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## **Feminist SM: A contradiction in terms or a way of challenging traditional gendered dynamics through sexual practice?**

Ani Ritchie & Meg Barker

*Much academic literature on SM (somasochism) still portrays it as anti-feminist with authors arguing that, for example, SM reproduces and reinforces heterosexual gendered hierarchies and power imbalances. This study explored how women who identify as SMers understand and explain their practices in relation to feminist principles and gendered dynamics. An in-depth focus group discussion was conducted with a group of women who practice SM. Participants were involved in designing and managing the discussion and in analysing the transcripts. It is clear that these women did not perceive their SM practices to be necessarily incompatible with a feminist agenda. The potential for SM scenes to subvert or reveal traditional gendered dynamics was discussed and themes of distinguishing fantasy from reality and the importance of choice emerged.*

**Keywords:** Gender, feminism, somasochism (SM), women.

### **Introduction**

The research we present in this paper forms part of an on-going project exploring female sexuality. Our research aims to consider the role of feminism in women's sexual and relationship practices. We focus primarily on women with non-normative sexual identities (e.g. bisexual, SM) and those with alternative relationship structures (e.g. polyamorous). We also explore the potentials of using participant-owned methods to conduct research within a qualitative, feminist framework (Ritchie & Barker, 2005). Here we present the findings of a participant-led focus group discussion on issues of feminism and SM which we conducted with a group of women SMers.

Because SM is still pathologized in the American Psychological Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR, 2000), much past research has concentrated on clinical populations, assuming that people engaging in SM are psychologically unwell (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). This is despite evidence demonstrating

the relative psychological health of those involved in SM (Gosselin & Wilson, 1980; Moser & Levitt, 1995). There is a small, but increasing, body of research investigating the experiences and understandings of those in the SM communities themselves.

Taylor & Ussher (2001) explored the ways in which SMers constructed their sexualities: as deliberately going against the societal norms of heterosexual sex, as pleasurable, as an escape from everyday life, as transcending to a heightened state of consciousness, as a learned behaviour or pathology, and as inexplicable. Their analysis uncovers personal theories of SMers themselves, as does that of Beckman (2001). Beckman identifies five motivations for engaging in SM: as an alternative to 'normal genital sexuality', as a safer form of sex, as a way of exploring sensual bodily experiences, as a way of transgressing stereotypes of (particularly lesbian and gay) sexuality, and as offering transformative possibilities such as tension release. Langdridge & Butt (2004a) take this kind of analysis further to consider what is gained from the various ways SMers present their sexuality. Their examination of the ways in which SMers represent themselves on the internet suggests that they dismiss and draw on certain available discourses in order to portray their sexuality in some acceptable way which might help gain them recognition as sexual citizens. For example, Langdridge & Butt found that SM websites explicitly rejected the notion of SM as pathology and something with identifiable causes (part of the psycho-medical discourse). Also, websites focused on the consensual nature of SM, and SM as involving power exchange rather than sexual violence and pain (Langdridge & Butt, 2004b). In our wider research we have found that SMers counter common stereotypes associated with their sexual identities and practices by presenting SM as safe rather than dangerous, psychologically healthy rather than disordered, actively chosen rather than the result of abnormal drives, controlled rather than violent, and consensual rather than coercive (e.g. Barker, 2004a).

### ***SM and feminism***

Historically, SM has been marginalized and stigmatized for being anti-feminist as well as pathological. Back in 1984, Gayle Rubin, argued that SM was presented in most academic writing as 'inherently anti-feminist' (p.302) and countered this with her own 'pro-sex' position. Califia (1980) wrote that SM was perceived as 'the epitome of

misogyny, sexism and violence' (p.169). Califia went on to claim that her (at the time) own openness about her SM lost her friends, a lover, a publisher, an apartment, her membership of the lesbian-feminist community, and her good name. SM was central to the feminist sex wars and is still seen, by many, as inherently anti-feminist and objectifying.

There remains a strong academic voice condemning SM from a feminist perspective. Jackson (1996) argues that SM reproduces 'the hierarchical ordering of gender' (p.25), and Jeffreys (1996) that SM 'eroticises the crude power difference of gender which fuels heterosexual desire, reinforcing rather than ending it' (p.86). Both these quotes display a distinct lack of knowledge or understanding about what actually goes on in SM. We are not clear how a scene where a woman beats her boyfriend with a crop and then penetrates him with a strap-on dildo reproduces 'the hierarchical ordering of gender' nor how a scene where she slowly pierces the skin of her girlfriend's arms and chest with medical needles 'eroticises the crude power difference of gender'. Alongside this reinscription of (unequal) heterosexual tradition, these theorists claim that SM and feminism are mutually exclusive, and that lesbian SM is symptomatic of internalised homophobia and self-hatred (Russell, 1982). The common SM discourse of consent is of little weight with feminists who feel that this made it worse: that women deliberately seek out situations where they could be powerless victims due to internalised hatred. In addition feminists have claimed that the very notion of consent has historically been used to justify women's inequality, naturalising oppression. Russell (1982) suggested that consent is not an indicator of equality; just because SM involves consent 'does not mean that it has overcome heterosexual power dynamics' (Butler, cited in Sullivan, 2003, p164).

Here we are not dismissing the existence of gendered power imbalances in SM play. It is unlikely that any group in society is able to escape these entirely. As Rubin (1984) argues 'erotic minorities such as sadomasochists...are as likely to exhibit sexist attitudes or behaviour as other politically random social grouping' (p.302). However, we would challenge the continued assumption of SM as inherently anti-feminist and the ignorance of practices other than those which reproduce the heterosexual norm of a dominant man with a passive woman. The reflections of our participants which we will

present shortly, engage critically with both of these issues, demonstrating awareness of the complex nature of 'consent' and interrogating at length those SM practices which appear to reproduce gendered power imbalances.

The only past participant-based work on SM reviewed here which mentions feminism and SM explicitly is Taylor & Ussher's (2001) paper. In their exploration of the discourse which positions SM as 'dissidence' they report how primarily female participants drew on a different feminist discourse to the anti-SM position outlined above. Participants presented SM as part of pro-sex feminism, consciously transgressing conventional heterosexuality and 'parodying sexual relations considered as traditionally subjugating, oppressive and exploitative of women' (p.303). Taylor & Ussher's female participants spoke about how they were able to be the active person with the 'cock', how SM sex could mean they did not have to have penetrative sex, how they dominated men in order to hold power over them, and how their playing with experiences like wife-beating highlighted a cultural shift away from gender oppression. SM was presented as ridiculing, undermining, exposing and destroying patriarchal sexual power. Some similar themes emerged in our current research which undertook a fuller examination of women's understandings of their (gendered) SM practices as potentially feminist.

### ***The current research***

This paper draws on material taken from a focus group discussion, in which we had a participant focus on women who practiced SM, and a discussion focus on the relationship between SM and feminism (Frith, 2000). Our study differed from empirical work presented above in its employment of feminist participant led methods. As in our previous research (Ritchie & Barker, in press) we have attempted to reduce researcher-researched hierarchies by giving our participants control of the research process, from generating discussion questions and moderating the focus group, to analysing the transcript and reflecting on draft papers. In addition we include our own stories here, practicing what Lambevski calls 'an act of ethnographic honesty' (1999, p.399). As autoethnographers we value methodology which 'legitimises and encourages the inclusion of the researcher's self and culture, as an ethical and politically sound approach' (Etherington, 2004, p.141). However, like Califia we recognise that we are

treading a difficult and dangerous line by being open about our own sexual stories. As Plummer reminds us, 'the outcome of telling a story is never clear in advance but is always under different degrees of contestation and conflict' (1995, p.28). Since telling SM stories can involve describing activities which are still illegal in the UK (any practices which might leave marks on the body which are more than 'transient or trifling' are currently illegal - see Chaline, this issue) we have used pseudonyms for ourselves and our participants in the paper, and negotiated a level of anonymity for those involved in the research by removing identifying details about family and partners.

Focus group methodology has been advocated in sex research since it offers 'conditions under which people feel comfortable discussing sexual experiences' (Frith, 2000, p.277). Frith also argues that the format might encourage participants to discuss 'socially sanctioned' sexual practices when group members have shared experience, and Basch (1987) claimed this is particularly apparent when the views expressed by group participants are in opposition to the mainstream. Folch-Lyon & Trost (1981, p.445) suggested that focus group discussions help participants to feel 'less on guard against personal disclosure' and it is suggested that group members who know each other well (as ours did, in several cases intimately) might encourage more detailed and honest disclosure (Kitzinger 1994).

The focus group comprised seven women, ranging in age from late teens to mid forties. Participants were approached through an on-line forum and much of the preparatory work for the focus group (for example generating discussion questions) took place on-line. The focus group itself took place in the living room of one of the participants (Joanne) and was facilitated by another of the participants (Katherine). We constructed a participant group that covered a range of different experiences; some members of the group had been practicing SM for a number of years, some had more limited experience. Several of the women in the group were involved with each other and therefore had experience of playing (engaging in SM) with each other which came up in the discussion. Pearl and Gabrielle are life partners, as are Joanne and Laura, who are also currently involved with Jane. Joanne and Elizabeth have played together, as have Gabrielle and Katherine. Such an involved group is not without its complications and tensions, however it is our experience that in closely networked groups the potential for

participants to challenge each other based on shared knowledge is a powerful dynamic (Ritchie & Barker, in press). Clearly there are ethical issues when we research those who form part of our own social (and sexual) networks. Bolton (1995) suggests that researchers in the field of sexuality should ask themselves:

[w]hat right do we have to enquire into the sex lives of Others, whether in our own culture or in some exotic distant realm, if we insist on our own right to privacy, to remain silent about our own intimate lives? (p.161)

Since part of our agenda is one of autoethnography, in which to tell our own sexual stories we would inevitably be telling the stories of our lovers, play partners and friends, it seems more honest to allow those women into the story construction, and invite their lovers in to collaborate in telling their own stories too. One of the present authors has spoken elsewhere about the tensions of being both a storyteller and a story coxer (Barker, 2004b). Plummer himself questions the extent to which stories told to 'coaxers' in social science research might be 'more like the researchers' stories than the subjects'' (1995, p.29). In viewing the storytelling process as one of collaboration, and focusing on the role of what Plummer would term 'joint actions' in storytelling we hope to explore the construction of stories as more complex productions than simply something 'told' or 'heard'. Later in the paper we will describe several examples of this shared construction of meaning. The analysis we offer below is also a process of collaboration, we asked participants to perform a simple thematic analysis on the transcripts (as outlined in Langdridge, 2003) and they were also given the opportunity to reflect and comment on drafts of the paper as it developed.

### **Analysis**

We will begin, as the focus group itself began, by setting the parameters for analysis by considering the participants' self-definitions in relation to SM and feminism. We will then outline the two themes emerging from the analysis which participants felt were central to the discussion. These were:

- Countering misconceptions about SM (our own misconceptions, those we perceived to come from anti-SM theorists and those we felt were common in wider society).
- The distinction between fantasy and reality, linked to the notion of ‘choice’ (particularly the choices available to women through feminism and choice as power in SM).

### *Setting the parameters for discussion: definitions*

In this section we explore the participants’ definitions of SM, and self-definitions in terms of feminism, sexuality and SM roles. SM can be a difficult term to define because it means different things in different contexts. The group began their discussion with a consideration of how they used the term. Katherine proposed that ‘we’re using SM as shorthand for BDSM’. However, she went on to say that she personally tended ‘to use DS for mind games, dominance/submission, B&D for bondage and discipline, and SM for sadomasochism, and they’re quite, three separate things in my head,’ whilst Laura responded ‘I understand what you mean but I don’t really differentiate those categories very discreetly.’ Relating to terms used for different SM roles, Gabrielle suggested that ‘people will say top and bottom is more about physical sensation, which might or might not include pain, and dom(me) and sub is more about psychological control.’ Jane agreed, ‘again I think it’s a definition you don’t always use in practice but theoretically I think that would be where the distinction was.’ Therefore, in this paper, we will use the term SM to encompass various types of play involving pain, power exchange, restriction of movement and punishment. The terms ‘top’ or ‘dom(me)’ will be used to refer to the people who give the sensation or exert control, and the terms ‘bottom’ or ‘submissive’ will be used to refer to the people who receive the sensation or give up control, although, as we will see, that there is much debate over who holds power in an SM scene.

After these discussions we asked each member of the group to give a description of their self-identity. Several participants commented on the role of feminism in their identity, Jane said that in addition to being a ‘bi female poly switch’ she was ‘also very much a feminist’, claiming that feminism was ‘a reasonably strong part of [her] identity’. Most of the participants made reference to their SM practices and roles in their introduction to the group; here for example Joanne comments:



I'm bisexual, female, poly, um, SM is a very important part of my identity, my SM identity. I'm a submissive bottom, um, I do switch but it's probably a less fundamental part of my identity to top.

All of the participants identified as switch to a degree with the exception of Laura who said 'I sometimes define as a dominatrix, and sometimes as a femme top, although, you know, I do occasionally bottom, I am even butch occasionally, but I don't define as switch, it just doesn't feel right'. Gabrielle and Pearl both felt that they switched 'pretty equally' whereas Elizabeth, Katherine and Jane all echoed Joanne's comment above in claiming that they felt more strongly sub or bottom.

In terms of sexuality, the majority of the group identified as bisexual although Gabrielle identifies as lesbian and Laura said that whilst she now identified as bisexual she had in the past identified as lesbian: 'I used to think of myself as a failed lesbian but I'm coming to terms with it.' Most of the participants had experience of playing with men and women. For Gabrielle the negotiation of her (limited) experiences of SM with men required some reflection on her construction of 'lesbian' identity. In the following extract she is encouraged by Pearl (her life partner) to offer a description of the definitions and boundaries she set around a shared experience of topping Pearl's male partner.

Gabrielle: The stuff around where we draw the lines between SM and sex and what that does in terms of identity is really interesting too, I mean, I wound up accidentally topping Pearl and Earnest, by accident, by accident! And that...*wasn't* sexual – well it was

Pearl: He was *wanking*

Gabrielle: It was quite sexual for you [Pearl]

Several Voices: [laughter]

Gabrielle: I had some kind of arbitrary line which was like I wasn't being sexual with *him*...and I managed to make that not threaten my lesbian identity which is really really important to me, but it raised interesting questions around where I do put those boundaries...and where I'm

drawing those lines, and what it would feel ok to do with him and what it wouldn't feel ok to do with him...the SM bit felt very very clear, the slightly sexual bit, I think what I did in my head was just feel like "No, what I'm doing now is being sexual with you [Pearl], and he's *here*, and I'm allowing him to be sexual on his own, quietly."

Several Voices: [laughter]

Pearl: With your fingernails in the back of his neck as I recall. Helping.

Katherine: Just being friendly.

Here then, Gabrielle is challenged to justify her claim that the experience of topping Earnest was not (for her) sexual by Pearl who points out the potential contradiction in her narrative. Pearl can only recognise the disparity between what Gabrielle says and the 'real' story because Pearl is herself part of the story. Katherine has also heard the story before (she is an ex-lover of Gabrielle's) and adds to the retelling of it by supporting Gabrielle's position that the experience was not (for her) sexual but 'friendly'. These kinds of challenges mirror those found in Kitzinger's (1994) study on HIV prevention where the participants in her focus groups were able to point to contradictions between what health workers said they did (in the research group) and what they were known to do outside of the research group. Frith (2000) suggests that the potential of focus group research to draw on such interaction is one of its major strengths in sex research, claiming that the interactive nature of the data gathered by these methods 'can provide researchers with detailed information not only about sexual activities but about the way these activities are understood by participants' (p.291). Drawing on these 'joint action' moments allows us to explore the shared construction of sexual stories and social meaning between this closely networked group. It also allows our participants to explore and explain their own understanding of SM activities in different ways, as in the example above.

### ***Countering misconceptions about SM***

In our previous work with polyamorous women (Ritchie & Barker, 2005), the issue of exploring and then countering stereotypes became a recurring theme. In this research

there were similar attempts by the group to set out and then counter common stereotypes and misconceptions about SM. Early on in the discussion Laura, Gabrielle and Pearl each described what stereotypes they understand the feminist sex wars to be based on, in relation to SM. Laura suggested that although ‘it does seem like the battle’s moved on’, she had read an on-line feminist critique of SM and concluded ‘I really don’t see how feminists can do this sort of thing to each other’. Pearl drew on academic research, agreeing with Laura that the debate was played out less intensely, but more insidiously, in current academic circles:

[In a recent review of literature] it wasn’t so much that there were big rants about SM but more that it was just accepted [...] throwaway statements of like, “SM: that’s oppressive, that’s anti-feminist”, so it’s still something that’s out there, I think, in a way that’s not passionately discussed but just kind of assumed.

Katherine asked ‘what are the assumptions based on, do you think?’ The first perception the group came up with is that SM is about men dominating women, and is therefore ‘disempowering to women’ (Katherine).

Jane: And if you’re a feminist and you’re involved with a man, and they’re actually going to be topping you, then you can see...

Pearl: This book was on heterosexuality, I think it was assuming that all SM and heterosexual relationships was the men being dominant.

Jane: That was the thing I was going to say. That sounds like it’s working on the male top, female bottom/sub, whatever...

Joanne: That’s just such a surprising assumption.

Gabrielle: But it’s a really strong assumption.

To counter this assumption that tops/dom(me)s were always men and bottoms/submissives always women, Joanne drew on her own initial preconceptions about SM:

Well, when I first became aware of SM and DS, and before I really met people, my image of it, was dominant women and submissive men, and I wondered how I'd fit into that as a woman who was submissive.

Elizabeth offered support here, claiming 'all the phone cards you see, it's always dominatrix' to which Joanne responded 'Yeah, woman with the whip.' When we discussed participants' own practices it was clear that whilst in some relationships women might exclusively bottom or submit (as seems to be the assumption in the feminist anti-SM literature) to a male partner, those same women might have relationships in which they exclusively top or dominate a male submissive partner. Pearl for example, has bottomed casually to Katherine's male partner Chris, but predominantly tops within her long-term relationship with Earnest. Since the majority of the participants switch to a greater or lesser degree, they reject any explanation of SM which is based on assumptions that female SMers only bottom.

Jane pointed out that the common assumption that SM was anti- feminist since it disempowered women by making them submissive to men was grounded in another misconception:

Part of that's also the assumption that even if it is woman sub, that subs don't have any kind of power and it's more complicated than that...You *do* have a certain amount of power as the bottom in the scene, part of it's power you're sort of giving over to the top, but it's not...it's a lend'

So there is another important inaccuracy in how the group feel SM is perceived: the idea that submissives have no power. Again Joanne drew on her own experiences to counter this assumption: 'That was one of the first things I remember hearing...during the SM workshop where I met Laura and the guys: the idea that it's actually the bottom who has the power'. Laura supports this saying that 'everybody knows the bottom really runs the scene'.

Participants suggested that SM was ‘not about the bottom, particularly the stereotype of the woman [bottom],...lying back and going “do what you want, master”’ (Jane), and talked at length about the ways in which SM scenes were negotiated to accommodate the desire of both dominant and submissive participants. In fact the issue of negotiation was so central to the group that we plan to devote a separate article to its exploration. As Langdrige & Butt (2004a) and Beckmann (2001) found, consent is a major discourse in the SM literature and websites, probably because it counters the common perception that SMers may rape or abuse others. Moser & Kleinplatz (2003) argue that this perception is perpetuated by the DSM (2000) which inappropriately categorises together individuals who take part in consensual SM with those who engage in non-consensual activities such as rape.

The third stereotype the group engaged with was one which emerged from our summary of the academic literature. Pearl had suggested that SM was negatively viewed by some feminists because it ‘reproduced gendered, power gender dynamics, that were negative’ (Jackson, 1996; Jeffreys, 1996) and, like Taylor & Ussher’s (2001) participants, the group challenged this perception that SM reproduces conventional gendered hierarchies by drawing on their experiences of subverting these roles. Pearl spoke of SM enabling men to cry and experience vulnerability, and of her experiences of being a woman who penetrates rather than is penetrated, and who can ensure physical control over her male partners through the use of bondage. Laura said ‘one of the things I really enjoy about slave training with men is I’ll redress the orgasm balance...definitely part of dominating men for me is about redressing that balance’. She makes submissive men ask for permission to orgasm and ensures that she orgasms first and more often.

Gabrielle said that SM in woman-woman relationships had been criticised by anti-SM feminists with the argument that ‘anything that reinscribes some difference of power between two women, is argued, in that school of feminism, to be reinscribing heterosexuality onto it, so it’s becoming as damaging as heterosexuality was.’ As Califia (1980) reported, SM is accused of being violent as opposed to the equal, gentle sex that feminist lesbians should be engaged in. Gabrielle challenged this idea herself questioning the assumption it is rooted in: that ‘two women having [non-SM] sex must be about two equals having sex’. She argued that ‘that just isn’t borne out in reality’, suggesting that

power dynamics will come in to any form of sex. Laura also dismissed the idea that any relationship could be without power imbalances. SM might be understood as rendering more visible (and potentially undermining) broader ‘structural inequalities’ in society (Langdridge & Butt, 2004a, p.48). Participants also highlighted the notion that ‘[in SM] power is not connected to privilege’ (Sullivan, 2003, p.161), particularly in relation to gendered hierarchies of power.

Participants were not claiming that SM was automatically feminist however, as we will illustrate in the next section, they also told stories of dominant men who were anti-feminist and men who avoided topping because of their physical strength and cultural links between masculinity and violence. Some participants spoke of finding it more difficult to trust dominant men than women, or finding it harder to be a ‘scary’ top as a woman than as a man, suggesting that it is extremely difficult to completely escape gendered expectations and dynamics. However, overall, both dominant and submissive SM roles were presented as compatible with a pro-sex feminist agenda and as a potential way to reveal and subvert gendered power dynamics.

### ***The distinction between fantasy and reality***

The distinction between fantasy and reality came up at least fifteen times in the discussion, in contexts such as when Joanne responded to an initial question about the relationship between feminism and SM with ‘I don’t have a problem reconciling my feminism with my submission because I see them as reality and fantasy’. After reading the final transcript, Jane said that ‘the distinction between fantasy and reality is really vital’. This reflects distinctions made in SM literature (e.g. Easton & Hardy 2001; 2003) and Beckmann’s (2001) finding that her participants drew clear borderlines between fantasy and reality to present SM as consensual and harmless rather than coercive and potentially dangerous.

As we said earlier, many of our participants used ‘feminist’ in their self-definitions, and all of us made reference to our SM identity. We were particularly interested in how, as feminist women, we negotiated SM practices which might be seen as anti-feminist. In our group, the separation between fantasy and reality was particularly strongly emphasised when participants discussed practices that might be viewed as anti-

feminist (specifically rape scenes, domestic abuse scenes, and 24/7 female submission) or as otherwise potentially exploitative (age-play, racial slavery play, and wearing SS uniforms<sup>1</sup>). Participants echoed Califia's (1980, p.174) argument that 'meaning is derived from the context in which it is used', where she points out that the historical oppressors (wife-beaters or Nazis) may not be the top in an SM encounter and, even if they are, SM acts as a parody rather than a reproduction or reinforcement of that oppression.

Generally participants suggested that practices (even those which drew on gendered power imbalances) which were about *fantasy* were acceptable (and could be deemed feminist) but these were very clearly set in opposition to the *reality* of male dominated society. As Joanne summarised, 'it's the distinction between fantasy and reality...if I want to submit to a man I might get off on power play that is to do with stereotype images of men but it's a fantasy, it's not real life'. The specific example of prostitution came up several times in the discussion, Elizabeth said:

I play with that a lot because I've got a huge prostitution kink [Laura: You're not alone] I don't feel in any way as though it's demeaning to me...I don't play it like that...in that particular context, I feel so powerful

So the idea of *playing* with these situations and roles was explicitly set against the realities, Katherine later commented: 'we've been talking about fantasy scenarios...obviously we're not saying that all prostitutes find sex erotic, because that's clearly not the case'. Several of the participants drew on their experiences of the line between fantasy and reality being crossed. One mentioned her experiences as a sex worker, and Elizabeth spoke about a non-consensual encounter with a dominant male:

I've got a kink about domestic violence and I would love to do scenes that were fantasy with that, but I had someone offloading their own personal domestic violence on me non-consensually the other week and it was a very *very* big lesson in the difference between fantasy and reality. It was

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<sup>1</sup> See Moore, this issue, for a detailed discussion of Fascism and SM.

horrible...but I still want to do it as part of a scene...I think it's still possible, so long as they understand, so long as they know that it's fantasy as well,

Some authors caution however that it is important to recognise that this parody or 'theatre' of SM 'is not the *opposite of life* as it is sometimes posited. Nor does 'playing a role' take one out of the ideological circulation of the dominant culture' (Hart, 1998, cited in Sullivan, 2003, p160). There was some discussion in the group about how these fantasies could be explored safely, specifically participants talked about whether playing with male domination in this way might tap into some ideologically naturalised 'maleness', as Elizabeth comments here 'you just have to find the ones who can put it on and take it off rather than the ones with whom it's inherent. It's *hard*, it is hard.' Katherine reflected this back to the group later; 'that's part of why subbing to men is, can feel more dangerous, because you feel like you can't, as Elizabeth said, there's a feeling that you can't really control what they're going to do'. These discourses of 'natural' male aggression seem to conflict with the possibility of playing with gender mentioned earlier, displaying how participants drew on both alternative and more traditional discourses of sex and gender in their talk. Several participants spoke about how they would not be involved with men who seemed to genuinely enjoy abusing women. It was clear that they did not want to play with somebody who would not look after them, as Katherine put it, 'there's no point someone going away and leaving you tied up if they genuinely don't care'.

These discourses emerged again in the group's consideration of the one practice which a number of participants felt might be anti-feminist: 24/7 relationships where a woman submitted to a male top or dom all of the time. Laura said: 'I still wouldn't go as far as to say that it's always and automatically anti-feminist to be in a 24/7 female sub relationship, but if I had to name something that was suspect, that would be it'. The defining line here again seemed to be about empowered choice, Laura went on to comment 'if it's negotiated, consensual and everything I don't know if I *can* really say "no, sorry, that's anti-feminist", if that woman has *chosen* to be a 24/7 submissive...' Pearl said:



One of my biggest fantasies recently was just total domestic servitude to a man 24/7...it's totally anti-feminist-seeming, but I'm really comfortable with me wanting that kind of thing. It's when it just comes out from a bloke and it's not been negotiated first and it's not been me asked for it, that's when I feel uncomfortable with it. When I'm wanting it I don't actually feel that it's a problem...Women are traditionally oppressed by men, so whereas I think it's ok for me to want it. It may be more troubling if they're just doing it.

Jane offered support for this idea: 'It's ok from the point of view of the exploited one to say 'ok, this happened, and I want it anyway'. Fantasy then (24/7 female to male submission) is distinguishable from reality (patriarchal oppression and traditional domestic servitude) when it involves choice. Clearly participants felt that as women they had the right to choose to play with gendered power, but were concerned by scenarios where men chose to impose this. As this illustrates, the distinction between fantasy and reality was very much bound up in whether people had actively chosen to take part in an activity or not. Jane's analysis of the transcript following the focus group highlighted this 'idea of choice' as a key area for exploration drawing on sections of the discussion such as the following extract from Laura:

It's a bit like the whole thing about feminism being about more *choices* for women, so that there's a really big difference between a woman who *chooses* to stay at home and look after her children, be a full-time housewife *now* when arguably she does *have* a range of choices that she didn't have in the fifties

Jane claimed that 'feminism is surely partly about being able to choose what you want to do and what you want to be' and for many of the participants it seemed that there was a similar emphasis on choice in SM. In the following exchange, Laura and Katherine

return to the issue of submissive power in their discussion of the importance of choosing to submit.

Katherine: I can understand, because as a sub, for me, part of it is about complete loss of control, not actually having it, but, you know, at least feeling that I have lost control of the situation.

Laura: But it's that power of actually *choosing* to lose control...

Katherine: Exactly.

Jane summarised this issue, writing in her reflection on the transcript: 'the idea of power and power exchange [is important] it's about choosing that exchange rather than having it forced on you'. The ability to *choose* submission was thus central to our participants understanding of SM as empowering and feminist.

### **Conclusions**

During the feminist sex wars of the late 1970s and 80s Califia (1980, p.166) wrote 'it's difficult to discuss sadomasochism in feminist terms'. Like Califia, Laura, who was the oldest participant in our group, spoke of her experiences of 'the whole sex-positive, sex-negative SM feminism thing' and the difficulty of reconciling her SM practices and feminist politics in the 1980s. Twenty years later we suggest that dominant academic discourse still assumes that SM is inherently anti-feminist. The participants in this research attempted to negotiate their identities as feminist *and* SM, recognising the tensions in doing so. Elizabeth, who at 19 was our youngest group member, highlighted this in her discussion of dominance and submission when she said 'I find it really hard, really hard to work out how I can do that and want that and still try somehow to define as feminist'. Langdrige & Butt suggest that 'the story of S/M can be seen as a battleground for the transformation of intimacy' (2003a, p.48). Particularly important in this battleground, we suggest, are the issues of choice and the carefully policed boundaries of fantasy and reality.

Our participants privileged the notion of choice in their understanding of feminism and SM. They recognised the tensions in this position however, for example in

the extract concerning 24/7 cited earlier, Laura suggested that she would find it difficult to claim that practices such as 24/7 female to male submission were inherently anti-feminist 'if that women has *chosen*' to submit. Nonetheless there remained some concerns amongst the group about some of these practices. Butler (1982) asserted that the notion of consent in SM 'does not mean it has overcome heterosexual power dynamics' (cited in Sullivan, 2003, p.164). In the group this idea was explicitly challenged by participants' accounts of the potential for SM to reveal and subvert heterosexual and patriarchal power imbalances, for example Laura's attempts to 'redress the orgasm balance'. Participants also explored tensions in relation to who has the power to choose. For example Joanne, Pearl and Elizabeth all spoke about enjoying scenes which played with domestic abuse, servitude or prostitution, but only when they chose to, not 'when it just comes out from a bloke' (Pearl). This issue is closely linked with the second key point made by our participants, the 'very *very* big lesson in the difference between fantasy and reality' (Elizabeth). Participants drew careful lines around practices which they felt played with or parodied power dynamics (fantasy), and those which they deemed to reproduce structural inequalities (reality). Discussions echoed Hopkins' (1994) claim that 'similarity is not sufficient for replication' (cited in Sullivan, 2003, p.160). Again we recognise tensions in this position however, as was highlighted in our participants discussion of the need to find male dominants 'who can put it on and take it off' (Elizabeth). Sullivan (2003) suggests we might think of SM roles as 'not an expression of one's inner self, but rather ... [as] fluid, non-essential, freely chosen, subject positions' (p.161). This idea, supported by the work we present here, offers some challenge to the assumptions that underpin the feminist condemnation of SM as reproducing and perpetuating heterosexual and patriarchal power hierarchies. The women SMers whose voices we share in this paper are freely choosing subject positions which they suggest have the potential to recognise, challenge, subvert, parody and transgress these hierarchies of power (see Smith, this issue, for a more detailed theoretical consideration of such issues of choice and freedom in gendered SM play).

In her groundbreaking paper in 1984, Rubin argued that a sex hierarchy existed which rendered anything other than monogamous, heterosexual sex in the 'outer limits': bad, abnormal, unnatural and unacceptable. Psychiatric categories, mainstream

psychological writing and academic feminist theories still place SM firmly in these outer limits, meaning that people like ourselves and our participants continue to be pathologized and criminalized, unable to safely and openly express our sexuality. As Califia (1980, p.180) argued, SMers are the ‘victims of sexual oppression not the ones to blame for it’. Twenty years on, the conclusion to Rubin’s paper still holds, and is something today’s feminists should take note of: ‘Those who consider themselves progressive need to examine their preconceptions, update their sexual educations, and acquaint themselves with the existence and operation of sexual hierarchy. It is time to recognize the political dimensions of erotic life’ (p.310). It is this political dimension that participants highlight throughout this paper, in their consideration of how power and gendered dynamics may play out, or be subverted, in their sexual practices. We hope this paper will go some way to providing Rubin’s requested sexual education and will help readers to examine their preconceptions about women SMers.

**Ani Ritchie** is Lecturer in Media With Cultural Studies at Southampton Solent University. Her research focuses on the construction and negotiation of sexual identities in women with a specific interest in women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, SM and / or polyamorous.

**Address:** Faculty of Media, Arts and Society, Southampton Solent University, East Park Terrace, Southampton. SO14 0YN

**E-mail:** Ani.Ritchie@solent.ac.uk

**Dr. Meg Barker** is a senior lecturer in psychology at London South Bank University. She is the honorary secretary of the Lesbian and Gay Section of the British Psychological Society and associate editor of their journal, Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review. Her research focuses on sexual communities specifically the bisexual, polyamorous and SM communities.

**Address:** Department of Psychology, London South Bank University, 103 Borough Road, London, SE1 0AA.

**E-mail:** barkermj@lsbu.ac.uk

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