

BDSM from A to Z: consent as a tool against pathologization in internet BDSM “handbooks”

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Sexuality, culture and politics A South American reader

Although mature and vibrant, Latin American scholarship on sexuality still remains largely invisible to a global readership. In this collection of articles translated from Portuguese and Spanish, South American scholars explore the values, practices, knowledge, moralities and politics of sexuality in a variety of local contexts. While conventionally read as an intellectual legacy of Modernity, Latin American social thinking and research has in fact brought singular forms of engagement with, and new ways of looking at, political processes. Contributors to this reader have produced fresh and situated understandings of the relations between gender, sexuality, culture and society across the region. Topics in this volume include sexual politics and rights, sexual identities and communities, eroticism, pornography and sexual consumerism, sexual health and well-being, intersectional approaches to sexual cultures and behavior, sexual knowledge, and sexuality research methodologies in Latin America.

BDSM from A to Z: consent as a tool against pathologization in internet BDSM “handbooks”*

Bruno Dallacort Zilli**

Introduction¹

The acronym BDSM encompasses a variety of erotic activities. B stands for “bondage”, often with ropes or handcuffs. The pair B and D stands for “bondage and discipline”, the use of erotic fantasies of punishment, while D and S represent “domination and submission”. These are fantasies where one “surrenders” to a sexual partner, role-playing humiliation and abuse. The pair S and M stands for “sadism and masochism”, or “sadoomasochism”—the use of pain as erotic stimulation. Fetishism is also a BDSM practice, involving sexual arousal motivated by specific body parts or objects, such as feet or leather. This acronym was developed in an attempt to describe activities involving sexual content defined by two characteristics: these practices are classified as *sexual disorders* by psychiatry; and, among its adepts, the rules and definitions of BDSM are based upon the notion of respect for one’s partner’s consent. The social representations of BDSM associate it with sexual perversions such as sadism, masochism and fetishism. However, BDSM is a complex sub-culture that has expanded and established a tenuous claim as a sexual identity with political rights. BDSM adepts are in constant communication and they are politically organizing to fight stigma and the prejudices society at large currently holds regarding their practices.

The present study uses an approach taken from medical anthropology. Central to our analysis is a debate regarding the production of medical knowledge and rationality. For this reason, the present article does not offer up a review of the literature of the subject’s treatment in the social sciences. Our research originated with a survey of articles dealing with sadoomasochism in psychiatric journals (both in English and Portuguese).² These articles drew attention to the issue of sexual disorders and the existence of studies in psychiatry that are beginning to question whether certain sexual behaviors, such as sadoomasochism, are pathological or not. While not exactly central to the current psychiatric field, these articles resonate with recent scholarly studies of

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¹ This article is based on the master’s degree dissertation *Perversion Domesticated - Study of the BDSM legitimating discourse on the Internet and its dialog with psychiatry* (Zilli, 2007).

² These articles were surveyed as part of the “Sexuality in Psychiatric Classifications” research project, coordinated by Prof. Jane Russo (IMS/UERJ).

sexuality.³ The analysis presented here was built through an ethnographic survey of texts on the internet that discuss BDSM practices. Its analytical focus are those points where the legitimacy of BDSM contact the very medical definitions of sexual behaviors as pathological.

Currently, psychiatry textbooks classify these pathological sexual behaviors as “paraphilias”, a subgroup of “Sexual and Gender Identity Disorders” (Manual, 2002). According to Foucault (2001), these categories were first described in medicine in the nineteenth century, mainly by psychiatry, which called them “perversions”. The “medicalization” of sexual diversity was a general trend that characterized the interaction between medicine and society during the nineteenth century, incorporating into medical terminology behaviors that were already stigmatized or problematic for the notion of “traditional family”. Psychiatry was a privileged agent in this process and its attempt to account for peripheral (in regard to marital sexuality) sexual phenomena led to the creation of social characters who were defined by their “sexual perversions”. These phenomena were classified as “sexual deviations” and terms such as “sadism”, “masochism”, “fetishism” and “homosexuality” are important examples of the diagnoses produced in this period.

Today, in a phenomena such as BDSM, but also especially in the gay rights movement,⁴ one can observe these once “perverse” actors struggling with strictly psychiatric/pathological definitions of their sexuality as they attempt to claim a legitimate sexual identity. These claims are mainly expressed by an effort towards legitimacy that has very well defined goals and is expressed by an institutionalized *discourse* (Cf. Foucault, 2001). Psychiatry, however, is often used as a reference in these claims. Its scientific referendum is utilized in the argument that BDSM practices are not necessarily pathological or dangerous. Analysis of BDSM legitimization discourse reveals the central position which the concept of *consent* has as the main criteria to distinguish between a healthy sexuality and its pathological forms. Consent, in this case, is understood to be an exercise of individual will and an expression of the rational desire to engage in sexual activity.

The BDSM “handbook” on the Internet

Discourses that seek to legitimize BDSM can be found on the internet on websites dedicated to this practice. Claims for a legitimate, non-pathological and decriminalized

³ Cf. the work of Gregori (2004) presented in the Final Considerations and also Leite Jr. (2000). Duarte’s discussion (1989) regarding Victorian psychiatry was also an inspiration for this study, particularly his analyses of Krafft-Ebing’s as a of social (and sexual) life in the nineteenth century.

⁴ The American gay movement’s demands for a positive representation of homosexuality had a direct result upon American psychiatry, which in the early 1980’s dropped homosexuality as a diagnostic category in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In large part, this was due to direct pressures from the gay movement against the definition of homosexuality as a pathology. (Cf. Kutchins & Kirk, 1997)

characterization of BDSM are disseminated on the internet by BDSM defendants keeping in contact with one another. Being a medium that is characterized by its ease of communication, the promise of anonymity and the opportunity to contact people sharing mutual interests, the internet is ideal for the formation of identity groups creating different types of virtual communities. BDSM discourse supports the idea of group identity, a sense of belonging expressed through the acquisition of information on the techniques, concepts and definitions that are regarded as essential to BDSM practices.

A survey of the available texts on the internet shows that writings about BDSM occur in several formats: in the form of articles (with or without bibliographic references), journalistic notes, news reports (commented or not), stories and poems, among others. There is one format, however, that focuses specifically on the context of BDSM legitimacy. This format can be usefully labeled as “handbook”. It is usually succinct and organized into topics, offering an overview of the important issues regarding legitimacy discourse, summarizing the most pertinent themes discussed by BDSM practitioners. Marked by an objective and formal approach, the “handbook” has spread among BDSM communities on the internet, since it is the type of material that flows easily into discussion spaces such as internet forums and mailing lists. It is also frequently published on BDSM-dedicated pages. In fact, the proposed function of the “handbook” is to be on the fighting front for BDSM legitimacy, being one of the first contacts with BDSM for those who might be curious about it. This type of text aims to serve as a tool for clarification and giving ammunition to practitioners for them to defend their preferences. The effort for BDSM legitimacy has its spearhead in the “handbook”, mainly because it organizes a vast amount of information available in an easy to read format..

There is not a single BDSM “handbook” on the Internet. Each group has its specific version. The content of the “handbook” remains virtually the same regardless of its origin or location in the internet, however. In part, this fact is due to the very nature of hypertext: it is no longer possible or necessary to differentiate a text or even a piece of it from its original location or the place of its copy because the data is diffused in the entire range of the hypertext via an infinite reproduction (Cf. Levy, 1996). This fact can be found in the occurrence in the many sites dealing with BDSM practices of multiple pieces of text or texts translated, reinvented, or simply copied.

Through more general observation of these pages one can get an idea of what types of claims are perceived by BDSM participants as representative of themselves and their practices. The need to be in contact with these claims is stipulated as the most important. Indeed, mastery of the content of the “handbook” seems to be a focus shared by all those who are committed to BDSM in the virtual communities. It is the acceptance of these claims that defines the “BDSM community” on the internet. Considering these facts, the present article aims to analyze the “handbook” collected on one Brazilian site created by Brazilian practitioners of BDSM, thus focusing our analysis of BDSM legitimacy claims on one concrete example.

Desejo Secreto (“Secret Desire”)

“Secret Desire” (<http://www.desejosecreto.com.br/>)⁵ is a website organized by the administrators of a mailing list of the same name. Indeed, one can consider the mailing list and the site to be a single institution. Many of the BDSM legitimacy claims on the internet are connected to a mailing list or forum, indicating the existence of a certain information flow in BDSM communities on the web. In fact, the story BDSM practitioners relate about these claims is that all conventions are defined in the debates (sometimes inflamed) that occur in areas of collective discussion. After systematic organization by the members who participated in the discussion, the material is published on the internet in “handbook” format. The forums thus serve as “melting pots” where content about BDSM legitimacy is continually (re)developed and refined. The uniformity of BDSM legitimacy claims on the Internet is partially associated with this constant updating, both in terms of content and in terms of the ability to attract new adepts.

The “Secret Desire” site discusses BDSM practices in several of its sections, presenting information copied from various sources. Part of the material is translated to Portuguese from American websites. In origin and content, “Secret Desire” illustrates some important features of BDSM legitimacy claims:

- 1) The assertion that BDSM is a set of sexual practices understood as a “lifestyle”.
- 2) The need for healthy physical and mental BDSM practices, mediated by safety and consensual concerns. These concepts are defined by the phrase “SSC”: safe, sane and consensual.
- 3) Concerns about the stigma of sexual perversion.
- 4) A dialogue with psychiatry, seeking legitimacy.
- 5) The influence of the U.S.A. and U.K. BDSM communities in the settings that characterize these practices.
- 6) The defense of the political right to sexual diversity for BDSM practitioners.
- 7) Encouragement for all practitioners of BDSM to master and be familiar with the technical jargon of BDSM activities in order to talk about and act according to an acceptable BDSM logic as expressed by “SSC”. “Consent” is a category that dominates this jargon and it is central to understanding the meaning of “legitimate BDSM”.

⁵ This page is currently closed for new updates, but the entire content used for this study is still available.

The content of the BDSM “handbook”

In its “What is BDSM?”⁶ section, “Secret Desire” presents a set of arguments that serve as an introduction. The psychiatric and academic fields, as well as other fields of knowledge, are frequently called upon to give a scientific basis for the legitimacy the site struggles towards. On “Secret Desire”, one can access a version of this section in Portuguese and a link to the original English text of another type of “handbook”: the list of FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) from the “alt.sex.bondage” discussion forum (also referred to as “a.s.b.”).⁷ The list contains answers to frequently asked questions organized by the administrator of this American discussion group that has been active since 1995.⁸ These questions range from issues on information for beginners and the curious to justifications regarding the validity and legitimacy of BDSM activities. We quote below from two examples taken from “Secret Desire”, which are typical of the “Handbook” format and which illustrate our analysis of BDSM legitimacy claims. The quotes are from the internet and were made in italics, reproduced verbatim.

Through some basic definitions, BDSM legitimacy claims clarify what kinds of behavior are at stake when they refer to activities they want to represent. These claims build upon the idea of the existence of a set of practices that are sexual in nature and consented to by all its participants. Consent is the most basic notion of BDSM. It limits the universe being discussed in such a way that all considerations regarding the details of practices and relationships imply that BDSM activities are consensual and there is no actual abuse or violation of those involved. For the members of the community analyzed here, consent is what separates BDSM from criminality.

Just so it is totally clear at the outset, NONE OF THIS MATERIAL ADVOCATES ANY KIND OF NONCONSENSUAL BEHAVIOR. What I am describing here is a variety of ways for lovers to enjoy one another, if and only if they both want to, and both give their consent.

(<http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/a.htm>)

And another example:

If everyone involved agrees to what is happening, it is not a crime. If they do not, then it is. This distinction is not in principle difficult to understand, and being involved in SM makes it very clear. SM practitioners are *_more_* familiar with consent issues than most, and as such are *_less_* likely to commit crimes of the sort that people

⁶ <http://www.desejosecreto.com.br/oqueue/oqueue.htm>. These will be translated from material quoted in Portuguese, since the original English version is no longer available on the internet.

⁷ <http://www.desejosecreto.com.br/altsex/altsex.htm>. These will be quoted here in the original English.

⁸ <http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/faq.htm>

confuse with SM. And NONE of the material in this FAQ advocates ANY kind of nonconsensual, criminal behavior.

(<http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/v.htm>)

A much emphasized definition of consent is that it involves the ability to assume responsibilities: a trait developed only by adults. Therefore, children are strictly barred from BDSM practices, as well as any sexual activity in general. This idea is also expressed by the notion that BDSM is "play". However, it is an adult form of play, because of its sexual content. Some participants in BDSM question the "real" meaning of the consenting act, of allowing oneself to be physically or psychologically "violated". These participants repudiate the idea that the nature of BDSM is a playful game or form of play. Debates about "real BDSM" are thus common, and in these the place of consent is questioned as a mediator of erotic stimulus.

Most BDSM adepts demonstrate constant dissatisfaction regarding the definitive definition of consent. References to these disagreements constantly recur in BDSM legitimacy debates on the internet because the existence of different interpretations of consent is perceived as a basic element of BDSM. As a whole, BDSM adepts preach respect for any point of view regarding their practices as long as consent remains the essential limit. However, there are certain contradictions in this attitude and one can perceive that the definition of consent is constantly being negotiated. This contradiction is perceived by the practitioners themselves as a kind of paradox inherent in the idea of consenting to be violated. This contradiction can be seen in the example bellow:

Sometimes, discussion on a.s.b veers into a heated debate about what is involved in "real" dominance and submission or "real" BDSM play. (...) One thing is sure: attempting to set strict boundaries around what is and isn't "real" SM, or what is and isn't "true" submission or pain play or roleplay, is an endeavor fraught with peril. (...) One topic that does come up in this context, though, is whether only consensual SM is real SM--or rather, whether the term "SM" excludes any behaviors that are not consensual. As I stated in the beginning of this FAQ, I use "SM" here to refer to acts between consenting adults (...) a.s.b is largely composed of postings by people whose sexual practices are considered unhealthy or at least weird by many others. We recognize here that different people really do have different sexualities, and different preferences. Hence, we try to avoid blanket statements such as "Behavior X is WRONG!" or "Behavior X is NOT OK!" or more generally, "_Your_ kink is NOT OK!" We would instead say, "Your kink would not be OK _for me_. Here are some of the risks I see in that kink. How do you deal with them?"

(<http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/q.htm>)

In this example the value that is given to impartiality is very clear. The ideology of "one cannot judge" and "there is no right or wrong" is very strong in this discourse. The only exception is the condemnation for disrespecting the wishes (or pleasures) of

another. The ideals of tolerance and impartiality highlight the fact that BDSM involves an enormous amount of practices, but not all adepts are fond of all activities. Taking this into account, the idea of a "BDSM community" can be more clearly defined as a combination of different people with different tastes, associated by the "kinkiness" of their sexual preferences. These people are in touch with one another through the internet, and look to legitimize their practices by presenting themselves as an organized and politicized sexual identity. The main claim to legitimacy is that only consensual sexual activities are part of BDSM. The understanding of consent is debated exhaustively so that it can be theoretically applied to every practice and context in the community. Because of this, its application is understood as controversial and subject to individual interpretation. One of the characteristics of BDSM legitimacy claims is thus the assertion that consent does not have a complete and closed definition, but needs to be constantly negotiated by practitioners.

BDSM Activities and the BDSM community: the "scene" and its "characters"

One of the basic definitions in the BDSM "Handbook" is regarding the concepts of roles. The "active" role is associated with those individuals known as "tops" who perform activities of domination and are identified as sadistic personages. The "passive" role encompasses individuals known as "bottoms" who engage in submission and are represented as masochist.⁹ BDSM sexual activities may also involve the use of tools or erotic paraphernalia: "sex toys". It can also be combined with various binding techniques known as "bondage". Such arrangements may be associated with fetishism: erotic preferences that range from the use of accessories and leather garments to the preference for specific body parts such as hair or feet. Any fetishist, with his or her myriad "fantasies", is also a BDSM character along with dominant sadistic tops, submissive bottoms and many other types.

These various characters in fact are sub-identities in BDSM culture. People are thus identified with the "alignment" of their choice and may look for texts, discussions and erotica more specific to their tastes. Sometimes the boundary between a given character and another is blurred. Someone can be identified as a sadist and a dominant, for example, with a fetish for leather who likes to immobilize the partner in bondage. The division between tops and bottoms seems to have a fairly clear boundary, however, but even this can be overcome in terms of the diverse experiences in the trajectories of an individual. Some people start as bottoms and become tops, or vice versa. Some people are even known as "switchers" and are defined by their eagerness to change roles.

⁹ While BDSM adepts use the same gay slang to describe the passive (penetrated) and active (penetrative) roles in sexual intercourse, their meanings are not the same. A BDSM bottom can execute the penetrative role if this is the function that he performs at the behest of his or her top (who will then be penetrated).

The division in roles and the use of "fantasies" connect to the idea of BDSM activities as a "scene" interpreted by actors. "To make a scene" is to engage in a particular BDSM sexual activity which will be part of a BDSM play. The community of activists and practitioners is also sometimes known as "the BDSM scene." In this idea of a "scene", it is implicitly understood that BDSM sexual activity can be "turned on" and "off" and that it is not real life, but stands apart from "reality".¹⁰

SM has definite connotations of theater. The fact that you are a submissive while you're playing sexually does not mean you are a pushover in real life, nor does your being a dominant while playing mean that you are an overbearing egotist. These are roles that you can play; you are in some sense an actor.

(<http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/b.htm>)

Because of this feature, a scene can (and should) be discussed in a time that is recognized as outside of the scene itself, which may be before it starts, during any interruption, or even after its completion. This time of dialogue between participants is meant to define what is and what is not working in accordance with the preferences of those engaged in the scene. The erotic elements of the scene are determined by mutual agreement before it starts, including how the scene can be stopped through a "safeword". The safeword allows a scene to be interrupted at any time via a predetermined code, which need not be a word, but could also be a gesture or other signal. The existence and dissemination of the safeword mechanism is thus one of the most recurrent arguments presented in BDSM legitimacy claims.

The safeword represents an ideal of control over the BDSM activity – even though the erotic goal of BDSM involves submission to a partner, or in other words, to abandon control. This is a point of contention for many practitioners when they discuss the "true" meaning of consent. However, the limits set by BDSM security rules determine that only what every participant desires is acceptable. The safeword guarantees security, emphasizing one thing considered essential for any BDSM relationship: communication. Communication allows negotiation to take place, which in turn opens the door to consent – and without consent there is no BDSM.

A safeword needs to be taken seriously. Sometimes you may be playing with a top you don't know that well, and if they do something to you you don't want, it's important that you have a way to let them know, IMMEDIATELY. Especially if you're tied up or otherwise made helpless.

(<http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/c.htm>)

¹⁰ However, this assertion is often questioned when BDSM adepts debate over a more refined definition of consent, or in the attempts to characterize what would be "real BDSM", where violation is consented to but not role-played.

The Games

The distinction between physical and psychological stimulations and the definition that neither is exclusive or mandatory is also part of the basic definitions of BDSM:

SM is a sexual orientation or a form of behavior between two or more adult partners. This behavior may include, but is not limited to this, the use of physical and / or psychological stimulation with the purpose of producing sexual arousal and satisfaction. Often, one partner assumes the active role (top or dominant) and the other assumes the passive or receptive role (bottom or submissive). Practitioners of SM may be heterosexual, bisexual, gay, transgender or intersex [sic].

(<http://www.desejosecreto.com.br/oquee/ncsf01.htm>)

A BDSM activity can be restricted to the psychological. It is then known as a relationship of "Dominance / submission", D/s¹¹ or DS. BDSM adepts who play these games talk in terms of psychological or emotional triggers that must be activated by both dominants and submissives in order to awaken feelings of subjection in a game of negotiation and exchange of power. These triggers involve humiliation and subjugation - sometimes construed as a manipulation of emotional or psychological pain. While not necessarily involving genital stimulation, or even physical contact, these activities are understood as sexual due to their erotic content, which is exciting for those involved. Trust and intimacy between the partners practicing BDSM are perceived as necessary in this experience, which is ideally understood as taking place in a relationship where the partners have a deep level of commitment and in which the emotional stimulation plays a key role. Commitment and complicity are precisely the sexually stimulating elements in this sort of relationship and they remain the basis of the consenting act, allowing one partner to consent to submitting to the other and for the dynamics of power exchange to occur seamlessly. Even when this sort of activity occurs outside of the context of a loving relationship,¹² DS is an erotic act because of the implicit trust it requires and the possibility of surrendering safely.

When a BDSM relationship is characterized by physical stimulation of any kind, pain becomes a central issue. According to the "handbook", pain is perceived as a powerful erotic stimulus, but it must always be carefully and technically managed. The ideal objective is to cause intense pleasure through the application of sensory triggers that cause / increase the participants' sexual arousal. It is thus clear that BDSM pleasure is not related to "pain" simply, but to pain as associated with pleasure: pain administered in a specific way, technically and with the sole intention of erotic stimulation. This relationship is known as SM, or sadomasochism. It is understood that there is not a

¹¹ The letter S for submission is commonly used in lower case as a mark of subjection.

¹² There are professionals hired to be tops in a scene where the relationship is strictly a business one (this is one of the meanings of Dominatrix). BDSM legitimacy discourse does not deal with these situations outside of the very generic recommendation for a clear negotiation of all elements of the scene that will be performed.

clear separation between DS and SM, which is well expressed in the presence of both in the BDSM acronym. For pain-based stimulation to have an erotic meaning, it must obviously be consented to. Because of this, the practice of sadomasochism blurs into the domination / submission relationship, which can include techniques of discipline (another meaning for the D in BDSM), since these can be as much psychological as physical. SM practice may also involve the use of bondage.

Sexual diversity and legitimacy: SSC–“Safe, Sane and Consensual”, and regulation through community

Another argument for legitimacy that establishes a basic definition situates BDSM as another form of sexual diversity. In accordance with this argument, BDSM is a legitimate erotic expression that can be practiced by adults of any sexual orientation. BDSM legitimacy claims emphasize that its practitioners are normal, that they are equal to anyone and that BDSM can be practiced by anyone so inclined. The only limit is consent. This argument seeks to differentiate BDSM from criminal individuals and behavior. It is also applied to the debate regarding the “real” nature of BDSM and the already-mentioned need felt by practitioners for establishing the limits of consent and the role of fantasies that do not involve consent. These fantasies appear in many erotic materials, but are not necessarily considered “taboo” if they are understood by everyone as fantasies. This is the ambiguity of BDSM practices, which sometimes simulate acts that are not consented to. In other words, BDSM adepts recognize that fantasies about non-consensual practices are part of the erotic imagination of people who practice consensual BDSM. The argument is that everyone must learn to draw a line between what is acceptable and what is not.

There is no doubt that many people who practice consensual BDSM enjoy fantasies involving acts of nonconsensual bondage, dominance, submission, sadism, and/or masochism. But when it comes to real life, consent is of fundamental importance. A story may include nonconsensual acts and yet be an SM story; an SM relationship can become abusive while remaining an SM relationship; but when people here on a.s.b and in the larger scene talk about SM as it ought to be and should be (and in my experience, as it usually is), they mean consensual, healthy SM.

(<http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/q.htm>)

The rules that guide this usage of common sense are called “SSC”. They stipulate that BDSM should occur in a context that is **S**ane, **S**afe and **C**onsensual. In this sense, BDSM is treated as a practice with a high potential for risk, similar to a radical sport, for example. It is therefore necessary to know by heart the conditions and rules of BDSM, in order to minimize the possibility of accidents. The specific definition of what exactly each element of SSC means is also seen as a source of controversy, but it is perceived that there’s a need to define it as strictly as possible in order to create a reliable BDSM

experience. The concepts of sane, safe and consensual and their functions thus have slight variation, but are otherwise very homogeneous:

Safe is knowing the techniques and worrying about the safety of items that are involved in what you're doing, and acting, then, according to this knowledge.

(...)

Sane is knowing how to differentiate between fantasy and reality. (...) It is also being able to distinguish between mental illness and health. One way to distinguish real mental illness from sanity is to observe if the behavior patterns of an individual cause problems in his life. Washing hands until the skin peels off or so frequently as to affect daily activities, for example, is a sign of mental illness. SM, like any other behavior, can be a sign of psychiatric problems. However, the vast majority of its practitioners consider that SM enriches their lives, including recognizing improvements in other areas of their lives.

Consensual is to respect the limits imposed by each of the participants during the entire time. Consent is the fundamental, primary ingredient of SM. The difference between rape and sexual intercourse is consent. The difference between violence and SM is consent. The same behavior may be criminal without consent and very pleasant with consent. The parameters of control are agreed between those involved and the everyone's consent is necessary.

(<http://www.desejosecreto.com.br/oquee/ncsf02.htm>)

The knowledge required to practice BDSM, as well as the ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality, is identified as something necessary and legitimating.. The debate surrounding SSC, then, is about the role of violence in typical BDSM erotica. In fact, this "erotica of violence" is so present and by definition such a part of BDSM that consent is essential in order to actually differentiate BDSM from (sexual) violence. Consent therefore becomes the focal point for establishing BDSM as something legitimate and not pathological. Consent is, of course, complemented by the notion of physical and mental "well-beingness" that is expressed by Sane and Safe. If a practitioner feels emotionally and physically comfortable with his or her activities, then these can be considered legitimate. However, unlike consent, sanity and safeness are self-assessed criteria and their importance assumes a secondary place in discussions and arguments about BDSM legitimacy claims.

The components of SSC serve as a tool which the community of practitioners of BDSM uses to control its members. This control works more through exclusion than through punishment. SSC is a concise and efficient way to define a set of legitimate practices and individuals. Everything not in agreement with SSC is ruled out. However, it is essential to observe that there is not consensual agreement regarding specific applications of SSC.¹³ For example, on the need for dialogue and negotiation:

¹³ Perhaps one of the factors contributing to this conflicted perception is the nature of the lists and forums where the BDSM discourse is produced and debated. Virtual discussion groups are known for their "wars" and emotional exchanges of insults caused by disagreements (this is not a characteristic of BDSM forums and chats alone).

There are some who feel that negotiating--talking--"ruins the momentum". The image they seem to have is of the lovers who need say no words; every touch, every action, is perfect. That's great when it happens, but it doesn't happen automatically.

(<http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/b.htm>)

Another example can be found in discussions regarding the use of a safeword:

Not every SM player uses safewords. Some people into SM don't find them useful for the style of play they prefer; more straightforward communication suffices for them. Some partners find their need for a safeword gradually diminishes as they come to know each other better. Some people do SM in which the bottom doesn't *want* to have a verbal escape route, for the duration of the scene. (This "no-safeword" play is also sometimes called "edge play.") One thing that you will learn about the BDSM scene is that styles vary wildly, and peoples' experiences are astonishingly diverse.

(<http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/c.htm>)

In these arguments, consent becomes an effective tool with which to draw a clear line between marginality / pathology and "normality". It relies on a definition that can be understood even by people who are not interested in BDSM. There seems to be a pragmatic approach behind the whole controversy over consent because if certain lines are exceeded, BDSM legitimacy claims would be damaged. So the truth is that the debate on the SSC and other forms of BDSM sanctions are refinements of the primary ingredient of legitimacy: consent.

Categories of subjectivity

BDSM "handbooks" discuss the causes and origins of BDSM erotic desire, but only in order to determine that the origin of a particular type of erotic preference is not known or cannot be clearly identified—much as is the case with heterosexual or homosexual desires. For instance, BDSM desires should not be associated with childhood abuse. This kind of argument demonstrates a more psychological / psychotherapeutic interpretation of sexual disorders. Also, the current classification criteria for mental illness used by psychiatrists make no reference to psychological processes or structures underlying the behavioral symptoms of a specific diagnosis (such as the psychoanalytical idea of neurosis). These criteria make possible arguments where a differentiation between a pathological behavior and another behavior that is connected to a lifestyle can be established. This is a maneuver that is central to BDSM legitimacy claims.

Legitimacy claims are thus strengthened if they avoid discussing the origins of BDSM preferences. Furthermore, BDSM is portrayed as a deep and meaningful psychological, emotional and even spiritual experience. BDSM can thus be analyzed as deeply influenced by a "laymen's psychology" when it expresses concern about the ability of its adepts to cope with what they see as the "powerful psychic forces" that can

be unleashed by BDSM activities, or the need for constant dialogue and reflection regarding the nature of these activities and the meaning of their connection to sexual fantasies (which often involve non-consensual fantasies).

If you are worried about getting "too into SM", it means that you are sensitive to your spiritual and sexual development, which in itself means you have less to worry about. Trust your instincts. SM is nothing but opening up the the powerful energy within us all, and being willing to experience that energy with and through others; it is intimate and loving. Even a hard scene, involving ruthless domination and serious pain, is an act of love, and a very deep one at that; it takes a lot of trust and a strong connection between the people involved to create such a scene

(<http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/z.htm>)

These arguments for BDSM legitimacy demonstrate how its activities are understood as experiences requiring or leading to the development of a psychic / emotional predisposition that "awakens" its adepts to a higher level of consciousness or erotic awareness. This emphasis on the subjectivity of BDSM practitioners and on their communication is seen as a positive value in a morality system focused on the ability to express individual will. In these arguments, the inability to express sexual desires or to communicate said desires with one's partner is understood to be negative. The recommendation for deep self-reflection and self-analysis as a requirement for the practice BDSM is justified by the need to maintain security and appears in the following example:

If you have issues around your personal sense of self-worth, and if you feel that being submissive (albeit perhaps an enticing idea) might serve to confirm and consolidate your negative self-image, you would do well to think hard about whether D/S play is for you at this stage of your life. The answer may well be "no." (And conversely, if you are considering topping someone who wants to submit because they deserve no better, you might consider whether you want a partner who thinks so little of themselves.) In general, it's imperative for everyone who does SM to look hard at their motivations and their boundaries, and to be clear on whether the SM (whatever form it may take) is self-actualizing or self-destructive.

It may not be all black-and-white, either; there may be some particular activities or roles or words that will make you feel unsafe, scared, or worthless, and you may well want to avoid those activities/roles/words. That is exactly what negotiation is for; you have the right to do what feels good to you and avoid what does not, and you have the right to insist your partner respect your boundaries. (This goes for any relationship, of course, BDSM or no.) The discussion of "when do dom/sub relationships become excessive or abusive" is an ongoing one on s.s.b-b, and for good reason; it's an important topic. BDSM may at times be therapeutic, but it is in no sense a substitute for therapy.

(<http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/e.htm>)

BDSM and the psychiatric classification of sexual disorders

Dialogue with mental health is constant in BDSM legitimacy claims. It appears in SSC through the idea of sanity, but especially with regards to the distinction between normal and pathological behavior. Medical classification of pathological sexuality is considered very important. However, the BDSM community does not clash with medicine: psychiatric classifications are addressed in order to legitimize BDSM practice. The internationally influential Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)¹⁴ of the American Psychiatric Association is usually quoted to establish and clarify the difference between BDSM and behavior that would be understood as a mental disorder of a sexual nature, known in psychiatry as paraphilias.¹⁵ The current definitions of mental disorders seem satisfactory to the practitioners of BDSM.

As more studies are being published, mainly in recent years, the medical community, including the portion devoted to mental health, is beginning to accept that SM is not only safe but is also a legitimate aspiration.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), SM in itself is not a mental illness. The DSM-IV diagnostic criteria of both sadism and masochism states that SM only becomes a diagnostic dysfunction when:

The fantasies, impulses or sexual behavior lead to clinically significant distress or impairment (for example, becoming mandatory, causing sexual dysfunction, requiring the participation of individuals without their consent, bringing legal complications or interfering in social relationships).

In addition, the DSM-IV clearly distinguishes the non-pathological sexual behavior, stating that:

A paraphilia should be differentiated from non-pathological use of sexual fantasies, behaviors or objects as a stimulus for sexual arousal.

(<http://www.desejosecreto.com.br/oquee/ncsf04.htm>)

However, BDSM's relationship with the scientific field is not an accepting one. It is understood that much of the prejudice and marginalization associated with BDSM practices are based on analysis taken from biased studies which address only the pathological side of—or rather pathological individuals associated with—BDSM. The traditional stigma of sexual perversion is, at the end of the day, what claims for BDSM legitimacy fight against.

¹⁴ The section on mental disorders of the International Classification of Diseases of the World Health Organization is based on DSM.

¹⁵ The list of specific disorders refers to the traditional nineteenth century nomenclature of the perversions, including fetishism, zoophilia, pedophilia, exhibitionism, voyeurism, sexual sadism and sexual masochism. It is remarkable that homosexuality is absent from this list, given that it was a diagnostic category understood to be a perversion in the nineteenth century. Thanks to the gay movement, homosexuality has now become a legitimized behavior in the context of the APA's sexual diversity policy statement.

Almost all the books written about SM and other alternative practices in this century have been written by psychologists and therapists (i.e. people outside the scene), and almost all have portrayed SM as a dangerous practice, indulged in only by "unhealthy" individuals. The reason? Healthy individuals weren't the subjects being studied; rather, the subjects were all seeking psychological treatment from the authors of the books! The "studies" completely ignored the many many well-adjusted, happy people who were also into SM. It's easy to conclude SM is harmful when your only experience is with psychologically maladjusted SM people, and when you aren't interested in presenting a balanced view (as few authors are--psychologists can be as sexually judgmental as anyone).

(<http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/v.htm>)

Psychiatry's current criteria utilize the idea of suffering or mental disability in social interactions to diagnose mental disorder in an individual. This is a mandatory criterion. A parallel can be drawn between it and the arguments about well-being and physical and emotional safety in BDSM legitimacy claims:

More recent events in the psychiatric community have shown a change in opinion about SM. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Conditions is a document produced by the American Psychiatric Association. The DSM-III, published in the late '80s, classified "sexual sadism" and "sexual masochism" as disorders for which treatment was recommended. The APA, in the DSM-IV, reclassified SM as not necessarily a disorder, unless the practice of the SM produces clinically significant ongoing emotional trauma, or leads to death, serious injury, or disability. The DSM-IV is recognition by the therapeutic community that SM can be practiced in a psychologically healthy way. Specifically, DSM IV, © *1994*, page 529, §302.83, "sexual masochism": Classed as a paraphilia, not a disorder, lacking negative implications unless "the fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning." Sexual sadism is discussed 2 pages later, §302.84, with similar qualifications.

(<http://www.unrealities.com/adult/ssbb/v.htm>)

Arguments about consent are more common in BDSM debates than about well-being, however. The definition of "legitimate" BDSM mainly revolves around the idea of a consensual sexual act. In the dialogue with psychiatry, however, health considerations move to the fore and arguments revolve around the healthy relationships that BDSM practitioners have with their desires. By using the criteria of well-being, BDSM practitioners can demonstrate how definitions of sexual disorder cannot be applied to them and their activities, since they are not under psychological stress (excluding the suffering caused by prejudice) and still maintain their capacity for social interaction. What both BDSM arguments and psychiatry have in common in the use of their categories is that they are creating a new distinction between pathological sexual behavior and

the free expression of sexuality, even if it is a "different" sexuality. BDSM legitimacy acknowledges that pathological behavior can be found in some BDSM practitioners. These cases are not considered to be healthy or legitimate, however. Such people are not even perceived as part of the BDSM community: they are something else. They are subjects of psychiatric inquiry, as in case of pedophilia (which because it is sex with children, who cannot consent, is non-consensual) or non-consensual or simulated Sexual Sadism Disorder. The idea is this: BDSM desire is not pathological; the way a given subject relates to it and puts it into practice is what determines his or her mental health.

Final Considerations

BDSM practitioners propose to reform the values assigned to their sexual behaviors, demonstrating a desire to legitimate their practices. This can be observed in their efforts to censure contents that would make these practices unacceptable, most particularly elements of violation. Violence is then subjected to a compromising and non-threatening interpretation, through which BDSM can be understood as a sexual activity that improves the well-being of its adepts and enhances their pleasure. The purge of pathological features from BDSM activities thus redefines the ethical and moral concepts they trigger. In respect to pathological forms of sexuality BDSM boundaries are reinforced and clearly demarcated. It is thus possible to achieve legitimacy by asserting that BDSM manifestations are not pathological.

BDSM legitimacy claims coincide with typical ideas about sexuality politics rather than with anomalous manifestations of sexual activities. The affirmation of the political autonomy of the identities associated with BDSM behavior mirrors a process of negotiation between the original definition of these phenomena by the psychology (which had previously classified them as deviant) and the interests of those who are identified by these medical descriptions, but who long to be freed from association with criminality and pathology. This process of negotiation is evident in the use of such concepts as "consent", "will" and "choice", which are defining criteria in psychiatry. BDSM legitimacy claims, as they appear on the internet, are in frank and open debate with medical conceptions about sexuality.

Analysis of the arguments used in this discourse indicates a need to "tame" the violent content of BDSM practices. Such "domestication" takes place mainly through the assertion that these erotic activities are non-subversive in nature. Practitioners also emphasize individual self-control and adherence to rules that are extensively debated by the group and which are based on the notion of consent as an element of distinction from criminal behaviors (which are non-consensual). These concepts seem to be at the root of what Gregori (2004) called a "politically correct eroticism." Gregori writes in

the context of the gender studies¹⁶ and investigates the relationship between eroticism and violation in the “new forms of eroticism” that value a quest for pleasure, fun and better self-esteem. These goals are often achieved through pedagogic exercises, sexual stimulation techniques, “sex toys” and other erotic fantasies. The author sees these practices as a pragmatic approach to sexual function and believes that this sexual ideal changes the role of violence within sexual practices.¹⁷

On the one hand, in these discourses one finds a domestication and neutralization of the sense of violation in the meaning of the erotic, operated by the effort of integration (as opposed to subversion) in the presentation of products and techniques for sexual performance. This is related to the idea of a bodily “gymnastics” in the use of sexuality, where one engages in sex in order to strengthen one’s “self”. Moreover, by making violence less visible in the erotic field, efforts to ensure its politically correct exercise are strengthened. This invisibility process is executed by a notion of consent that is mainly articulated with sadomasochist fantasies. A perfect example of the application of “pragmatism” to the erotic, these practices mobilize consent as an act of will. The meaning of pornography then moves away from the traditional notion of the obscene and subversive, being replaced by the “concept of sexual practice as a body technology which aims to strengthen individual self-esteem.” (Gregori, 2004: 254) In this context, parts of the phenomena that were previously regarded as perversions or disorders of sexual behavior—that is, phenomena that were defined as being purely sexual—begin to be considered as political in nature: i.e., as a lifestyle, a “sexual option”, a sub-culture or the representative of a political minority.

It is the presence of the ideal of equality, of respect for other’s opinions, which unifies the various activities covered by BDSM. Respect for another’s rights also rule consent, demonstrating how BDSM adepts perceive the need to legitimize themselves and their activities to society. This attempt to accommodate different points of view is associated with the diffusion of egalitarian ideals, already typical of the political arena, in the field of representations about sexuality. Consent is a concept which ensures that the limits of individual rights are not exceeded. It is the main way to fight against prejudice and marginalization. It can be observed that the issue of consent has crystallized in BDSM legitimacy claims as the tool capable of establishing a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate, between healthy and sick. The subversive element is thus stripped from the erotic: what is erotic cannot be subversive, and what is subversive cannot be erotic. In this manner, the transformations in conceptions of sexuality that occurred in the twentieth century can be significantly perceived in debates regarding BDSM. The reform of notions about sexual behavior that developed in twentieth century sexology has had great diffusion into the social fabric. Béjin (1987) speaks of a resonance

¹⁶ Judith Butler, Gayle Rubin and Carol Vance are her main interlocutors.

¹⁷ Bataille (2004) is an exemplary author that explains the connection between the erotic and violence / violation, revealing contents of transgression (social and individual) in eroticism.

between the “sexology problem” and the “sexual aspirations” of modern individuals. In discussing the idea of “sexual democracy”, Béjin (1982) describes a sexuality that is instigated to refine its processes in order to maximize erotic results, utilizing a rational calculation of the use of pleasure. For Béjin, these ideas about sexuality refer to the body / spirit dualism, which operates with ascetic designs and which preaches the rational use of the body and its pleasures on one level while, on another level, instigating a hedonistic and sensualist sexual satisfaction. Masturbation is a canonical form in this ideal of sexuality, in which subjects can understand the various forms of sex as variants of the masturbatory act itself. The function of the “other” (the partner) is thus only to enhance individual excitement. Because of this there can be a regular exchange between different forms of expression of sexuality on the common grounds of a self-sexuality, especially in the passage from hetero- to homosexuality¹⁸. It is this set of ideas that Béjin calls “sexual democracy.”

The perception that BDSM is an enriching (one could say empowering) sexual, intellectual and spiritual experience refers to the understanding of BDSM practices as a means of achieving a higher plateau of pleasure and sexual efficiency—a unique and distinct plateau of pleasure, actually. Moreover, this hedonist ideology is marked by the notion that everyone has the right to enjoy their pleasures. These equal rights in opportunities to achieve pleasure merge with the argument that BDSM is accessible to any person, of any sexual orientation. There remains an underlying significant element: there is no moral condemnation of the practices involved in BDSM. “Immoral” is not taking into account the wishes (and pleasures) of the other. In the case of consent, it is immoral to disrespect the other’s desire to not participate. Pleasure rights are guaranteed by the rationalization of sexual activity that takes place through the ideals of communication and the expression of individual will. They are so necessary that they become a barrier to the maximization of pleasure. On the one hand, great pleasure can be achieved through the expression of desire and will, but on the other hand, respecting another’s consent may become an impediment to this hedonistic ideal.

In BDSM, this element becomes clear in the limits consent places upon violent erotic fantasies. Behind this contradiction lies the real theme that is contained within the moral code expressed by BDSM: the appreciation of a human nature that is credited with being able to perceive internal emotional processes in order to fully express sexual desires and enjoy them with a partner. This is an ideal model of personhood, of subjects that can be masters of their own actions—and are therefore capable of rationality and consent—who can also perform self-examination and self-criticism and have a strong ability to dialogue with others. This model implies an understanding of human beings as endowed with individual will and a “powerful” sexual energy that can be rightly or wrongly channeled, lost and atrophied, or exercised and developed.

¹⁸ However, Béjin admits that there is not an equal replacement between all the different forms of “sexual catalysts” and one shouldn’t consider them equivalent in function.

This is a naturalistic conception of sexuality which lies in stark contrast to the ideals of rationality and discipline implicated by the rules of “BDSM play”. The importance given to the ability of expressing desire thus becomes second only to the condemnation of disrespect for another’s desire. Consent, then, can be seen as an indispensable articulation tool in this moral system. It is not so much an element of social legitimacy, but an ethical attribute that needs to be exercised in the BDSM practice.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

A.S.B. - Alt.sex.bondage (a mailing list)

BDSM - Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadism & masochism

DS - Domination and Submission

SM - Sadism and masochism

DSM - Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - Published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA)

FAQ - Frequently Asked Question

SSC - Sane, Safe & Consensual.