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Turning the World Upside Down: Developing a Tool for Training about SM

Meg Barker

During the past three years in which I have been researching and publishing work on SM (e.g. Ritchie & Barker, 2005; Barker, Iantaffi & Gupta, forthcoming 2007) I have been asked to provide training sessions on the topic in a number of contexts (for example, with health professionals, sex therapists, counsellors, people involved in film certification, and members of lesbian, gay and bisexual community groups). In addition to this I have incorporated sessions about SM into my teaching with undergraduate and postgraduate students studying courses on human sexuality, mental health and clinical psychology.

One major issue that I have faced in running such teaching and training sessions is how to get past the blocks that many people have around SM due to the dominant discourses that are likely to have constituted most of their previous exposure to the topic. Mainstream media depictions and everyday perceptions of SM are largely negative, perpetuating psychiatric and legal perspectives of SM practices as pathological and on a 'slippery slope' towards criminal behaviour (see Barker, Iantaffi & Gupta, elsewhere in this volume). It seemed necessary to challenge some of these 'taken-for-granted' before I could present research material about the experiences and needs of people in the SM communities and others who engage in SM practices. I wanted to encourage students and trainees to reflect critically on their existing assumptions about SM, loosening some of their existing constructs before making other alternatives available to them (Burr & Butt, 1992).

In the teaching and training that I have previously carried out on other aspects of sexuality (particularly lesbian, gay and bi sexualities), I have frequently used existing exercises which have been designed to get participants questioning their assumptions and revealing them as just one way of constructing the object under consideration rather than as 'fact' (e.g. Rochlin, 1977; Butler, 2004, outlined below). Many of these resources have been developed as part of a tradition of lesbian and gay awareness training within equal opportunities, medical and educational contexts (Peel, 2002). However, I could find no

past awareness-raising sessions on SM. Most workshops about SM take place in SM community contexts with people who are either already involved in SM or who are strongly considering it (e.g. Kinkfest, 2005; 2006). They tend to focus on introducing attendees to SM techniques and how to use these safely. There is little material available aimed at introducing people outside the SM communities to SM.

In her overview of lesbian and gay awareness-training, Peel (2002) mentions that trainers often use exercises within training in order to encourage attendees to realise their existing stereotypes, gaps in their knowledge and so forth. Bertram and Massey (forthcoming, 2007) also write about using such exercises as pedagogical tools in a higher education context. This seems important because higher education has been described as a site of ‘thundering heteronormativity’ (Epstein et al., 2003, p.102), where heterosexism and homophobia are still commonplace and non-normative sexualities continue to be silenced and excluded in both textbooks and lecture material (Barker, forthcoming 2007). Snyder and Broadway’s (2004) analysis suggests that such exercises may also be useful in the context of school teaching because of the ‘pervasive acceptance of heteronormative behaviour’ there, which ‘privileges students that fit the heterosexual norm, and oppresses through omission and silence those who do not’ (p. 617).

Bertram and Massey (forthcoming, 2007) discuss their reasons for using exercises like Rochlin’s (1977) ‘heterosexuality questionnaire’ as pedagogical tools. Amongst these they include the development of critical thinking skills in students in order to flatten the hierarchy between them and the teachers. They also talk about the goal of shifting scrutiny away from subordinate to dominant groups (in this case from LGB people to heterosexuals). Feminist authors, lesbian and gay activists and queer theorists have all employed such techniques to put their points across in particularly powerful ways which may amuse and relieve readers on the ‘inside’ whilst simultaneously engaging and discomfoting those on the ‘outside’ by encouraging empathy and the imagining of oneself in a very different societal position. This encourages normative populations to reflect on their positions of privilege and the ways in which oppressive hierarchies are perpetuated (Fine, Weis, Powell and Wong, 1994; Garber, 1994).

Such exercises aim to increase awareness of the perceptions, positioning and treatment of marginalised groups by drawing attention to the constructed nature of

divisions of sex, gender and other related categories. Social constructionist writers have pointed out the cultural and historical specificity of current understandings of sex and sexuality by making comparisons between different time periods and societies (e.g. Burr, 2003). Kimmel (2006) explicitly draws on discourses of cultural comparison in his 'anthropological field study' of a 'Nacirema' subculture: 'Tarfs'. By using anagrams and anthropological jargon he presents common American fraternity practices as unfamiliar, bizarre and 'other'. By the time the reader has understood the trick they have already engaged critically with the material (in the way they might when reading about some foreign tribe) and questioned the practices, particularly realising the homosexual elements in what is often promoted as a particularly macho version of heterosexuality.

In the case of sexuality, a major goal of exercises is to show that normative heterosexuality itself is culturally and historically constructed (Weeks, 1993) and to show the impact of a person's own standpoint on the kinds of questions they ask (and don't ask). Exercises often point such social constructions out by imagining parallel universes, alternative realities and carnivalesque 'worlds turned upside-down' where conventions and rules are reversed in a way reminiscent of the early modern 'feasts of fools' (see Oldridge, 2005).

Examples of tools which challenge stereotypes and myths by envisioning what life would be like if these were reversed include the much used heterosexuality questionnaire, attributed to Rochlin (1977), which asks respondents questions such as: 'what do you think caused your heterosexuality?', 'is it possible that your heterosexuality is just a phase you may grow out of?', and 'is it possible that all you need is a good gay or lesbian lover?' This enables them to imagine an alternative reality in which heterosexuality was treated as homosexuality is in this one, encouraging empathy and drawing attention to the problematic assumptions that lie behind common views of homosexuality. Butler's (2004) 'homoworld' 'attempts to give heterosexuals a taste of what it would be like to live outside of the dominant norm regarding their sexuality' (p.15). It describes a day in the life of a heterosexual person who lives in a world where homosexuality is the norm, saturating everyday conversation and popular representations in the way that heterosexuality does in our world. For example:

Arriving at work, one of the admin staff is showing pictures of her holiday she just took with her girlfriend in Lesbos. As you join the group to look at the photos you get asked “Where did you take your last holiday?” Do you admit it was Corfu, a destination well known for its heterosexual holidays, and do you say who you went with? (p.15)

and

Finally you reach your home tube station and as promised your boyfriend is there to meet you. You feel a flood of relief at seeing him, realising how tired you are. But do you greet him with a kiss with all these people still around? As you walk home you both have to walk down a quiet street. You start to hold hands, glad of the contact. However, unexpectedly a group of youths rounds the next corner and you let go. Did they see the contact? Are they going to say anything, heckle you? Worse still, is this a potentially violent situation? You both stare at the floor as you walk past. (p.17)

Sedgwick’s (1993) essay, ‘how to bring your kids up gay’ similarly invites the reader to imagine a world where same-sex sexual desire was valued and parents would look for self-help literature to help them to encourage it in their children. Rothblum’s (1999) ‘friendship planet’ exercise turns monogamy on its head by imagining a planet where people treat lovers as we do friends and vice versa (so they look for one true friend, deny themselves friendships on the side, try to avoid friendliness with inappropriate people, and have a number of uncomplicated lover relationships). Steinem’s (1978) essay asks her readers to imagine a world where men menstruated, suggesting that menstruation would become something to boast about and celebrate with rituals, with national research bodies to find cures for PMS and to provide free sanitary protection.

I wanted to begin my own workshops and teaching sessions on SM with a comparable exercise which would help attendees to become aware of their existing assumptions about SM and to begin to challenge these. I felt that it would be more powerful if attendees saw for themselves the problems with the common myths around SM rather than me telling them directly that these were problematic. Specifically I wanted to highlight some of the popular misconceptions around SM (see Bridoux, 2000; Barker, Iantaffi & Gupta, forthcoming, 2007), for example that SM always involves

extreme amounts of pain or lasting damage, and that it is violent, non-consensual and unsafe. Like Kleinplatz and Moser (2005) I decided that it would be useful to contrast SM practices with culturally acceptable practices like sport and leisure pursuits to challenge participant's criteria for deeming SM dangerous, wrong, sick or otherwise troubling.

First I developed an exercise along the lines of Rochlin's (1977) questionnaire (described in full and discussed in detail in Barker, 2005). In this the reader is presented with thirteen descriptions of 'scenes' and asked to decide, for each one, whether they would be concerned or not if a friend revealed taking part in this activity (for therapist training 'friend' was changed to 'client'). Examples of scenes include:

An individual pays a stranger to carefully insert sharp pieces of metal into parts of their body. This leaves permanent scarring and sometimes results in infection.

and

A small group of people arrange to meet in a private space in order to watch others role-playing being raped, humiliated and tortured. They find this an enjoyable way of spending their evening.

Generally I get the participants into groups of three to look at four or five of the scenes in detail. They then feed back to the rest of the class which they found most disturbing and why. This leads to a useful discussion of issues such as levels of informed consent, negotiation, physical and mental harm, sexual context, and power differences, which tend to be some of the criteria used to make these judgements. Usually one or two students will realise the 'trick' of the exercise at some point. Like the practices described in Kimmel's (2006) article, the scenes are mostly descriptions of commonplace activities that a non-kinky heterosexual person might take part in (tattooing, watching a thriller, going on a stag night, wearing high-heeled shoes, etc.) Three are real SM scenes, taken from my research, but these are almost never the ones that are picked out as problematic. Once this is revealed the group discussed how activities are socially constructed as acceptable or unacceptable and this leads into a critical consideration of the construction of SM practices as pathological and/or criminal.

I also often use Kleinplatz and Moser's (2005) article as a follow-up exercise because this applies the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual criteria (see Moser & Kleinplatz, this volume) to heterosexual behaviour in order to show that heterosexuality could just as easily be categorised as a paraphilia as SM since it often leads to distress (they consider sexual dysfunction, affairs and divorce, for example).

In addition to these materials I wanted to develop more of an explicit 'world turned upside down' exercise along the lines of Butler's (2004) 'homoworld' or Rothblum's (1999) 'friendship planet'. As several authors in this volume have pointed out (e.g. Weait, Downing), SM authors and activists often draw comparisons between SM and sporting activities when campaigning for the legal rights of SM practitioners. The healing narratives of SM discussed elsewhere in this book (Barker, Iantaffi & Gupta) also sometimes sound rather similar to the claims made about the positive physical and psychological impact of 'good exercise'. Given my own rather positive perspective on SM (and a lifelong perplexity at the mass appeal of participation in, and watching of, sporting events) I tried to imagine a world in which the way we viewed SM and the way we view sport were reversed. The following is what I came up with. I hope that I, and others, can begin to incorporate exercises such as this and the one published previously (Barker, 2005) and to evaluate how these are responded to and which prove the most useful in achieving the kinds of aims discussed above. I would welcome any feedback from any colleagues using these, or other, exercises.

THE DAILY KINK

Get Whipped into Mental and Physical Shape for the Summer: PM Urges us to Learn the Ropes from our Olympic Boys and Girls

Today we welcome our UK team of Olympic SMers home from Madrid where they have been demonstrating their expertise in a number of different events, achieving gold in Japanese Rope Bondage, boot-worship, and co-topping. This in the same week that Britain's Manchester Fetishists romped home from the States with the world cup, which was gladly passed over to them by the exhausted California Leathermen after a strenuous and nail-biting four hour session. TV viewers can catch a re-run of the event this Saturday following the human-pony chariot racing on ITV.

Prime Minister Tina Blur greeted the Olympic team along with a crowd of thousands when they arrived back at London Heathrow this morning. At a later press conference she encouraged the public to learn from these role models and to ensure that they build a range of SM activities into

their weekly routine. A recent report to the ministry of health confirmed that even a leisurely daily spanking increases the average lifespan by three years. In a passionate speech Blur spoke of her own Sunday meditation sessions in a rubber sleep-sack. 'It is ever citizen's duty to ensure that they maintain a healthy and happy body and mind,' she said. 'Periods of needle play and flogging release endorphins and raise heart rate as well as providing a valuable emotional release.' The PM also spoke of the team-building potential of group-based role-play. She recommended that business people engage in brief role-reversal sub-dom scenes during their lunch-break to relieve work-related stress and to aid manager-employee relations.

There are plans to build an even larger play-stadium at Wembley to accommodate the growing number of internationally renowned professional SMers who are keen to use the venue. Top SMers pull in salaries of several million pounds. Number three seeded cane-sub Jan Pindle, who courageously endured 350 strokes to bring home bronze from Madrid, is rumoured to earn at least ten million a year. He recently said 'I would like to see a move towards the kind of SM-camps they have in the US to train students to become professionals'.

Unfortunately, a group of extremists have attempted to taint these recent successes by forcing their agenda into the public arena once more. The 'sports' contingent wasted no time in latching onto the PM's rousing speech. The PM said that this was 'a vain attempt to convince a weary public of the legitimacy of their bizarre activities, by drawing some kind of comparison between them and popular SM pursuits'.

The Daily Kink have heard of one group who meet in secret to pound each other in the head until one or other is rendered unconscious. Almost as concerning are the underground 'rugby' afternoons whose depraved 'scrums' frequently result in broken limbs and brain damage which our overworked health services are then expected to treat. Another minority group suspend themselves from dangerous heights with ropes and harnesses: a practice resulting in several deaths every year.

Shockingly, participants in these marginal activities experience *no* form or sexual or sensual pleasure as a result. Given this lack of any normal reason for such behaviours, we asked Professor Jane Dollar of Yile University to explain. 'Clinical studies have shown that most 'sports' practitioners have been damaged by early experiences of abuse', Prof. Dollar claimed. 'Competing for leather-encased sacks of air has clear Freudian undertones and may well be a result of arrested development.'

Martin Blackhouse is a campaigner from a national group which is fighting for a complete ban on all 'sports' or 'sports-related' activities. 'We are battling to tighten legislation so that prosecution will be much easier in these cases' Martin said. 'The dangers involved in 'sports' are severe. We are concerned about what will happen if children get access to footage of activities like 'American football' and attempt to copy them. There is also clear evidence that taking part in 'sports' is the start of a slippery slope leading to increased levels of aggression and violence.'

The Daily Kink managed to conduct a private interview with an anonymous 'sportsman'. 'Jack', as we will call him, was seduced into 'boxing' at a young age. He showed us his private collection of the peculiar satin costumes and oversize gloves that 'boxers' are expected to wear. Jack's involvement in 'boxing' led to him becoming involved in 'bare knuckle fighting' and he has been present on two occasions where somebody has beaten to death. No more evidence is necessary to prove that 'sports' are extremely dangerous activities which are only practiced by sick individuals. The claim by 'sportspeople' that they consent to take part cannot be taken seriously. As Prof. Dollar says 'the so-called consent

of mentally unstable persons cannot be taken account of in a court of law.'

To conclude on a more positive note, recent university statistics show that SM-studies is now the fourth most popular course taken in the UK, with many students also specialising in SM-physiotherapy and SM-massage, learning the skills necessary to prepare professional SMers for scenes and to deal with the occasional minor injuries that result from more strenuous practices. We truly are a nation of SM-lovers!

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