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Journal Item

How to cite:

Barker, Meg (2005). On tops, bottoms and ethical sluts: The place of BDSM and polyamory in lesbian and gay psychology. *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review*, 6(2) pp. 124–129.

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Version: [not recorded]

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Focus on Activism

On ‘tops’, ‘bottoms’ and ‘ethical sluts’: The place of SM and polyamory in lesbian and gay psychology

Meg Barker *in conversation with Dossie Easton*

In a recent issue of the *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review* (Barker, 2004) I interviewed a leading bi activist about the place of bisexuality in the UK and in academic research, but bi communities are not the only ones to be under-represented within psychological writing on sexualities. My own research focuses on polyamory or poly (‘a relationship orientation that assumes that it is possible [and acceptable] to love many people and to maintain multiple intimate and sexual relationships’, Uriel, Haritaworn, Lin & Klesse, 2003, p.126) and SM (sadoomasochism, usually encompassing any consensual exchange of power and/or pain). These sexual identities or practices are found across bisexual, lesbian, gay male and heterosexual groups. However, there is little psychological literature considering the experiences, understandings or needs of people in these communities.

Rodriguez Rust (2000) and Sedgwick (1990) argue that we tend to focus on gender as the only characteristic relevant to sexuality. SM and polyamory both suggest the need for a broader understanding of sexuality encompassing factors such as: the relative power of those involved, the physical acts being carried out, and the number of people taking part. Both SM and polyamory challenge many of the ideals of conventional

heterosexuality including monogamy, traditional notions of ‘the couple’, and the purposes of - and roles within – sex: for example, male activity and female passivity.

Dossie Easton is one of the most prolific writers on the subjects of polyamory and SM. Her books, written with colleague Janet W. Hardy (aka Catherine A. Liszt), include *The Ethical Slut* (1997), *When Someone you Love is Kinky* (2000), *The New Bottoming Book* (2001), and *The New Topping Book* (2003). Their latest book, *Radical Ecstasy* (2004), came out late last year and considers the spiritual possibilities of SM practices. In the absence of any manuals or guidance by academic psychologists on multiple relationships or SM practices, Dossie’s books are the main port of call for many polyamorous and sadomasochistic people, in both her home country, the US, and here in the UK. Dossie Easton is a licensed marriage and family therapist specialising in relationship issues and alternative sexualities in San Francisco. She has worked in the US mental health system for ten years, plus three years at a battered women's shelter. She also teaches on relationship and SM skills, techniques and philosophy, and is a poet and performer. During her life she has identified as heterosexual, then as bisexual, and for the past twenty-two years as lesbian: currently referring to herself as ‘a dyke and queer’ (Easton & Hardy, 2001, p.2). She was one of the founding members of the *Society of Janus* (San Francisco’s SM support and educational organisation).

Last year Dossie visited the UK to take part in a conference on women’s SM in Manchester (SM Dykes, 2004). During her trip I met up with her over a meal for UK poly people and invited her to be interviewed for *Focus on Activism*. When we met I began by asking her about her reaction to the popularity of her books.

The Ethical Slut and Polyamory

MB: How do you feel about the fact that polyamorous people all over the world reach for *The Ethical Slut* in times of crisis?

DE: It's so great to hear that. Getting to write the book was such a blessing: getting to put it out there, having it so well received and getting to write it in an atmosphere where I didn't have to censor anything.

MB: Can you tell us a bit about how you got to this point in your life: author of so many influential texts?

DE: I got very lucky. I'd been teaching workshops since 1973, doing formal sex education, and working with support groups like the *Society of Janus*. Although I was engaged in public speaking, I'd always been shy about writing. About twelve years ago I met my co-author Janet, and she said "you should write a book about bottoming"¹ and I said "I'm too anxiety-ridden to write by myself; I could only do it if you wrote it with me". So she said "okay", and a great relationship was born. Our books are the best selling mainstay of the Greenery Press², so we get to keep them in print as long as we want and under whatever conditions we want. There are nobody else's values telling us what to do.

MB: Are there any other books on polyamory besides *The Ethical Slut*?

DE: Yes there's a book by Deborah Anapol (1997) called *Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits* which is a perfectly good book - if a bit more conservative than ours. We wanted *The Ethical Slut* to be useful to everyone who has a polyamorous lifestyle. For

¹ Easton and Hardy (2001, p.3) use 'bottom' to refer to 'someone who has the ability to eroticize or otherwise enjoy some sensations or emotions – such as pain, helplessness, powerlessness and humiliation – that would be unpleasant in another context' and 'top' to mean 'someone who can eroticize giving someone an experience that would be unpleasant in real-world interactions – so a top might be a dominant, sadist, master, mistress, nurse, pirate captain, or whoever else is titularly running the show' (p.4).

² Greenery Press is a publishing house based in Oakland, California which was founded in 1991 by author Janet Hardy and publishes books on 'adult sexuality'.

instance, people who are dating and teenagers at highschool, as well as those you immediately think of - the primary partners with secondaries or triads or whatever³. We wanted to be very inclusive.

MB: Can you tell us a bit about your own story of coming to be polyamorous?

DE: I'd had three monogamous relationships and in between those I would be what I called a slut. At one great moment in my life I realised that, in fact, I felt more like myself as a slut than I did when I was struggling to be somebody's wife. Not that I haven't had partnerships since then, but thirty-five years ago I decided that I was not going to be monogamous again. It was partly a feminist decision: I don't want to be territory; I don't want to be property (see Rosa, 1994; Robinson, 1994; and Jackson & Scott, 2004 for more about feminist arguments against monogamy).

Also in poly you can have a whole range of relationships. Rothblum (1999) encourages us to imagine what it would be like only being able to have one friend, the way that we are currently only supposed to have one sexual partner. It seems to me that the idea that we should care an enormous amount who else our partners share sex with is probably something that is cultural. In the fifties there was a wonderful book published called *Patterns of Sexual Behavior* (Ford & Beach, 1951) in which sexual patterns were compared between 195 cultures. Many were not monogamous. Monogamy is also rare amongst animals. It's certainly not a 'natural' condition (see also Hird, 2004; Barash & Lipton, 2002). Non-monogamy has long been an accepted practice among a number of long-term gay male couples (see Kitzinger & Coyle, 1994). My daughter and I lived in

³ Common polyamorous set-ups include people having one or two 'primary' partners and other 'secondary' ones, triads (where three people are involved with each other), and quads (e.g., two couples being involved with each other). Some polyamorous people live together in families or tribes (see Labriola, 2003, for a more extensive overview of various models).

the garden apartment of such a couple, who had been together for seventeen years, and we all had other lovers who we brought into the household. It was a wonderful place of constant visiting and love connections, with this very solid basis to it. They were my daughter's uncles.

Women and SM

MB: You are over here in the UK now to attend a conference on women's SM (SM Dykes, 2004). What is that about?

DE: It's amazing to see so many of us gathered together in one place. The big conferences take over whole hotels. *Black Rose* in Washington has 2,500 people, *International Mr. Leather* in Chicago has 10,000 twice yearly. At this conference I am doing an erotic writing reading, a workshop on poly, and a workshop about role-playing in SM. We ask questions like: how do you figure out what your emotional limits are and how to role-play safely? I always tell people that the scene⁴ is not over until everyone is back in the state of consciousness that they were in before they started playing. If you are going to do this kind of scene you need to have the time and the support for returning afterwards, so we put a lot of focus into aftercare, how you figure out what your emotional limits are and what to do if you trip over them. It has to be okay to safe-word⁵ to end a scene or to interrupt it to make some adjustment, or change something that is not working.

MB: So SM is very safety oriented, including emotional safety as well as physical safety?

⁴ A 'scene' refers to a period of SM 'play' when those involved take part in SM practices.

⁵ A 'safeword' refers to a previously negotiated word or signal that an SM participant can use to signal that there is a problem or that they want to step-out of the scene momentarily or permanently.

DE: Right. The last workshop I'm doing is one based on our book *Radical Ecstasy* and it is about how you use breathing or trance from intense experiences, like pain, to go into transcendental states of mind, and how you come back down from those.

MB: It is conference for women who practice SM. SM has been, and continues to be, controversial in academic feminism and feminist politics (e.g., Rubin, 1984). What are your thoughts on this?

DE: Oh I was femina non grata throughout the eighties! It was very hard. I was not welcome in most women's spirituality circles. When my SM was discovered at the battered women's shelter where I had worked as a legal advocate they had problems, saying it was "terrible" and "disgusting" and that I was "a victim of patriarchy". This was despite the fact that I had worked there for two years and they approved of my work. SM can be a way for women to grasp power. I'm sixty so I grew up in the fifties. There's a lot of conflict between what I was raised to be, and what I turned out to be in terms of it not being okay for me to grasp my power. There are some scenes in which the top provides the bottom with the opportunity to triumph over extreme physical and mental stress, a sort of ordeal that supports the bottom in finding her power. Sometimes I allow myself to be beaten down, but if I do that it is because I've chosen to do that, and my partner is helping me do it. I have been a battered woman: I assure you it is quite different. SM play is not the real world. We can distinguish between fantasy and reality. I have been playing for thirty-five years, and it has not turned me into either a perpetual victim or an overbearing dominatrix. It has been a big part of my feminism and a mechanism for helping me find my own power - having been raised as a person who believed I shouldn't

have power, and who should dedicate my life to washing someone else's socks (see also Ritchie & Barker, in preparation).

SM, Psychotherapy and Psychology

MB: You've written about SM being a potentially healing thing. Can you explain that?

DE: *The Topping Book* has a chapter suggesting that, whether it is individually, within our families, or within our cultures, some experiences and thoughts are associated with shame, rage, guilt or fear, and are split off and relegated to a territory of the unconscious that Jung called 'the shadow'. My notion of the healing power of SM is that it is a path to reclaiming parts of ourselves that have been banished. If I go into my victim space in SM what I'm doing is I'm going into a split off place with someone who will support and validate me. We go in knowing we're going into a difficult place and I wake up a piece of me and bring it into consciousness. We use that physically intense connection between us as the thread that keeps us safe in that scary place. We come back out into a place that's very loving, very nurturing, maybe we're very turned on and we'll have orgasms, or maybe we'll just hold each other. Whatever the case, we are going to come back out in a way we have written and scripted ourselves. Like many therapists, I believe that consciousness, being able to be fully conscious of difficult conflicts, is in and of itself healing. Once I can think about whatever the problem is clearly, I can probably figure out what to do about it.

MB: Do you think this form of SM actually impacts positively on self-esteem then?

DE: Definitely. If I play into my worst place, my victim place, and somebody else thinks I'm very sexy and desirable, that's powerful.

MB: SM is still classed as a disorder in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM, see Moser & Kleinplatz, 2003). What are your views on this, given that you seem to be portraying it as a potential form of therapy?

DE: In the DSM it is now only considered a disorder if it causes significant distress or dysfunction in a person's life, but that still allows some people to imagine that it is okay to pathologize any consensual, non-violent sexual behaviour, and I would point out that what we do is not violence; it is very carefully calculated stimulation. The DSM is better than it was, but I don't like the notion that a person who is feeling terribly frightened, guilty or confused about their SM would go to a straight therapist and be told that they could be cured of their desires, especially because, as I said, I think that SM desires can be in the direction of healing.

MB: So the DSM criteria mean that a therapist could try and cure someone of it?

DE: Exactly. There's a lot of talk about that in relation to homosexuality and whether it is acceptable to attempt to change somebody's sexuality (e.g., Spitzer, 2003). It's scary, especially when you think of young people. People should be free to follow their sexuality to wherever it should lead them: that's my understanding of dignity and health.

MB: What advice do you give to psychotherapists who have SM or poly clients?

DE: I do talk to psychotherapists a lot and do training with them when I can. It is important to open therapists up to the possibility that there are people doing these things who are not pathological and that sexual behaviour does not define pathology. In many cases, when people have a problem in their life it is unconnected to whatever it is they do sexually that puts them in a minority. If there is not direct connection between somebody's sexual lifestyle and the problem they're presenting to you, are you able to

see that, or are you going to keep looking for connections, or even make one up? The problem with SM is that most therapists have so little information and most of what they think is information isn't true.

Ways Forward for Psychology

MB: What would you like to see academic psychology doing in terms of research on, and messages about, SM and polyamorous people?

DE: I ran from academia myself. I don't like writing articles in that language that is central to academia. I don't really want to give an inch to people who think that writing doesn't count if you don't use as many enormous words in dead languages that you can think of. That being said, I welcome the research and writing on SM and other previously pathologized sexualities now being conducted (e.g., Beckmann, 2001; Taylor & Ussher, 2001) and have, myself, been interviewed for several such dissertations and projects.

MB: Much academic work on sexualities seems to focus on sexual identities rather than sexual practices.

DE: Yes I've noticed that. I'm referring clients now back to the early books on sexual practices (e.g., Barbach, 1976; Loulan, 1985). There are people writing these incredible discourses on queer theory and yet in workshops I still have to say things like 'did you know that most women learn to have orgasms by masturbating?'

MB: Do you think that people are scared of discussing sex?

DE: Yes. When I was first working for San Francisco sex education we trained volunteers to answer anybody's questions and talk with anyone about sexual concerns. A lot of what we were doing was finding a language to talk about sex, and all of a sudden

that has disappeared. Even in SM and polyamory discussion groups I've noticed that when we start talking about actual fucking people will be quite shocked. If you can't talk about it, how can you think about it? Much less negotiate any expression of sex with another person.

MB: Do academics take your work seriously?

DE: I have had people dismiss it because I practice poly and SM myself. This is the old argument that you can't be both a participant and an observer in research. However, I would point out that this is only applied by people who are pathologizing whatever behaviour is being researched. Otherwise we would have to say that parents should not do research into child-rearing, and someone like me would need to do research into heterosexual monogamous marriages because I am outside of that!

MB: The bottoming book quotes you as saying 'my main contribution to both the SM and lesbian communities is my unstinting effort to reclaim the word "slut"' (2001, p.2) Can you tell us more about this?

DE: If a slut is a person - a woman usually - who celebrates sexuality, then why should that not be a compliment? One straight man in his fifties told me that men don't identify as sluts, and I asked him what he would call himself. He said "a stud" and I said "what's the difference?"

MB: Do you think that language more generally is important when it comes to alternative sexualities?

DE: I think that we have a problem with language that is used around sexualities. The language that we get from English has been largely used as insults: "you cunt", "you dick" and all that. We have a tradition of using pseudo-scientific, polysyllabic, medical

language as if it was somehow cleaner, and it makes everything sound like a disease and as if you need to be a doctor to be able to talk about it. That language distances people. Euphemisms again convey the message “you’ve got to hide it”; you can’t talk about it directly. So to my mind reclaiming the direct straightforward language is the way towards giving those words positive connotations. ‘Polyamory’, however, is a Greek and Latin based word, but it seems to work for people. ‘Non-monogamy’ and ‘trans-marital’ have been suggested as alternative, but they are both monogamy and marriage-centred. I’m sixty years old. I’ve been watching all this stuff for a very long time. I don’t think we have the faintest idea what it will look like when we live in a society that really allows us to be who we are and to express ourselves in the ways that fit for us. When that happens, that will be just wonderful, and I hope I’m doing my part to help us along the journey to that day.

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