree to the connection before anything can happen. Civilization attempted to tell individuals what they should and should not do with their bodies, but contemporary SM relationships gives them the option not to do whatever they want with their bodies but to pick a side: the one controlling or the one controlled. In the rapport, the dominant controls the submissive so that, in the end, neither has control over their own bodies, but one individual at least has full control over the other. Is SM then, because it contradicts civilization’s aggressive attempt at somatic control, a contradiction to the civilizing process also? Or is it, because it achieves civilization’s goal of controlling bodies, a

part of the civilizing process? To answer is not only difficult because of the obvious contradictions but also because sexuality as a whole is still struggling to reclaim physical power over the body. Yes, it is being constantly redesigned, but it is also losing autonomy as it becomes an instrument towards the individual's self-identity. As Giddens argued, "[Sexuality] is something each of us 'has', or cultivates, no longer a natural condition which an individual accepts as a preordained state of affairs" (Giddens 1992:15). What this means is that sexuality is becoming an individual characteristic, and no longer something defined communally. This, of course, sounds wonderfully utopian, but in the face of civilization's collective sovereignty, can an individual characteristic maintain its strength? Regardless of the answer (arguments can be given in support of either cause), both sexuality in general and consensual sadomasochism clearly belong as subjects in the debate on the civilizing process, whether they are directly or inversely correlated.

2.2 A COMMODIFICATION OF SEXUALITY

SM rapports are by definition relationships of power. Jessica Benjamin even calls it a "pure culture" of domination – a dynamic which organizes both domination and submission" (1988:52). In most societies or groups, authority requires enforcement or other tactics of subjugation. In consensual SM, however, when a rapport is made, the authority figure is accepted immediately by the submissive (this, of course, if the practice's rules and the bottom's limitations are maintained). In *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin (1988) discusses both power and sadomasochistic relationships. She traces the source of male domination psychoanalytically, showing how it is socially constructed, but fails to discuss how this stereotype is not a norm in the practice of sadomasochism. Benjamin discusses only female submission and why it might be internalized: why a woman, confronted by a strong

contemporary feminist discourse, might choose to willingly submit to a man. I use “might” because Benjamin, in her work, only focuses on *The Story of O* by Pauline Réage (1955), a fictional novel, as her main case study. While I do not want to dismiss *The Bonds of Love* because its author introduces some truly fascinating theories, I still believe that anthropological research might contribute to the study of consensual sadomasochism more. First of all, *The Story of O*, although receiving significant praise in the BDSM community, does not provide an accurate description of the activities that take place at an SM party/gathering since its story is highly sexual. As mentioned before, and demonstrated by several ethnographic works (Newmahr 2010, 2011; Williams 2006, 2010; Beckmann 2009; Langdrige & Barker 2007), SM scenes, particularly when staged in a public context, often do not have a sexual nature. Newmahr (2010) describes the confusion between consensual SM as a social practice and erotic prelude eloquently:

The failure to distinguish between SM as a social phenomenon, on the one hand, and private sadomasochistic sex on the other, obscures the complexity of SM. Further, the oversimplification of SM as being “about sex” reinforces the pathologized assumptions about the nature of desire, arousal and eroticism. (Newmahr 2010:328)

The Story of O is an erotic novel above all; hence it is not the most accurate source for describing female submission in general. Apart from that, Benjamin focuses on just one type of relationship in which the man is the dominator, and the woman the submissive, and does not look into the different rapports that the practice of SM entails. My thesis aims to explore these elements that Benjamin has omitted, and look at both male and female domination and submission.

Considering contemporary mediatisation of this body practice, consensual sadomasochism has become something that is publically tolerated by contemporary society,

but this is mostly due to what Andrea Beckmann (2009) refers to as the commodification of sexuality (126). However, public discourse, she demonstrates, still evokes stereotypical myths related to the practice, correlating BDSM with torture, violence, and the lack of any consensual feature. This form of mediatisation is inherently tied to consumerist society's portrayal of power, as something transparent, located in a certain commanding individual (Hunt and Wickham *in* Beckmann 2009:129). From the Middle Ages, passing through history, kings and nobles were exchanged with given hierarchies. By constructing power as a source of inequality and violence, modern society can only view the play of power in consensual SM the same way. The practice of BDSM, however, is at all times characterised by a negotiation of authority, inherently based on mutual consent, and thus, has a strong foundation in equality among its practitioners (131-132). Power and powerlessness, Beckmann argues, are superficial concepts in comparison to “conventional power arrangements” as the submissive, although lacking power officially, is never helpless. He/she essentially sets the limits of the relationship (132).

Lynn S. Chancer (1992) delves deeper into the significance of power in consensual sadomasochism, focusing on how hierarchy and unequal power are overcome within the practice. She does, however, warn that even though rapports such as professor-student or employer-employee are essentially characterised by the same aspects of power, SM relationships require several more conditions to be met (Chancer 1992:2). One of the critical aspects of BDSM rapports is that both parties, whether dominant or submissive, are attached to each other through a strong physical and mental connection. Such a bond is also deeply ritualistic, power and powerlessness being contractually-formed characteristics, and not aspects that one is born into due to any kind of socio-economic factors (3). But perhaps the most fascinating characteristic that makes the practice of BDSM essentially different from

any other hierarchical relationship is its consensual nature and the fact that the submissive individual takes part in making the rules. Like Beckmann, Chancer argues that, whereas in society the strong are those who regularly impose limits and set conditions, in consensual sadomasochism limits are composed by all parties involved in a rapport (5).

Chancer uses her life experience in talking about sadomasochism. However, the relationships that she uses to create a framework were never the kind that I defined previously; they did not fit into the practice of BDSM. They were, however, she argues, a play of domination and submission, and of sadistic and masochistic behaviour. She posits that sadomasochism does not belong more to one group than another, but that it characterizes the whole of humanity, and is encountered often throughout our history. Although in my study I will primarily focus on one group rather than SM as a widespread characteristic of human nature, Chancer's arguments prove that the subject can be crucial in understanding the way power and gender work, and understanding society in general since, as she argues:

sadomasochism refers to a ritualized pattern that in and of itself does not discriminate by race, class, sex, ethnicity, or sexual preference. Part of its complexity, as we shall see, is that a man can be a masochist as well as a sadist, a woman sadistic as well as masochistic (even though, of course, sadomasochism becomes gendered within a particular historical context); similarly, sadomasochism is not exclusive property of straight or gay persons, or of a particular national minority, or of a caste. (Chancer 1992:10).

This aspect of humanity is all-embracing, and does not discriminate. Considering all this from a micro point of view, it can be argued that the practice of BDSM creates a society thanks to its non-judgmental nature, its strict rules, which can be viewed as norms and morals or at least as guidelines, and thanks to its redefinitions of gender and power. Relatively easily, a study of this practice can reveal much about wider society.

It should not, however, be understood that the sadomasochistic characteristic of society is exactly the same as contemporary consensual sadomasochism. An important differentiation needs to be made here. Beckmann (2009) suggested that the media's portrayal of SM as a violent and non-consensual practice was due to consumerist society's depiction of power and sexuality. Chancer (1992) goes deeper into this representation and looks at how sadomasochism has emblazoned itself as a social structure within society through the institutionalization of patriarchy, a concept tied strongly to unequal relationships and male domination. She argues that "in the case of patriarchy, a tendency toward sadistic exercising of power and masochistic experiencing of powerlessness has been bifurcated along the lines of gender, with each side symbiotically requiring services only the other can provide" (Chancer 1992:33). Considering all this, it is easy to understand how in spite of mediatisation, consensual sadomasochism still maintains its deviant nature within wider society. This is because it is confused with classic sadomasochistic features, with institutions that limit and imprison.

2.3 AUTHENTICITY VS. SIMULACRUM

I have previously mentioned rules and typologies, but there is another essential typology that appears discursively, that of "power exchange", a topic closely linked to the practice's erotic nature or self-imposed lifestyle. Most BDSM rapports are defined by *Erotic Power Exchange* (EPE), whereas the practice is only manifest within a couple's sexual life. The other type, better related to an SM lifestyle, is *Total Power Exchange* (TPE). In this latter category of BDSM relationship, both dom/homme and sub adopt a 24/7 type of rapport, which means that both remain in their respective roles constantly (or at least this is what is expected of them).

Many practitioners, however, are reluctant about TPE rapports as they bring into discussion the topic of slavery because they assume the complete control of the dominating party over the submissive. However, complete control is a subjective variable, and one which transforms TPE into a personally-defined type of relationship. Newmahr (2011) delves further into understanding how this contractual imbalance of power can exist, whichever the form. She argues that these performances of power are essentially symbolic. The scenes are meant to create the impression of authenticity, and, thus, many practitioners try to maintain appearances and “perceptions of power differences outside of SM scenes” (Newmahr 2011:71), although this is usually met with some form of paradox or cognitive dissonance as most practitioners of BDSM do not necessarily act in real life the same way they do in an SM rapport. As she explains, “unlike in improv or other kinds of performance, the authenticity in SM lies in the extent to which SM participants are able to convince themselves, and each other, of the real-ness of the experience.” (73). Thus, consensual SM requires more than just role play; it requires a certain level of internalization of its ideologies.

Another form of power discourse that Newmahr (2011) writes about is again a verbal manifestation of the practice the same as EPE and TPE. The name of the praxis itself, BDSM, contains a key element in its ideology of power relationships: “domination and submission” (D/s), which is essentially different from simple SM, but represents a crucial element in making the practice seem authentic.

Viewing the play of power in consensual sadomasochism as a simulacrum of the ‘real’ thing can, however, create a confusion as to BDSM’s reality as a practice. Even the linguistics create a surreal set in which the script is discussed beforehand and the consent given, and in which the actors perform scenes. It can be considered the same as reading a book or watching a film, but, as was mentioned before, trivializing the practice does not reveal anymore truth

than spreading the pathologic images of it does. Newmahr writes about a particular rapport she had witnessed in order to shed light on the reality behind this praxis: “even as contexts are (merely) *simulations* of dominance and submission, the pain in their scene was quite real” (61). SM play, however, should not be confused with “the authentic experiences of the narrative with which it engages” (65). It is not the violence or the lack of a consensual nature that historical sadomasochism has known thus far. It is an altogether different species, which needs to be understood within an altered framework.

2.4 NEGOTIATING DOMINATION, DESIRE AND DEATH DRIVES

In terms of gender, SM gives immense freedom because in these types of rapports, the dominant can be either male or female and the submissive either as well. Other than personal choice, there is no other variable. Giddens (1992) writes about “plastic sexuality”, which releases itself from reproduction and makes its scope anti-naturalistic, almost frivolous in comparison: pleasure. Clearly deviant at the time of its introduction considering traditional European habituses, what plastic sexuality did was free women’s sexuality “from the rule of the phallus” (1992:2). Consensual sadomasochism frees sexuality even more than this because it seems to ignore, discursively at least, the male sexual domination stereotype. In SM, women no longer represent the weaker sex. Moreover, as my research into the field has shown, there is no concept of weakness among practitioners of consensual sadomasochism. Several of my interviewees have spoken about the power that submissives have in their rapports. Because it is a contractual practice, *subs* (as they are referred to within the community) can end the rapport at any time and even take part in the formulation of rules. Even more so, they exert an inner strength that creates a powerful sense of respect from the

dominants. There are even submissives who control the entire rapport, and this is called *topping from the bottom* within the practice.

Overall, gender and weakness become superfluous in consensual sadomasochism. Here, however, another paradox takes shape. Because there is no real powerlessness, is this type of relationship based on pure or impure power? To exert power, does one really need the weak? When discussing a contractual relationship such as this, one needs to take into account that a negotiation of domination also implies a negation of it. By becoming contractual, domination and submission turn into pure entities because nothing can contest them, but also turn into impure forms because they contradict the ‘natural’, historical order of power and powerlessness.

All this, however, is based purely on the discursive nature of consensual sadomasochism. If any of the codes or regulations of the practice are broken, then the incident is no longer part of consensual SM. My research has revealed the fact that these rules are indeed followed strictly because any sort of relapse means the immediate expulsion from the community. Also, because these practitioners create a sort of elite in the way they speak about themselves in comparison to *vanilla* rapports (which they use as a term for conventional types of sexual encounters and relationships), there is also a fear of being exiled from this very small avant-garde ethos.

I have so far stressed the complexity and seriousness of the practice while, at the same time, not entering into specific details of what consensual sadomasochism implies. I have used words such as “pain”, “pleasure” and “risk”, which are all very serious, but for those who, still remain blocked within the mere kink perspective, all this seriousness probably seems delusory. For them, consensual sadomasochism is a mere leisure activity. Newmahr’s research (2010), however, revealed that SM relationships have very rich interactions, which distinguish them from leisure activities. She lists six important characteristics: “the need for

perseverance”, the “pursuit as a career” (in this case, however, the term *lifestyle* is used by practitioners), the “effort involved in the acquisition of knowledge, training, experience, and/or specialized skills”, the “durable benefits”, which are recognized by the members of the community, an “unique ethos”, and “personal identification with the leisure activity” (Newmahr 2010:318).

More than this, I would add, by pursuing pain as a means to pleasure, what practitioners of consensual sadomasochism do is embrace desire through the death drive (Freud [1920] 1995). As Deleuze and Guattari describe their concept of “body without organs” through these two drives, so too can SM fit within the concept:

The death instinct: that is its name, and death is not without a model. For desire desires death also, because the full body of death is its motor, just as it desires life (...). Desiring-machines work only when they break down, and by continually breaking down.” (Deleuze & Guattari [1984] 2004:9)

Submissives, by embracing pain, break down in order to achieve pleasure. The dominant’s pleasure comes from the sub’s because he/she knows that this end was reached through his/her guidance and control. Each have achieved their role when this pleasure is attained, and so, after turning desire to death, both drives are fulfilled.

In the end, another paradox is created by these last points. On the one hand, because of its strict rules and guidelines, consensual SM appears as something fitting for rational choice theory. Practitioners seem to make their choices based on rational calculations of risk and chances of pleasure. The same stands true for Newmahr’s (2010) list of six characteristics of serious leisure. It’s as if there is but one recipe to the practice. On the other hand, there is an obvious “feel for the game” (Bourdieu *in* Grenfell 2008:54) as practitioners learn over time all that their praxis involves and only master it later. Although Bourdieu uses the game metaphor to stand in opposition to rational choice theory, what my research has exposed is the fact that

practitioners employ both in describing their participation within the practice. Firstly, they rationalize their membership in order to not only justify and legitimize their activities, but also in maintaining their elite. They are not sexual deviants like others might be because they believe in three normative values, which guide them: safe, sane and consensual. Secondly, their highly-reflexive nature convinces them to easily state that all they know now was mastered over time and they take great pride in this fact. Although usually used in opposition, it appears that rational choice theory and the “feeling for the game” work well together when discussing consensual sadomasochism. However, considering the nature of my research, I will not use rational choice theory, but rather the idea of “rational choices” as I do not intend to map a practitioner’s pattern of behaviour. By focusing on discursive reasoning, I will explain how my informants rationalize their practice in the attempt to justify it and build consensual SM as a serious and intellectualized activity, while at the same time engaging in play, and how these two aspects—rational and playful—work together in questioning normative domination.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

I have mentioned in the introduction that I have been researching the practice of consensual sadomasochism for two years now. The fieldwork for this thesis was done within the academic year 2012-2013, most intensely in the months of April and May 2013, but I have previously researched this praxis for my BA thesis at the University of Bucharest as well, during the academic calendar 2011-2012 (Văcăroiu 2012). My previous work focused on how practitioners of SM discursively justify their practice to overcome cognitive dissonance and how, by employing that discourse within a collective environment, they go beyond the somatic society.

Turner ([1992] 2002) describes how contemporary society is obsessed with controlling the body, similarly to Elias's civilization, but how it fails to achieve it in the end. Starting from this point, I explained how, by creating a verbal manifesto as well as written rules, practitioners of BDSM create a *hypersomatic* society, in which control over the body is achieved. Since physical and even mental control over the body stands at the core of the practice, those who become involved in SM have no choice but to embrace this nature. In order to accept it and overcome any kind of dissonance that might stand in the way of internalizing it, practitioners develop a powerfully intellectualized discourse to stand both as an explanation for others and as a justification for themselves.

My previous research helped me to not only develop a deeper understanding of consensual sadomasochism, but also in creating a network of informants. I initially started my previous fieldwork by reading Romanian practitioners' blogs, which I found quite easily through a couple of Google searches. Once I felt comfortable enough to approach people for a direct conversation, I wrote my e-mail address on one of the blogs as a comment, adding that I am thinking about writing about the practice. I was hoping that the owner of the blog would respond, but, to my surprise, she was not the only one. Soon enough I began receiving e-mails from several people and eventually met them in real life for face-to-face interviews. Through recommendations I met other practitioners and the snow ball effect continued to my recent fieldwork as well.

Having contacts from my previous fieldwork helped me greatly in this current research as I had already developed a sort of status within this network. At the beginning, people were somewhat reticent in speaking to me. In e-mails, the reality of my identity was questioned along with my true intentions. Even after giving proof that I am who I claimed to be, my informants were defensive in their replies, which, they later told me, was because they thought my research would involve passing judgments about them. After putting them at ease

about anthropologists' objectivity, my contacts became much more relaxed and more open to talk about their experiences. Within my recent research, I did not encounter these defensive beginnings anymore. Meeting new informants via recommendations added to my status as an objective researcher and helped me in gaining their trust.

Even though the snow ball effect is widely criticized as being amethodological, I believe that this limitation was unavoidable in my research. Firstly, because the practice revolves around eroticism, it is quite difficult to find people candid enough to speak about this aspect of their lives. Trust as well is something more easily gained when a mutual acquaintance can vouch for your discreteness. Secondly, because practitioners tend to differentiate between their everyday life and this intimate circle, it can prove problematic to recognize members of the SM community. This issue is solved by having informants indicate other practitioners. Thirdly, considering the size of the community itself, it is close to impossible to find practitioners who live in their own bubble. In most of my interviews, my informants told stories or recalled conversations that involved other members of the community apart from the common acquaintance we had, revealing that they knew, sometimes quite well, people that I had already spoken with. In a way, this last point removes one of the main limits of the snow ball effect – that it does not lead to representative data – by exposing a network of practitioners in which, unavoidably, all its members are connected.

3.1 IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

For this thesis, I conducted seven in-depth interviews in Bucharest, Romania with Romanian practitioners. I spoke to both male and female submissives and doms, as well as switches. Two of my interviews were conducted with couples and were an interesting experiment as the interview would turn, at some point, into a kind of small focus group, when each couple

began debating a subject among themselves. This also offered me an opportunity to observe their interaction⁵. I had one more interview via Skype and several conversations in writing with other practitioners via Fetlife (a social networking site similar to Facebook but which is aimed at the kink community).

Previous ethnographic research on the subject of consensual sadomasochism has focused on both fieldwork and interviews (Newmahr 2010, 2011; Beckmann 2009; Williams 2006, 2010), but my research involved only the use of unstructured in-depth interviews for several practical reasons. Firstly, the given research time-frame of my one-year MA was quite limited. I was invited to parties and small gatherings where the practice is discussed (called ‘munches’) by my informants, where I could have observed them interact, but because I was living in Budapest for most of the academic year I could not attend them. However, I believe that having interviews with couples made up for this loss as I was able to observe them interact directly. Secondly, my interest lies mostly in how practitioners talk about power and gender, and how they incorporate their notions into the practice, information that is best revealed through unstructured in-depth interviews despite the practice’s highly experiential nature.

The use of unstructured interviews is two-fold as well. First, relying on discourse alone has its dangers, among these the possibility of encountering and receiving desirable answers. However, lengthy, unstructured interviews gave me the opportunity to not only create a rapport of trust with my informants, but also gave me sufficient material to sift through their discourse and look for possible contradictions, which provided an interesting

⁵ Although I use the term ‘interaction’, I am still construed by the limits of my research to remain within the realm of discourse. I have not had the opportunity to observe practitioners interact during a scene (a term they use to describe their play sessions) during my fieldwork, but I do believe that being present during their discussions provided me with relevant information despite this lack.

element in understanding how they rationalize the practice. Also, hints of cognitive dissonance in their discourse and in their stories provided a source of understanding how normative domination is overcome and turned into a choice. My second point in choosing unstructured in-depth interviews is connected with the complexity of the practice, and the complexity of such notions as power and gender, which no amount of pre-designed answers could summarize in full. As Marvasati (2004) explains: “In-depth interviewers aim to gain access into the hidden perceptions of their subjects” (2004:21). Thus, my aim was not only to analyze the stories that the practitioners shared with me, but to also look into the discursive elements that they might not have been conscious of.

As for the interview guide, writing one proved difficult since with each type of practitioner (be they dom/domme, submissive or switch, male or female) a different set of questions was required. Thus, I picked a couple of topics to look for and designed questions at the moment of the interview, depending on the flow of the conversation, which included issues of power, gender and nativity, as well as others. This method worked quite well since, many times, my informants began talking even without my asking a question, and I believe that shaping the interview as a discussion helped in maintaining my interviewees’ trust. On average, my interviews lasted approximately two and a half hours.

3.2 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

I have so far used the terms “practice” and “discourse” quite loosely. It is true that they have become favourites among contemporary anthropology as a replacement for the “Other”-constructing concept of “culture”, but it is in this case important to understand why these might provide crucial knowledge in making sense of my chosen topic. Lila Abu-Lughod

(1991) argues for the method of “writing against culture” and she views *discourse* and *practice* as two of the best tools modern anthropology has in understanding the modern world (Abu-Lughod, 1991:147). These two concepts, she posits, are a necessary escape from the classic methods of ethnography, based almost solely on sight, on what the researcher saw and thought he/she saw. This standard observational method that anthropologists have employed since the beginning of the field produced only “partial truths” as James Clifford argued (1986:11). Discourse, on the other hand, permits the subject to speak for itself, to make itself known, leaving room for less interpretation and fewer assumptions from the ethnographer (Abu-Lughod & Lutz 1990; Clifford 1986). As Bourdieu (1977) states: “it is understandable that anthropologists should so often forget the distance between learned reconstruction of the native world and the native experience of that world, an experience which finds expression only in the silences, ellipses, and lacunae of the language of familiarity” (1977:18). However, it should not be understood that researching discourse represents a mere reproduction of a monologue. Verbal analysis is required in order to crack the code and gain a *more* correct and detailed perception of the practice and this is exactly what I aim to do in my next chapter.

CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The way civilization is analyzed presently is based so much on rationalization that we almost forget how irrational civilization actually is. Norms and values are man-made, and so is the structure they help construct. As Elias calls it, the “civilizing process” was never a cause of long-term planning ([1994] 2000:365). As if by accident, sexuality was taken as an instrument of exerting control, especially at the hands of Christian ethics, which condemned plastic sexuality. It wasn’t that, at some point in time, a group of people asked for this civilizing

process, the one that we are so proud of in the present. As Elias writes, “civilization is not “reasonable”; not “rational”, anymore than it is “irrational”. It is set in motion blindly, and kept in motion by the autonomous dynamics of a web of relationships” (367). And perhaps this blind motion is the cause for which civilization ultimately fails in achieving complete control. What can then be said of a practice born out of the same instinctual need to control, but which, due to its deviant nature, adopts a rationalized discourse?

4.1 COGITO ERGO SUM BDSM

Although it might seem absurd to vouch for the idea of rational choices in discussing an individual’s motivations behind committing to a practice still considered deviant by mainstream society, rationalization might actually be the key in understanding these choices. One of the criticisms that are most often brought up in sociology is actually a misunderstanding of rational choice theory because it assumes that individuals calculate risks and expected consequences and merely choose the option with the best outcome. This, of course, contradicts the obvious reality of humanity’s impulsive and emotional nature (Hechter & Kanazawa 1997:192). However, the thick model of rational choice theory, proposed initially by Max Weber, posits that behaviour can only be predicted when we know the motivation behind an individual’s choices (194). Hence, social reason is not quite like economic rationality. Despite the fact that I do not use the theory in itself, I believe that the idea of “making rational choices” that I employ cannot ignore the influence of emotions and impulsiveness either. As I will explain in chapter 4.2 *Feel for the Game*, rationalization does not function on its own within the practitioner’s discourse.

In my research on consensual sadomasochism, I have come across two distinct ways of becoming initiated within the practice, both similar however in their rationalization process. The practitioners themselves use the word “initiation” to describe the event, but more when referring to individuals who had never before tried anything of this nature. For some members of the community, as I shall describe, their initiation is a little more ambiguous.

The first group of practitioners is what I call “native”. These are individuals who reportedly developed an interest in sadomasochism ever since childhood. Robert, for example, a 38-year old switch, claimed that he felt sadomasochistic impulses from a very early age:

From an age when I didn’t even know the alphabet I enjoyed pricking myself with rose thorns and looking at the drops of blood. Later, long before I could even start deciphering the depths of religion, I prayed that no one “up in Heaven” would see me. (...) I don’t think I was older than five or six years old then. (...) How do you call it when you’re born with meditative powers? That you’re a psychic or a medium, not that you practice something. The same for me in domination rapports. I don’t practice BDSM. I was BDSM from the moment I was born.

Robert uses his nativity in two ways. First, as a method of overcoming the dissonance between religious expectation (that entity looking down on him from “Heaven”) and his own desires. Secondly, as a way to justify his current interest in SM. This notion of nativity is particularly interesting when placed within a society prone to explaining everything in terms of social constructs and reveals a discourse similar to the one justifying homosexuality. The idea that “natural” trumps “cultural” appears to be a line of reasoning that functions within this practice as well.

Diana, a 21-year old submissive, who helped me to find the best term to name this premature tangency, claimed that she also developed an interest from an early age: “Personally, in my case, I know that it is something native. I noticed my affinity towards sadomasochistic practice ever since childhood, long before I could call it BDSM”. Several

others of my native informants also invoked this interest before being capable of naming it. Nevertheless, one needs to consider the possibility that these answers might be mere desirable responses and not necessarily truthful. Even so, I claim that the validity of such replies is secondary to my argument. More important is the fact that this nativity is given as a justification of the practice and used to rationalize the practitioner's commitment to SM.

The second group, which I call "self-taught", is formed of individuals who only later in their lives became aware of the practice's existence and learned about it before committing to it. Mara (28 years old, switch) told me about her initiation:

At 16, my first sexual experience was like that. The guy was a fetishist. He liked to see me in stockings. We were rockers and wore baggy clothes and pins in everything, but one day I came to school like... there was some sort of party, and I came in a skirt, and he saw me all feminine and went crazy. It all started from one detail. And then he realized he likes wearing stockings too. At that time, being my first experience with a guy, and sexual no less, I thought that this is how things are supposed to be. And then I realized that we were the weird ones because the girls at schools didn't tell stories like this. And I realized that this guy's a weirdo! I had a phase like this, backing away from it all, thinking that he's crazy and look what he got me into! That it's not normal, it's not okay. You know, all that social programming.

Similarly to Robert, Mara went through cognitive dissonance, not because of religious issues, but because of social ones. She later looked back objectively at the whole relationship and realized that she actually enjoyed the sexual aspect of it. She began meeting other practitioners and gave her first experience a name. Both Mara and Diana use the idea of naming the practice as a way to justify it in front of social expectations as if, by naming it, the practice gains a higher degree of reality and a sense of belonging to the mainstream world. After all, what is more mainstream than a name and a definition?

Alex (30 years old, dom) told me that he only discovered his passion for consensual sadomasochism a couple of years ago, but has already developed a rationalizing discourse around it:

I think I see those people [natives] as being instinctual. I think they see BDSM as something that starts from within. I see it more as something cold and calculated and much more natural... as an intellectual pursuit. (...) I think those who discover it as kids express their sexuality through this [BDSM]. They're more true, more genuine... Me, I don't think that my sexual energy is expressed through this. Rather, it animates me. It's like some sort of fuel.

For some practitioners, their rationalization appears to be done consciously. Interestingly enough, Alex does not use words such as “hobby” or “leisure activity”. For him and for most of my interviewees, SM is more than a mere activity, and considering its highly reflexive discourse, it might as well be considered an “intellectual pursuit”. This is closely connected to Newmahr’s (2011) idea of consensual sadomasochism as serious leisure, whose list of six characteristics I described in detail in chapter 2.4 *Negotiating Domination, Desire and Death Drives*.

Although the two patterns, “nativity” and being “self-taught”, differ significantly because of the age difference and level of sexual maturity when the interest in SM became apparent, both groups of practitioners engage within the same legitimizing discourse. Both are forced on account of society’s judgment to rely on powerful arguments to support their practice and their choices. For example, nativity, the fact that the praxis comes naturally to the individual, is not reason enough in the eyes of society, and thus is not enough for the practitioner either. In my interviews with native informants, emotional reasoning consisted of the most passionate arguments, but were outnumbered by logical ones. What this means is that even if an individual commits to the practice on emotional grounds, his or her motivations still are turned into something rational. In this, the notion of “rational choices”

becomes an important argument in how the practice is legitimized, but it is not solely the researcher's instrument; it is also the practitioner's instrument of defending consensual SM.

Regardless of the emotional involvement that the practice demanded during the initiation process, SM, as a praxis that is still considered deviant, contradicts many of society's current moral values. Looking at it in depth, we can actually see that the same mainstream values are kept in rules such as "safe, sane, and consensual", which is one of the most powerful conventions that guides the practice. SM is thus not powered by violence, but by contract. However, on the surface, these guidelines are not immediately visible, and the practice still ends up portrayed from a pathological perspective. The practitioner, knowing full well how others view SM, and being born and raised among the same values, requires rational explanations in order to, firstly, overcome cognitive dissonance when becoming involved within the practice, and, secondly, in order to maintain his or her status within mainstream society. All in all, rationalization appears to guide the practitioner's psyche quite well, especially when motivations are also taken into account.

Past initiation and already fully immersed into the practice, these individuals still rely heavily on rationalizing further choices, such as the side they choose to be on, dominant or submissive. Some practitioners discover early on what their inclination is; others discover it later. Nina, for example, (26 years old, *domme*) first became initiated as a submissive, and only afterwards realized that she enjoys having the control. Now she is the dominant in all her relationships. Others realize that both positions suit them well, such as Robert's case. He also began as a submissive, but when he didn't find a capable partner, he states, he switched to being the dominant himself. Now he oscillates between the two roles depending on his partners.

Choosing this role might be instinctual for some, but as the examples prove, most practitioners adapt to their experiences and relationships, always in search of their true identity within the practice, and always rationalizing their choices based on past outcomes. Nina offered an explanation for her change of position: “When I first experienced the role of the dominant, I immediately realized that this was who I am. Everything seemed natural, as if I was built for this.”

This example leads to another way in which practitioners rationalize and legitimize SM, such as with Robert’s claim that he does not practice BDSM, but rather that he is BDSM. By associating the praxis with their own identity, a characteristic which Newmahr (2010) finds imperative in the pursuit of BDSM as serious leisure, my informants might make it seem like their reasoning is based on emotions alone, but it is actually one of the most important ways to rationalize a practice. When the boundaries between an individual and his/her passion are interlocked, then to deny one means denying the other. Consensual sadomasochism is thus legitimized by the legitimacy and status of the person who practices it.

4.1.1 CONFRONTING THE MAINSTREAM

In many ways, SM discourse does not differ from women’s rights movements. Both demand the right to control one’s body, and in order to meet their demands, both attempt to socially reconstruct the individual. François de Singly (2005) explains this condition by splitting modern man into two circles: one of appearances and one of true self. To become autonomous, the individual cannot remain within the first circle alone. To achieve intimacy, social habit must be abandoned (de Singly 2005:116). In the case of consensual sadomasochism as well, there is a self free of social habit, who is autonomous, but, at the

same time, an inhabitant of mainstream society. To link the two circles, so neither is abandoned, practitioners justify one to the other.

To me, as an outsider, my interviewees rarely mentioned how they see mainstream society, but whenever they did, it was with a dose of reproach. Flavia (23 years old, formerly a submissive, now no longer a practitioner) provided perhaps the best example: “People laugh when somebody makes a joke about rape, but shudder at the thought of BDSM”. Robert also reproached the mainstream world for its lack of tolerance, but also accused some practitioners who give consensual sadomasochism a bad image; in this, he revealed a certain sense of normativity on his part, probably produced by his mainstream identity. He expressed his negative views on people who dress in leather clothes and corsets in broad daylight “on the bus” and on people who don’t know where one practice ends and another begins. To make this last point, Robert gave the example of one individual’s description on a forum dedicated to the subject of BDSM:

I have a post on BDSM forum on some people’s limits. “Limits: animals, cutting...”. Wait a minute, guys, what are you talking about?! I guess I should be glad that your limits don’t include knitting socks. What connection do animals have with BDSM? We’re talking about different things, guys! There was another one there: children. And I guess almond cakes should be another. Wouldn’t that be a limit too? [sarcasm]

Robert made fun of this lack of knowledge about what consensual sadomasochism actually involves, but his demeanour suggested frustration at the thought of such opinions about BDSM. After this sarcastic little outburst, Robert explained that what he was trying to say was that consensual sadomasochism is in no way associated to zoophilia or paedophilia and that any non-practitioner who might read such descriptions might get the wrong impression.

This type of comment, present in several of my interviews, leads to an elitist discussion on what exactly qualifies as consensual sadomasochism and exactly who can rightfully claim to be a part of the community. By speaking so, practitioners surround

themselves with their avant-garde ethos and seem to create an auto-segregating effect through their discourse. Cristi (33 years old, dom), however, disagrees: “We don’t really exclude anyone. You have to be tolerant in this practice, but if you can’t write grammatically correct, then you’re just excluding yourself”. This correlates quite nicely with Alex’s notion of BDSM as “intellectual pursuit”. Cristi does not use the term ‘intellectual’ directly, but he clearly implies the need of a minimum level of education and intellect to be accepted within the community of practitioners.

4.1.2 A CAPITALIST RATIONALE

Perhaps the most active form of rationalizing the practice is making it a way of earning a living or even transforming it into a business. Although my informants were very keen to talk about their practice, they do not seem so eager to initiate others. Robert, the most practised individual whom I talked to, shared several of his experiences. When he turned from being a submissive to a dominant, he found it easier to teach others. However, he quickly developed a sense of oversaturation with the whole initiation process when he could not find a steady partner. Still, after having developed a reputation as somebody who can help others learn about the practice, he kept getting requests. “So, I started asking for money” Robert says, “if I could not connect emotionally to the other person, there wasn’t any real pleasure for me. You pay to learn everything else, so why not this?” So far, in my research, Robert has been the only one to mention money directly as a form of payment for SM services, but he is not the only one who found financial gratification to be among the benefits of BDSM.

There are also many female dominants who, on their sites, offer wishlists with different gifts they would like to receive. Although not money per se, even this involves a certain financial prospect. One male submissive I spoke to mentioned this expectation of receiving gifts as one of the reasons why he doesn’t believe in long-term BDSM relationships:

Honestly, I've never tried a long-term relationship. I would have liked to, but I haven't found the right person. And anyway, I've realized that for such a relationship you need to invest a pretty big sum of money, which I am not willing to accept. Giving gifts is nice, and preparing surprises for the person you love, but to pay to be at the feet of a woman is kind of humiliating. It's not what I want. (Radu, 35 years old)

Livia (27 years old, *domme*) went even further in justifying her dislike of BDSM as a paid service and gives money a sort of autonomy in her discourse: "I think money in the world we live in is an instrument of power and control. As much as we'd like to look away, this notion is deeply rooted. This is why I wouldn't want to offer my submissive the power to use, even if just mentally, this instrument of control over me." For her, getting paid for her services would mean losing her status as dominant altogether.

It is important to note here that although the practice can become a commercial service, it cannot be reduced to this. For most of my interviewees, SM is not something that can be bought or sold. Regardless of the ethics behind this, and the pros and cons, it is interesting how the possibility of making a living out of the practice becomes a way of legitimizing it. Other practitioners do not sell their services, but have found other ways of making money from their skills. Mara, for example, buys hemp and prepares ropes for shibari, the art of Japanese bondage, and sells them. She also organizes parties, meetings and even workshops. She even mentions that she has shared this business aspect with her mother:

About shibari, for example, I even had the courage to tell my mother! I told her: "Mom, I started selling ropes and I need a big pot to boil them in!" And my mom said: "What do you mean you're selling ropes?" Well, it's like this... I have a new hobby... And in this nice wrapping I told her all about it and that it's an art just like painting. Somehow, it made me really happy that I could tell my mom. She really didn't say anything. She remembered this kinky magazine back in the 90's, which featured some people who were tied up and that it was cool and erotic. But she added: "Just be careful not to get into those weird circles with Satanists that tie each other up and beat people!" No, no, mom, of course I won't...

This business aspect seems to trump all others in the rationalizing discourse as it can easily fit within the way the mainstream capitalist world tends to explain pretty much everything. What's a better justification than a business venture in late capitalism? Mara is not the only one to have discovered this aspect. Another practitioner, Rose, who is a female dominant, makes her own toys and specialized equipment and sells them.

There are even individuals outside of the practice, who, thanks to its intense mediatization in recent years, have discovered that SM sells quite well and is easily marketable to a highly sexualized urban audience. They have attempted to organize themed parties but practitioners criticise these ventures due to their lack of authenticity. Alex gives the example of a friend who owned a bar and organized an SM-themed fashion show/party: "They just hung some mannequins on the walls with some rope. That's not a [proper] suspension. And the mannequins were wearing beige lingerie!". This again leads to a segregating effect as it enforces a protocol of behaviour necessary to be considered a practitioner. One must know every inch of these elements, from the right attire at the right time to the proper definitions and rules. Auto-definition is very important when it comes to naming oneself a practitioner of SM, but in the long run, considering the collective nature of the practice, the community is the one that can make or break you.

4.1.3 COFFEE, TEA, SHIBARI: ON THE COLLECTIVE NATURE OF SM

I briefly presented the collective nature of consensual sadomasochism in *Chapter 1. Insight into the Practice*, a character that can be traced down historically even to the Roman Empire. Despite the fact that the practice has changed significantly from those times to the present, this communal nature has not dissipated. Quite the contrary, thanks to modern communication technologies, practitioners have found that their gregarious personality can now be more

easily satisfied. Robert spoke about how these influences made communicating easier and all the difficulties he had had before the advent of the Internet:

[I contacted others] through the newspaper, through listings. You'd write matrimonials: "Young man looking for young woman with the following passions"... But it sounded weird, you can imagine, especially if you used specialized terms. You had to be specific, but also keep it simple: "Looking for young woman who wants to use a young man for intimate needs, for producing pain, for taking orders, for education." So you had to say all these in Romanian, write these things down. Can you imagine my face when I had to give these ads to the post office? Can you imagine the looks I got from those clerk-ladies recently out of communism of '94-'97?

Robert continued to explain how finding other practitioners and, thus, new partners became much easier with the dawn of the Internet. He also mentioned how much he appreciated the possibility of maintaining his anonymity with the help of modern technology, an anonymity which he could not keep when submitting ads to matrimonial listings because the post office clerks asked for your real name and ID.

Nevertheless, despite this convenient change, many practitioners criticize these modern technologies for several reasons. Although the idea of *communitas* implies the lack of a common space in which practitioners can gather or can be found at all times, the virtual world comes closest to representing such a space. However, its intangibility represents a defect for some practitioners. Last year, Elena (30 years old, *domme*) shared her disappointment with me:

I realize that in Romania you cannot speak of a community. At least not a community that goes beyond the virtual. Yes, there are a lot of people interested in BDSM, but nobody organizes kink parties anymore. Those interested in pursuing such things find their partners on the many available dating sites.

The new communication technologies appear to have cut both ways as it concerns practitioners of SM. On the one hand, Robert mentions his appreciation of how easy it has become to find others who share his passions and how easy it has become to gain new information. Elena as well, even in her reproach towards the Internet, makes that point—“there are a lot of people interested in BDSM”—, something that would have not been as obvious had it not been for the easy access brought about by the Internet. On the other hand, the degree of authenticity becomes an issue again. The virtual world might provide assistance in terms of creating a social network of practitioners, but it is seen as being superficial, which is something understandable in the context of such an experiential practice as BDSM.

Many changes have occurred, however, since I spoke to Elena. In the last year, constant parties and munches have been organized not only in Bucharest, but also in other big towns in Romania like Timișoara and Cluj-Napoca. In the last couple of years, Mara has had the chance to meet many members of the Romanian BDSM community and, like Elena, has been disappointed by the lack of themed events, but last year, in September 2013, she organized her first party. Before that, however, she recounted how meetings usually occurred:

There was this site: BDSM forum, where some little gangs formed, who'd meet over coffee. Then one guy would find out that those people met and join them and so on until you have two, three, four... And then they had a private party in an apartment. You'd rent an apartment somewhere and you'd have a party just like somebody's birthday. You'd have some play – the couples which already existed. Those people all knew each other. No stranger would show up.

Even if they were small parties, the snow ball effect seemed to have been working for the Romanian community, slowly adding new members to its events. However, Mara told me, during one such party, a guest who had been invited had not been scanned so well previously. He apparently was a journalist from a famous Romanian tabloid. He secretly took pictures at the party and then the next day he published an article about the event and its participants.

After this, many members of the community decided to take a step back, but Mara told me how in her view this was not a solution:

I realized how important these parties are for some people, especially for those in their 30's and 40's who have a reputation to defend, jobs, families and, despite this, hats off, they continue to risk everything for their passion! So, I started off by organizing small munches. It was casual: thirty people dressed normally in a café. Nobody sees you. That's a munch. No fetish dress code. And this grew. At the beginning we'd have to reserve two tables somewhere, now we have to book an entire café!

Afterwards, for Mara, everything seemed to flow naturally. She began organizing parties and made sure that people felt safe there. She'd talk and scan every single guest and only afterwards individually message each one with the location of the event. At the same time, however, she tried to keep the events open for newcomers. She booked clubs that had no surveillance gear and made sure that nobody took photographs. Now, she organizes parties in different towns and has even planned a shibari workshop for June 2013, where she has invited some foreign practitioners to come and teach the local community.

Communitas, society or subculture, whichever the name, the collective nature of consensual sadomasochism cannot be questioned. However, apart from the fact that it brings practitioners together so they may practice their passion (you need at least two individuals to have a power rapport), what other functions does it have? My interviewees have recalled both practical and emotional reasons. Ovidiu (27 years old, dom) told me that there are some things you cannot do without a team of people, such as complex shibari suspensions, while Mara explained that the chance to meet and talk has helped many to overcome their worries about the practice. This communitas of information and friendship in which practitioners can feel at ease recalls a bit the idea of the contract. By imbuing a sense of safety and equality, the community eases the rapports of domination and submission that the practice entails and erases any feeling of imposed authority or hierarchy.

4.2 FEEL FOR THE GAME

It might seem like I have skipped the point slightly in how I have discussed the practice so far. After all, what does rationalization have to do with power? In my view it has everything to do with it. The rationale behind justifying consensual sadomasochism is the foundation of the contract. The practitioner's discourse, the one that enforces the most important characteristics of making SM a serious leisure activity (Newmahr 2010), as well as the way they actively turn it into a way of earning a living, is their business card. It is how they enforce their status within the community, and how others know to trust them. Without that trust, the praxis could not enforce its power protocols in the same easily-legitimizing way.

The contract in SM is not legal, and rarely is it tangible. It is a convention between play partners. There are certainly cases among practitioners when the limits are stepped over and the rules broken, but in such cases, all my interviewees agree, it is no longer BDSM. When consensuality becomes even slightly debatable, a play session can turn into something different altogether.

Although a highly rationalized practice, consensual sadomasochism is still defined by a feel for the game. Since the contract/convention between partners is in no way legally binding, other forms must be found to create a rapport of trust. Mara told me that she doesn't discuss all the limits with her partners beforehand, that she discovers them one by one in their play sessions:

To me everything happens spontaneously. They flow somewhat naturally. It's also about how you get to know a person and what you can get to know over coffee. You kind of get the feel of it, you know. And then you try something soft at first and then, depending on feedback... I don't like to make contracts beforehand and ask what your limits are and what you like and dislike and what you've tried before and what you haven't. I get the feeling that it's something

artificial, too constructed. That's my style. There are others who ask before. We're not like that [speaking about herself and Cristi]. We work with flair. Of course, we ask for feedback, especially after the first experience.

Cristi echoed Mara's point by saying that "Stepping over the line a bit doesn't mean breaking the rules or someone's limits. There has to be some element of surprise in a scene. Otherwise, the submissive is making all the rules. But when you do talk about limits, the conversation can't be flirting." Both Mara and Cristi agree that a feel for the game is very important: a sense of flair. Dominants in particular have to pay close attention to their submissives' reactions during a session and know when, even if a safeword is not uttered, to stop. Interestingly though, both Mara and Cristi concluded their ideas on a more serious tone, by noting when play ends – Mara by talking about the importance of feedback, Cristi by stating that important issues should not be discussed casually. Even when talking about play, they easily slip back into their rationalizing discourse as a sort of safety net.

4.2.1 PLAYING AT DANGER

Rationalization fits well in describing the way the practice becomes justifiable in the practitioner's mind, but it does not describe so accurately the play sessions common in BDSM. Interestingly, that is the word most used to illustrate consensual sadomasochism: play. It might seem misplaced within this interchange of power and pain, but it is exactly the word used by practitioners, and I believe that it eliminates most of the fearful thoughts that its more serious aspects might generate. Livia wrote about this on her blog:

Beyond any fantasies, which can get more or less metaphysical, the BDSM lifestyle is about play. We play in a relatively safe environment with the power we give unto others. We play with rules more consensually and more equitably than most people play with power in their vanilla world because there, their power games are officially taboo; they're swept underneath

the carpet. They pretend they don't exist and they use them without warning others and without respecting any rules.

By making everything transparent, Livia states that BDSM rapports are not only fair, but also playful. All participants in the rapport have power because they are all equally informed about the rules and regulations of conduct. However, she also adds that "I don't want to idealize the SM world. In practice, many rules are broken and there are "predators" and innocent victims everywhere. On the other hand, the fact that the transfer of power is discussed openly, which is the essence of the game itself, makes people more aware of everything."

Curiously enough, although play, Huizinga ([1949] 2000) tells us, has nothing to do with "any rational nexus" and "is not associated with any particular stage of civilization" ([1949] 2000:3), in BDSM there are clear apparitions of both rational choices and play-like behavior. Nevertheless, how can one distinguish between play and seriousness when both are equally intertwined within the same practice? Gregory Bateson (1954) explains it best with the meta-message 'This is play'. By offering the example of two monkeys engaged in play, Bateson distinguishes between the aggressive bite and the playful nip. No words are spoken in the play between animals, yet both are aware of each other's intentions. The intentionality of play is acted out non-verbally by instinct, and so, in BDSM as well, a play session is defined by, as Mara called it, a sense of flair in which partners know, approximately, what to do and what to expect.

There is another interesting element in play that we usually take for granted, but which is very important in discussing the practice of BDSM. Huizinga formulates it eloquently: "all play is voluntary activity" ([1949] 2000:7). When one out of two refuses to play, then whatever rapport builds between the same two individuals is no longer play. Consensual SM as well, by being at its core play can only be so when all members agree on the rapport.

Even if it is play, however, seriousness is never dispersed completely from the sessions. Newmahr (2010) describes this:

In SM play, flow is generated physically and/or psychologically, through topping or bottoming. Bottoming is more likely to result in observable altered consciousness than topping, but the community is also more highly motivated to recognize altered states in bottoms than tops. The flow experience for bottoms is most frequently called “subspace”. (2010:327)

Although Newmahr writes about BDSM practitioners in the US, my informants use this idea of “subspace” as well in its original English phrasing. The most important issue in this, however, is the fact that dominants are expected to maintain sobriety in play sessions. Submissives are allowed to enter and are actually guided into subspace and so for them the session loses a significant degree of seriousness or, rather, gains seriousness on a different level of consciousness. However, for the dominants, sobriety cannot be escaped completely since the biggest percentage of responsibility within a play session rests on their shoulders.

After all this talk of play, it is easy to remain with the impression that BDSM is not so serious after all, but the two are not antonyms, both in the case of this practice and in general. Don Handelman (1990) describes the common antithesis of play and seriousness:

Westerners commonly identify the ideation of play with the make-believe, with artifice and frivolity, and with the impossibilities of fantasy – and, enamoured of cognitive dualism, compare this unserious ideation with its opposite of the ‘serious’, whose apex is the sacrality of ‘truth’. Sacred truth and frivolous falsehood are among the extreme binary opposites of our modern conceptual universe. (1990:63)

What Handelman suggests here, with a subtle dose of reproach, is that play is not falsehood, merely that that impression has been imprinted in our reasoning. Play has its own authenticity, and does not need to be placed in front of that which is serious to gain importance. Moreover, in BDSM, play is not the same as the play between children. A dose of danger is maintained.

After all, pain cannot be simulated; it cannot be false. In this context, Velia (23 years old, submissive) criticizes the notion of play: “It is not play. It’s the difference between a puzzle and a fucking labyrinth”. Although she discussed the practice with a smile on her face, she refuses to see it in terms of mere play.

It is interesting, however, how even in pain, submissives maintain their agency. Talal Asad (2000) makes a very interesting point in viewing pain differently from its usual designation. For Asad, pain is not necessarily passive, not necessarily defined by a lack of intentionality from the point of view of the individual feeling the pain, but, rather, he sees it as “a kind of action” in itself (2000:31). In consensual sadomasochism, pain is not the body’s sign of dissent against power. By willingly permitting their bodies to be harmed and enjoying this ritual, submissives embrace power. Their pain is a sign of acceptance of the power rapport they belong to, not one in protest. Also, by giving their consent, their pain easily maintains its agency. It is not the mere effect of a cause, but a cause itself.

In this playfulness with pain lies consensual sadomasochism’s authenticity as well. I have before noted how play itself should not be considered falsehood. Moreover, since pain cannot be simulated, BDSM’s authenticity cannot be questioned. Even if we view their sessions as staged performances, “one should bear in mind that many, if not all, activities in social life are framed” (36) as Asad notes eloquently. Even though it is a contractual practice, even though it is play, BDSM can hardly be considered a simulacrum of power.

4.2.2 *THE STAGE: GENDER AND TPE*

Considering the point made previously, I feel I must discuss two final issues, which in view of their social reality differ significantly from play, but which are still set upon a sort of stage. In my previous chapters I discussed how gender itself actively reshapes classical definitions of power. By permitting both men and women to share roles of domination and submission

depending on each practitioner's preference, consensual sadomasochism does not differentiate between the two sexes in terms of power. Discursively, this is a fairly obvious perspective when discussing BDSM. However, in my research, I wanted to dig a little further into this subject, so I proceeded to ask my interviewees if they had felt any form of discrimination within the community or from other practitioners on account of their gender. Mara replied that she had not felt any, but that she had noticed others who did:

I know this very cute male sub. Played with him once. But he's not submissive at all in real life. He doesn't want to be treated like that except within a scene. He was sitting on some pillows at a café once and a Mistress Z. came to him. Mistress Z. acts like a domme by default. Even when she pees she's a domme! But that's just how she is. And she goes over to him and extends her hand. He shakes hands with her, but doesn't get up to offer her his seat or anything and she reproaches him for that. This guy felt attacked; he felt offended. "What's her business with me?! You're not my mistress!" I took the guy to the side and tried explaining it to him: "She wasn't treating you like a sub. She was just acting like a dominant."

By this example as well as others, Mara tries to explain to me how easy it is to feel discriminated within the practice, but how, in actuality, she adds "if you're OK in the head and with your self-esteem, there's no reason to feel like you're being discriminated. Yes, you're submissive, but you're submissive in front of who you choose to be. I choose. Freedom of will". With this last point, Mara enforces two points discussed previously: the importance of the practice's consensual nature and the lack of weakness in a rapport. Each practitioner holds a degree of power in their relationships. There can only be discrimination thus if one party lets go of that power, be it directly or indirectly.

However, it is fairly obvious how gender roles in BDSM can easily contradict gender roles in day to day life. Discursively, both can be supported even in their contradiction, particularly in the way Mara talks about her views on discrimination, but in reality both can clash quite easily. Livia mentions the inconsistency between being a woman and being a

domme: “Dominas just have to assume the status of sluts/nymphomaniacs because it isn’t acceptable that a woman be super-sexualized and still be normal, nor that a woman conduct a power rapport with a man just for the sake of that power.” Laura (22, switch) explains this with her own example. I asked her how she fares as a female dominant considering that she is petite and most likely smaller than her male partners. She answered that she feels superior when tackling somebody twice her size, but that she knows she doesn’t exude power at first sight. “I can’t do anything but perform femininity”, she adds. It is obvious then that in the practitioner’s discourse there is a clear differentiation between gender within the practice and gender outside of it. Even though within consensual sadomasochism being male or female is constructed around a particular setting and stage, a construction which has its own discursive framework, other more stereotypical gender roles still seep in within the framed experience. Power is then redefined in terms of gender discursively and maintained through the same processes of rationalization which I have written about previously. However, this redefinition is easily prone to failure, particularly when the practitioner attempts to satisfy both circles, the exterior (society) and the private (SM).

The second issue that I wanted to discuss at large with my interviewees was the notion of total power exchange, abbreviated as TPE. I had already found out, both from my previous research from 2011-2012 and from reading discussions on forums, that this notion of TPE was abhorred by many practitioners, for some because the notion seemed entirely a utopia and for others because it seemed a practice reminiscent of slavery, the term for submissives in TPE being ‘slave’. Discursively, this is what TPE means: relinquishing all power, eliminating consensus. In terms of authenticity, TPE in BDSM would mean both a more genuine sadomasochistic practice, but also a less genuine one as it eliminates one of the most important characteristics of the praxis – its consensual nature. When I asked my interviewees about total power exchange, I was half-expecting the direction that their answers would

proceed towards, but knowing that the subject was easily debatable, I thought it would lead me closer to how they see power within the rapport. Mara gave me perhaps the most detailed answer, again rationalizing the existence of an exterior circle, which has to be placed in equilibrium with the private one:

TPE exists only during determined periods of time and then it can't be called TPE any longer because it isn't total. It's determined. It's just D/s [dominations/submission]. A more total D/s, let's say. That's my definition of it. And then we can't live in a 24/7 relationship. We can only create moments. After two weeks, he gets tired, he has to go to work. I have a job. So, you can't live TPE. Even Mistress Z. who has a sub and says she lives in a TPE can't live in a TPE. Her sub came home one day and told her he was hungry. Mistress Z. went to the kitchen to make him something to eat. In that moment, there was no TPE. She went to make him food, not the other way around. Things can't be infinite, total. Everything has to be done within limits because that's why "safe, sane and consensual" exists.

Mara's last example fits both issues that I wanted to discuss in this section nicely, presenting both gender in SM and TPE within the only framework they can survive: a temporary one. Livia also writes about this and, jokingly, asks for "a week of TPE, please!" as if it were a coffee. Not only do they redefine the concept of "total", but the power rapport itself appears as something that can be only transitory. This can again question its authenticity, but more interestingly what it creates is a dynamic of domination and equality in which both can survive despite the other.

To construct a bridge between my arguments before moving on to my concluding remarks, what I wanted to show within this last section was another set of contradictions to add to the paradoxes previously mentioned. Rationalization interferes with play and its other framed experiences and both helps and takes from consensual sadomasochism's authenticity. However, civilization and its flaws cannot be fully escaped. As Fabiani (2013) notes, "The same would apply to modern man, who might easily succumb to the temptation of ceaseless play, if the reality principle did not return him to the performance of his social duties"

(2013:66). Regardless of how, theoretically, consensual sadomasochism might reach civilization's goals, humanity's exterior circle, as de Singly (2005) called it, remains the most important frame to which to set all others on. We are social animals after all and to meet the mainstream with the private circle means being open to the paradox.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I met Mara on Facebook after receiving invites to her parties from common acquaintances. We later met in person in April 2013, during my fieldwork. She suggested I come by her place, so we could talk in private. On a sunny afternoon, I knocked at her door and was greeted by a young woman wearing pig tails and a casual outfit, the only indication that she practiced SM being a small black collar she wore around her neck, a symbol she was owned by a dom. She invited me in. Her boyfriend or, rather, dom was also home. We sat down in the living room and started talking over tea. Unlike my conversation with Velia in the park, where we were the odd ones out, here a deaf observer would have noticed the SM paraphernalia easily: steel bars, handcuffs, floggers, canes. There were more than enough objects to know what the apartments' owners were up to. Still, they were motionless, lacking life. Like a vase on a table or the piano standing in a corner of the room, the toys and SM gear seemed decorative objects and nothing more. It became clear then that there were two sides to the practice: the play sessions themselves in which the gear becomes functional, and the moments in between, when rationalization processes occur.

My interest in writing this thesis laid in discovering how practitioners of consensual sadomasochism use power in their relationships. Although the practice of BDSM is one in which domination and submission play a central role, it is an interchange of power unlike any other, one that questions normative authority at every turn. On a close inspection of

consensual sadomasochism, the practice is neither pathological as it has been presented by past psychological works (Krafft-Ebing [1886] 2008, Stekel [1929] 2010, Ellis [1933] 2008), nor is it a mere kink activity (Newmahr 2011, 2010). The former because its values lie on certain normative guidelines such as the awareness of possible risks, sanity, safety, and mutual agreement of the people involved in an SM rapport. The latter because it is a serious leisure that involves a powerful ethos, the learning of certain skills and the embracing of the praxis as a lifestyle (Newmahr 2010:318).

As regards issues of power, SM relationships present a curious case because, while being based on the balance of domination and submission, each role is contractually-assigned. What this means is that the strong do not control the weak; they merely control the willing. This consensual nature of SM reveals a lack of powerlessness, and thus creates a sort of paradox. It is a pure power relationship because it is contractually defined as such, but at the same time it is impure because it contradicts the historical and 'natural' type of power rapports.

Where the body and sexuality are concerned, civilization has attempted to control both by repressing them through feelings of fear and shame. By doing this, however, both were given a dense discursive reality. And taboos are always prone to revolutionary ideas. The body and sexuality have attempted in the last decades to regain control over their own entities, but most examples, whether they be the limits of medicine or the fear of death, ultimately fail. Consensual sadomasochism, however, thanks to its contractual nature, claims complete control of at least one individual. In the rapport, the dominant has power over the submissive. Somatic control is achieved because it is given freely by one and accepted by the other.

As concerns issues of gender, authority is negotiated equally among men and women, depending on each other's sexual preference. Not only is power redefined within the context of this practice, but powerlessness as well as the woman loses the status of the weaker sex.

Weakness itself is removed from the equation completely since submissives are usually described as having an inner strength worthy of appreciation and respect.

All these issues, despite being explained theoretically, create paradoxes. Humanity is not accustomed to non-aggressive power rapports as any quick scan of history can easily attest. So, how do practitioners of SM make sense of these domination paradoxes? After studying Romanian practitioners' discourse on BDSM, I found several ways through which they redefine and embrace power, while at the same time maintaining a surprising equality in their relationships.

Firstly, my informants developed a highly rationalized discourse when talking about the practice. In order to justify it in front of mainstream society and in order to overcome their own cognitive dissonance, they have built a praxis that mirrors their own identity. For some, the best reason to committing to SM revolves around the issue of nativity. They felt as if they were born into this; that they sensed sadomasochistic impulses even before they could find a name for it, even before they thought their interest required a name. In a sense, the passion for SM grew with them and became an important characteristic of their personality. For others, the practice was something learned along the way, but still developed into more than just a hobby. Even these practitioners who are self-taught rather than native have developed an intellectual and elitist discourse. Through these forms of rationalization, the paradoxes of power implicit in BDSM are embraced, interiorized and given sense despite civilization's difficulty with understanding them. Also, by steadily forming a community, and developing businesses out of skills gained from the practice, what my interviewees have done is make their presence felt within mainstream society, proving to all who wish to see that consensual domination works on a bigger scale as well.

Secondly, within play sessions, where rationalization is replaced with a sense of flair, a feel for the game, practitioners prove how domination and equality over power work

together. They call it “play”, but its seriousness cannot be overlooked. After all, pain cannot be simulated. Still, it is play because it is equal and the authoritarian figure is accepted by all parties involved. This is the contract. Whatever breaches it transforms the practice into something altogether different from SM.

Perhaps the best answer however to how this redefinition of power within this practice occurs is through the notion of TPE, which stands for total power exchange. What my research has found is that consensual domination works in BDSM because it is temporary. The notion of totality remains a utopia. Power is thus left to one individual within a rapport because that person is not allowed to maintain it forever. Nor does that person desire to keep this authoritarian status continuously because having power indefinitely implies the absence of consensuality, a building block that SM cannot function without. BDSM is fuelled by a power that binds the relationship, but it is willed, not enforced and this is how it survives without making use of fear to control others.

REFERENCES:

- Abu-Lughod, L. 1991. "Writing Against Culture" In Fox, Richard G. *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. Pp. 137-162. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press;
- Abu-Lughod, L. & C. A Lutz. 1990. *Language and the politics of emotion*. Cambridge University Press;
- Bateson, G. 1954. "A Theory of Play and Fantasy" in Salen, K. and E. Zimmerman. *The Game Design Reader. A Rules of Play Anthology*. (2006). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press;
- Beckmann, A. 2009. *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion: Deconstructing Sadomasochism*. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan;
- Benjamin, J. 1988. *The Bonds of Love. Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. New York: Pantheon Books;
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press;
- Chancer, L. S. 1992. *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life: The Dynamics of Power and Powerlessness*. Rutgers University Press;
- Clifford, James. 1986. "Introduction: Partial Truths" In Clifford, James and George E. Marcus eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Pp. 1-26. Berkeley: University of California Press;
- De Singly, F. 2005. "Le soi dénudé: sur l'inscription corporelle de l'identité intime" in C. Bromberger et al., *Un corps pour soi*, pp. 115-139; Presses Universitaires de France;
- Deleuze, G. & F. Guattari. [1984] 2004. *Anti-Oedipus*. London: Continuum;

- DeMello, M. 2000. *Bodies of Inscription. The cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham & London: Duke University Press;
- Elias, N. [1994] 2000. *The Civilizing Process. Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell;
- Ellis, H. [1933] 2008. *Psychology of Sex*. Home Farm Books eBooks;
- Fabiani, J.-L. 2013. "Chapter 3. Durkheim and Festivals: Art, Effervescence, and Institutions". In Riley A. T. et al, eds. *Durkheim, the Durkheimians, and the Arts*.
- Foucault, M. [1976] 1978. *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books;
- Freud, S. 1962. *Civilization and its Discontents*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company;
- . [1920] 1995. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in James Strachey ed. *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* v. 18. London: Institute of Psycho-analysis;
- . [1920] 2005. *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*. The Project Gutenberg EBook;
- Giddens, A. 1992. *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press;
- Grenfell, Michael. 2010. *Piere Bourdieu: Key Concepts*. Durham: Acumen;
- Handelman, D. 1990. *Models and mirrors: towards an anthropology of public events*. Cambridge University Press;
- Hechter, M. & Satoshi Kanazawa. 1997. Sociology Rational Choice Theory. *Annual Review of Sociology* 23: 191-214;
- Huizinga, J. [1949] 2000. *Homo Ludens*. London: Routledge;
- Krafft-Ebing, R. von. [1886] 2008. *Psychopathia Sexualis avec recherché specials sur l'inversion sexuelle*. The Project Gutenberg Ebook;

- Langdrige, D. & Barker, M. 2007. *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspective on Sadomasochism*. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan;
- Marquis de Sade, D. A. F. [1791] 2009. *Justine. Or The Misfortunes of Virtue*. London: Harper Perennial;
- Marvasati, A. B. 2004. *Qualitative Research in Sociology*. London: Sage Publications;
- Newmahr, S. 2010. Rethinking Kink: Sadomasochism as Serious Leisure. *Qualitative Sociology* 33 (3): pp. 313-331;
- Newmahr, S. 2011. *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk and Intimacy*. Indiana University Press;
- Réage, P. 1976. *Story of O*. New York: Ballantine Books;
- Stekel, W. [1929] 2010. *Sadism and Masochism. The Psychopathology of Sexual Cruelty*. Washington DC: Solar Books;
- Turner, B. S. [1992] 2002. *Regulating Bodies. Essays in medical sociology*. London: Routledge;
- Turner, V. W. [1969] 1991. *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press;
- Văcăroiu, I. 2012. *Sadomasochismul consensual și „societatea hipersomatică”. Intellectualizarea practicii BDSM (translation: Consensual sadomasochism and “the hypersomatic society”. Intellectualizing BDSM.)*. Undergraduate honors thesis. University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance;
- Von Sacher-Masoch, L. [1870] 2009. *Venus in Furs*. London: Harper Perennial;
- Weinberg, T. S. (1987). Sadomasochism in the United States: A Review of Recent Sociological Literature. *The Journal of Sex Research* 23 (1): pp. 50-69;
- Weiss, M. D. 2006. “Mainstreaming Kink: The Politics of BDSM Representation in U.S. Popular Media”. *Journal of Homosexuality* 50 (2/3): pp. 103-132;

- Williams, D. J. 2006. "Different (Painful!) Strokes for Different Folks: A General Overview of Sexual Sadomasochism (SM) and its Diversity". *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 13: pp. 333-346;
- , 2010. *Playing Dangerous Games: The Personal Story of a Social Scientist Entering the Complex World of Sexual Sadomasochism*. Booklocker.com Inc.