

PLAYING WITH IDENTITY: A STUDY ON THE BUDAPEST BDSM COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This thesis examines the unexpected outcomes arising from the intersection of sexuality, identity and game in BDSM. In so doing, it explores the performative nature of BDSM by analysing BDSM practitioners' narratives in the city of Budapest. I examine the friction produced by the fact that BDSM is simultaneously deemed as a game and as a foundational element of my respondents' identity. I argue that rendering BDSM as a game is a strategy which enables practitioners to produce a seemingly bounded context, detaching BDSM practice from their problematic referents in "reality." The bounded space of the game allows practitioners to play with sexuality, that is, with parts of themselves perceived to be natural. Modern technologies of power have conducted us to find our subjectivity in sexuality, which has become the expression of our inner truth. Hence playing with sexuality/identity calls into question ontological notions of the self, destabilising naturalised gendered dynamics of power attached to sexuality. Examining the role of "play" in BDSM is critical when it comes to understanding why, in BDSM, gendered roles seem to be more fluid than in other forms of sex.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

When I started this project, I did not specifically aim to base my study on the Budapest BDSM community.¹ I was primarily interested in examining narratives of self-identified heterosexual people who subvert gendered power roles in sex.² I contacted people involved in the Budapest BDSM community as, in this practice, gendered dynamics of power seem to be more fluid than in heteronormative/vanilla sex.³ Although I had a superficial theoretical knowledge of this topic, BDSM was mostly an unknown world for me. When I began to conduct interviews, I did not expect my interlocutors to be surprised about the fact that I saw in BDSM potential for disrupting gendered power dynamics. However, most of them claimed not to have reflected upon this, since BDSM was a sort of inner disposition for them, which had manifested itself at a very early age. The most disconcerting thing was that my respondents referred to BDSM as simultaneously both an immanent element of their identity and a game/play. Ráhel, for example, argued that BDSM was an “addiction,” yet she had been born with it – it was “in her blood.” Can one be born a player? Can one become addicted to something which one is born with? These questions point to strategies of power to which we have become subjects.

This thesis revolves around the interplay between game, sexuality and identity in BDSM. Michel Foucault (1978) opened a new path in the field of gender studies by pointing that, in modernity, sexuality became the locus from which new categories of personhood were produced. The naturalised correlation between sexuality and identity leads us to take sex very seriously. The discursive production of modern identities from the locus “sexuality” has been widely studied (Halperin 1990; Weeks 1990; Foucault 1978). Performativity theories

¹ BDSM: an acronym which stands for B&D (bondage and discipline), D/s (domination/submission), and SM (somasochism). See section 1.1.1.

² By sex, I refer to sexual acts/practices

³ This assumption was based on my previous readings on BDSM (Michel Foucault [1984] 1996; Gayle Rubin 1984; Patrick Califia 1994).

have also examined the potential of “parody” when it comes to deconstructing naturalised notions of selfhood linked to sexuality and gender (Butler 1990). However, the intersection of “play” with sexuality/identity remains unexamined. In drawing on theories which gave rise to the notion of performativity (Austin 1962; Derrida 1988). I focus on the tension between playfulness and seriousness in BDSM practice: in other words, between game and everyday life. My aim is to examine the effects arise from rendering as a game a practice (BDSM) which is perceived as a foundational element of my respondents’ subjectivity. In so doing, I argue that, in the case of my respondents, the seemingly sharp boundaries between their identity in “reality” and game are often disrupted, calling into question ontological, fixed ideas of the “self.” This is manifested by the fact that the emotions experienced in BDSM practice are described as being more real than those lived in everyday life/”reality.”

BDSM is indeed a playful activity in which people, in some cases, allow themselves to play with their sexual identity. However, what occurs during the game seems to penetrate the sphere of reality, making the borders which separate these worlds blurred. This thesis focuses on the ways in which “reality” and game intra-act in BDSM,⁴ reshaping my respondent’s subjectivities. Referring to BDSM as a game allows practitioners to produce a space perceived as bounded. This makes it easier for them to play with sexual roles, which are usually perceived to be immutable. In BDSM, the term game does not only involve a way of depicting a practice in which people incarnate different characters, but it is also a mechanism which enables practitioners to separate BDSM from both its origins as pathology and its often problematic referents in “reality.”⁵

Calling BDSM a game can therefore be considered as a performative strategy, which allows practitioners to detach BDSM practices from hegemonic gendered dynamics in sex,

⁴ I have borrowed the term “intra-action” from Karen Barad (2003). An intra-action is a process in which different elements co-participate in the production of temporal intelligibility/meaning – these boundaries are constantly reshaped caught up in a system of ongoing becomings

⁵ Scenes of violence, domination, slavery or rape

by producing a new context. Interestingly, the bounded space generated by rendering BDSM as a game also opens up the possibility of playing with sexuality/identity, without this necessarily being intended. The performative nature of the BDSM scenes allows, in some cases, more flexibility when it comes to playing with gendered roles in sex. However, this does not imply that BDSM is a panacea for gendered inequalities. As Margot Weiss (2011, 17) argues, BDSM can simultaneously reinforce and disavow the referents of the scenes performed by practitioners. Practitioners are often caught within hegemonic discourses that, far from subverting structural inequalities, reiterate them.

In the case of Budapest, the borders between BDSM/game and “reality” are negotiated in the intersection of global/local, public/private. In other words, they are negotiated in the intersection of the longings for having a visible community as those imagined outside, and a private understanding of BDSM, which is perceived as the realisation of an inner disposition. For some of my respondents, although BDSM is inside, the “conservatism” of Hungarian society in sexual matters does not allow them to fully express them-selves.⁶ That is to say, in order for their inner truth to emerge, they must look outside. Others, however, perceive sexual desire as a deregulated private locus, which implies that they only need to practice to freely express who they are. This friction between outside/inside echoes the political situation of non-normative sexualities in Hungary, which are perceived by the conservative sectors of society as an external challenge to the national values; the left, in contrast, understands these conservative views as anti-European (Renkin, 2009). Hence, in Hungary, the politics of sexuality is constituted by the interplay of both how transnational politics is imagined, interpreted and (re)produced and the current hegemony of nationalist conservative ideas (Renkin, 2015)

This thesis examines the unexpected outcomes arising from the intersection of sexuality, identity and game in BDSM. I argue that playing with parts of oneself understood

⁶ See Feri and Márk’s opinions on Hungarian society (3.3)

to be immanent can open up the possibility of deconstructing naturalised gendered dynamics coupled to sexual acts. Examining the role of “play” in BDSM is critical when it comes to understanding why, in BDSM, gendered roles seem to be more fluid than in other forms of sex. Examining the ways in which practitioners play with sexuality may help us to understand the discourses in which they/we are embedded.

This thesis speaks from a particular location, Budapest, in which the BDSM community relies on the BDSM knowledge produced outside. The non-particularly cohesive nature of the community makes that the BDSM global trends are internalised and embodied, (or even disavowed) in multiple ways. This produces a multiplicity of views of what BDSM is or should be. However, this is not only a specificity of the Budapest context. BDSM as any other category should not be studied as a unified whole, regardless where one speaks from.⁷ The particular and the structural, the global and the local are entangled and constantly interplay reshaping and constituting each other (Appadurai 1991; Tsing 2005). Budapest is, doubtlessly, a particular context with its own specificities, yet most of us are subjects of similar strategies of domination, which have made of sexuality the place in which our selves are found (Foucault 1978). In this sense, the ways that practitioners play with sexuality may help us to understand how modern techniques of domination operate from within us.

1.1 Review of Literature on BDSM

1.1.1 *A Critical Overview on the Production of BDSM*

BDSM is an umbrella term, an acronym which stands for B&D (bondage and discipline), D/s (domination/submission), and SM (sadoomasochism).⁸ The origin of this assemblage of different practices has been argued to be recent (Weiss 2011). However, there is evidence of

⁷ By this, I do not only refer here to geographical location but also from the different subject positions of oneself and the individuals or communities that one studies.

⁸ This thesis highlights that treating different categories as a unified whole can lead to problematic generalisations. All these categories, although somehow related, make reference to practices through which very different desires are expressed and realised.

the use of this term by US SM lesbian groups in the 1980s (Robinson 2015, 5). The production of “somasochisms” as both a pathology and as set of desires linked to a distinct identity dates back to the late 19th century. In *Psychopathia Sexualis* ([1886] 1999) the psychiatrist Richard Von Krafft Ebing established a taxonomy of practices circumscribed by the categories “sadism” and “masochism,” which were initially deemed to be two distinct sexual perversions. The term sadism is related to Marquis de Sade’s writings, and it involves sexual arousal or enjoyment produced by inflicting pain upon others. “Masochism” refers to being totally subjected to the will of a person of a different sex ([1886] 1999) and has its roots in the name of the novelist Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.⁹

The discursive production of sadism and masochism as a pathology was developed by Sigmund Freud ([1905] 2000), who, similarly to Krafft Ebing, believed that sadism was primarily a male disorder and masochism a female one. Hence, these two categories are a product of their time, grounded in gendered binary oppositions. Unlike Krafft-Ebing, both Freud ([1905] 2000) and Havelock Ellis ([1905] 1942) believed that there was a correlation between sadism and masochism, by arguing that usually these two “perversions” were often found in the same person.¹⁰

As mentioned above, Foucault shows how discourse transformed some sexual practices into perversions, pathologies and, ultimately, categories of personhood (1978). Sodomasochism was produced as a constitutive *other/outside* of heteronormative,¹¹ reproductive sex.¹² Robin Bauer argues that the binary, categorical division between

⁹ According to Kraft Ebing ([1886] 1999), masochism does not necessarily have to involve pain – a relationship master/slave or humiliation without physical violence involved would be cases of masochism.

¹⁰ The most striking peculiarity of this perversion lies in the fact that its active and passive forms are regularly encountered together in the same person. He who experiences pleasure by causing pain to others in sexual relations is also able to experience the pain emanating from sexual relations as pleasure. A sadist is simultaneously a masochist, though either the active or the passive side of the perversion may be more strongly developed and thus represent his preponderate sexual activity (Freud, 1905).

George Deleuze argues that sadism and masochism, far from being two sides of the same coin, are radically different phenomena (1967).

¹¹ Constitutive outside: an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation (Butler 1993, 3)

heteronormative/vanilla and BDSM sexual practices has obscured the multiplicity of behaviours within these two categories. This overshadows the fact that vanilla sex often incorporates BDSM elements and vice versa (2014, 5). This implies that, by producing sadomasochism, psychological discourse not only created a perversion but also the idea of normality. Sadomasochism became a vessel in which practices that were not necessarily valued in terms of normal/deviant until that point became a perversion embodied by subjects who needed to be corrected and monitored. Since then, the category “sadomasochism” has been historically theorised in terms of pathology. In 1948, sexual deviation was introduced as a category in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD)-6 (Reirsøl & Skeid cited in Bauer 2014, 6). Currently, fetishism and sadomasochism are still considered a “disorder of sexual preference” (F65) by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

1.1.2 SM and the Sex Wars

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, pornography and BDSM became the objects of dispute between radical feminists and pro-sex feminists in what has become known as the “sex wars.” Radical feminists believed that pornography and sadomasochism are not simple representations/fictions but mechanisms to perpetrate male domination over women. Andrea Dworkin (1974; 1981) and Catherine McKinnon (1989) became the most relevant voices in the radical feminist bloc. According to them, any kind of sex is based on patriarchal violence and domination. They argued that even lesbian sex replicates patriarchal dominant/submissive dynamics, which was reflected in the roles “butch” “and femme.”

Dworkin referred to BDSM in these terms:

Through the projection of archetypal sadomasochistic images, which are the staple of the sexist mentality, we become more a prisoner, robbed and cheated of any real experience or authentic communication, thrown back into the intricate confusion of being women in search of a usable identity (1974, 90).

The radical feminist argument about SM being not a representation of violence but violence itself is of great importance for this thesis as it explores the boundaries between reality and

game/performance. Dworkin and McKinnon seem not to draw a line between performance or, for what matters for this thesis, game and reality. Drawing on Wittgenstein's notion of "language games," I argue that the boundary between these two realms exists, albeit discursively produced and blurred, and that it is crucial to separate performance/game from reality – while accepting the fact that the two are often interlaced, affecting each other.

The radical feminist views on sex gave rise to the social movement Women against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM), which also became very vocal against SM (Robinson 2015). During this period, *Against Sadomasochism* (1982) was published: a collection of articles written by authors such as Audre Lorde and Judith Butler. The general tone of these articles is that SM is grounded in patriarchal, gendered inequalities.

In the "pro-sex feminist movement" Patrick (formerly Pat) Califia and Gayle Rubin were the two of the more prominent figures who reacted against radical feminist views on sex. Califia and Rubin were the founders of Samois, a lesbian-feminist organisation, which published *Coming to Power* to both foreground the subversive nature of BDSM and re-examine the ways in which sexuality has been studied by the feminist movement (Samois [1981] 1987). Along these lines, Rubin argues that the examples used by radical feminists to demonise SM are biased and pernicious (1984, 164). She argues that the radical feminist discourse on SM replicates the very same scapegoating dynamic used by the most reactionary sector of US society. Gayle Rubin defends the transgressive character of SM, claiming that it calls into question reproductive, normative sex (2012). These are also the views of Patrick Califia, who argues that the re-enactments of violence in SM are parodic and therefore, far from mirroring and reinforcing their referents, are critical of them (1994).

The parodic nature of BDSM is analysed in this thesis. However, I argue that there is often friction between the bounded, playful space produced in BDSM and the *seriousness* and intensity of the feelings lived during the practice – which are perceived as coming from pre-social parts of my respondents' selves. This intermingling of parody and seriousness, or

reality and game, produces ambivalence, and makes it difficult to examine BDSM as parodic alone.

1.1.3 *Queer Views on BDSM*

Similarly to Rubin and Califia, Michel Foucault saw in BDSM a practice with the potential to denaturalise seemingly fixed power positions – he referred to the San Francisco SM scene as “laboratories of sexual experimentation” ([1982] 1996, 330). According to him, in BDSM practitioners always play with power and sexuality – even when the roles (top/bottom) are static, he argues, practitioners know that they are playing ([1984] 1996). In a similar tone, McClintock argues that the exaggeration, polarisation and sometimes reversal of gendered power positions in BDSM caricature the hegemonic gendered order, destabilising ontological notions of gendered identity (1993). Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant have also foregrounded the subversive character of BDSM, which they consider a queer form of sexuality (1998, 564 cited in Weiss 2010). They focus on BDSM performed in public to argue that these kind of practices challenge heteronormative, private, individualistic sex.

This thesis agrees with Margot Weiss in her criticism of both queer perspectives which only want to see the transgressive nature of BDSM, and views that equate BDSM with everyday violence. Weiss focuses on the ambiguity of the outcomes produced by BDSM performances in which “social power can simultaneously draw on and disavow their social referents” (2011, 17). She argues that the San Francisco BDSM community is embedded in a consumerist/bourgeois dynamic, by pointing out that most of practitioners are white, middle-class individuals. However, unlike Weiss who mainly provides examples in which hegemonic gender dynamics are replicated or reinforced, I try to analyse cases that hold some subversive potential, while always foregrounding their ambivalence. Robin Bauer has critiqued Weiss for focusing solely on non-queer BDSM. He argues that the interlocutors of his study do not consider the consumption of BDSM equipment a crucial element of the practice (2014). Along these lines, my respondents seem to foreground other aspects such as

intelligence or politeness over the consumption of equipment as the most characteristic elements of the Budapest community.

1.2 Theoretical Considerations and Approach

The approach that I take with respect to BDSM is, to a certain extent, different from the existent literature outlined in the previous section. As stated above, this thesis focuses on the fact that BDSM is, on the one hand, referred to as a game and, on the other, seems to be a constitutive element of my interviewee's identity. In exploring the fine line that separates game from reality in BDSM, I draw on Ervin Goffman's Frame analysis theory (1974), which has been applied to game theory. Goffman argues that social relations take place within different frames.¹³ The activities which are perceived by the members of a social group as real occur within what Goffman calls "a primary framework" (1974, 43). According to Goffman, the relations which are not framed within a primary framework must be "keyed." Keying is a device or mechanism which alters the meaning of a practice in a primary frame. The notion of "keying" is useful to explain why the re-enactment of a scene of violence which could be problematic in everyday life is understood to be "something quite else in BDSM."¹⁴

Goffman's frame analysis theory has been applied to game theory to study the alternative worlds that gamers produce. Gary Alan Fine has applied this theory to role-play, by claiming that in role-play it is possible to draw a line between player and character identity (1983). According to Fine, the player must be immersed in the diegetic world of the character in order for the game to be successful/felicitous. In this study my interlocutors need to produce a diegetic world in which not only themselves but also their partners, must become immersed. However, in some cases drawing sharp boundaries between reality ("vanilla life")

¹³ Frames are different levels/realms of social interaction in which the meaning of a practice varies in accordance with the frame which is embedded in.

¹⁴ This expression is used by Goffman (1974, 43-44).

and the BDSM scene is not an easy task for them. In BDSM, the frames of the character and player often intermingle, making it almost impossible to discern between reality and game. This is a particularly prominent issue for those respondents who consider BDSM a life-style or who claim to be 24/7 BDSMers. In these cases, the dislocation between player and character identity, that is to say between different frames, is called into question.¹⁵

BDSM is rendered as a game, yet the emotions lived during the practice/play are felt as more vivid and intimate than those experienced in everyday life. I examine this apparent paradox by drawing on Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse as productive of identity (1978). Foucault argues that in modernity sexuality became a nodal point in which scientific discourses were deployed, giving rise to new categories of personhood.¹⁶ That which up until then had been more or less persecuted, criminalised practices or sins became the constituent elements of people's identities. The discursive production of identity through sexuality is an important part of a new set of technologies of power which arise in modernity, based not on exerting power through top-down coercion but by regulating bodies and populations (Foucault 1975). Foucault termed these new technologies of power as "bio-power." He argues that biopower operates over populations through scientific apparatuses which regulate and discipline bodies, producing subjectivity (2008). Biopower leads us to perceive sexuality as an expression of our truth, concealing the fact that biopolitical power has made of sexuality a highly regulated practice from which truth is discursively produced. The pathologisation and subsequent categorisation of certain practices under the term "sado/masochism" as well as the process through which these practices came to be understood as a pre-discursive truth is the result of this process.

¹⁵ I point out in section 3.2 the tensions within the community between those for whom BDSM is a private matter unaffected by the social and those who live BDSM as a lifestyle or assume the role they take in BDSM during their everyday lives.

¹⁶ This phenomena became particularly pronounced from in the 19th century (Foucault 1978).

The productive nature of discourse is implicitly and explicitly present throughout this thesis as it is crucial for understanding the close attachment of my participants to BDSM. Foucault calls into question the classical idea of representation, grounded in the assumption that knowledge represents objects which have a pre-discursive ontological reality. This idea of knowledge as representational implies that there is only a single truth (a single way of representing) which is disclosed by those who own the tools of representation (scientific knowledge). By claiming that discourse is productive, Foucault breaks with this idea (1978). According to him, the very same discursive practices that are rendered as representational tools are not portraying objects, but rather producing them. The deployment in modernity of discourses on the locus of sexuality is what, therefore, generated a new sort of truth and a new set of identities understood to be natural. The fact that discursive practises produce their objects challenges the idea of the transcendental liberal being. This sheds some light on the fact that many of my respondents perceive BDSM as an inner disposition, which finds its expression through BDSM practice. Foucault inverts this logic by arguing that it is the meaning given to some practices that produces notions of selfhood.

In highlighting practice as productive of meaning, this thesis draws heavily on Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977; 1984; 1990; 1998). Bourdieu's theory is composed of *habitus*, field and capital. He argues that practice (*habitus*) and structure (field) constitute each other, and that both are underpinned by capital. *Habitus* involves the embodiment of a structure, put into practice through a particular schemata, style, taste and ways of speaking, acting and feeling (1990). *Habitus* is not, however, totally determined by the structure, which entails that the ways in which rules of the game are subjectified and performed constantly reshape and constitute the structure. According to Bourdieu, *habitus* is strongly determined by economic and cultural capital, which can explain why my respondents insisted upon the affinities with other members of the community in terms of interests, intelligence, sensibilities and manners. Some of my respondents referred to BDSM as a "game for

intelligent people,” insinuating that their intelligence is given by their “BDSM” inner dispositions, without reflecting on their socio-economic status. Bourdieu refers to this lack of self-reflection on one’s position in a field as *doxa* (1984). I find the concept of *doxa* useful as it provides insight into why middle-class people do not often reflect on the structural inequalities which sustain their position in society. This echoes Foucauldian perspectives of modern power (1982), which operate in insidious ways, producing *free* subjects who regulate themselves in other’s/power terms. The *habitus* of my respondents is shaped by an idea of politeness and intelligence that makes the community respectable, yet to be respectable in those terms is only accessible to particular segment of society. I argue that the class position of some of my respondents allows them to reverse gendered power dynamics in sex, without that act jeopardising their position in their everyday lives. *Doxa* explains why these privileges are not often examined by practitioners.

Bourdieu’s idea of *field* refers to a structure, the product of a socio-historical process of negotiations and interaction between different actors, whose position in a field is determined by *habitus* and capital (1984). As mentioned above, field and practice (*habitus*) interplay and constantly reshape the rules of the game (norms of the field). I find Bourdieu’s notion of field helpful here as BDSM could be considered a subfield with its own historicity and non-static norms produced by the interplay of practitioners and structures.¹⁷ Bourdieu argues that, in order to be part of a game (field), one must take it seriously, be invested in it. Only by accepting the structure in which one is embedded can one question its rules. This investment or “feel for the game” is coined by Bourdieu as *illusio* (1998).¹⁸ I use this concept to approach the very different views of my respondents on what BDSM is or should be like as well as a way of explaining my respondents’ commitment to BDSM practice. According

¹⁷ By structures, I refer to medico/psychological discourses, well-established BDSM communities, academia, BDSM social networking, BDSM equipment producers, that is to say, the institutions which configure the BDSM constellation.

¹⁸ Bourdieu’s use of game as metaphor for structure/field as well as terms such as “feel for the game” and “libido” are very useful to illustrate my arguments on the difficulties of my respondents when it comes to separating game (BDSM) from reality.

to Bourdieu (1998), becoming part of a field requires “an entrance fee” (*libido*), a particular characteristic that makes a player recognised and recognisable by other players. My respondents insisted upon the difference between feeling BDSM as a “need” or as a “spice.” Feeling BDSM as a need could be considered the *libido*, which enables one to be accepted as real player.

Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of field echoes Wittgenstein’s notion of language games (1953). This term is used by Wittgenstein to argue that there is not a transcendental framework where the true meaning of a practice/word is to be found. The meaning of a word is given by its use, that is to say, by our practices in a particular context/language game. As in Bourdieu’s fields, language games are cultural products which pre-exist us. Therefore, we must initially trust the rules by which other players have been playing a particular game. The notion of language games is crucial for this thesis as it questions the idea of an ontological, pre-discursive reality. In other words, it challenges the idea of truth based on the agreement of an utterance/practice with a factual/pre-discursive state of affairs. A language game means that there is no such thing as more or less authentic practice/feelings; instead they become real within a particular context. This explains both the strong investment of my respondents in the game and the vivid feelings experienced while practicing BDSM. It also enables these feelings to be detached from an ontological, transcendental origin, demonstrating that they are the result of historical, relational processes.

“Frame,” “language games” “discourse” and “field” are concepts that analyse very similar phenomena, yet all of them allow me to develop my arguments in a nuanced way. The application of frame analysis to game theory enables me to study the immersion of my respondents in the diegetic frame of the “characters” they incarnate. Language game is useful to analyse how meaning is produced through practice. Unlike Goffman’s frames, in which there is a primary “reality,” Wittgenstein argues that the reality of the game is given by the investment of a player in it. Discourse is used to argue that the perception of BDSM as

respondents' inner truth/identity is the result of biopolitical technologies of power in which sexuality became a critical place for regulating subjects' lives. Finally, "field" helps me to pay attention to class issues in the Budapest BDSM community, by arguing that becoming a BDSM practitioner, at least in the terms of some segments of the community, is not possible for everyone.

Wittgenstein, Foucault and Bourdieu's emphasis on how meaning and subjectivity, far from being rooted in a ontological truth, are produced by/through practice allows this thesis to move forward, leaving behind a debate focused on drawing ontological boundaries between reality and game. In trying to shed some light on what is the objective of rendering BDSM as game, I also draw on the semiotic theories which gave rise to the theory of performativity. This body of literature allows me to explore how the bounded space produced for BDSM practice is accomplished by re-contextualising and resignifying practices with prior meanings, despite the fact that these past meaning often penetrate the BDSM scene. My aim is, therefore, to study how a context/bounded space is performatively produced in order to detach BDSM practice from their referents in everyday life. In so doing, this study draws on both Austin's speech act theory and Derrida and Butler's critiques of it, rooted in important ways in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language.

In a ground-breaking move in the field of semiotics, Austin drew a distinction between two types of speech act: constative and performative (1962). A constative utterance is regular statement, that is, a statement which describes a fact, e.g., the grass is green. This type of utterance is still rooted in an idea of truth based on language as a representational tool of a pre-discursive state of affairs.¹⁹ However, performative utterances are those which make something happen, e.g. "war is declared." According to Austin, when a performative utterance brings the wanted effects it is "felicitous." However, in order for a performative

¹⁹ See Foucault's critique of representation laid out above. As aforementioned, he breaks with this notions of representation as depiction of pre-discursive state of affairs by arguing that discourse is productive.

speech act to be felicitous, it must be uttered within the right context/conventions. Austin puts all his effort into describing the right conventions in which performative utterances work.²⁰ The bottom-line convention for Austin is that for a performative speech act to be felicitous it must “be spoken seriously.”²¹

Derrida’s critique of Austin is grounded in the exclusion of non-serious language. He argues that Austin establishes a hierarchical relationship between felicitous/infelicitous and serious/non-serious. According to Derrida (1988), Austin presents these distinctions as binary opposites, as if the non-serious/infelicitous utterances relied upon the serious/felicitous ones. In Austin, infelicitous utterances are a citation of the felicitous ones, e.g., a theatrical representation or a game. However, Derrida argues that every utterance is citational. In other words, a performative utterance can only be felicitous if it repeats a coded recognisable statement. According to Derrida, utterances operate within the domain of a chain of historical repetitions, which is what has given particular meaning(s) to an action/utterance. Unlike Austin, Derrida argues that it is impossible to produce a bounded, foreseeable context. This entails that the agent of action is not in full control of the meanings/effects that the action performed will produce. Derrida argues that iteration brings previous contexts into a new one.²² In other words, the effects of an utterance/action are partially determined by its previous meanings, yet the effects produced are always new and unforeseeable. This implies that meaning can only be made in retrospect. In other words, giving a political value to what takes place during the game relies on the ways we interpret it.

Speech act theory is central to this study as it makes it possible to explore the performative element of BDSM. That is to say, the tensions in the hierarchical correlation

²⁰ See Austin (1962, 14-15)

²¹ John Searle has argued that the exclusion of “non-serious language” in Austin is provisional. He argues that this is reflected upon the fact that Austin embedded “serious” in quotations marks. On Searle, “Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida,” *Glyph* 1 (1977) 204-5.

Austin’s critique of philosophy of language is grounded in the lack of attention to performative statements, however, paradoxically, in a similar move, he decides to marginalise utterances that are non-serious language.

²² Iteration means repetition with difference, which implies that every time that an utterance/action is repeated a new meaning is produced.

between game (non-serious) and reality (serious), as well as the fact that feelings experienced during the game are felt as very “real.” These theories are also useful for studying the performative aspect of BDSM. In other words, how rendering BDSM as game can be considered an attempt to produce a bounded context, which enables practitioners to separate BDSM practices from their historical referents by resignifying them.²³

I analyse the recoding/resignification of the practices performed in BDSM by drawing on Judith Butler (1990; 1997). Informed by Derrida, Butler argues that the fact that the agent is not in mastery or control of his/her action opens up the possibility of resignification. Butler finds an agential locus for resignification in the space that occurs between the (re)productions of an action. According to her, parodic (non-serious) repetition can be used as political resource to deconstruct naturalised meanings. The fact that BDSM is rendered as a game: the exaggerated polarisation of power positions, as well as the reversal (in some instances of practice) of gendered power dynamics, echoes Butler’s idea of parodic/subversive repetition. However, some of my respondents do not aim to subvert the gendered order when practicing BDSM.

The lack of intentionality of my respondents implies that, in some cases, their embeddedness in a discourse in which sex becomes the signifier of power, is, ironically, what makes them behave in the everyday in accordance with the roles they take in BDSM. Saba Mahmood has criticised Butler for being caught within a dualist dynamic (2004). In other words, for Butler, norms can only be “suppressed and/or are subverted, are reiterated and/or resignified.”(2004, 22). Similarly to Derrida, Mahmood argues that repetition produces ambivalence regardless of the intentionality of the agent.²⁴ Ambivalence is a useful concept for studying BDSM practice, whose potential resides in the ways we make meaning of it.

²³ This could be considered an Austinian move in reversal. The aim here is that the performative act fails, by not producing any effects.

²⁴ The meaning of an action can only be grasped in retrospect and it is not solely determined by the intentionality of the agent.

Mahmood focuses on the Foucauldian concept of “techniques of the self,” which is not framed in terms of compliance or subversion. A technique of the self involves embodying the norm by mastering it. This repetition of the norm eventually congeals into an ethical disposition, which is to some extent independent of the moral codes imposed by structural power: “a different way of constituting oneself into the ethical subject of one's behaviour.” (1982, 240).

BDSM could be considered a technique of the self, a series of practices which are internalised by practitioners, producing new dispositions. This thesis shows that, although BDSM can be described in this way, practitioners, like Mahmood's ethical subjects, are embedded in social dynamics which transcend the BDSM scene. I take a poststructuralist approach by underlining that neither is everything totally determined by structures, nor are we free agential individuals.

1.3 The Budapest BDSM Community

There is no literature available on the Budapest BDSM community. My knowledge of the community is hence either the result of my respondents' narratives or has been obtained through the BDSM social networks used by Budapest practitioners.²⁵ All my respondents agree on the fact that most community interactions take place in two online social networks: smpixie.com (a Hungarian website) and fetlife.com (a global platform). Smpixie is the most popular among Budapest BDSM practitioners: there are more than 12,000 members, yet only about 300 people are active.²⁶ Smpixie requires payment of a membership fee to establish contact with other BDSM practitioners.²⁷ This platform organises munches, known as pixie

²⁵ The limited amount of time to conduct my field work make that some of the information here has not been verified by multiple sources.

²⁶ Several of my respondents agreed about the number of people active in smpixie.com

²⁷ The membership cost is \$3 for 7 days, \$6 for 20 days and \$80 a year.

Smpixie.com was recently sold by the former owner, who is a Hungarian BDM practitioner – none of my respondents know who the new owners are. According to Feri, it was bought for €30.000.

parties, which require an entrance fee for men (Ft1000) and are free for women.²⁸ The average attendance at these parties oscillates between 50-100 people. The other most used social network, fetlife.com, is an international platform and is totally free. Here, most of the interactions take place in English.

In addition to these, there are two more regular parties: one of them is organised by Feri, one of my respondents; and the other is a thematic party with Japanese bondage performances.²⁹ The regularity of these parties is not fixed, yet there are about 1-2 BDSM events a month in Budapest. According to my respondents, the average age of practitioners who attend these parties ranges between the late-20s and late-40s – there are also older and younger practitioners. Since last year Budapest has an annual party, “Luxuria,” organised by a Hungarian woman who lives in Sweden and her partner– more than 1000 people attended this party last year. Its entrance fee varies from €22 to €28, and participants must adhere to a dress-code in which street-clothes are “strictly forbidden.”³⁰ Although the Budapest BDSM community is not particularly big or cohesive, there are enough practitioners to organise regular events. The social network created for this community has also been popular enough to be sold for a substantial amount of money.

Most of my respondents coincide in highlighting common traits of Budapest practitioners, such as politeness and intelligence. When asked about the social class of the community members, most of my interlocutors agree in defining Budapest practitioners as middle-class. They also believe that the community members are more “open-minded” than the average Hungarian citizen. The cultural capital as well as the financial resources needed to take part in BDSM parties or to pay for the membership fee of the main BDSM online platform are examined in Chapter 3. I argue that BDSM has the potential to deconstruct

²⁸ Much: casual social gathering for people involved in or interested in BDSM (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Munch_%28BDSM%29)

²⁹ I attend to one of the Dark VIP parties. The entrance fee for these two parties is Ft3.000.

³⁰ This information is available on the party website: www.luxuriaparty.hu/

naturalised dynamics of power linked to gender. However, not everyone has access to the privilege of becoming part of this group. I also sustain that class privilege is crucial when it comes to being able to subvert roles in sex without that act endangering one's social position.

The nature of this study, alongside with the lack of literature, makes it difficult to speak about the history of BDSM in Budapest or its connection with international BDSM communities in depth. None of my respondents could give specific information of the history of the community, however, they claimed that events described above have not been taking place for longer 10 years. Most of my interlocutors argue that the emergence of a more or less consolidated community has its roots in the emergence of both international and local BDSM social network. Feri, one of my respondents, is in contact with international practitioners through fetlife.com. He has organised workshops and gatherings (munches) with international practitioners who came to Budapest to spend their holidays. A great deal of my respondents became involved in BDSM through the internet, which seems to be a crucial tool when it comes to connecting the Budapest community with international ones.

1.4 Methodology

My approach to this study has been informed by in-depth, extensive conversations with practitioners involved in the Budapest BDSM community. After the first few interviews, I abandoned my initial research topic and let myself be informed by what my respondents wanted to tell me.³¹ When I started to look for respondents for this project, I did not know how to establish contact with them. I conducted internet searches on key-words related to BDSM in Budapest, which led me to websites in which professional dominatrices offered their services. I wrote a standard email explaining my research interest and providing information about myself and the institution in which I study. I sent those emails in a similar way to sending out a message in a bottle: more than 100 messages, to be exact. After two

³¹As mentioned in the first paragraph of the introduction, my initial focus was put on solely study the outcomes arise from the reversal of gendered power dynamics in heterosexual sex.

days, someone replied: a woman called Izabella, who wanted to know more about my research. I exchanged several emails with her and she told me that she would put me in touch with a man who organises BDSM parties in Budapest. Izabella was the only person who replied to those messages. I am convinced that luck has been an important factor in realising this research. After that, everything became easier. I was recommended a social network related to BDSM, I created a profile and started to contact practitioners through this platform. During the subsequent weeks, I found enough participants to conduct my research.³²

This study is based on in-depth, qualitative interviews with open-ended questions. The interviews took place between March and May 2016. They were recorded and tended to last at least 1h.30min. The nature of BDSM as a category makes a qualitative approach more appropriate, as BDSM is an umbrella term which encompasses a myriad of practices. Practitioners have very different views about what BDSM is or should be like, and a qualitative methodology enabled me to delve into the nuances of my respondents' subjective relationships with BDSM. In most of the cases, my respondents were willing to speak at length and in depth, to the extent that, on some occasions, I had to politely stop the interviews after two hours. Most of the participants were contacted through two social network websites: fetlife.com and smpixie.com, and a few of them (four) were recruited through the snowballing method. All the respondents have agreed, through a consent form, to be anonymously quoted.

The information which has made this research possible was gathered from 12 interviews with people involved in the Budapest BDSM community. I tried to find people with different social characteristics; however, my lack of knowledge of the Hungarian language limited the sample of this thesis. My respondents' age varies from 21 to 40. There

³² The fact that I used these recommended websites makes this a kind of snowball sample, which limits the representativeness of my respondents.

are seven women and five men – most of them (10) are Hungarian, there is also a woman from the UK and an Iranian man. They have all studied or are studying higher education programmes and have an excellent command of English. Apart from the interviews, I attended a BDSM party in April 2015, which was an important moment in becoming aware of the narrowness of the sample of respondents. In this party, the majority of the attendants were middle-aged people: older than the average of my respondents – and most of them did not speak English. Many of the respondents asked whether I was a practitioner. I am not part of the Budapest community, nor am I a BDSM practitioner. This has doubtlessly influenced the attitude of my respondents towards me. They have been very helpful in having a didactic attitude and guiding me through terms and practices that I did not know. However, not being part of the community limits my knowledge when it comes to fully apprehending the emotions and pleasures that emerge from this practice.³³

During the interviews, all the respondents asked questions about the nature of my study. I preferred to give details about my research topic at the end of the interview as I did not want to influence their narratives with any declaration of values. However, I believe that an interview is a “three way conversation” between the interviewee, the interviewer and the culture/discourses in which they are embedded (Abrams 2010, 10). I draw on Lynn Abram’s notion of “intersubjectivity” to foreground the fact that the participants of an interview “cooperate,” producing new meanings (2010). I started all my interviews by asking for biographical details, in a chronological order, about their involvement in BDSM practice. Most of them argued that the origin of BDSM was rooted in their childhood or, in some cases, that BDSM was a sort of inner disposition. I have taken a social constructivist/poststructuralist approach in this thesis, which implies that there is a clash between my respondents’ perceptions on BDSM as something immanent and the discourses in which I am embedded. Something that I also found interesting is that, in some of the

³³ These emotions are, however, subjective and therefore felt and embodied in very different ways.

cases, the respondents visibly struggled to create meaning out of their attachment to BDSM in a chronological way. As Diamond argues (2006), biographical narratives can produce new forms of subjectivity. This seems to be the case for some of my participants, who often doubted themselves when narrating their initiation in BDSM practice. Some of them stated that, during the interview, they had the chance to think about parts of themselves which they had not previously reflected upon.

When evaluating the data gathered, I used a discursive analysis (Fairclough, 2003). I started to examine patterns and themes in the interviews once I had enough data to contrast. For example, all of my respondents used the term “game” to refer to BDSM. Their insistence on referring to BDSM as a game has re-shaped the nature of my thesis as well as the questions that I asked in the following interviews. When asked about why they referred to BDSM as game, I realised that none of my respondents have previously reflected upon this. Calling BDSM a game is therefore a sort of *doxa* (something taken for granted), yet it radically affects the meaning given to BDSM practices (Bourdieu, 1984). I also asked my respondents questions about experiences which can be read as a turning point in their attachment to BDSM, e.g., “how did you become involved in BDSM?” Drawing on Joan Scott (1992), my aim here was to examine the discourses which have constructed my respondents subjectivities. This has helped me to understand the ways in which my respondents “feel” BDSM.

1.5 Structure

In Chapter 2, I focus on the fact that, although BDSM is deemed a game, what occurs while playing often penetrates into the “real” lives of my respondents. I draw here on Goffman’s frame analysis theory to argue that my respondents find it difficult to manage the relationship between BDSM (game) and reality, by arguing that the boundaries between these two realms are blurred and arbitrary. I later argue that the fact that BDSM is a sexual game makes it be perceived as a practice arising from a natural instinct, that is, as the externalisation of a truth

which is unmarked by the social. I argue that, far from being pre-social, these feelings are the result of discursive strategies deployed in sexuality, which produce a truth/identity, but not an immanent one.

In Chapter 3, I focus first on the schemata that constitute a recognised player and the ways in which these are embodied, and then use these reflections to study the very diverse understandings of what BDSM is. I draw on Bourdieu to argue that in every game a symbolic and affective entrance fee (*libido*) is required (1998). In BDSM, the *libido* which constitutes an authentic player seems to be a “need” for practicing in contrast to those for whom BDSM is only a “spice.” I use the concept of *habitus* to explore the classed nature of the community, which makes BDSM a game which is not accessible to everyone (Bourdieu 1977; 1984). *Habitus* also allows me to argue that BDSM’s rules are embodied in very different ways, affecting the ways in which BDSM is perceived by my respondents.

In Chapter 4, drawing on performativity theories (Austin 1962; Derrida 1988; Butler 1990), I sustain that the fact that BDSM is rendered as a game enables practitioners to produce a context in which BDSM practices are resignified, yet the prior meanings of those practices often penetrate into the scene. BDSM practices have the potential to denaturalise gendered dynamics of power in sex, even if this is not explicitly intended. Finally, I argue that the meaning emerged from these practices is ambivalent and can only be examined from a subjective position.

I argue that the intersection of game, sexuality and identity in BDSM practice opens up the possibility of playing with a part of ourselves understood to be immutable and natural. A game can be considered a performative strategy which produces a bounded space in which the historical meanings of certain practices can be recoded. However, recoding a meaning does not necessarily imply doing it in a subversive way. I therefore argue that BDSM is not the ultimate solution for gendered structural inequalities.

BDSM, like any other sexual act, is hence a social relation practiced by individuals who are embedded in discourses, which are often the matrix of the production of exclusion. Associating BDSM with an inner disposition that makes practitioners “special,” as well as the classed nature of the community, means that asymmetries in power relations can, in some cases, be reproduced rather than subverted. The meanings that BDSM practices carry with them can only be given in retrospect and do not rely on a single interpreter. I attempt to point out the political limitations and potential of BDSM, to let the reader make her/his own meaning. This thesis is significant because it goes beyond studying the fact that gendered power dynamics are more easily subverted in BDSM than in heteronormative sex. In so doing, I analyse the strategies that make this fluidity possible. Examining BDSM by focusing on the performative nature of calling it a game can help us to understand how people who do not necessarily aim to subvert the gendered order can play with parts of themselves perceived to be natural.

Chapter 2: Finding Oneself in the Game

How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe games to him, and we might add: "This and similar things are called 'games' ". And do we know any more about it ourselves? Is it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is?—But this is not. ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953, § 69)

Play and reality are perceived as two distinct realms separated by sharp boundaries, yet what happens while playing often transcends the game world. We play to escape or to be oblivious of the weight of the quotidian, to lose ourselves in the joyful experience of the moment. However, when we play we also suffer, compare ourselves with one another and get involved in arguments with other players. The emotions that emerge during the practice of play often penetrate into the space of what is deemed reality, revealing the fragility of the boundaries that separate play from everyday life. BDSM is commonly rendered as play/game among practitioners, yet my respondents often consider it a constitutive part of their identity.

In this chapter, I explore the outcomes produced by the frictions between game and sexuality in the Budapest BDSM community. I argue that the artificial boundaries between game and “reality” are often disrupted. It could be said that play is a form of escapism, of hiding from who we are. Nevertheless, playing also allows us to distance ourselves from social norms, by generating a more fluid space with its own rules. Incarnating people, animals or objects enables us to enter the space of otherness; in other words, to expand our notions of selfhood. Hence, playing with sexuality opens up the possibility of denaturalising gendered power dynamics in sex, which are understood to be immutable.

In the first section of this chapter, I draw on the application of Ervin Goffman’s frame analysis (1974) to game theory, and particularly to role-play. I argue that in BDSM practitioners’ transition from the primary/hegemonic frames – what a particular cultural group conceptualises as the everyday – to a BDSM/play- frame, which has its own codes,

ethics and morals. Ashley ML Brown argues that sexual role-play generates a bounded/safe space which separates play from the hegemonic moral codes in which players are embedded, by producing its own set of norms and ethics (2015). However, for some of my respondents, these two frames tend to intermingle, affecting one another. I argue that, in some cases, it is difficult to trace a line between primary (everyday) and secondary (game) frames. Fine argues that in role-play the player, that is the actor behind the character, must become immersed in the diegetic world of the character in order for the game to be successful (1983). In other words, a player must act according to his/her character's dispositions, tastes and morality. However, I argue that, in BDSM, characters' and practitioners' identities often interfere with each other. I draw on Wittgenstein's notion of the language game to argue that the emotional/material investment put into a game/frame is what makes it real (1953), regardless of whether the frame is perceived as primary (reality) or not.³⁴ Finally, I use Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblance" in order to show how different frames/language games are interconnected and constitute each other.

In the second section, the focus is placed on the interplay of sexuality, game and identity as it is felt during BDSM practice. I draw here on Janice Irvine to argue that emotions that are felt in BDSM, far from being located outside of the social, are discursively produced (2008). This can explain why my respondents perceive their emotions during the practice as "raw reality" unmediated by the social. The strong attachment of my respondents to BDSM can be examined through the lens of the discursive production of identity from the locus of sexuality. According to Foucault (1978), in modernity scientific discourses were deployed on "sexuality," transforming what until that point had been more or less regulated practices into categories of personhood, deviancies or perversions. "Sadomasochism" is, hence, the result of the pathologisation of some practices which were branded as deviant in the late 19th

³⁴ The material investment (as well as the emotional one) is analysed in the next chapter in which I examine the community in terms of social class.

century. BDSM is a discursively produced category with traceable origins, yet a great deal of my interlocutors argue that they were born BDSMers. I argue that the fact that BDSM is a game in which sexuality and identity are involved implies playing with parts of one-self which are understood to be natural and immutable in modern biopolitical regimes, opening up the possibility for deconstructing naturalised power positions coupled to particular bodies.

2.1 Bridging Gaps between Frames

I'm on a public bus crossing the Chain Bridge heading to the "Buda side" and leaving Pest behind me. I revise my notes for the first interview of this study, yet I cannot resist looking away and contemplating the elegance of Buda-Pest, cut across by the river Danube, which demarcates the boundaries of what were once two different cities. Boundaries, even those traced by geographical features, are malleable and unstable – social events continuously reshape them. Buda and Pest are currently two parts of one single city, which is connected by numerous bridges over which one can freely transit, moving from one's place to the *other*. The bus drops me off close to Ráhel's home. Ráhel is a woman in her late 30s who self-identifies as dominant-pansexual. She is one of the more active members of the Budapest BDSM community, and has been one of the first persons to show interest in participating in this research. Although I have suggested doing this interview in a café, she feels more comfortable in her apartment since she is "very antisocial and don't like to be in public places." I call the doorbell and a male voice invites me to go upstairs. When I reach the second floor, a tall, slim man in his early 20s is waiting, and asks me to take my shoes off. The apartment is small but cosy: only a kitchen and a big room from where Ráhel invites me to sit on the bed, opposite her. While I make myself comfortable, she asks me whether I want to drink something: "A glass of water please," I reply. The young man rapidly leaves the room and returns with my beverage. With the glass of water in my hands and still disoriented, I start wondering about the nature of the relationship between Ráhel and the

young man. I will realise later that I am immersed in a world whose rules I am not acquainted with.

During the course of the interview, Ráhel tells me that she has maids who “serve” her – the young man is one of them. She claims that she has always been dominant and it is natural for her to be served. I ask her whether to dominate men has empowered her in everyday life:

Ráhel: Of course, it is more comfortable because I have more time to do everything, because I have a maid who does the cleaning and they can take care of my dog when I have to do something. But I think I’m the same, so it’s not a role for me it’s been as it’s always been inside me, so it doesn’t change anything.

Santi: So you have always been like this?

Ráhel: Yes... I work as a project manager, so leading groups or people is not strange for me at all.

Ráhel argues that being a dominant person has always been inside her, it is in “her blood.” However, when asked whether in her long-term amorous relationships her partners must take a submissive role out of bed, she states:

my relationships don’t work like this, I hate this question. There aren’t those kind of roles, I am dominant in most of my life, but that does not mean that I have to be strict or strong. The fact that I’m an emotional person makes me a better dominant partner.

When I analyse this interview, I find it difficult to make meaning out of this concatenation of statements. On the one hand, for Ráhel to be dominant is in “her blood.” This is not only reflected in the fact that for her it is “natural” to have maids serving at her apartment but also in her professional position as project manager. On the other hand, she “hates” to be asked whether long-term partners must be submissive with her. In other words, her relationships with her long-term partners do not respond to dominant/submissive dualisms, yet, interestingly, she argues that being emotional with them “makes her a better dominant partner.” These apparently contradictory statements show that the boundaries between BDSM and everyday life seem not to be clearly defined in Ráhel’s life.

Ráhel, like most BDSM practitioners, refers to BDSM practices as a game. However, for some of my respondents, these games are blended with their everyday lives. Goffman’s

frame analysis can be useful to cast light on the correlation between reality and game (1974). I particularly focus here on how Brown has applied Goffman's theory to sexuality in virtual role-play (2015). Goffman argues that there is a primary framework, which encompasses the hegemonic ways of understanding the world; in other words, what is understood by a particular social group to constitute everyday life. Goffman uses the concept of "keying" to refer to the mechanism which allows people to switch from one primary frame to another one. For Goffman, "keying" is "the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (1974, 43-44)." For example, BDSM practices such as flogging have their historical referents in torture practices inflicted on the weak; however, when enacted in BDSM these practices are "something quite else."

This becomes relevant in light of Ráhel's interactions with her "vanilla friends." Ráhel argues that "when they come here (her home) and see that I have maids, they say: are you crazy!? Do you have servants? Do you have slaves? This is the 21st century, you cannot have servants!" Despite her friends' opinions, Ráhel argues that this situation is very "natural" for her. In the case of Ráhel, the two frames (the vanilla one and the BDSM) intermingle, making it difficult to determine which frame is primary or secondary. Ráhel spends most of her time at her apartment where she is "served" by her maids, yet she also invites her "vanilla friends" to visit. It could be said that "keying" is not needed in this case to draw boundaries between frames. It is as if Ráhel shuffled the layers of Goffman's frames like a card-sharp. In Goffman's frame analysis, there is a hierarchical relationship between frames: the primary frame does not need to rely on the secondary ones to stand. However, in Ráhel's apartment, the primary frame is not necessarily the base on which other frames are superimposed. Ráhel's apartment produces a context in which the two realms she inhabits can be brought together. According to frame analysis theory, we must adopt different identities in relation

to the frames in which we are embedded. However, Ráhel does not need to switch from Vanilla to BDSM. In her apartment, she can simultaneously be/become both.³⁵

In drawing on Goffman, Fine distinguishes three levels of frames in role-play: the frame of the person (primary frame), player (secondary) and character (tertiary) (Fine cited in Brown 2015, 55). The secondary frame involves having specific knowledge about the rules of the game, a knowledge which must be shared by the other players, that is, players must play by the same rules – this implies knowing the regulatory principles of the activity. The tertiary frame involves the knowledge that the character incarnated by the player has of its frame/world. Brown, citing Montola (2008), refers to this frame as the diegetic frame.³⁶ According to Fine, the “gaming world is keyed in that the players not only manipulate characters; they are characters (cited in Brown, 2005, 17).” For him, this entails that the identity of character and player must be different – players must become immersed in the world of their characters.

I would like to go back to the experiences of my respondents to shed some light on these theories. I take the metro towards a central café just a few hundred meters away from the Danube to meet with Izabella – she is the first person who replied to the multiple messages that I sent to Budapest practitioners. I have exchanged several emails with Izabella, who has asked for details about what kind of research I’m conducting. She has only agreed to do this interview after seeing documents which prove that I am carrying out this study. Izabella is a woman in her mid-20s. She self-identifies as a submissive-brat who is primarily

³⁵ Here I would like emphasise that this is only possible in certain physical spaces/context such as Ráhel’s apartment

³⁶ The spatio-temporal world depicted in the film. Anything within that world (such as dialogue or a shot of a road sign used to establish a location) is termed diegetic whereas anything outside it (such as a voiceover or a superimposed caption) is extradiegetic. This distinction is especially associated with diegetic sound: for example, when a record-player is shown to be the source of onscreen music. A diegetic audience is an audience within the depicted world (www.oxfordreference.com).

“into pain and role-play.”³⁷ During the interview, she refers to BDSM as a game and I try to find out where her insistence on the word “game” comes from:

Santi: Is BDSM a game for you?

Izabella: Yes, I mean... totally. I usually compare it with when children play. I mean, they play at being animals or things... things. You know how children play. It's not really connected to reality... This is how I feel about BDSM... what we're playing is not connected to reality; the reason why we want what we want is connected to reality.

Santi: Can you tell me a bit more about that?

Izabella: (Laughs) Ok, for example, it's not really connected to reality that someone is interrogating me, or that I'm a maid, but the feelings I want to have are connected [...]. For example, I'm bratty, my method is to hurt the other person and then get punished. I think that deep-down I'm hurting the other person in a relationship [...] even in real life I think I should be punished.

Izabella seems to draw sharp boundaries between game (BDSM) and reality. The characters she incarnates “are not connected to reality,” yet, interestingly, she states that “the reason why we want what we want (while playing)” is connected to reality.” Unlike that argued by Fine (1983), the character's identity is here interlaced with that of the person and player. Something that draws my attention when I listen to the recording of this interview is that Izabella compares BDSM to children's games. Children are not required to produce the same ontological coherence as adults; they can engage in games in which they can become anything that crosses their mind. The child's self is still in a process of formation; unlike adults, they can afford to have multiple selves before their identity becomes a coherent and unified whole. Here, Izabella gets involved in “child play,” which enables her to access the emotions that she “wants to have.” These are emotions that could probably not be accessed if she were not immersed in the frame of her characters. However, what her character feels is lived as a “real emotion,” that is to say, as belonging to the everyday world or primary frame.

This entanglement, overlapping and interplay of frames can be illuminated by Wittgenstein's notion of the “language game (1953).” He coined this term to argue that utterances' meaning is to be found in their usage. According to Wittgenstein, there is no

³⁷ Brat: A bottom who enjoys struggling against control or challenging the top. Brattiness has a wide spectrum from the playful 'uppity bottom' to the smart-ass masochist (which see). Some brats are 'testing' their dominant, others have a desire to be 'conquered and tamed,' while some simply do not wish to be controlled (<https://www.squidge.org/novad/Primer/Definitions.html>)

transcendental origin of an utterance/practice. “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” (1953, § 43). In other words, meaning is the product of practice, of the way in which we act in a particular context. This context or frame is what Wittgenstein calls a language game. Hence a practice/utterance only makes sense within the boundaries of a game. Wittgenstein argues that language games are constituted, recognised and recognisable by “family resemblance.” That is to say, by their similarities with other language games, which are part of a family: “the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres. (1953, §67)” This means that language games, or frames, are interconnected, with the effect of constituting one another – they rely on each other to become meaningful. It also implies that the boundaries between different games, far from being sharp and immutable, are blurred, malleable and arbitrary.

Echoing Wittgenstein’s ideas, it could be said that in the case of Izabella it is impossible to draw a line between frames/games: what is felt in the diegetic frame transcends to “reality.” The worlds inhabited by Izabella’s interplay make it impossible to neatly separate the character from the player’s identity, or the boundaries of what is deemed as a game from those of what we call reality. As Wittgenstein asks rhetorically: “For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? (1953, § 68).”

Reality and game seem to be entangled in BDSM practice for most of my interlocutors. This is also the case of Sára, a psychology student who started to practice BDSM with her boyfriend. I meet with Sára in café close to CEU in Szent István Bazilika, one of hot spots of the city where tourists throng in large numbers, altering the everyday life of the city. The day prior my meeting with her, I had interviewed a man, Jákob, in the same place. During the course of the interview with Sára, I realise that their stories are identical. When I finish my conversation with Sára, she tells me that, “yesterday,” I had interviewed

her boyfriend. Both Sára and Jákob self-identify as primarily dominant – this has led this couple to switch roles. Sára tells me that she uses safe-words during BDSM practice. I am interested in finding out whether the use of a safe-word could be considered as a sort of mechanism that undoes the laminating of Goffman's frames:

Santi: Do you use safe-words?

Sára: Umm... No... No, once... My boyfriend used it.

Santi: Do you want to share something else about that?

Sára: Umm, yeah. I was dominant. I was enjoying what we were doing but it was too much for him. And... he was crying and I couldn't decide if that was part of the game or if it wasn't. And I didn't want to stop the scene and then he told me, "ok, it's enough. It's red. Stop!"

Santi: Why did you feel bad?

Sára: Because of two reasons, because I felt my cruelty, it's not a good thing to face bad things in you. The second, is that I felt I hurt him outside the scene like as if it became reality. Am I really a bad person? And... ok I'm not because I stopped when he said "stop." But I couldn't see that it was really bad for him. But I guess it's part of practicing [...] it was the beginning of our relationship.

Santi: And... you said that it was part of reality. Has it happened to you other times that while practicing you can feel that that it's part of reality?

Sára: Of course, all the feelings, those feelings are part of reality. I guess that what's not part of reality is only the rules, the play, the scene... How we are in that situation... I think it's part of reality, otherwise, I think I would go mad.

Santi: What do you mean by going mad?

Sára: (long silence) Ok... I'm happy, I really am and someone tells that I'm not happy but I feel it, and it's not matching. I don't know whether you understand (I shake my head). No? I cannot verbalise it.

If Sára's narrative were analysed through the lens of frame analysis, one could argue that the safe-word here works as a sort of *unkeying*, as if the frames superimposed on the primary one were removed, and reality was reconstituted. However, what Sára is arguing is more complex. She claims that despite the fact that her boyfriend was alerting her to his suffering ("he was crying") she could not decide whether that "was part of the game or it wasn't." Later she says that she felt bad because (1) she faced her "cruelty" (2) she could not see that "she was hurting him outside the scene." The realm of the scene and that of the everyday are almost impossible to discern here. Both Sára's cruelty in the game and her boyfriend's suffering are perceived as real. She makes this clear when she states that the feelings in the scene "are part of reality." Otherwise, she "would go mad." I find it particularly interesting that when she tries to make sense of this entanglement of frames/realms, she

“cannot verbalise it.” The intermingling of frames makes BDSM more difficult to analyse than other games. As in the case of Sára, practitioners often have difficulties managing the relationship between game and reality. The intersection of games and sexuality makes BDSM a very particular game in which parts of the self, felt as very intimate, are exposed during the game.

The examples provided in this section show that Goffman’s hierarchical division between frames is not easy to make in BDSM practice/play. Person, player and character identity are not always easy to distinguish in my respondents’ cases. In BDSM, frames often intra-act, affecting one another. The boundaries drawn between reality/game and person/character, that is to say between “being” and appearing to be, are called into question.

2.2 Looking at Oneself in the Mirror

In order to play we need to interact with other people. We cannot learn how to play a game without observing other play-mates or competitors. Playing is, then, a relational activity which is learnt through practice in a social environment. As mentioned earlier, BDSM is rendered as a game, yet many respondents describe the emotions lived during this practice as very real. In BDSM, sexuality and game intersect. Here, practitioners play with sexuality: the locus from which categories of personhood are produced. People involved in BDSM call themselves practitioners, players, BDSMers or kinksters.³⁸ The two former terms refer to the agent of an action and are therefore more connected to practice. In the latter two, the reproduction of practices seem to have congealed in something which came to be perceived as an inner disposition, a notion of selfhood. Interestingly, although BDSM is rendered as play/game, a great deal of my interlocutors argued that they have always been players.

A few hours earlier than the meeting with Izabella described above, I met with Feri. Izabella has put me in contact with him. Feri is one of the most active members of the

³⁸ My respondents used all those words, yet I noticed that the words “kinkster” or BDSMers were used more often by those who have relationship with BDSM international communities.

Budapest BDSM community and organises parties, munches and workshops.³⁹ We meet in a central bar close to Deak Ter in which BDSM munches used to take place. When I arrive, he is waiting for me outside the bar. It is not difficult to recognise him – he has previously sent me an email describing himself as a very tall man (1.93) with a “punk Mohawk.” We enter the bar and sit on a table close to the counter. Feri brings several books about BDSM with him, which he displays on the table. The front-pages of those books have pictures of dominatrices in latex suits. Feri clearly does not mind that the people around us find out that he is a BDSMer.

I ask Feri when he became interested in BDSM. Feri claims that he has had BDSM fantasies since he was a kid – this is common to many of my respondents who claim to “have always being interested in BDSM,” “being born this way” or even that “BDSM is in their blood.” Feri, who self-identifies as a lifestyle-switch with submissive inclinations, became aware of his submissiveness at the age of seven,⁴⁰ when some girls tied him up in a summer-camp. Later, as a teenager, he started to search online for sex which corresponded to his sexual fantasies. Only then did he become aware that there was a category, BDSM, through which he could articulate his desires. He became active in both chat-rooms and BDSM social networks, which connected him to other members of the Budapest BDSM community. This initial experience with BDSM echoes a great deal of the narratives gathered for this study.

Kath Weston provides a very similar account to those of my respondents with reference to gay people in rural areas of the US in the 80s (1998), who became aware of not being “alone in the world” through media and pop culture representations of the US gay community. Jákob (Sára’s boyfriend)’s story is almost identical to the narratives gathered by Weston:

³⁹ Munch: See footnote 26.

⁴⁰ Switch: A switch is someone who participates in BDSM activities sometimes as a top and other times as a bottom or (in the case of dominance and submission) sometimes as a dominant and other times as a submissive (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Top,_bottom,_switch_%28BDSM%29)

I remember that I saw a magazine in a convenience store, it's hard to say how old I was... 16. There was a girl on the front-page of the magazine blindfolded and bonded [...] that was the moment that I realised this is something which exists outside my head in the outer world, and that was liberating. That experience... I'm not alone, not completely alone [...] I don't know if somebody in my city or my country is interested in this. Probably, in Japan or I don't know... But, this is something which does have a market so it's worth it to produce material for people who are interested in this stuff.

Similarly to the narratives of gay people in rural US in which homosexuality was located in urban spaces (Weston, 1998), this moment connects Jákob with an imaginary community, which he places far from his everyday-life, perhaps in Japan. Jákob tells me that, a year later, when he had an internet connexion installed at home, he immediately searched for material related to BDSM. The role of the media, which Weston highlights in her narratives, is here substituted for the possibilities that the internet, and particularly social networks, creates for people with specific interests/desires to come together. My respondents can only articulate their fantasies and desires through a community, which is the product of a socio-historical process. This means that, in order for them to enter the community, they have to accept and learn some rules which pre-exist them.

Wittgenstein argues that in order to start playing a language game, we need to trust other players and the rules they use; in short, we need to learn the grammar of the game (1953). We can only question the rules of a game once we are part of it, that is, when we have played according to the rules, which are embodied and internalised by mimicking senior players. As Wittgenstein puts it: "Is there a why? Must I not begin to trust somewhere? That is to say: somewhere I must begin with not-doubting" (1953, §150).

Let me go back to the ways in which Izabella refers to her emotions in BDSM role-playing. For her, role-playing makes it possible to feel emotions that "are connected to reality through her characters." However, she needs someone who understands the diegetic world of her characters for the interaction to be satisfactory. Izabella does not like to give specific instructions to her partners because, for her, "to make a situation good is about the feeling and [she] cannot tell the other person how to do that: either [she] has the feeling or [she

doesn't].” She is sceptical of finding a long-term partner with whom she can connect in BDSM relationship. If she found someone who is not “into BDSM, he would have to do his homework by reading about everything” and she is “doubtful the people would do that.” Izabella needs her partners to understand both the BDSM rules and the diegetic codes of the worlds that her “characters” inhabit; in other words, a player who understands and enjoys the games she likes to play. She is doubtful of finding a long-term partner who would do “his homework,” in other words, she needs to feel that the playing comes naturally to her partners. However, she became involved in BDSM and learnt its rules through her ex-partner, who was several years older than her and had a great deal of experience practicing BDSM.

In the same vein, Ráhel is contradictory when she also claims that she does not practice with men who do not have experience, yet, on the other hand, she believes that people who are really “committed” to BDSM are born with BDSM desires. When asked whether she had a mentor she said that “she does not believe in those clichés.” Ráhel and Izabella have internalised the rules of the game and are sceptical of the authenticity of amateur players. However, as Wittgenstein argues (1953), before we become players games already have their own rules, which we can only learn through practice. In other words, one can only become a practitioner after having performed some practices circumscribed by the BDSM game.

Similarly to previous examples, there is an underlying tension in the testimonies of a great deal of my interlocutors who claim to have immanent BDSM desires, yet can only become BDSMers once they have acknowledged the existence of a community – which, far from being long-standing, has a brief history. BDSM encompasses a myriad of practices, which prior to the production of this category were not necessarily detached from what we understand today as heteronormative sex. As Wittgenstein argues (1953), the boundaries between games are arbitrary; that is to say, there is no such a thing as natural boundaries

which neatly separate two realms/games. The boundaries between what are considered to be BDSM practices and vanilla practices were produced and fixed through discursive strategies.⁴¹

Michel Foucault claims that, in the modernity, sexuality became a locus of regulation in which different scientific discourses became entangled, producing new categories of personhood (1978). For example, what used to be a sinful, criminal act (sodomy) became a new species (the homosexual), an object of study, who embodied the entanglement of different discourses which intersected in the nodal point of sexuality. Like other communities produced around sexual identity, BDSM has its origin in the scientific production of sadomasochism through the pathologisation of some practices branded as deviant in the late 19th century. The production of SM as deviancy gave rise to a community with common points of identification, dispositions and attitudes towards life. The fact that BDSM is simultaneously “play” and a locus of identification makes it difficult for my respondents to separate the realms of game and reality – in other words, of their identity inside and outside the game.

Sex is understood as a space in which the real self emerges; when we have sex we are not acting or wearing masks: we are our-selves. Sára claims that “BDSM is like looking at yourself in the mirror and people don’t want to look at the mirror.”

Sára: It’s hard facing yourself and seeing that you can be cruel, you can be aggressive. “It’s hard to accept those feelings.” And I think that people don’t want to see themselves like that”

Santi: Let me use this metaphor. For example, when we act in a social environment we have to restrain ourselves, so there are different layers that we have put on. And when you are practicing BDSM, it’s as if you peeled off all the layers and the real “you” emerged. Is that what you’re saying?

Sára: Yes... yes, like, it’s like, for example, experiencing cruelty just as raw cruelty without any meaning that society puts into cruelty.

⁴¹ As Robin Bauer argues (2014, 5): Through the construction of BDSMers as ‘perverse’ and distinct from the sexually ‘normal’ population, the power dynamics and the elements of sensation play and immobilization in non-BDSM encounters have been obscured. This has led to the idea that BDSM and non-BDSM sexuality are two sharply distinct sets of behaviours, and that individuals are either ‘into BDSM’ or not.

Here, the friction between game and sexuality calls into question the ontological boundaries between “being” and appearing to be. When we play, particularly in role-play, we incarnate someone/something which is not usually felt to be so intimately connected to our-selves. However, in BDSM, the intersection of sexuality and game turns what is performed during a game (BDSM) into a reality perceived as unmediated by the social. Wittgenstein challenges the idea of meaning/reality located in the transcendental by arguing that meaning is not found in the correspondence of a practice/word with a pre-discursive/transcendental reality. This implies that there is no such thing as more or less real practices or, as in Goffman’s frames, a hierarchical relationship of language games/frames: practices become real within the game. Whether a language game or frame is perceived as real depends on both our investment in it and the discursive strategies to which we are subjects. Very similarly, Foucault argues that notions of selfhood derived from sexual practice were discursively produced. This implies that discourse is precisely what generates our perception of what is real, of emotions that we feel as very intimately attached to our-selves (1978).

Janice Irvine has analysed the production of visceral, intense emotions with a discursive approach (2008).⁴² According to her, emotions cannot be solely explained by rendering them as purely irrational and impulsive or as totally rational, calculated strategic actions. Irvine argues that a re-emergence of the study of emotions in academia can help to cast some light on the ways in which intense emotions arise and become politically meaningful.⁴³ According to her, bodily sensations produced by some emotions are often thought to be non-discursive. In other words, emotions are situated outside of discourse; only once they have been experienced can we conceptualise them (in retrospect) with the discourses available to us. Irvine, however, argues that emotions are discursively produced.⁴⁴

⁴² Janice Irvine has applied affects theory to the study of moral panics which seem to follow a script in order to demonstrate that bodily reaction and visceral emotions are discursively produced (2006).

⁴³ This re-emergence of the study of emotion has its roots in affects theory inspired by the writings of Silvan Tomkins (1995) and its application in the field of gender studies (Sedgwick 2003)

We think about sex as purely instinctive as if our sexual identification, preferences and desires were determined by natural forces. This can explain why my respondents' emotions while playing are perceived as unmediated by the social, that is, as more real than reality itself.

By no means do I mean to question the connection with themselves that my respondents experience during BDSM practice. Instead I argue that discourse produces “real” feelings, which, far from being solely personal, are socio-historical products. What is particularly interesting here is that during BDSM practice people play with sexuality and identity, that is, with what they understand as their inner truth. This opens up the possibility of deconstructing naturalised power positions anchored to gender, sex and sexuality, by playing with them. The bounded space created by a “game” produces a margin for manoeuvre in a space (sexuality) which is understood to be instinctive and non-discursive. This can explain why, in BDSM, power positions attached to sexuality can, in some particular cases, be more easily reversed than in normative sex, without that jeopardising the BDSM practitioners' position in society.⁴⁵

2.3 Conclusions

In this chapter I have argued that, although BDSM is considered to be a game, the emotions experienced during the game are felt as a “raw reality” and thus, in a way, realer than real. What is experienced in the game becomes the higher truth of the self. I have used Goffman's frame analysis theory to argue that the hierarchical relationship between reality and game does not stand when it comes to my participants' experiences (1974). This is the case of Ráhel, who, in her apartment, can be simultaneously “served” by her maids and have a conversation with her “vanilla” friends. Along these lines, Sára could not differentiate whether her partner's emotions belonged to the realm of game or reality until he used the safe-words. The examples provided demonstrate that in BDSM the boundaries between

⁴⁵ This strongly relies on class, which enables people to be both part of the BDSM community and secure their position in society - I will develop this idea in the next chapter.

games are often disrupted. The notion of language games allows to understand that playing is not outside reality, but constitutive of its own reality, regardless of whether particular practices take place in what we consider the everyday/primary frame or not.

I have argued that most of my respondents perceive BDSM as an immanent force, yet BDSM is a discursively produced category with easily traceable origins. The fact that sexuality became the locus of the production of identities in modernity explains why practitioners perceive BDSM practice as an immanent part of their identity (Foucault 1978). The intense feelings lived during practice are hence the product of the perception of sexuality as a space where our real “self” is freed from social constraints. Finally, I have argued that the intersection of game and sexuality/identity makes BDSM a very particular game in which practitioners play with ideas of them-selves understood to be immutable. Although BDSM has the potential to denaturalise power roles in sex, the fact that my respondents are caught within a liberal understanding of identity leads some of them to draw a line between authentic and inauthentic practitioners. I examine the consequences of this in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Feeling the game(s) differently

Wittgenstein is probably the philosopher who has helped me most at moments of difficulty. He's a kind of saviour for times of great intellectual distress -- as when you have to question such evident things as 'obeying a rule'. Or when you have to describe such simple (and, by the same token, practically ineffable) things as putting a practice into practice.

Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 9)

The intersection of sexuality/identity and game makes practitioners to take the game as something very intimate and deep. They need to be invested in the game in order to be recognised by the community. The rules of the game must be internalised and embodied by the player, who must accept and trust rules as if they were natural. However, playing the game is sometimes not accessible to everyone. We know that taking part in some games is often strongly related to education, class and the time at one's disposal. In order to play a game, we also should speak the same language, that is, be able to inhabit the same world as other players. In this chapter, I first focus on what is required to become a BDSM player. Secondly, I examine who are allowed to take part in the game. Finally, I analyse the different and diverse views about what the game is or should be.

In the first section of this chapter, I focus on the dichotomy produced by some of my respondents between real and non-real players. Bourdieu argues that every game/structure requires its own “entrance fee” (*libido*) that makes one a recognised player. I argue that the BDSM libido is an inner “need” for the game in contrast to only looking for “spice” in partaking in practice. Drawing on Rousseau critiques of the inauthenticity of actors and “prostitutes,” I sustain that this pre-discursive need is rooted in liberal notions of an ontological, stable self. In so doing, I use Foucault (and Wittgenstein) to argue that discourse, rather than representing an ontological, pre-discursive truth, produces those objects/subject who it claims to represent (1978). This seems to be true for some of my participants, who

claim that BDSM is “inside them.” I argue that what produces the need for the game is the repetition of some practices, which congeal in a habit perceived as a natural.

In the second section I argue that the fact that BDSM is felt as an inner disposition means that the shared cultural affinities and behaviours in the community are taken for granted. It is as if this shared schemata was given by a “natural disposition” towards BDSM rather than by socio-economic status, the latter remaining invisible for some practitioners. In drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* (1977; 1984), I argue that to be part of the game requires having the same *habitus* as the other players, that is, inhabiting the same game. Being part of the game implies, then, an investment in oneself in accordance with the tastes of the community, which might be given by family privilege or personal cultivation. In the Budapest community, a specific kind of intelligence and politeness seem to be the marks which allow one to be a player.

Finally, I focus on the rules which constitute BDSM by drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of *illusio* (1998), which involves both being immersed in the game/structure and taking it seriously. As Bourdieu argues, only when one is seriously invested in the game is it possible to question its rules. Practitioners often have very different perspectives on what BDSM is or should be in the future. Here I study different ways of understanding BDSM through the cases of Ráhel and Feri, who have very different opinions about the game they play. I also argue that the fact that the game is lived and embodied in different ways calls into question ontological, stable notions of BDSM desire, as it is externalised in multiple ways.

3.1 A Need or a Spice?

For experienced players it is usually boring to play with amateurs as they think that beginners are not fit for the game. However, one can only become an expert in a particular game through practice, perseverance and interest, which implies that initial clumsiness and frustration are part of the learning process. For the amateur, practice is therefore crucial. We can have the best master, and/or have thoroughly studied the rules of game for years, yet we

will not really understand the game until we start playing. Becoming a good player requires taking the game seriously, devoting time to it, lear

ning from other players. Any beginner will make many mistakes when they are learning. However, with practice, one manages to internalise the Rules, not needing to think more about them: they become natural. In other words, the game becomes so familiar that it is perceived as reality, as part of one's self. The experience gained provides entitlements and ascendancy over other players. This can explain why my respondents tend to think that in order to play the BDSM game properly, one must have an innate predisposition, a need for playing.

Bourdieu argues that every field/community imposes “a tacit entrance fee,” which he calls “libido” (1998). Each community has its own kind of *libido*, which is required to become proper players. Many of my respondents draw a line between the people for whom BDSM is a “need” and those for whom it is just a “spice.” The need for BDSM seems to be this “entrance fee,” a “BDSM libido,” which makes one a recognised, recognisable player. As described above, most of my respondents agree that BDSM is a necessity or, as Ráhel's case, an “addiction.” Along these lines, Jákob claims that he is “almost sure that this (BDSM) is something internal that belongs to himself.”

Jákob: If someone tells me: “I have discovered my interest in BDSM as a grown up [...]” Someone who did not know anything about BDSM and discovered it last year. I would be surprised. I think that he is lying to himself.

Santi: There is another way of thinking about this. Perhaps, everyone potentially has desires related to BDSM.

Jákob: Yes some elements are present in almost everyone's personal lives.

Santi: What's the difference between some elements present in most people's sexual lives and BDSMers or practitioners' desires?

Jákob: (long silence) The difference depends on whether you're using BDSM as spice or a need.

According to Jákob, BDSM requires a very intimate attachment, that is, a commitment which not everyone has. As Jákob claims, if someone who has become a recognised, *proper* practitioner sustained that she/he recently became interested in BDSM, he would “think that he [she] is lying to [her]himself.” In other words, in order to become a practitioner one must

have the *libido* regardless of whether they want to acknowledge it or not. This implies that the “BDSM libido” is thought of as something that one cannot acquire: either one has it or not. This divides people who engage in BDSM practices into authentic practitioners and people who are just looking for some excitement: a “spice.”

Like the rest of my interlocutors, Ráhel refers to BDSM as a game. However, when asked about the use of the word “play,” she claimed that she actually prefers the expression “to be together” because it is “deeper.” For her, the term “play is theatrical.” Ráhel believes that BDSM is something “deep” that “comes from inside.” She finds BDSM events in which people practice in semi-public environments superficial, “like playing in a theatre.” The use of the word theatre to refer to practices considered to be superficial or inauthentic echoes Rousseau’s critique of theatre actors ([1758] 1968). Rousseau critiques actors because they become a play-thing in the hands of the audience. They do not listen to their inner essence/truth and perform different identities in exchange for money. The protean nature of the actor, who constantly wears different masks, destabilises ontological notions of the self. This liberal/Rousseauian conceptualisation of the self is grounded in an immutable inner essence which makes an individual (or group of individuals/community) unique, driving their ways of being in the world. Modern technologies of power (biopower) have produced the notion of sexuality as the manifestation of this liberal/ Rousseauian essence (Foucault, 1978).

Echoing Rousseau, Ráhel is very critical of professional dominatrices, who she refers to as “prostitutes.” According to her, they are not real BDSM practitioners, since they do it for money. This is also reminiscent of the historical relationship of the masquerade balls and the “prostitute,” pervasive in 18th century British imagery (Carter 2004). The conflation of masquerade and prostitution became the signifier of patriarchal representations of femininity as inauthentic and unstable, as opposed to a masculinity represented as natural and fixed. In the same vein, Rousseau himself compared the actor to the prostitute. For Rousseau, the actor/prostitute, rather than trading with themselves, “trade in [her]himself” ([1758] 1968,

79). In other words, they do not trade with their bodies but with their “selves.” According to Rousseau, the actor “annihilates himself, as it were lost in his hero” ([1758] 1986, 81). The actor and the prostitute lose their subjectivity and become objects in the hands of their clients/audiences. Ráhel’s references to both theatre and prostitution are reminiscent of this notion of a stable self, which must act in a truthful and coherent way. However, although Ráhel is not fond of the word “play” to refer to BDSM, she, like the rest of my interlocutors, calls BDSM play/a game. Unlike Rousseau’s actors who annihilate themselves, BDSM practitioners find them-selves in the performance. In order to act truthfully while performing, their urge to play/perform must come from inside and be taken seriously.

The practices performed by *authentic* BDSMers seem to correspond to desires understood to have an immanent/transcendental origin. Wittgenstein called into question the traditional notion of truth in philosophy by arguing that practices/utterances do not have to match with a pre-discursive state of affairs to be perceived and lived as true or real (1957). According to him, it is the use of a practice within a regulated space (language game) which makes the practice meaningful and therefore which produces truth and reality.

In the same vein, Foucault (1978), challenges the liberal/Rousseauian notion of the ontological self. Foucault critiques the classical idea of representation by arguing that discourse, far from representing a pre-social, ontological state of affairs, produces the same objects/subjects which it claims to represent.⁴⁶ This implies that there is no such thing as a pre-discursive inner essence/truth. It is, instead, the repetition of some practices within discursive confines that produces the idea of an ontological essence/reality.⁴⁷ As argued in Chapter 2, the relationship between sexuality and identity established in modernity made

⁴⁶ I use “represent” here as a close synonym of “depicting” or “portraying.”

⁴⁷ By discourse, I do not refer to what is said, written or done, by what constrains or enable it, that is, the moves that one can make in a particular game. In this sense, Foucault’s idea of discourse echoes Wittgenstein’s language games. However, Foucault seems to foreground more the capacity of discourse to produce categories of personhood.

sexual practices such as BDSM become understood as a sort of natural game, as if they were rooted in a pre-discursive immanent origin.

The case of Sára can be helpful to cast some light on the tension between practice and “being.” Interestingly, Sára (Jákob’s partner) is the one of the very few of my respondents who claims to have developed her BDSM desires and fantasies in her adulthood. As described above, Jákob claims that “he would be surprised if someone became involved in BDSM as a grown up.” He would think that this person “is lying to [her]himself.” Consequently, he believes that BDSM is a “need” for him, whereas Sára could have “a relationship with vanilla sex and be fine.” However, when I asked Sára whether she would need to continue practicing BDSM in a hypothetical, different relationship, she stated that she “would need to have some BDSM elements.” Unlike most of my respondents, Sára implies that it is practice, and not an inner disposition that has produced a “BDSM need/libido.” However, the fact that she claims not to have an immemorial attachment to BDSM entails that she does not have what constitutes a *proper* BDSM player in the view of the majority of my respondents: a pre-discursive predisposition towards BDSM – “the BDSM libido.”

What is experienced during BDSM practice is understood by my respondents to be a manifestation of their true selves. However, the need to live these experiences does not have to come from a pre-social place. The intersection of game with sexuality/identity makes BDSM a game in which people become highly invested. Meaning/truth is not found in the correspondence of a practice with a pre-discursive reality (Wittgenstein 1953). This entails that there is no such thing as more or less authentic practices: instead, they become real within the game. The players’ investment and embeddedness in the game is what makes it real, a felt experience.

3.2 Who are the players?

The close attachment of many of my respondents to BDSM makes them understand their sexual desires as an inner disposition, which is articulated through the existence of a community based on sexual affinities. Finding a community allows them to externalise something that was concealed “inside their heads.” The ways in which these desires are later realised are therefore shaped and regulated by a series of organised, already-existing practices circumscribed by the BDSM constellation. Their interest in BDSM practice moves them to invest in themselves by replicating a style, taste, ways of behaving and speaking which are considered to be proper within the community. This enables them to become recognised BDSM players. This investment in oneself crystallises into an embodied disposition perceived as a natural way of “being” that all practitioners share.

BDSM is, however, not a game which is accessible to everyone, at least in the terms established by some sectors of the community. Community engagement often requires payment of entrance fees to parties and munches, specific dress-codes, social network memberships, equipment and time at one’s disposal. Weiss argues that BDSM is embedded in a capitalist dynamic grounded in the consumption of equipment, which is only accessible to the middle-class (2011). Although Weiss acknowledges that there are groups of practitioners which are not so immersed in a consumerist, middle-class lifestyle, she dismisses their importance, by arguing that they are not significant in terms of numbers.

In his ethnography on queer BDSM practices, Bauer critiques Weiss for being “biased” in her analysis as she only addresses a specific community (2014, 16). Bauer argues that his respondents often rejected the association of BDSM with consumerism. Although most of my participants were university-educated, middle-class people, their relationship with the consumption of BDSM equipment is not homogenous – most of them argue that

acquiring equipment was not an important element for BDSM practice.⁴⁸ This shows that there is not, therefore, such a thing as a homogenous understanding of what BDSM is. The rules of the game are internalised and embodied in numerous ways. However, it is possible to identify some shared dispositions which are particular to the Budapest community as well as other behaviours which are informed by international communities. In the case of Budapest, class markers such as “politeness and “intelligence,” rather than the consumption of BDSM toys, seem to be fundamental aspects when delineating the boundaries of the community.

The case of Feri illustrates well how the sense of belonging to a community determines and shapes people’s notions of selfhood. Feri organises parties in a fully-equipped BDSM space, which he sublets to other practitioners and where some workshops delivered by guests from international BDSM scenes have taken place. He has also read a good deal of literature on this topic, and has written some articles for online BDSM magazines. Feri’s commitment to BDSM practice and community-making, as well as his engagement with the consumption, production and dissemination of BDSM knowledge has crystallised in an identification with BDSM, which he defines as a “lifestyle.” He is committed to making a stronger community, which he would like to become similar to other more organised communities abroad.

Like in the case of other members of the BDSM community, Feri’s personal, temporal and material investment in BDSM has cemented into a lifestyle. Bourdieu refers to this phenomenon as *habitus* (1990). *Habitus* is the way in which the culture of a specific social group is embodied: a “system of acquired dispositions.” i.e. taste, values, ways of speaking and sensibilities, which organise the ways we act (1990, 12-13). *Habitus* produces practices in

⁴⁸ I was not able to find participants who did not fit into the difficult-to-define concept “middle-class.” However, this does not mean that there are not groups of practitioners or individuals who do not belong to privilege social classes.

Material investment in BDSM toys did not necessarily correspond with the income of my respondents.

accordance with schemes engendered by history” and is strongly determined by both social class and by what Bourdieu terms the rules of the game, which are prescribed by a structure or “field” (Bourdieu, 1984, 82). A field is the table-top upon which the game takes place, that is to say, the structure within which the interactions between the members of a social group or community are performed. According to Bourdieu, a game/field is produced by the interplay of the rules of the game and the way that they are embodied and performed (*habitus*). In what follows, I will try to show that, although the *habitus* of my respondents has several affinities, the ways that BDSM rules are put into practice are not homogenous at all. This implies that BDSM practice, far from externalisation of a pre-social disposition common to all practitioners, is embodied in multiple ways in accordance with the discourses to which practitioners are subject.

BDSM could therefore be considered a (sub)field with a particular set of rules which are not only embodied and enacted but also reshaped by practitioners. The particular BDSM lifestyle embodied by some of my respondents, such as Feri, requires monetary and temporal investment, which only certain individuals can afford. It also requires contact with other more organised BDSM communities,⁴⁹ which have the resources to produce knowledge. In short, to become a BDSMer is not accessible to everyone.

Feri’s self-investment and cultivation has allowed him to gain enough contacts in the community. For example, he argues that it is very difficult to establish contact with dominant women, yet, after being involved in BDSM for several years, he knows enough women with whom he can practice. However, Feri complains about not being invited to some secret/elitist BDSM parties, especially given what “he has done for the community.” Despite all the years of self-cultivation, he is still not a recognised member for the organisers of these

⁴⁹ This also implies to know foreign languages – Feri speaks English, Italian and some Hebrew.

private parties.⁵⁰ Acquiring a BDSM *habitus* allows one to be part of a group, yet this is not always accessible to everyone regardless of the effort and economic capital put into it.

I am waiting in a café close to one of the main Budapest universities for Agnes, a young woman, a student of this university, who is in her early 20s. Agnes self-identifies as dominant, yet when she has “trust” with her partners, she can switch and take the submissive role. Agnes describes BDSM as “play for intelligent people.” She only dates people who practice BDSM. However, she does not like lifestyle BDSMers and believes that “24/7 submissive men are not successful or very intelligent.” Agnes looks for partners who are older than her by “at least 10 years,” and who live by themselves. She gave me a very detailed description of the type of men she likes:

I prefer men who are intelligent... in a leadership position in their life, and who are successful, because I think my life is also good. I'm successful in my studies. I look for people who are also successful in their real life, and no one would say: “he wants to be dominated” [...]. People who only need this kind of sex as a compensation.⁵¹

Later, along these lines, she claims: “before I have BDSM play with a man, when we have a date, he has to give me flowers or something. I like these things. He has to be a man, I have to be a woman, and then we can change.” Agnes needs to dominate men of high social status who are intelligent or who “know languages, like her.” During the course of the interview, Agnes tells me that, on some days she receives about 50 letters from submissive men. She is surprised about how many “normal, intelligent people” send her letters yet, unfortunately, she cannot reply to all of them.

Agnes needs to practice with men with a similar or higher social status than her, in other words, men who understand the grammar of the game and who speak the same language as her.⁵² For Agnes, normality seems to be related to keeping BDSM a private issue.

⁵⁰ Being recognised by the members of these parties could be related here to socio-economic status, age, gender, as well as issues of visibility of one's *BDSMness* – this argument is speculative.

⁵¹ Here Agnes is refereeing to the need of these men to counterbalance their privilege position in society, by taking a submissive role in BDSM

⁵² All the submissive men and dominant women interviewed for this study sustain that there is an unbalanced number of submissive heterosexual men with respect to dominant heterosexual woman – particularly, when it comes to women who do not charge for their encounters with submissive men.

Her *habitus* requires her to be able to separate the public sphere (the everyday) from the private one (game/sexual life). Weiss argues that the fact that BDSM is often performed in the privacy of the bedroom leads practitioners to perceive BDSM as being unaffected by the social (2011). Agnes understands BDSM as something private in which the scene is not affected by the social, however, she needs to dominate men of a higher status than her: people who she can “feel proud of” when they are in “public.” Here, the reversal of roles, and perhaps also the pleasure experienced, relies on a temporary disorganisation of the gendered social order, which must be reconstituted after the *private* scenes. The position of Agnes’s partner in society, that is, the public life, determines the BDSM scene, which paradoxically is still understood to be private.

Unlike Feri, who lives BDSM as a lifestyle, Agnes draws sharp boundaries between play (private) and “reality” (public). Agnes and Feri play the same game but the ways they interpret and embody it are very different. For Agnes, submissive men who live the game “24/7” are not successful and less intelligent.⁵³ In other words, for Agnes those who do not want to stop playing are not normal, which may reflect the origins of BDSM as pathology. She needs to feel proud of her partners, which implies that her partners must be masculine outside the scene. Feri, nonetheless, feels proud of being a “lifestyle BDSMer,” which is reflected in his public image. The ways in which the BDSM rules are subjectified relies on the different discourses/games in which practitioners are embedded. As Bourdieu argues, *habitus* and field/structure constitute each other. In other words, the interplay between the rules of the game and the ways those rules are put into practice is what constitutes the game. Class is a crucial element of the BDSM *habitus*, yet not the only one. Other aspects, such as normative understanding of gender or making the game public/visible (this is the case of Agnes), can affect the ways in which the game is felt.

⁵³ It is important to note that she only refers here to 24/7 submissive men.

As mentioned above, the *habitus* of my respondents is very diverse, which makes BDSM a very heterogeneous game. However, most of them highlight the “intelligence” and “politeness” of the Budapest practitioners. Gaspar, an international MA student who has been involved in the Budapest BDSM community for a year, is surprised by the intellect of the BDSM practitioners not only in Hungary:

The BDSM community, even though we don’t talk that much because we don’t speak the same language... They are really nice people, they are very respectful, and they have been very respectful to me as a foreigner. I have never seen any sort of conflict, of rudeness... Another thing that I have noticed with these BDSM communities that I have known throughout my life... They are extremely smart people. I am still thinking how this is possible. They can talk about a subject for half an hour in a very professional, academic, well-argued way. These people really care about reading, about education. I’m still thinking how this is possible.

Gaspar does not understand how it is “possible” that other members of the BDSM community can speak in a way in which he feels strongly reflected upon. For him, BDSM practitioners are very “respectful” and polite with foreigners. They are also very “open-minded” and “sensitive with minorities.” In a similar way to him, several of my respondents argue that “BDSM is a game for intelligent people.” The fact that Gaspar cannot find an explanation for the high-brow nature of the BDSM communities echoes the way in which Bourdieu refers to the concept of *doxa*. “Doxa happens when we ‘forget the limits’ that have given rise to unequal divisions in society: it is ‘an adherence to relations of order which [...] are accepted as self-evident’ (Bourdieu, 1984, 471). *Doxa*, in turn, is directly linked to *habitus*. This implies that the embodiment, strong investment and long-standing embeddedness in the field makes practitioners experience their *habitus* as natural.

Gaspar does not reflect upon the fact that BDSM practitioners probably hold a similar cultural and material capital to his. He finds it mysterious, yet these attitudes are strongly related to the middle-class. For people born in middle-class environments, privilege is often invisible and taken for granted: “it goes without saying because it comes without saying” (Bourdieu, 1977, 166). This can explain why the intelligence and politeness attributed

to BDSM practitioners is perceived as pre-social, as if it were determined by natural BDSM dispositions rather than social factors. Politeness and intelligence become *doxa*.

Soon after meeting with Feri, he puts me in contact with more members of the community. Márk, one of them, sends me a link to a party whose theme is Japanese bondage. In order to attend this party, I have to send an email/application to the organisers. They quickly reply, providing information about the address of the party, the dress-code (kimono or elegant) and the entrance fee (3500 F.t). Marjana, a classmate also doing research on BDSM, is coming with me. Marjana and I live in the same student dormitory, I knock on her door to fix the time we should take the bus to go to the party. Marjana asks me what I'll be wearing. We both have doubts about whether the most elegant clothes we have will be enough.

The party takes place in a medium-size apartment with a big garden in which a martial arts performance has just started when we arrive. People stand in the garden while paying attention to the show and make comments about it, speaking softly. No one moves from where they are until the performance ends. Most of the participants are middle-aged and dressed very elegantly, doubtlessly more formal than Marjana and I – most men are wearing suits and ties and most women wearing cocktail dresses. When the performance ends we enter the apartment and order some not particularly cheap drinks in a small, improvised bar, in which sushi was also offered. The apartment is full of BDSM equipment, which is displayed as if it were part of an exhibition. Marjana and I find it difficult to engage in conversations with the attendants due to our lack of command of the Hungarian language. We spend most of the time speaking with a woman in her early 30s who is a teacher in a primary school. She complains about both the average age at the party and the fact that there are not enough chairs for everyone to sit on, which is not acceptable for a party of this kind. This woman lived in Ireland for two years and claims that BDSM parties in Ireland were more fun than in Budapest, yet she has not been a very active member of the Budapest

community. When the last performance (a Japanese bondage representation) ends, the woman offers to take us home in her car.⁵⁴

I was not able to arrange any interviews for my study in the party. However, the quantity of toys/equipment, the “elegant dress-code,” the ways in which people spoke with each other or the woman complaining about the lack of chairs made me become aware that only people of certain socio-economic status can afford to attend these kinds of events. The limited amount of time available to conduct my fieldwork, as well as my ignorance of the Hungarian language, make my arguments about class speculative. Nevertheless, Márk, who has been part of the community for several years, claims that “the people he knows are educated at universities.” He argues that he can only speak for himself, which “is not enough to reach conclusions in a scientific study.” In the same vein, Ráhel claims that most men belong to higher and well-educated classes:

there are dumb men, primitive people in smpixie (smpixie.com) as well but they don’t find a partner. I have a lot of friends in this community and there are lot of people, most of them have Master’s like me, PhDs, so they are very well educated.

To find a partner, that is, to be part of the community seems to require embodying a certain cultural capital, which enables one to behave in the way expected by the other members of the community; in other words, to acquire a *habitus*.

Unlike in the Bay Area (Weiss 2011), the consumption of BDSM equipment does not seem to be as important in Budapest. Although some of my respondents such as Feri or the owner of the apartment where the party took place have invested important amounts of money in “toys,” most of my interlocutors claim not to own many (in some cases any) BDSM equipment. They, instead, seem to place more emphasis on markers such as intelligence and politeness, which seem to constitute the *habitus* of the game. Agnes and Ráhel’s narratives show that, in Budapest, submissive heterosexual men can primarily find partners through a

⁵⁴ This bondage practice is called Shibari.

habitus which relies on intelligence and politeness.⁵⁵ Although one could argue that submissive heterosexual men challenge the correlation between sex and power relations, this seems only to be accessible to middle-class, “polite,” “intelligent” men.⁵⁶ Here class is not only important when it comes to being able to engage in BDSM practice but also in allowing these men to simultaneously subvert sexual hegemonic norms and maintain a privileged social position. This becomes evident in the case of the men who Agnes wants to practice with. These men (as well as Agnes), far from subverting gendered power positions, reproduce these dynamics outside of the BDSM scene.

As has been argued, in BDSM the intersection of game and sex holds the potential to destabilise the power positions attached to sexuality, which are perceived as immutable. Playing with sexuality opens up the possibility of deconstructing naturalised notions of selfhood, which are discursively produced. However, to be part of some sectors of the Budapest BDSM community requires holding certain acquired dispositions, material resources and having time at your disposal.

3.3 The Rules of the Game

Games, like any other social activity, are regulated by rules, yet there are games which have more defined and strict norms than others. Before engaging in a game, some players prefer to read the manual. Others, however, like to play a practice round to see how the game works. Children often invent their own rules, subverting the norms that were established by the game regulators. The respondents of this study have very different ideas about what BDSM is or should be. Sometimes, it is as if they were referring to different games, with different rules. For many of them, these rules change according to whom they play with; that

⁵⁵ They can also arrange an encounter with a professional dominatrix, which, obviously, implies having certain material resources.

⁵⁶ By this, I mean what is considered as politeness and intelligence within these circles.

is to say, players often adapt to the ways in which other players play. The multiple ways of living game makes it difficult to analyse BDSM as a unified whole.

BDSM is a social activity with its own history, which, like any game or reality, is the result of a repetition of practices through time. In this sense, the influence of the international BDSM community is of great importance in Budapest due to the short history of BDSM in the city.⁵⁷ BDSM practitioners in Budapest often rely on knowledge produced abroad to re-enact certain practices branded as BDSM. For example, all my respondents refer to BDSM as play/game – even Ráhel, who prefers “be together” to this term, uses it. Calling BDSM a game has become a sort of *doxa*: something taken for granted.⁵⁸ However, it is more important to follow the rules imposed by the international community for some practitioners than for others, who let themselves to be guided by their intuition.⁵⁹

I draw on Bourdieu’s concept of *illusio*, whose etymology goes back to the Latin word “*ludere*” (play), to cast some light on my interlocutors’ strong attachment to BDSM and the views of both my interlocutors and others on it. *Illusio* is “the fact of being caught up in and by the game, of believing [...] that playing is worth the efforts” (1998, 76). In other words, *illusio* requires taking the game seriously, being invested in the game. Interestingly, Bourdieu uses the metaphor of game to speak about our embeddedness in social structure. He argues that the games that are important to us have been internalised and embodied as if they were natural. This is reflected in our *habitus*: dispositions, style and tastes which are the embodiment of the field. Bourdieu calls this “the feel for the game” (1998, 77). This echoes some of the testimonies previously analysed in which some of the respondents claimed to experience “real” feelings during BDSM practice. According to Bourdieu, *illusio* does not simply imply being in the game, but taking it seriously. Those who take the game seriously

⁵⁷ See 1.3

⁵⁸ Both Margot Weiss and Robin Bauer as well as the respondents of their ethnographies refer to it as a game. In fetlife.com, a global BDSM networking, the words play or game are also commonly used by practitioners.

It has been impossible to trace back the origins of the usage of the term play/game in a BDSM context.

⁵⁹ These intuitions are always shaped by the discourse in which they are embedded.

are willing to “undertake a revolution”: to change the rules of the game (1998, 78). *Illusio* implies that the players might “disagree with one another but they at least disagree about the object of disagreement” (1998, 78). The result of *illusio* is a community with a strong sense of belonging.

I would like to go back to Ráhel’s house to show how *illusio* echoes my participants’ views on BDSM. Three weeks after our first interview, I go back to Ráhel’s apartment. On this occasion I’m supposed to interview Konrád, the young man who was at Ráhel’s apartment during my first visit – he is a university student. He has suggested Ráhel’s home as the right place for our conversation. I sit on the bed again, this time opposite Konrád, Ráhel and her dog. We agree to have a conversation between the three of us, rather than an interview between Konrád and me. During the interview, Konrád argues that he is much more interested in BDSM than in Vanilla sex. He claims that in BDSM he is flexible with his partner’s desires but that he has his own fantasies. I ask Ráhel whether she also takes into consideration the fantasies of her BDSM partners:

I don’t care about what are the main fantasies or fetishes of my servant. He or she has to do what I want, so it’s simple.

Santi: So, if they tell you they want something to be done, you wouldn’t do that...

Ráhel: No, I wouldn’t meet him or her because I don’t care. I want to get to know someone, I don’t speak about BDSM. I make it clear from the beginning. I only speak about intellectual things with him or her [...] because I don’t care about his or her desires.

Ráhel makes it very clear here: if someone wants to play with her, they should submit to her rules. Paradoxically, Konrád argues that he has his own fixed fantasies, yet he can only practice BDSM on Ráhel’s terms.⁶⁰ Konrád must be totally invested in Ráhel’s way of playing if he wants to play, which implies developing a *habitus* in accordance with the way she feels the game.

⁶⁰ Konrád does not have more BDSM partners apart from Ráhel.

As mentioned above, Ráhel sees BDSM play as something intimate and private which is in “her blood.” When asked about the nature of the Budapest BDSM community, she stated:

I don't believe that doing BDSM things together makes a community. I don't want to hurt Feri. We had some fights [...]. But I don't agree with him in this one. I think that this kind of BDSM is only a theatre, very shallow. I define myself as a kind of deep person. But being with several servants at the same time at home is deep, because I choose and we don't play a theatre, it comes from inside.

Ráhel believes that, in order to make community, it is not necessary to get involved in group activities outside of her apartment. She seems to consider BDSM a private issue, which is “deep” and comes from “inside.” Along these lines, Ráhel also claims that Konrád “was born with it.” She strongly disagrees with Feri about what the game should be like. She has what Bourdieu calls “the feel for the game.” In other words, her investment in BDSM practice is strong enough to make her care about the right way of practicing BDSM.

Ráhel plays her own game, creating her own interpretation of BDSM rules.⁶¹ This echoes what Foucault refers to as “techniques of the self” (1984). That is, a repetition of practices which do not aim to follow the norm, but to make their own interpretation of it. This series of repetitions have the potential to crystallise into new subject not totally regulated by power mechanisms. However, according to Foucault, one must undergo a process of self-reflexivity in order to understand the discourses to which one is subject. He calls this process *desubjectification* (2007). *Desubjectification* implies that we must understand the techniques of domination in which we are embedded in order to create a subject who is not totally determined by hegemonic discourses. This does not seem to be true for Ráhel, who is caught within a liberal notion of the self. It is true that Foucauldian care of the self opens up the possibility of developing a way of life not solely prescribed by hegemonic power, yet this way(s) of life(s) does not necessarily have to fit into the ethical parameters of others. In fact, doing it one's own way echoes a neoliberal fantasy/strategy of domination.

⁶¹ She does not use safe-words or allows her partners to speak about their desires or preferences

There are multiple and diverse ways of feeling BDSM. Feri's feel for the game is very different from that of Ráhel. He is highly committed to community-making activities, and complains about the lack of interest of some members of the community, who do not want to read or learn about BDSM techniques. According to Feri, not having enough education on BDSM can harm one's partners both "physically and psychologically:"

In order to do BDSM, you need to educate yourself in what you do. Some people say we just feel it, we feel what we are doing it, like... I don't have to educate myself about it.

Santi: And... to be educated (in BDSM practice)... Does that make the community better?

Feri: Yes that's my opinion. It's like driving or anything if you practice if you learn if you read books about cars [...] your driving experience would be better. So same for BDSM if you read article about pushing the edges of your partner [...] or you ask another person [...] the experience will be better.

Feri states that "feeling BDSM" is a very good thing, yet one needs to practice. Feri takes BDSM dominant trends borrowed from international communities as a reference for what the Budapest community should be like. Weiss argues that in the Bay Area community there has been a proliferation of "workshops on technique" and "community rules focused on safe play" in the last few decades (2011, 31). Along these lines, Feri complains about how, in his parties, practitioners do not worry about hygiene and he has to clean and disinfect all the equipment by himself before and after every party. He also organises workshops on risk management which are conducted by international practitioners in his BDSM space. Unlike Ráhel, who does not need the guidance of anyone to express her inner truth, Feri believes that what he has inside must be articulated by learning from outside. Although Feri and Ráhel call what they play BDSM and they are strongly invested in it, they seem to be playing very different games.

The fact that the Budapest BDSM community is not very cohesive makes practitioners subjectify and embody the rules of the game(s) in multiple ways. Most of my respondents complain about the lack of organisation and cohesion of the community. Márk claims that "Hungarian people are not too free in their sexual life: not only in BDSM, but in general."

Hadley Renkin has argued that sexual minorities in Budapest are understood as transnational by the Hungarian right-wing. On the other hand, homophobia is perceived by the left-wing as anti-European (2009). This echoes Feri's opinion about a segment of the Budapest community. Unlike my other Hungarian respondents, Feri does not use smpixie.com, preferring fetlife.com. In fetlife.com it is possible to contact people in any part of the globe. Feri claims that practitioners with profiles on fetlife

are more open minded, they are willing to learn from other, they are not xenophobic. There are a lot of Hungarians who hate foreigners. There are many nationalist, racist people in Hungary. There also are a lot of people who don't know it or don't speak English.

Feri associates being open-minded and non-racist with knowing languages, such as English. He locates a community of people with a similar *habitus* to him outside Hungary, which explains why he encourages practitioners to learn English as "there is not good information and literature about BDSM in Hungarian." Feri's ways of understanding BDSM can have positive outcomes such as "feelings of not being alone in the world." They can also lead to politics of pride, which is an important resource for fighting against the stigmatisation of BDSM practice.⁶² However, these ways of playing are regulated by those who have the resources to produce BDSM knowledge.

The borders of what should constitute the game in Budapest are negotiated in the intersection of transnational/national, outside/inside. Feri believes that being "willing to learn" from outside makes the practice better. On the other hand, although Ráhel also describes Hungary as a conservative in terms of sexuality, she claims not to need rules borrowed from outside to be truthful to herself. Nevertheless, what she feels as truth, far from being devoid of social constraints, is the result of a pervasive strategy through which we are shaped into free subjects who regulate themselves, yet in the terms of modern techniques of power (Foucault, 1983).

⁶² The Swedish kinky community has recently joined to the LGBT pride events (<http://www.stockholmpride.org/joinstockholmpride/Kinkykvarteret/>)

These very different ways of feeling the game demonstrates that BDSM is not an immanent disposition which should manifest in a homogenous way if practitioners are true to them-selves. The multiplicity of ways of feeling BDSM makes it impossible to examine it as if it were a homogenous game, with well-defined, immutable rules. Perhaps the right approach here is not to continue drawing boundaries between game and reality. Reality is not an ontological force behind practices but what we do is what produces reality. This can explain practitioners' real emotions in the game. What they do while playing is not outside reality but making its own reality.

3.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have first focused on some of my respondents' conception of BDSM as need. By contrasting the narratives of Jákob and Sára, I pointed out that in order to be "real" BDSM one must render it as something which has always been inside one-self. Sára's testimony implies that BDSM has become a need for her through practice, yet the fact that this need does not come from inside makes her an inauthentic player. This idea of *having* BDSM renders the classed nature of the community invisible: a *doxa*. Gaspar's lack of explanation about the intelligence and politeness of the community shows that the perception of BDSM as a natural disposition makes practitioners believe that their BDSM selves are manifest in their attitudes towards the world. The privileged position of a great deal of practitioners makes subverting gendered roles in sex an easier task for them because (1) social class allows them to find partners (2) they can go back to a position of power after the practice (in the case of submissive men). The example of Agnes illustrates the latter argument: the gendered roles in her relationships need to be emphasised in order to be only momentarily subverted.

Finally, I have argued that BDSM is embodied and lived in multiple ways, with reference firstly to cases of Feri and Agnes. Agnes believes that practitioners (specifically submissive men) who want to live in their roles are not normal. Feri, however, lives BDSM

as life style; he is invested in creating a more solid community informed by the BDSM international movement. In contrast to Feri, Ráhel believes that BDSM is something private, yet, unlike Agnes, she lives her dominant role 24/7. This multiplicity of ways of living BDSM demonstrates that BDSM is not an immanent category, externalised and embodied in a homogenous way. Instead, the sometimes discordant discourses in which practitioners are embedded determine the ways in which they live the game. However, all my respondents coincided in calling BDSM a game. I find it interesting that BDSM, unlike other social/sexual relation, is deemed as a play. In what follows, I will explore what I the aim of calling BDSM a game.

Chapter 4: Taking the Game Seriously

Whatever precautions you take so that the photograph will look like this or that, there is a moment in which the photograph surprises you and it is the other's look that, finally, wins out and decides.

Jacques Derrida (1987)

In the previous chapters, I have been trying to demonstrate that the boundaries between “reality” and game are blurred and arbitrary. However, this does not imply that these borders do not serve a purpose. What is the aim of calling BDSM a game? One could argue that the artificial line traced between reality and game separates the serious from the non-serious. Nevertheless, we take some games very seriously, to the extent that our identity is shaped in accordance with what we do or undo in sex (Foucault, 1978; 1986). We all know that what occurs in the game is not part of reality, yet sometimes games and fictions can trigger very intense emotions; they can also shape our way of thinking, our tastes and sensibilities. For example, when we find a movie or a theatrical play politically or ethically problematic, we engage in heated debates about the limits of fiction. What are those limits? Why should a game or fiction have limits if it is not supposed to be serious, that is, to affect the everyday?

In this chapter, I examine what the aim of referring to BDSM as a game is. In so doing, I argue that the word game is used as a kind of performative strategy, whose purpose is to resignify the historical meanings of the practices (re)enacted in BDSM. As has been argued, the bounded space produced during the practice allows practitioners to play (in certain cases) with the gendered dynamics of power attached to sex, which are normally perceived as immutable. Ironically, the oft-mentioned fluidity of BDSM seems to be (at least my respondents’ cases) an unintended effect arising from detaching BDSM practices from their referents.⁶³ The effects that the practice has on practitioners seems to exceed their intentionality, shaping their ideas of themselves in unexpected ways.

⁶³ The fluidity attributed to BDSM has been discussed in section 1.1.3.

In the first section of this chapter, I focus on the performative nature of BDSM. Drawing on Austin (1962), I argue that rendering BDSM as a game enables practitioners to virtually separate BDSM scenes from their referents in “reality,” by producing a new context. This not only allows them to partially detach certain practices from their historical meanings but also the category BDSM (SM) from its origins as pathology.⁶⁴ I draw on Derrida’s critique of Austin’s non-serious/infelicitous performative utterances to argue that the practices performed during the game (BDSM) affect my respondents’ everyday lives (Derrida 1988). Informed by Derrida, Butler saw in non-serious language/practices a resource to subvert naturalised notions of gender through parodic repetition, e.g., drag performance (Butler 1990). The fact that BDSM is considered a game could fit into Butler’s notions of subversive parody. However, my respondents do not explicitly express an intention of mocking ontological notions of gender and identity.

In the second section, I show that the lack of intentionality of my respondents when it comes to subverting gendered power dynamics in sex does not necessarily imply that BDSM has no potential for re-shaping practitioners’ subjectivities. I draw on Foucault and Mahmood to show how the repetition of some practices can congeal into new notions of one-self. However, as Weiss’ argues (2011), the meaning and political implications arising from BDSM practice produce ambivalence, as they are determined by discourses to which we are subject. I argue that the lack of intentionality mentioned above makes it difficult to analyse the political implications of BDSM in terms of either/or: that is, of reinforcing or subverting norms.

4.1 Setting the Scene: producing an *uncontaminated* context

“Come on it’s just a game!” “Don’t take so seriously!” We have all being enraged after having been addressed in those terms. Games are supposed to have their particular rules with their

⁶⁴ See 1.1.1

own morality and ethics, yet players' sense of what is fair is also usually brought into the game. When something is problematic in a game, we usually react against it. Think about people who create movements against war-games for kids. They would not protest if they did not believe that those games shaped kids' subjectivities, by making them more aggressive. Despite the efforts to unlink BDSM practices from their prior meanings, BDSM has an impact on the everyday lives of those who practice it, affecting their self-perception of behaviours. Rendering BDSM as a game allows practitioners to partially detach kinky practices from their referents, yet the former meanings of these practices seem to filter through the porous boundaries of the game.

I am about to finish my fieldwork and take the metro to conduct an interview with Martha, a British woman in her early 30s who has lived in Budapest for a few years. The interview takes place in a central terrace on the Pest side. Martha was part of the London BDSM scene, which she became involved in when a friend offered her work as a “sushi girl” in kinky parties.⁶⁵ She does not want to define herself as either totally submissive or dominant. When asked about which role she feels more identified with, she states:

It sounds such as simple question... For me it is not really straightforward, because I think I have always tended to be a sub but, at the same time, I sort of feel that I want to rebel against that [...] My problem with this idea of being submissive is that it doesn't appeal to me in my head although when I'm in that situation, I quite enjoy it. Conceptually, I like to be on top, but... when I imagine myself being the sub, the feminist inside me kind of rages.

“Conceptually,” Martha likes to be the top as “the feminist inside [her] kind of rages”; when she thinks about herself being the “sub,” however, she acknowledges that she “quite enjoys” being in that position. Martha finds it difficult to reconcile what she does when she takes the submissive role with her political views. Similarly to Martha, Izabella is also a feminist and argues that in order to come to terms with what she allows men to do to her, she needs to counterbalance it by “being stronger” in her everyday life. In these examples, BDSM

⁶⁵ A practice based on serving sushi on the naked body of a woman.

practices cannot be totally detached from their referents. Here, what is done during practice carries its previous meanings with it, which act in conflict with Martha and Izabella's ideologies.

For both Izabella and Martha what they do in BDSM scenes is not inconsequential. Although the actions performed during the practice are supposed to take place in a context isolated from reality, they produce a conflict with their political identities. This failure to create a bounded context echoes Austin's attempt to produce the ideal conventions for his performative utterances (1962). Austin established a distinction between constative and performative utterances: between statements that can be only true or false, e.g., the sky is blue; and statements that make something happen or not e.g. "I name this ship the "Queen Elizabeth" (1962, 6).⁶⁶ He argues that a performative utterance is successful (felicitous) or not (infelicitous) in accordance with the conditions in which it is uttered; in other words, it relies on context.

Austin repeatedly attempts (and fails) to find an uncontaminated context in which his performative utterances bring the intended effect. He argues that, even when all the proper conditions are given, in order for a performative utterance to be successful it "must be spoken 'seriously' so as to be taken 'seriously'" (1962, 9). Austin refers to the uses of a performative utterance as infelicitous and parasitic, e.g., in a theatrical performance: "a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor or spoken in a soliloquy" (1962, 21-22). In other words, he argues that a performative speech act uttered by a theatre actor does not cause any effect as it is not serious. According to this logic, practices re-enacted in a game like BDSM should be considered infelicitous/parasitic in relation to their referents in "real" life – if they were felicitous they would be rendered criminal acts. Conceptualising BDSM as a game enables practitioners to de-contextualise an otherwise problematic practice in an attempt to make it innocuous or

⁶⁶ See more in section 1.2.

inconsequential. However, BDSM is a very particular performative activity: on the one hand, there is an attempt to detach BDSM from reality by deeming it a game, i.e., a non-serious practice. On the other, BDSM may become a lifestyle, a practice in which “real emotions” are experienced, or, as in Izabella and Martha’s cases, it may interfere with their political views. The production of a BDSM *non-serious context* as a result of calling it a game could be deemed an Austinian move in reverse. Ironically, the aim here is to fail. That is, in order for the scene to be successful, it must not have any effects or consequences in the “real” world. Nevertheless, as has been argued, what takes place in a BDSM scene often transcends the boundaries of the BDSM realm.

Informed by Austin, Derrida argues that it is not possible to distinguish between performative and constative utterances (1988). Derrida inverts Austin’s logic of inquiry and, instead of placing all the attention on the felicitous use of language, he focuses on so-called non-serious language. In Austin, a successful performative utterance excludes the possibility of citation, e.g., an actor representing reality. However, Derrida argues that every utterance (however constative or performative, successful or not) is always citing a previous usage of that language. He argues that the meaning produced by the repetitions (iterations) of an utterance/practice is both determined by its previous meanings and altered by the context that the new repetition produces.⁶⁷ Hence, according to Derrida, meaning is always unforeseeable regardless of the intentionality of the agent, who is not in total control of the effects that a practice/utterance will bring. This implies that the meaning of BDSM practices exceed the intentionality of practitioners, as they are conditioned by both the past meanings of the practices being re-enacted and the interpretations that are made of them in retrospect.

BDSM practices are indeed determined in large part by their past in non-BDSM contexts. However, the historical development of the BDSM community has partially

⁶⁷ Iteration: repetition with difference, in other words, an alteration of the previous meanings produced by previous citations of the same utterance or practice (Derrida 1988).

recoded the meaning of some of these practices.⁶⁸ Similarly to Derrida, Butler has shown how meaning comes to be perceived as natural in virtue of the repetition/reproduction of certain practices across history (1990; 1997). However, given that meaning is never totally predetermined (Derrida 1988; Butler 1997), Butler finds in the temporal space that occurs between the different (re)productions of an action an agential potentiality for resignification (1997).

Butler sees in Austin's non-serious/infelicitous performative utterances a resource to resignify hegemonic norms (1990). In so doing, she draws on the parody of gender in drag performance to call into question ontological notions of gendered identity tethered to sexed bodies. Deeming BDSM a game echoes, to a certain extent, Butler's idea of resignification through non-serious/parodic repetition. However, unlike drag performance, the intention here is not necessarily to mock/subvert the idea of the ontological origin of gendered power dynamics in sex. This is illustrated by the fact that none of my respondents reflected upon the political potential of switching and reversing gendered roles in BDSM. Ironically, the political implications of certain BDSM practices, which I have pointed out throughout this thesis, seem not be intentional for most of my respondents. This, however, does not mean that these actions are not political or do not affect my respondents' subjectivities.

4.3 Switching on Circuit

The political potential of BDSM practices is contingent upon multiple factors such as the prior meanings of their referents as well as the discourses in which both the agents and the readers of these practices are embedded. Along these lines, Weiss argues that the reproduction of scenes of violence and domination in BDSM produce ambivalence (2011). This implies that BDSM practices cannot be analysed in terms of either/or; of either subverting or reiterating the norm. Weiss draws on Mahmood's critique of Butler's

⁶⁸ In section 1.1 I lay out the historical development of SM/BDSM practices.

subversive repetition to argue that repetition often produces ambivalence, regardless of whether the aim of the agent is to subvert, consolidate the norm or neither of these.⁶⁹ In other words, the re-enactment of a scene of violence in BDSM practice can be simultaneously interpreted as a parodic subversion of “real” violence and a problematic reproduction of it.

Although I agree with Weiss’s analysis of the ambivalence of BDSM practices, Weiss primarily focuses on examples in which the historical/hegemonic meaning of the practices re-enacted in BDSM penetrates the bounded space of the scene. Weiss argues that, in the Bay Area BDSM community, hegemonic gendered, racial and class inequalities constitute BDSM desires and practices. She describes the interplay between BDSM and the social/”reality” as a “circuit,” by pointing out that it is not only the social that affects BDSM but also that BDSM has a certain impact on the social. However, Weiss’ examples primarily follow a unidirectional, top-down trajectory, pointing out how BDSM practice is marked by the hegemonic social order. Weiss justifies her approach, by arguing that queer theory has overemphasised gender transgression in BDSM. However, the norm in the BDSM community in the Bay Area, she tells us, is that men tend to be dominant and women submissive. Interestingly, the latter fact does not apply to the Budapest community as there are as many submissive and switch men as dominant ones.⁷⁰ With the purpose of completing Weiss’s circuit, in the following section I try to analyse how the reversal of power in BDSM can produce unexpected outcomes.

The influence of BDSM practices on the everyday lives of my respondents has already been discussed. However, providing a different reading to Weiss’, I would like to focus on the case of Jákob and Sára,⁷¹ which encapsulates how the BDSM game and “reality” affect each other. Both Jákob and Sára claim to be “more dominant than submissive,” yet

⁶⁹ This idea is also taken from Homi Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry (1994).

⁷⁰ In smpixie.com, the most used BDSM social networking website in Hungary, there are 3500 profiles registered as dominant men, 2.600 as submissive and 1.350 switches. Some of my respondents argue that although there are more dominant men than submissive registered in BDSM sites, submissive men are much more active in the community.

⁷¹ I interviewed them individually.

they usually switch their roles around every two weeks. When this couple started their relationship, Jákob had been practicing BDSM for more than 7 years. Sára, however, did not have any *proper* BDSM experience – although she had been interested in BDSM “for a while” as a good friend of hers was part of the Budapest BDSM community.⁷² Sára describes the first time that she practiced BDSM as a sort of moment of epiphany:

I'd like to tell you an experience of mine when I was first dominant with him (her current partner). It's very interesting, after the session, I had this visual image in my mind. It's like stars and the stars get to connect. It was a shocking experience, I felt... ok I was now dominant. I had these many feelings and this one session can explain many things in my life my attitude to things my behaviour towards certain people, certain things. I guess that I understood that part of my personality.

In this narrative, taking the dominant role seems to adjust to Sára's idea of who she is. Sára claims that she likes “to lead people, “organise things,” and be “top in life.” Here, assuming the dominant role serves as means of reinforcing and solidifying Sára's notion of selfhood. In other words, what she was doing corresponds to who she believed she was. When I asked her whether her behaviour in non-BDSM interactions changes according to the roles she takes, she replied:

Sára: When I'm dominant, I'm more organised and more in control in my life as well. When I'm submissive, I'm a lot more dependent on him (her partner), and it's harder to be organised.”

Santi: It's as if there were two Sáras

Sára: Exactly!

Santi: And which one do you like better?

Sára: first... If you have asked me this question a year ago, I would've said the dominant one, but now I like both.

Santi: Was it difficult to take the submissive role for the first time?

Sára: Yes, I was really afraid. The hardest thing wasn't not to trust him but to see myself like a submissive, so when I could allow myself to be like that, then I could do it. The submissive role was more a gradual process, I went deeper and deeper.

Here there is a clear contrast with respect to the previous revelatory moment which consolidated Sára's idea of her-self. Being the submissive one entailed for her a gradual process of coming to terms with a new idea of her-self. Interestingly, Sára directly links the role that she takes in BDSM with how she behaves in everyday life, as if her sexual life

⁷² By “proper” I mean an experience which she calls BDSM.

organised the way in which she acts. As discussed earlier,⁷³ Sára claims that practicing BDSM is like looking at oneself in the mirror, a way of being confronted with “raw” reality without the “social meanings put into it.”⁷⁴ However, here taking on the submissive role did not imply a sudden confrontation with herself, but a “gradual process” of consolidation through repetition – now she equally likes her two selves.

Jákob agrees with Sára in how she changes according to the BDSM role taken: “when she is the dominant one, she is more dominant during the day time too.” Similarly, he claims: “when I’m the submissive one, I feel younger. I feel as if I were child, not a baby child but a young one with less power.” He also feels “dependent,” “being taken care of,” and claims that “that’s not bad at all.” The hegemonic cultural meaning invested in some practices attached to the power role “submissive” – which was not perceived to be as their natural role by either Sára or Jákob – has changed their subjectivities. Although Sára still speaks about her-selves in dual terms, that is to say, moving from dominant to submissive,⁷⁵ she argues that, in general terms, her personality has changed since she started to be submissive in BDSM:

Santi: Have you noticed any important, general changes in your personality since you started to be a sub?

Sára: I’m sure, I became more flexible in life. I was much more rigid before. I can express my feelings better. I can show myself more in real life.

Santi: Do you only relate these changes to BDSM practice?

Sára: I’m sure there were other things as well because, two years ago, I started to study psychology and have been dealing with getting to know myself, but I think 50% of it was BDSM.

Sára claims that the repetition of BDSM practices has changed her idea of what she was, i.e. primarily dominant. Despite the lack of intentionality, the performative space produced by deeming BDSM a game enabled both Sára and Jákob to perform some practices which were not initially perceived to be part of their nature. Here, the repetition of practices crystallises

⁷³ See Sára’s narrative 2.2

⁷⁴ See section 2.2

⁷⁵ It is likely that my question influenced her argument about being split into two selves.

into a new notion of selfhood, calling into question ontological notions of identity. However, the fact that their behaviour changes in line with the role they take show that they seem to be caught up in discourses in which sex is perceived as an ontological bedrock: as the organiser of our social conduct. Ironically, the tension between serious and non-serious, or between simultaneously taking sex very seriously and playing with it, allows destabilisation of the fixed power roles attached to sex. As in Mahmood's addition to Butler's theory (2012), this case cannot be conceptualised in terms doing *or* undoing the norm. Here, they simultaneously do and undo the naturalised sex/power correlation.

Along these lines, Foucault did not only see sexuality as a locus of regulation but also as a potential space for resistance and radical alterity of the norm. He referred to BDSM as a kind technique of the self with the potential to alter hegemonic norms:

the s/m game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid. Of course, there are roles, but everyone knows very well that those roles can be reversed. Sometimes the scene begins with the master and slave, and at the end, the slave has become the master ([1984] 1996, 387–88).

I am more cautious than Foucault about the fluidity of BDSM. As argued in the previous chapter, the BDSM community is embedded in hegemonic classed and gendered dynamics. Nevertheless, I do believe that BDSM is a more fluid activity than normative sex. As in the case of Sára and Jákob, the intersection of game, sexuality and identity in BDSM opens up the possibility of acting in ways which are not totally predetermined by structural power. However, the re-signification of hegemonic norms can only be performed within the confines of regulated social relations. The BDSM community can produce its own trajectories of meaning through the repetition of particular practices, yet the outcomes of those repetitions are uncontrollable and ambivalent. This implies that BDSM practices have the potential to alter power relations, yet also to reinforce them, or they can even do both things at the same time.

4.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate that rendering BDSM a game can be considered a performative strategy, which allows the re-contextualisation of practices whose referents in “reality” are problematic. The bounded space produced attempts to separate BDSM practices from their referents in reality, however, the prior meanings of these practices affect the scene. For example, Martha and Izabella’s narratives demonstrate that there is a clash between ideology as feminist and what they do while practicing BDSM. I have argued that the primary aim of referring to BDSM as game seems to be related to separating the practice from “real” violence. Ironically, the political implications that arise from playing with sexuality and identity are a kind of side-effect. The lack of intentionality when it comes to denaturalising the power positions of my respondents show that the subversive potential of BDSM does not solely reside in the agent.

The case of Sára and Jákob demonstrates that calling BDSM a game has enabled them to play with parts of them-selves understood to be immutable. The repetition of practices within the realm of the game has crystallised into a new notion of selfhood which transcends that realm. Here the intentionality of the agents is not necessary to change their perceptions of themselves. In fact, it is their embeddedness in the system which produced the idea of an immanent correlation between sex and power which makes this transformation possible. The effects that the repetition of BDSM practices has on practitioners are therefore multiple and ambivalent. In other words, the political potential of BDSM is contingent upon the particularities of every case and the meaning we make of it.

Conclusions

Why focus on the fact that BDSM is rendered a game? Calling BDSM a game might seem an innocent gesture. As Gaspar told me, “does it really matter what we call it?” But meaning is never innocent. I have tried to show that the way we name things does not represent a fact but produces it. Words matter. They often exceed the intentionality of the speaker, as if we were spoken by language. As Butler puts it “the body of the speaker exceeds the words that are spoken, exposing the addressed body as no longer (and not ever fully) in its own control. (1997, 13).” The fact that BDSM is referred to as a game has implications which are crucial for disclosing the specificities of this practice. This opens up the possibility of understanding why there is more fluidity in the roles taken in BDSM than in other forms of sex.

I have attempted to demonstrate that the intersection of sexuality, identity and game in BDSM makes it a very particular practice. BDSM is indeed a game, yet a game which is taken very seriously. My respondents understand their attachment to the practice as immanent, as if they were natural players. However, BDSM, or SM, is a category with easily traceable origins. This implies that the intimate relationship of my respondents with the practice is, far from natural, the result of a socio-historical process which has transformed specific practices into categories of personhood. We are persuaded to believe that we do what we do because we are who we are. However, as the authors who have helped to write this thesis argue, it is what we do that makes us who we are. In other words, the practices that we perform are not driven by a pre-discursive urge to act, which my respondents locate inside them. The need to act is the result of the repetition of those very same practices, which carry with them a history of meanings. As Nietzsche claimed, “[t]here is no “being” behind the doing, effecting, becoming; “the doer” is simply fabricated into the doing—the doing is everything” ([1887] 1998, 25). The discursive strategies to which we are subjects have given particular meanings to sexual practices, making them seem natural and instinctive.

Paradoxically, BDSM is understood to be simultaneously a natural force which defines what one is, and a game.

The fact that my respondents play with sexuality, and so with what they are, ironically turns what is understood to be an immanent force into something malleable. The entanglement of sexuality/identity and game shatters the boundaries between what one is while playing and who one is in real life, to the extent that the emotions felt in the game are perceived to be “raw” reality, as if the real “self” arose while playing. I have argued that playing with one’s “real” self creates the possibility of denaturalising immanent notions of identity anchored to sexuality. The examples of Sára and Jákob shed some light on the effects that playing with identity may have. Both Sára and Jákob feel that what they experience comes from the most intimate part of them-selves. However, their selves have been transformed by the practice/game. Playing with their identities has congealed into a new way of being in the world, which demonstrates that gendered dynamics in sex are not an ontological fact. The cases of Sára and Jákob have also shown that sex is a critical element when it comes to shaping the ways we act in and react to the world. Switching roles in sex has changed both Sára and Jákob’s ideas of themselves, which shows that they (we) are embedded in discourses in which sexual practices define who we are. This naturalised relationship between sexuality and identity is precisely one of the most sophisticated techniques of domination inflicted upon us since modernity (Foucault 1978).

As discussed earlier, my respondents often claimed to have a need for the game. I have tried to demonstrate that this divides practitioners into insiders: those for whom the game is in them; and outsiders, who are only looking for spice. Although some of my respondents engage in practices which destabilise liberal notions of identity, they are often caught up in this dynamic. According to them, BDSM is pre-social: as Ráhel put it, it is in her blood. The fact that BDSM is understood as a natural disposition leads my respondents to think that their BDSM nature is externalised in a particular way, which is common to all

the community. This overshadows the fact that the homogeneity of behaviours within the community is often the result of structural classed inequalities. Aspects such as intelligence or politeness were often highlighted by my interlocutors as traits which are taken for granted, without reflecting on how those characteristics are strongly marked by class privilege.⁷⁶ As mentioned above, BDSM has the potential to disorganise naturalised dynamics of power. However, this is not often the aim of practitioners, for whom BDSM is a conduct for realising desires understood as pre-discursive. Practitioners are often embedded in discourses which, far from attempting to subvert structural inequalities, reproduce them.

I have argued that the multiplicity of ways in which BDSM is felt is marked by a myriad of factors, particularly highlighting the tensions between more individualistic and communal ways of living the game – the latter being more exposed to international norms. BDSM has become a way of life for some of my respondents. The fact that BDSM is lived in different ways challenges the idea of a homogenous and immanent need for the game. I have shown that BDSM can be considered a “technique of the self” through the example of Ráhel, who does not adhere to the international rules of the game (Foucault, 1984). Interpreting the games in one’s way may congeal into an ethical disposition. However, it is necessary to first examine the discourse in which one is embedded in order to challenge those very same discourses. By pointing out the different ways of living the game, I have shown that BDSM is not a natural essence that manifest in a homogenous way. Although the rules of the game are interpreted in multiple ways, what is common to all my respondents is that BDSM is a game.

The effects of calling BDSM a game and the political implications of this have been extensively discussed. However, I have also attempted to demonstrate that deeming BDSM a game is part of a strategy which allows practitioners both to separate BDSM practices from

⁷⁶ Here, I do not imply that intelligence and politeness is the property of the middle-class. What I mean is that the kind of intelligence and politeness they seem to refer to seem to be part of the middle-class *habitus*. See Gaspar’s example (Chapter 3)

its origins as pathology and to detach them from their referents in “reality.” “Game” is hence a performative strategy which enables practitioners to produce a bounded space with its own rules, yet the norms of the everyday often penetrate the realm of the game. What is particularly interesting here is that the aim of referring to BDSM as a game is not to play with the naturalised dynamics of power in sex, but to separate BDSM from real violence. This lack of intentionality shows that the political potentials and limitations of BDSM practices does not rely solely on the intention of the agent, but on both the prior meanings of the practice and how the readers of those actions produce new meanings in retrospect. This implies that the meanings of BDSM practices are ambivalent as they can simultaneously reiterate and denaturalise gendered dynamics of power anchored to sex. I have attempted to point out the potential and limitations of BDSM practice so that the reader of this thesis can make meaning of them.

This study has attempted to analyse BDSM through a different lens to that used by the existing literature on this topic. I have demonstrated that calling BDSM a game plays a crucial role when it comes to understanding questions which have been widely discussed, such as the fluidity of power roles in this practice. I hope that this thesis represents an addition to queer views which solely see in BDSM a transgressive form of sex in which roles are freely chosen. I have demonstrated that this fluidity of roles may not be the product of an intention of subverting normative forms of sex. I have also shown that in some cases practitioner’s practices reiterate hegemonic norms. This study has attempted to shed some light on feminist perspectives which equate SM or BDSM with “real” violence by demonstrating that the boundaries between reality and fiction/game, yet blurred and artificial are meaningful. I have also attempted to expose the potential that BDSM practice holds to continue demonstrating that the linearity: gender, sex, power is the product of socio-historical process of exclusion. This thesis also shows that the theories used to analyse identity within the game realm could also be productively applied to other fields such as game

studies. I hope that my modest contribution has been meaningful in working towards understanding the political significance of BDSM practice

Finally, I would like to point out that the narrowness of the sample of my respondents, as well as the fact that I have only examined a single community invites further investigation along these lines. For example, conducting research in queer BDSM communities could shed some light on the effects that arise from subverting sexual norms in intentional ways. A more nuanced analysis of social class is also fundamental. Accessing non-privileged communities or individuals who engage in BDSM practice could provide significant insights into the ways in which subverting sexual norms affect non-privileged individuals in their everyday lives. Examining the role of the “game” in gay or lesbian BDSM could help understand whether the reversal of roles (if there is such a phenomenon in these cases) involves the same effects in these communities. Lastly, contrasting the Budapest BDSM community with international ones with reference to this thesis could help to better understand the relationship between the global and the local in BDSM, which is key in supporting my argument. In Budapest, the BDSM international rules are subjectified in multiple ways. However, this is not only a local phenomenon. The particular and the universal/structural, the global and local intra-act, re-shaping and constituting each other (Appadurai 1991; Tsing 2005).⁷⁷ Most of us are subjects of global strategies of power which are embodied and put into practice in different ways. The fact that, in BDSM, practitioners, here in Budapest and elsewhere, play with sexuality can help us to understand the discourses through which we have become subjects.

⁷⁷ Intra-act (Barad 2010) See footnote No 4

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