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THE DEEPEST INTIMACY.
A SOCIOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF BONDAGE,
DOMINATION, SADISM AND MASOCHISM (BDSM)
IN CONTEMPORARY ITALY

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Ai miei genitori
To my parents

The Deepest Intimacy. A Sociological Account of Bondage, Domination, Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) in Contemporary Italy

Introduction

When it came out in 1954, *Historie d'O* published under the name of Pauline Réage went almost unnoticed by the larger public. The media and the readers became aware of it only one year after, when the novel won the French literature prize "*Prix des Deux Magots*". A great scandal about the explicit sadomasochistic content of the book accompanied growing sales. The French publisher faced, because of the plot, obscenity charges, which though did not stop the printing. From there on, several editions and translations followed, as well as film adaptations.

It was only forty years later, in 1994, that the author of the book, Anne Desclos, declared in an interview to the Guardian that she wrote the famous *Historie d'O* (Réage, 1954). This caused the surprise of the public, since it was deemed that the author was a man, namely Pauvert, the publisher. Anne was a journalist and novelist who worked for the famous publisher Gallimard in Paris.

The novel is often cited as a literary milestone both as a French literary product and as erotic book. It is so famous in the western literature that it is imprinted in the public memory of European readers, as well as BDSM practitioners. For the time it was published, it clearly represented a scandal for its explicit content and descriptions of sexual acts, as well as the corporal punishment which O and other young women face. At the same time, though, what struck the media and the public was the fact that, after a moment in which O behaves as a submissive woman just for the love she brings to her lover, she starts enjoying the pleasure of submission autonomously.

The book came out in the fifties, almost ten years after the end of the Second World War, a period of material reconstruction and of re-building of national and personal identities. Those were the years that immediately preceded the sexual

revolution, a series of close events that changed sexual and social attitudes and behaviours of western countries.

Historie d'O could be thought as one of the first literary events that embodied the forthcoming changes brought about by the youth and women's movements. The plot of the novel insisted on the fact that O does not oppose to enter and later remain in the elegant house with the other slaves and masters. She chooses to remain. For this reason, the novel has been usually read as empowering for women (Bedell, 2004) since it proposed an alternative model to that of the housewife, the mainly model proposed to European women after the Second World War. After the war, when the men returned, women were relegated to the home and raising children. The model proposed by O is different, since the protagonist makes her own choices and decides to embark on a journey following her lover's request. The agency of O is deemed to be evident in this context.

Fifty-seven years after the first edition of *Historie d'O*, E. L. James, *nom de plume* of Erika Mitchell, a studio manager assistant, wrote the trilogy named *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Brennan, 2012; James, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). The first novel started as a fan fiction[1] of the novel *Twilight* by Meyer (Comella, 2013; Meyer, 2005). Originally, the novel has been self-published as an e-book and printed on demand. It was one year later that the current publisher acquired the publishing rights, and printed also the second and the third volume of the trilogy. Since that moment, millions of copies have been sold worldwide, marking a sales hit (Comella, 2013; Hollomotz, 2013). In 2015 a movie adapted from the plot of the novel has been released. Despite being characterised and criticised for its poor literary style, its publishing success is apparent. The binomial

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[1] Fanfiction is fiction involving characters or setting from an original work of art, like a novel or a movie, created by fans. It is a sort of unofficial spinoff of a work of fiction.

epithet 'mommy porn' has been frequently used to describe this novel featuring sadomasochistic and erotic elements within a normative couple – traditional, monogamous, and, finally, white.

The plot of *Fifty Shades of Grey* consists of essentially in the redemption of one of the two protagonists; the male protagonist, Christian (consider the name: Christian) lives a sexuality marked by aggressiveness and sadism as a result of some childhood trauma that involved him and his mother. The sweet and innocent Anastasia, attracted by Christian' fascination is immediately introduced into his world, with all the BDSM paraphernalia of blindfolds, whips, plugs and so on. She enjoys being Christian's submissive, from the very beginning. In short, in the end she manages to marry him and to give him two beautiful children; through the patience of a wife, she progressively help Christian getting rid of his traumas and accepting a more traditional sexuality, reproductive and happening in wedlock.

The reader, throughout the novel, is brought to think that in some way Christian is ill, and that his sadism is the result of traumas lived by him as a child and his mother. Since 'love conquers all', Anastasia manages to achieve redemption both for him, who enters a nuclear family after a traditional wedding, and for her, who is redeemed by the wedding itself for having engaged into sexual intercourse and other BDSM interactions before this same wedding.

The element of commodification is apparent in the novel: through expensive gifts Christian wins the attention of Anastasia – some would say that she has been pressured and harassed into accepting this kind of relationship; through expensive objects and luxury – private helicopter, personal driver, a loft with views of the city, service staff and a private elevator – he wins her favour. Christian is rich and shows it; he uses his wealth to attract Anastasia and to achieve his own goal of conquering her.

The novel, while selling millions of copies worldwide, has been harshly criticised by insiders and outsiders – i.e. BDSM practitioners – for the fact that what is depicted is not at all BDSM, but abuse. The relationship that Christian is trying to impose to Anastasia is deemed abusive and characterised as stalking (Downing, 2013). The depiction of what BDSM is highly inaccurate since it does not stress the importance of consent, and could contribute to the persistence of the stigma that BDSM practitioners face (Corvid, 2014; Lady Velvet Steel, 2015). It has to be remembered, though, that it is a novel – or a porn novel – and thus does not necessarily need to be realistic. Analysing the plot, it is evident that neither Anastasia nor Christian see their agency increased thanks to their relationship; their relationship resembles the one between a patient and a nurse. There is not emancipation, neither freedom as a result of Anastasia's choices.

Anastasia and Christian do not transgress anything. The role of the BDSM as practiced in that novel is expression of Christian's malaise and sufferings. It is the only way that Christian knows to interact with others, in particular Anastasia, as a representative of the opposite sex. Anastasia engages in these practices as a result of Christian's request and intense courting.

I choose to introduce these two novels, so close but at the same time distant, although enjoying a similar success in sales as a way to develop a discourse that looks at sadomasochistic practices, currently called BDSM, in the last fifty decades.

To understand the differences in the values conveyed by the protagonists of these two novels, a historical and sociological contextualisation is necessary. The sexual revolution was one of the major events that challenged sexual habits in the last decades and constituted a watershed that accounts for these and many other changes in sexual attitudes in western countries. Despite differences of opinion about the scope and duration of the sexual revolution, its importance and heritage deserve close

examination. In the next section, I will discuss how BDSM practices have been affected by the sexual revolution, in particular regarding their formalisation and systematisation.

The Role of the Sexual Revolution

As BDSM practices have developed in western countries, there has been progressive expansion of discussion on the topic among the general public, practitioners and scholars. First of all, when we speak about BDSM we refer to a set of different practices which have existed for a very long time, and not aggregated under the umbrella term 'BDSM' until recently. In fact, BDSM practices were scattered around as distinct elements of different fields: sexuality, illness, personal taste, etc. For example, Parisian brothels in the 18th century allowed clients to engage in whipping sessions with prostitutes (Sisson, 2005). Thus, in that case, whipping was a practice engaged in with a prostitute, a quirk of the client, the eccentricity of a rich man who could pay extra money for it. The representatives of this first phase were, without any surprise, de Sade and Sacher-Masoch. They institutionalised the first form of sadism and masochism respectively in the form of literary works. On the other side, there were the detractors of those practices: Krafft-Ebing, the famous alienist, considered his patients as ill, since they were affected by sadism or masochism. In this sense, sadism and masochism – not yet together as in sadomasochism, formalisation that will be created later – represent a condition that a man suffers from[2].

The years starting from the 1950s or 1960s, especially in the United States, mark the birth and formalisation of the first SM groups. After the Second World War, the first

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[2] As I will show in chapter number 2, a different discourse has to be made for women. For a more detailed account of female masochism, cf. Walters (2012).

groups of people engaging in SM appeared in the United States within the gay community; at about the same time the first groups of leathermen appear. In SM we find sadism and masochism united in what later becomes the most common way of addressing those practices, at least until the 1980s: SM.

Those are the years of the birth of SM groups as we know them; they are defined as subcultures, since a strong member identity is present, based on clothes, language, cultural codes, for example the famous handkerchief that accordingly to colour and position signals the role and the preferred practices, and a strong sense of community. Leathermen claim recognition for their alternative sexuality, based both on homosexual encounters and on sadomasochistic practices. In the meantime, the newly emerging contemporary gay movement was taking its first steps. The social stigma attached both to homosexuals and sadomasochists helped in building this cohesion.

The 1950s and 1960s were the years that immediately preceded the sexual revolution, which in western countries marked rapid and visible changes in sexual, moral and social attitudes. The birth of SM is thus inscribed in the years that forerun what is deemed as one of the more huge changes in sexual attitudes and behaviours of contemporary western countries. What is usually called the sexual revolution is a series of changes that took place in the United States and some European countries between the 1960s and the 1970s. Youth and women's movements pushed forward to expand their sexual freedom, and their emancipation from the old patriarchal society. Those were the years of the countercultures with the hippies and flower children, of sexual experimentations, such as free love, forefather of contemporary polyamory, and political lesbianism, and of the gay and lesbian movements (Alexander and Thompson, 2008; Giddens, 1989; Macionis, 1987).

The importance and control of social institutions such as the church, the family and the state had diminished, and people enjoyed more freedom (Macionis, 1987). Some medical and technological inventions, like 'the pill', allowed a further decoupling of heterosexual intercourse from reproduction (Alexander and Thompson, 2008; Hawkes, 1996; Macionis, 1987). The appearance of the first porn magazines like *Playboy* for men and some self-help manuals helped women and men in pursuing their sexual pleasure out of wedlock (Alexander and Thompson, 2008).

Some scholars, though, contest the range of the sexual revolution either in terms of sexual behaviours (Garton, 2004) or sexual moralism (de Lauretis, 1999). De Lauretis argues that the sexual moralism of the United States is still present and has not been challenged in any lasting way by the sexual revolution. She draws attention to the backlash that followed the decades of the sexual revolution (de Lauretis, 1999). The doubts about the sexual revolution concern its extent and duration, the clash of many political agendas, often contradictory and the consequent lack of unification, and finally its uniqueness, since other sexual revolutions have been identified in history and in the previous decades (Allyn, 2000; Garton, 2004; McLaren, 1990; Nye, 1999).

Within the decades immediately preceding the sexual revolution, some scholars registered changes in the sexual behaviours of the American population. Among them Alfred Kinsey, a scholar with a background in biology. The Kinsey reports (Kinsey *et al.*, 1948; 1953) shed new light on the sexual behaviours and attitudes that were deemed to characterise the average American. They had effects both within and outside of academia. In particular, what struck the public and the media was the huge portion of both men and women engaging in homosexual practices and in premarital sex. What was thought to be a puritan and catholic society, avoiding sexual contacts outside of wedlock and not engaging in homosexual sex, was in fact not.

Within the changes of the sexual revolution, BDSM formalises. The first use of the word BDSM was documented in 1969 (Dalzell and Victor, 2008; Dalzell, 2009). The BDSM of those years is marked by the claim for a sexuality different from the norm. Sex is no longer something done only within wedlock, by heterosexual couples and linked to reproductive goals. Leathermen are in this sense the emblem of the recreational, non-reproductive, out-of-wedlock homosexual sexuality. Pleasure is redefined, no longer characterised by vaginal penetration by a penis; it focuses on the whole body as source of pleasure (Foucault, 1984b) and on the liberation, the resistance and the freedom inherent in those practices (cf. Foucault, 1984b and Rubin, 1984).

SM subculture is created, with its own language, gestures, codes of conduct, places in which to gather, and so on. In the meanwhile, heterosexual people also start practising BDSM and creating their own – yet similar to that of the leathermen – subculture.

What Next? BDSM after the Sexual Revolution

From there on, there has been a progressive increase in the number of BDSM practitioners as well as growing interest and attention devoted to these practices. BDSM develops and becomes organised in Europe, especially in the northern countries, and clubs and meetings start to appear. European BDSM subculture was organised around gay and heterosexual gatherings, as in the United States.

Progressively, commodification enters the BDSM scene. Parties, merchandising and corsets as well as latex outfits appear and are sold with success. BDSM becomes a business; sex toy manufacturers, retailers and distributors earn from it (Comella, 2013; Hollomotz, 2013). Calls for emancipation and equality, based on identities that now

seem scattered, slow down. BDSM is no longer chiefly an affirmation of a different sexuality and identity, since the movements that claimed their own difference from the 'normality' had lost their strength, at least in the western countries. BDSM showed its commodified and commercialised side (Comella, 2013), as well as its lifestyle aspect. Just as the choices of a consumer express his or her identification with certain values and a precise segment of society, so does BDSM adopted as lifestyle.

New forms of discrimination appear, as well as new 'identities', which are persecuted and ostracised. In some countries LGBT movements, and in general those claiming equality in sexual diversity, have an organised agenda and their own lobbies. BDSM no longer constitutes simply a form of resistance and transgression.

In this context, *Fifty Shades of Grey* appears. It revives the topic of sadomasochism, but presents it as the result of a trauma; it is badly written (Comella, 2013), the choice of adjectives is poor and so are the descriptions of the characters. It is as if the end or the cooling down of the battles for sexual diversity, for citizenship and inclusion, not only for different sexualities, produced a cultural product well below the standard of *Historie d'O*. The female and male protagonists of *Fifty Shades of Grey* do not seem to embody either emancipation or empowerment. Nevertheless, some sex educators and toy manufacturers claim that it *Fifty Shades of Grey* fostered the negotiation of sexual practices and the awareness of one's own sexual preferences; ultimately, it could even have helped in opening up discourse on different sexualities (Comella, 2013). This is at least what Hollomotz (2013) tries to do when considering the success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a trampoline from which to speak about disabilities and sexualities. She positively exploits the space created in the public discourse by the craze for *Fifty Shades of Grey* to claim sexual rights for disabled persons. The success of the

trilogy, whether remarkable or not, is an occasion to question normativity in the sexual field.

Aside from this, it is perhaps no accident that a cultural product such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which depicts BDSM as the result of a trauma and puts forward the possibility of redemption through heterosexual sex, appears at a time when little value is accorded to topics such as sexual diversity.

The changes brought about the sexual revolution have been accompanied by a paradigm shift – or better: the appearance of a new paradigm alongside with the other, within the social sciences. The last 50 or 60 years have been characterised by the reinforcement of the social constructionist paradigm and by the appearance of queer theory. The next section will account for such paradigms and will present the structure of the thesis.

In Theory: from Social Constructionism to Queer Theory

"How poorly sex serves sexuality."

William Simon

"I want to ask you what is perhaps an impossible question.

What is sexuality, or at least what would you include

if you were forced to define sexuality?"

Steven Seidman

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It is difficult to draw a line that marks the beginning of what is termed as social constructionism and queer theory. Both of them, in any case, see their origins in the social, economic and cultural changes linked to the mid-20th century. Absence of fixity, emphasis on fluidity of identities and a great importance placed on questioning the centre – instead of the margins – are some of the main ideas carried on by these paradigms. The trend in the social sciences of investigating the affinity between queer culture, social constructionism and postmodernism is widespread and well acknowledged since the beginning of the 1990s, at least in the United States and the United Kingdom (Stein and Plummer, 1994).

During the 1960s, the same years of the sexual revolution, a series of changes in the social and sexual attitudes and behaviours happened; at about the same time, a new paradigm emerged in the social sciences. Social constructionism provides an alternative to the essentialism of the positivistic paradigm (Seidman, 2011). This paradigm states that the explanation of social phenomena could rely on several theories, rather than on a unique and comprehensive one, and that sexuality is seen as a cultural and social construct, instead of merely a biological phenomenon (DeLamater and Hyde, 2003). The idea that phenomena have an intrinsic truth is questioned; realities become constructions, 'truth' becomes multiple and subjective. Biology is seen as providing only some of the preconditions that inform our sexualities; their role in shaping our behaviours is minimised (Seidman, 2011). Ultimately, these perspectives give the individual the agency to structure his/her own 'reality' and attribute meaning to their actions. Just as O's reality is informed and given sense by her lover's request to experience sexual interactions with people other than himself, the social actor builds his or her own meanings.

Laumann and colleagues (1994), and later Plummer (2003b) and many others call attention to the importance of the context in shaping what constitutes sexuality. "Constructionists have aimed to show the myriad ways in which human sexualities are always organized through economic, religious, political, familial and social conditions" (Plummer 2003b: 515).

Social constructionism supplied to youth and women movements the theoretical justification for their struggle against *status quo* and patriarchy: if the social and sexual role of women changes over time and in different societies, patriarchy is neither eternal nor unchangeable. If social reality is constructed, it can be deconstructed and altered. Furthermore, gay and lesbian movements use similar argumentation to reinforce their claims for equality and non-discrimination.

Foucault is usually indicated as one the main sources on the study of sexuality within the social constructionist paradigm as well as within queer theory[3]. In fact, he stressed the role that 17th century discourse about sexuality should have played in subjugating and controlling dissident sexualities. On the contrary, he thought that the official medical and psychological discourses – as agents of social control – had the effect of creating the very multiple sexualities they were describing. Thus, social constructionism means, in this sense, construction through discourse – even though this discourse was intended to categorise as illnesses BDSM-like practices (Foucault, 1976). In this regard, Taylor (1997) is in line with the thesis of Foucault when he acknowledges the taxonomic explosion of sexual pathologies in those years (cf. for example Krafft-Ebing).

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[3] I do not intend to trace the genealogy of the paradigm of social constructionism in this thesis, but simply to provide an example of how one of the sources of such paradigm – and other paradigms as well – explicitly dealt with sadomasochistic practices. Foucault deals explicitly with SM practices in an interview with Gallagher and Toronto in 1982 (Foucault, 1984b).

After the sexual revolution, as previously stated, BDSM subculture is organised, systematised and structured. It develops further in the United States and Europe. This shift is accompanied by the formalisation of new theoretical tools, such as queer theory. The fragmentation of power – social, political, economical and other forms – and of strong identity based groups like LGBT ones accompanies the fluidity with which queer theory perceives gender and sexual roles. Identity-based agendas become instrumental alliances with the aim of reaching a precise political goal and afterwards dissolve (Fraser and Olson, 2008). The absence of fixed identities means that the alliances based on them are also ephemeral and fluid.

Even though there is no agreement on what 'queer' – and consequently 'queer theory' – means (Epstein, 1994) some scholars tried to systematise the theoretical standpoints of this paradigm (Arfini and Lo Iacono, 2012; Stein and Plummer, 1994). Queer theory conceives sexual power as permeating social life and expressing itself through a *continuum* or through multiple alternatives, rather than binary divisions; firstly literary genres and later sexual gender boundaries are blurred. Heterosexuality is denaturalised, and the meaning of concepts such as gender identity and sexual orientation are loosened, or at least weakened. Reflections on (sexual) citizenship are marked by the awareness that any form of citizenship leaves someone out.

Queer theory promotes the disruption of the *status quo* rather that a coherent theoretical formulation of sexual and civil rights, identities and politics. It is more analogous to a carnival, or a parody, than an organised political march with a defined agenda; queer is marked by political incorrectness (Arfini and Lo Iacono, 2012).

Queer theory is situated at the crossroads of feminist and postcolonial studies, in particular the reflections on the Gramscian concept of subalternity (Gramsci, 1975; Liguori and Voza, 2009) as developed by Spivak (1988) after the changes of the sexual

revolution. The debate on social constructionism including the contribution of Foucault's *History of sexuality* was one of the first steps toward the birth of queer studies (Arfini and Lo Iacono, 2012).

Whether as an academic theorisation of an Anglo-American elite (Plummer, 2003a), or a set of movements that induced social, political as well as theoretical and cultural change in societies (Arfini and Lo Iacono, 2012), queer theory still has a space of its own among contemporary sociological debates. Its academic and elitist nature has been traced back to the origins of queer theory as a school of thought that especially at its inception developed among the most prestigious institutions of the United States (Plummer, 2003a). On the other hand, queer theory is also strongly present in the grass-roots activism that fostered queer politics, in particular in the cases of ACT-UP and Queer Nation. Queer theory in this sense has a transformative range not to be side-lined (Arfini and Lo Iacono, 2012).

Despite the supposed normalisation of queer – are we in a post-queer era? Ask Arfini and Lo Iacono (2012) – the integration of queer theory into Italian academia has been limited so far. Thus, queer theory will remain relevant in contemporary and future sociological debates.

Within these social, cultural and theoretical changes, BDSM practices acquire the contemporary – yet still changing – configuration. My aim is to understand BDSM and place it in a wider contemporary context, through the analysis of BDSM practitioners' narratives and meanings.

The thesis is divided, as the table of contents indicates, into two parts. The first is more traditional and academic. It contains the sociological overview of the phenomenon, the analysis of the academic literature and the methodology employed. The second is

more intimate and colloquial. While taking up the theoretical themes of the first part that guided both the data collection and the data analysis, it deals with the narratives of the practitioners and the participant observations. Finally, some appendices complete and expand on the data collected.

In the introduction, I analyse BDSM practices from a socio-historical perspective. Along with academic reconstructions of the events that led the first BDSM groups to organise and systematise, I analyse the role of the sexual revolution in shaping and changing attitudes and behaviours related to sexuality. New paradigms, such as social constructionism and queer theory, informed the study of human sexuality from those years onward. The first part of the thesis relates to the construction and the evolution of a sociological agenda on the topic of BDSM. How did BDSM become an object of study? How did research on BDSM evolve through time and paradigms? The first section of the thesis answers to these questions. In chapter 1 I construct a definition of what constitutes BDSM considering personal narratives and empirical data drawn from participant observations. This chapter deals with the introduction of BDSM from a sociological perspective. The key issues for the study of these practices are here presented and explained; they constitute the core topics that informed the interview guide (cf. appendix B). Chapter 2 deals with what the academic literature concerning BDSM: from the first formalisation of sadism and masochism of the 19th century to the more recent overlapping between BDSM and polyamory. Throughout this time span, the different theories all shared the common idea that BDSM practices were part of a marginal sexuality. If at the end of the 19th century 'marginal' was used as a synonym for deviant, the meaning of the word later acquired a less denigrating significance. Especially after the postcolonial theoretical contribution, more awareness informs the use of 'marginal'; in fact, what is marginal is defined by the centre, and could be the

result of a political or economic calculation. Furthermore, 'marginal' recovered its 'quantitative' meaning: it simply indicates a phenomenon which is not widespread among the population as data in chapter 1 show. Chapter 3 deals with the methods and methodology employed, with particular attention devoted to the role of the body of the researcher – mine – in conducting a research on such a 'heavily embodied' topic. The ethics of the research are included in this chapter. Sensitive data, in fact, must be protected as well as the identities of the participants.

The second part of the thesis is focused on the empirical data collected during the fieldwork and the interviews in Milan. It relates to both the discourses and the interactions observed. BDSM practitioners are at once both doing and being practitioners: they engage in actions and gestures that justify such a qualification (doing) and at the same time they are (being) practitioners, even if they do not demonstrate their membership in the community. Chapter 4 deals both with the folk narratives of the subculture and with some historical reconstructions of the development of BDSM practices. I named them folk narratives in the sense defined by Fine (1982). A folk narrative is the culture produced within groups that carries specific local meanings and is valuable and necessary for the identity of the group itself. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 as a whole constitute the core of the analysis of the material provided by the observations and interviews. Chapter 5 deals with the arousal of the bodies of the practitioners, as well as with their stories. The first participant observations are reported here, almost in their entirety. In the following section, BDSM practitioners' narratives are analysed in terms of their sexual and identitarian dimensions. Some detailed profiles of practitioners enhance the reflections developed throughout the chapter. Chapter 6 analyses the persistence of the feminist and queer

discourse in contemporary BDSM. From the sex wars onward, the feminist and queer discourses have been translated into the narratives and argumentations of practitioners, especially with regards to consent and abuse. Chapter 7 reconceptualises contemporary BDSM within the intimate framework. First, power, pleasure and play, some of the core elements of BDSM practices, are deconstructed and reassembled in order to encapsulate their meaning as they emerge from narratives and observations. Then, BDSM practices are placed within the conceptual framework of postmodern intimacies. The idea of intimacy as access describes many features of contemporary BDSM. Postmodern intimacies include conceptualisations that move beyond that of intimacy as love, marriage, tenderness and the like. To be more precise, postmodern intimacies include such meanings but place them side by side with others: intimacy as access, as unsafety, as commonality and impersonality, just to name a few. Thus, BDSM is framed within contemporary sociology through the concept of intimacy, which best describes both the frame of such practices and one of the main aims of engaging in them. Finally, chapter 8 summarises the findings of this research and outlines further developments for future research. The conclusions prefigure further areas of research – thus the research could in theory continue further – and leave the reader with an open question: would BDSM be considered as a queering of the modern concept of intimacy, or is it part of the normalisation of a marginal sexuality?

PART ONE. PUTTING BDSM ON THE SOCIOLOGICAL AGENDA

1. Presenting BDSM

1.1 Toward a Sociological Definition

> *"Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions*
>
> *have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience.*
>
> *It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without,*
>
> *above and below, male and female, with and against,*
>
> *that a semblance of order is created."*
>
> Mary Douglas

BDSM is an umbrella term that stands for Bondage, Domination, Sadism and Masochism (or Sado-Masochism) and appeared for the first time in 1969 (Dalzell and Victor, 2008; Dalzell, 2009). Different definitions of SM are used by scholars emphasizing in turn different aspects of these practices.

The most quoted definition appears to be the one by Weinberg *et al.* (1984). They rely on the participants' definition of SM. They identified five features: 1) dominance and submission, defining dominance as "an appearance of rule over one partner by another" (Weinberg *et al.*, 1984: 380-381); 2) role playing; 3) consensuality, that is, voluntary agreement to enter into play[4] and to honour certain limits; 4) a sexual context; 5) mutual

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[4] The word 'play' is often used in the English and Italian languages – the latter being a translation of the English word, in my opinion – to indicate the engagement in a BDSM session; 'do you want to play with me?', 'c'mon, let's play!' are typical phrases that could be heard at any BDSM play – indeed – party. It is as if BDSM were a game. Games, in fact, once analysed sociologically (Perinbanayagam, 2006), possess several characteristics that could be valid for BDSM sessions. The similarities between – indeed – a BDSM play and a game are several. They both are narratives in which an agents interacts with these narrative structures; are engaged voluntarily and are settled in time and space that are no part of ordinary, everyday life; the aim is to engage in cognitive involvement and emotional engagement with the other – which sometimes requires emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) – and ultimately they both provide the opportunity to experience deep and complex emotions that could help to overcome sensations of sadness and alienation (Perinbanayagam, 2006).

definition, namely a shared understanding by the practitioners that their activities are SM. This is the classic definition of SM in contemporary social sciences, emphasizing consent and role play.

Similarly, the definition proposed by Taylor and Ussher (2001), again based on BDSM practitioners' discourses and interviews, takes into account four features: 1) consensuality; 2) unequal distribution of power, fixed or fluid in the case of switches; 3) sexual arousal; 4) compatibility of definition, that is the shared definition of what they are doing as BDSM.

Comparing the two definitions, we note that from the latter the element of role playing is absent and that in neither pain is present. In contrast to what is perceived to be one of the core features of BDSM, the infliction of or the search for pain, there is no trace of it in these two definitions.

The last definition I want to examine is the one given by Truscott (1991: 16):

"S/M is a convenient abbreviation for behaviours between consenting adults that are sexually pleasurable, that involve a short- or long-term exchange of power and responsibility, and that may involve activities not traditionally associated with sexual behaviour, such as bondage, flagellation, cutting, branding, and the adoption of roles in which one partner is 'dominant' and the other 'submissive'. Sexologist Dr. Charles Moser adds that both partners consider what they're doing different from the 'norm' of the larger society."

New elements appear in this account: the duration of a relationship, which can also be short, and practices not usually identified as sexual. Within this paragraph, we

can identify elements already present in the previous two definitions: consent, SM as something (sexually) pleasurable, the adoption of roles and exchange of power and responsibility. Furthermore, it is interesting to note the presence of the word 'responsibility', absent from the other two. The fact that the transfer of power should be accompanied by the assumption of responsibility is here underlined for the first time.

The sexual context in which BDSM is thought to be framed is controversial, since not all the BDSM scholars and practitioners think of BDSM as something sexual (Simula, 2014); after all, what is perceived to be sexual is socially constructed and culturally relative (Laumann *et al.*, 1994; Weinberg and Newmahr, 2014).

I argue that in the first and most famous sociological definition of BDSM (Weinberg *et al.*, 1984), scholars did not include the community or group dimension thus leaving out of their analysis a great proportion of the phenomenon. Data from my empirical research, in fact, suggest the importance of a community – or a network, or a group of reference – for those involved in BDSM practices. Even the BDSM practitioners who do not play in public – or semi-public – (Weiss, 2011) spaces, rely on a group of reference. On the other hand, contemporary scholars do account for the importance of the group in researching BDSM (Luminais, 2014; Simula, 2014). These groups or communities have different functions: provide information and support to new members; discuss BDSM related topics; organise gatherings around BDSM or simply organise leisure time; provide through munches and other meetings the opportunity to meet new play partners, etc. I show within this thesis the importance of the group in these and other frames, such as for example in establishing bad or good reputations for BDSM practitioners.

Since BDSM is an umbrella term including different sets of practices, it is difficult to collect and provide data regarding its diffusion among the population. Ayzad (2004) is

one of the first in Italy to have attempted to make a list of all BDSM practices, but the decision as to which practices fall within the BDSM frame or not is often made by the single individual.

In general, obtaining data about the diffusion of BDSM is difficult, and thus data are old and problematic. Usually scholars define a set of practices they intend to monitor and then proceed to survey the behaviours. Research about the diffusion of BDSM among the population started in the United States with the team of Kinsey (*et al.*, 1948; 1953). They discovered that 11% of men and 17% of women reported trying bondage, and that 12% of females and 22% of US males reported erotic response to a SM story, while more broadly 55% and 50% reported having responded erotically to being bitten (Kinsey *et al.*, 1953). Also in the United States, Peterson *et al.* (1983) found that 5-10% of the population engages in SM at least on occasional basis. For Janus and Janus (1993), 11% of women and 14% of men have had some sexual experience with sadomasochism. Moser (1999) reported an estimation of Hunt (1974) saying that approximately 5% of the population reported obtaining sexual pleasure from inflicting or receiving pain. Richters (*et al.*, 2008) reported that the previous year 2.2% of men and 1.3% of women in Australia had been involved in BDSM. Years earlier, Richters *et al.* (2003) reported that among those who had a sexual partner the previous year, 2% of men and 1.4% of women engaged in BDSM. Other estimations refer to BDSM as being played in the United States and the European Union on a regular basis by 5-10% of the population (APA, 2000; Masters *et al.*, 1982; 1995; Reinisch, 1990; Weinberg, 1995; Gross, 2006; The Kinsey Institute, n. d.).

Data about the diffusion of BDSM does not reflect the differences in commitment, time and energy dedicated by BDSM practitioners to these practices; in fact, whether the interest is mild or strong is impossible to say looking at quantitative data.

1.2 Key Issues for the Study of BDSM

When this research started, the questions I had in mind about BDSM were in some cases understandably different from the ones that I actually asked practitioners. I think that keeping track of those changes itself constitutes part of the research. Adjustments, changes of mind or simply new questions raised are part of the process of the research itself. For this reason, I am going to narrate this very process.

At the beginning of the research, I identified some key topics that constituted the most important point I would deal with in my research. I would build the draft of the interviews around them. The first questions, the ones that had most impact, in my opinion, since they dealt with the topics which were the less understandable for me, regarded pain and humiliation. It is a common place, also among academics, to understand that BDSM is first and foremost about pain and pleasure (Gross, 2006; Landi, 2011). The common discourse purports that pain is pleasurable for those engaging in BDSM practices, full stop. To me, it appears now that this dynamic is quite different from a simple equation between pleasure and pain. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the research I perceived the 'general' population, those not engaging in BDSM, as avoiding pain as much as far as possible, while some 'others' searched actively for pain within a sexual context because they found it pleasurable.

As for humiliation, either given or received, I was interested in the ways it was enacted and signified within a BDSM relationship. The role of humiliation was of particular interest to me since I was aware of the common contemporary narrative about couples – whether life-long or one-night pairings – that is, that they should be founded on equality. Especially from the point of view of someone identifying with the

female gender, couples (especially heterosexual couples) must be founded on equality – equality of time dedicated to housework, equality of time spent with children if any, equality of time dedicated to paid work. This stress on desired equality comes from a long period of disparity in those aspects. So why do some people, especially women, look for humiliation, going against the tide of the common narrative of couples? The position of those inflicting humiliation, rather than receiving it, appeared to me as more intellectually comprehensible: is this not what happens every day to some categories of people with a particular race, religion, gender, and so on?

This importance of pain and humiliation has to be tackled. I thought that, given their importance within a BDSM context, expressed in sessions, discourses, practices and so on, they could have an important role even outside of the BDSM context. I supposed that pain and humiliation could be thought as communicative or cognitive tools outside of the BDSM frame. Would pain and humiliation constitute a lens through which BDSM practitioners looked at their everyday interactions? This is what I thought. Since some scholars – as I will show further on – as well as practitioners define their interest in BDSM as a lifestyle, meaning that BDSM plays an important and extensive role in their image of themselves, I thought that some of the elements defining BDSM – pain and humiliation, in this case – could be part of that lifestyle, extended well over the BDSM frame.

This question clearly changed its form and concentrated on what I was taking for granted: which forms do pain and humiliation take within BDSM contexts? Gradually, I became aware of the fact that those two elements were indeed fundamental in the BDSM frame, but not in the sense that I expected. More nuances and more profundity were to be discovered in what pain and humiliation mean; even the meaning of 'pain' became an object of inquiry. I discovered the cultural and context relativity of pain, as well as its

relationship with pleasure in the brain and the difficulty in conducting research with pain receptors in the medical field, but most of all I started thinking that pain was a means through which to look for other 'things', like a specific kind of relationship or a particular mental condition. Humiliation, as well, acquired a new meaning once I explored what is called 'choice feminism' and all the neoliberal positions regarding matters of sexuality and the body.

Thus, started from a desire to investigate pain and humiliation outside BDSM, I found myself analysing the role of them within that very frame.

In the second place, I wanted to know more about this close association between pleasure and pain. I took for granted that they were directly related within a BDSM frame, that is, during the BDSM sessions, and wondered whether BDSM practitioners looked for pain as a pleasurable experience even outside of that frame. What was the relationship between those two elements like in a sexual context, for example? Several scholars, probably relying on the ancient wisdom of the Kama Sutra among other texts, recognise the role of pain, like bites or spanking, in building up sexual excitement (Collins, 2004; Kinsey *et al.*, 1948; 1953; Mains, 1984).

The reason through which they assess the role of pain as arousing are different, but they all agree on the fact that receiving physical pain could be sexually exciting. Collins, for example, describes the process through which this happens as a result of the physical attunement between – among, I would say – BDSM practitioners. Physical, bodily and breath synchronisation would help people to become aroused; this could happen also if they are attuned in a painful interaction.

"Here the emotions derive from pain; the key is that the pain is turned into reciprocally intensifying interaction, and thus into a different bodily and emotional pattern. [...] Sado-masochistic eroticism and its variants (including bondage and domination, sexual humiliation, etc.) can be explained in this fashion; that is, they are all techniques by which intense emotions are created that feed into erotic excitement [...]" (Collins, 2004: 244)

Mains (1984) relies instead on the recently – at that time – discovered endorphins and their opioid-like nature; endorphins are released within the body as a result of pleasurable but also physically painful stimulation. He furthermore explores the neurological perception of pain. Mains had a PhD in biochemistry that likely helped him in developing and deepening this argument. Also Newmahr (2010), relying on her interviews and observations of the BDSM scene, stated that a particular kind of pain, that she called autotelic, takes the form of an almost pleasurable experience, since it is appreciated and valued as pain. There is another kind of pain that is valued since it is pleasurable, and is the kind of pain instantly transformed into pleasure.

This transformation appears to happen in a sudden and incomprehensible way – incomprehensible especially for the practitioners – far from the concept of emotional work, rather more mediated and less direct (Hochschild, 2003).

I was heavily focused on pleasure and pain, and I wondered whether the desire to receive or give physical pain could be a way out of the anaesthetisation some experience in everyday interactions in western societies. I later realised that that assumption was quite naïve, but *Fatigue society* (Byung-Chul Han, 2010) struck me for its account of the

overcoming of the disciplinary society as conceived by Foucault (1975). The author suggested that contemporary social actors are more performance oriented than ever before, and that they are forced by circumstances to market themselves as they would a product. Casalini (2011) calls this frame a prostitutional context, where everyone should and perhaps must present him or herself in the best possible way to others, as if they were buying him or her. I thought that a way out of this loop of performance and focus on results that are never enough, could potentially be accessed through physical pain. I saw pain as a possible way of slowing processes and thoughts, rhythms and distancing oneself from the frenzy of contemporary societies. This happened to be quite fitting in some ways, for some practitioners engage in BDSM as a way to relax, as well as to construct a context far away from the constraints of everyday life – like a sort of vacation; but this could be said for BDSM as a whole, and on further consideration the argument of Byung-Chul Han appears to be too negative and partial.

Another concept that fascinated me, and still does, is the emotional energy as most recently thought and wrote about by Collins (2004). The concept in question goes back to Durkheim's (1912) and Simmel's work (see for example Simmel, 1903), which currently appears to be meeting a renewed interest from sociologists. For Collins, the maximisation of the level of emotional energy is the motivation for which individuals repeat certain interactions and avoid others. The aim of the individuals would be to look for interactions that could maximise their level of emotional energy; they have an amount of energy that results from previous, successful or not, interactions; and it constitutes the driving force that moves them from one interaction to the other. Emotional energy is described as a feeling of confidence, strength, moral righteousness, enthusiasm, even joy: a "feeling of confidence, strength, enthusiasm, and initiative in

taking action" (Collins 2004: 49). Emotional energy is exaltation. Since Collins describes rituals in a way applicable both to sexual encounters and BDSM scenes, I was interested in understanding which forms emotional energy could take for BDSM practitioners; I expected answers relating it to a sense of fulfilment, emptiness, sexual gratification, relaxation, etc. Some of the most common answers, in fact, related the first moments after the scene as a relaxing peace or pleasurable void, emptiness and disappearance of troubles and thoughts.

One of the corollaries of thinking in terms of emotional energy is that people tend to repeat positive interactions and to avoid bad ones; positive interactions recharge their amount of emotional energy, others do not (Collins, 2004). It follows as a consequence that in the repetition of BDSM scenes the issue of boredom and social innovation could arise. One could easily get bored of the same sequence of BDSM practices – as well as of the same sexual ones. How are new practices introduced into the small groups? Who does this? Knowledge transfer is a process that takes place not only from the older members of the BDSM groups to the less experienced – and usually younger ones – but also among peers. How and from where does a person or a small group learn new BDSM practices? It appears that it is valued as positive and as a sign of competence and reliability – especially for dominant people – to try first on one's own body what is going to be done to another. Two kinds of knowledge are present within BDSM groups: one relating to safety recommendations, part of which is common knowledge (for example not to exchange blood or other bodily fluids with each other without protection) and one that regards the appropriateness of engaging and how to engage, in some practices. A submissive man was known among BDSM practitioners for being branded on his shoulder. Other younger practitioners have asked him repeatedly

how they could safely obtain a similar brand while minimizing the risks; his answer has always been clear-cut: don't do it. He was, he told me, against this kind of knowledge transfer; one has to be responsible for what he or she chooses to do, and if one decides to engage in this practice, he or she clearly has the means to obtain answers to this question.

The importance of social innovation and boredom are apparent if one considers the role that the negotiation process has in a BDSM scene. On the topic of negotiation rivers of ink have been poured; the topic is dealt with in chapter 6. As we will see, negotiation could be implicit or explicit, ongoing within the session or done before it (or both), detailed like the drawing of a contract or more general, and so on. The great importance of negotiation, sometimes held as a banner by activists and some academics, derives from the fact that is constitutes the boundary between consensual practices and violence in the common narrative. The idea of negotiation as a crucial boundary is not new: it goes back to the sex wars debate started at the end of the 1970s in the United States and the United Kingdom (cf. chapter 6 for the analysis of this debate and its contemporary offshoots). Thus, I wanted to know how – and if – negotiation happened among BDSM practitioners before or during a scene. The respect of limits is highly valued in the common narrative of BDSM practitioners, but at the same time, a dominant or a submissive who pushes his/her own or the other's limits is seen as courageous and gains admiration; this obviously does not extend to cases of abuse and overt violations of consent.

Most of all, I was fascinated by the ways in which practitioners approached BDSM: how they came in contact with it, whether they were following an inner curiosity

or were introduced to it by a friend or partner. So I asked them about their 'careers' in the BDSM groups from the very beginning.

Questions about their love life and the choice of play partners brought up issues that I did not expect. While investigating the relationships between their love and play partners – they could be the same person or not – I encountered what I did not expect: a huge and sharply increasing interest in polyamory. Variously defined, polyamory refers to the plurality of loving partners at the same time, all aware of the existence of one another. The phenomenon in itself is not new, since previous conceptualisations are present within the *milieu* of the sexual revolution of the 1970s that took place in some western countries. What appears to me is a renewed – perhaps cyclical? – interest toward this topic; encounters were slowly flourishing in Italy made with the purpose of gathering together and speaking about the possible ways in which one could overcome the stiffness and the suffocation of the monogamous couple. The interest in polyamory rapidly passed from a small group to another, and soon there was an overlap among BDSM practitioners and polyamory enthusiasts.

Regarding the everyday life of the practitioners, some questions arose about their openness toward others. I was interested in knowing if and to whom they spoke about their interest in and practise of BDSM. I expected various configurations, from the total openness where everyone around the practitioners is aware, to the total secrecy, where the practitioners declared and acted on his or her interest in BDSM online only.

The question of categorising practitioners somewhat haunted me: how many practitioners are there? What are their social and economical backgrounds? All these questions are very difficult to answer to, especially due to the fact that BDSM practitioners constitute a hidden population, marginalised, stigmatised and numerically

limited. Actually, a few answers to these questions have been given (cf. chapter 3). Ascertaining demographics of these hidden populations can, in my opinion, on the one hand reveal interesting information, however on the other, it can be a risky practice: once mapped and pinpointed, who guarantees that these populations will be left alone? The same argument could be raised for other hidden and possibly stigmatised populations that are perceived as different for non-visible characteristics, like non-heterosexual people and the like.

This interest in knowing about their socio-demographic features rapidly changed into other factors that could help to understand their experiences and life trajectories. So, the meaning given to BDSM practices and the narratives they developed became one of the aims of my research.

Finally, the last set of questions regarded the role of power. The conceptualisation of power within BDSM exchanges and sessions is very common, both on behalf of the practitioners and the academics. The consensual exchange of power is seen as one of the core features of BDSM; this kind of exchange clearly presupposes a starting condition of equality among – but usually between – practitioners. BDSM is sometimes indicated as TPE, total power exchange. The definition of what constitutes power is tricky and complex – for an attempt at this definition, cf. chapter 2 – because it is approached from different – and sometimes irreconcilable – frames: political, institutional, economical, that of gender, and so on. To define power as merely the process of giving or receiving orders is reductive, since other aspects could be ascribed to power – for example the action of not doing anything once an order is received.

For example, Collins (2004) defines power rituals as those involving the process of giving and taking orders; this is somewhat consistent with what happens during a

BDSM scene, but not completely. Collins' analysis, in fact, fails to grasp some of the nuances of the fact that BDSM scenes are heavily staged; this does not mean that they are false; simply that in this aspect, BDSM interactions resemble a piece of theatre. Unsurprisingly, we speak of roles – dominant, submissive, switch, dominant masochist, and so on. Furthermore, it is assumed that some resources are possessed in unequal amount by the order givers or takers; these resources could be knowledge or some kind of skills. Contrary to this presupposition, though, the narrative of the BDSM practitioners is that the starting point of their engagement in BDSM is a relationship based on equality.

The analysis of the concept of power within power rituals has been conducted without asking what definition of power do BDSM practitioners hold as valid for describing their interactions; however, the element of free choice, of voluntary engagements in these practices has been explicitly proposed by practitioners themselves.

Power is frequently, especially in the public discourse, equated with violence when one speaks about BDSM. The main reason is that some BDSM practices could to an outsider's eye appear as violent: whippings, slaps on the buttocks, etc. In my opinion, though, such a similarity exists only looking at the surface of things. The strength of some actions within BDSM sessions could resemble a violation of the other's will, but looking closer it will appear that consent is at the base of these interactions – nevertheless, some violations could occur and have occurred. I explored, throughout the thesis as well as thanks to practitioners' contributions, several definitions of power and violence in order to understand whether they were applicable to BDSM practices and to what extent.

Another topic that triggered my interest is the one of BDSM roles: how are they decided upon? Do they change according to the situation, or the person? The most general literature deals with two roles: dominant and submissive. I was interested in the ways they were embodied during and outside the sessions. Do they leave a trace on the way the person relates to others even in a non-BDSM frame? Was a dominant man more inclined to command in his everyday life or not? The question may sound not serious and even ingenuous, but this is what Collins states about order givers and order takers. In the long run, after continuously enacting the same role, they are more likely to be influenced by that role in their everyday interaction; their personality, says Collins (2004) is likely to be affected by the role they impersonate in a BDSM frame, like a self that occupies more and more space and importance overflows from a frame and occupies another.

The issues identified as fundamental for the study of BDSM constitute the core elements of the draft interview. I explained the thinking that led me to identify them and briefly discussed their importance, corollaries and implications. These key issues needed obviously to be somewhat translated for the benefit of the interviewee – I could not lay them out in their entire length, nor could I expect interviewees to follow me on such theoretical paths. Hence, the necessity to produce a brief and open draft for the interviews. After the first two interviews conducted also with the aim of adjusting and ameliorating the draft, the questions in their definitive – but still open – form were ready. I developed a draft for the interviews that was enough flexible and touched on all the theoretical points I was interested in. Interviews took place in a location chosen by practitioners, be it public or private, like their home or workplace, or a park. I informed them about the fact that I was going to audio record our conversation, and once I had

obtained their consent, I started. Every question was open and broad, thus the practitioners could talk freely and expand on their ideas. I advised them to freely move from one topic to another, and to let them follow the flow of their thoughts and memories.

2. From Sadomasochism to Poliamory: Theories of Marginal Sexuality

The literature review on BDSM is organised around two main themes. The first section of the literature review concerns the different approaches to the study of BDSM: psychiatric, psychological, and socio-anthropological. Since the second half of the 19th century, in fact, psychiatry, psychology and medical scholars have dealt with sadomasochism – the ancestor of contemporary BDSM. More recently, along with psychological works, sociological and anthropological research on BDSM has emerged, moving progressively away from the paradigm of deviance.

The second section of the literature review covers several topics related to BDSM, such as the concept of identity, the relationship between BDSM and the body, BDSM practices as constituting a subculture, the issue of sexual citizenship and more. These concepts intersect the social phenomenon of BDSM and analysing them allows us to better interpret the social factors and categories that are at play in a BDSM scene. Furthermore, a brief analysis of these concepts will provide further framework with which to view BDSM practices. For example, I show to what extent the category of 'subculture' could be applied to groups of BDSM practitioners and the BDSM community as a whole.

2.1 Sadomasochism as a Perversion

The earliest approaches to BDSM-like practices come from the field of psychiatry and psychology and perceived them as perversions. In the second half of the 19th century, psychiatrists start dealing with the concept of perversions within human sexuality, perversion meaning a deviation from the norm/normality.

2.1.1 Degeneration and Genetics

The famous alienist Krafft-Ebing deals with sadism and masochism in his major work, *Psychopatia Sexualis* (1886). His essay was part of the general impetus for cataloguing perversions that spread within European sexology in the 19th century. This impetus is linked to the diffusion of degeneration theory within Western scientific paradigms.

"These countries had seen rapid change from industrialisation, which resulted in the expansion of urban populations in cities [where] extremes of wealth and poverty were concentrated as never before [...] these changes caused unrest and confusion regarding society's perceived decline. Hereditary degeneration theory emerged as a myth to offer an explanation for these changes. [...] Degeneration explained that the evolution of species and culture had reached an impasse, meaning that society was in a progress of regression. [...] Heredity provided an explanation for the perceived social and moral degeneration of society [...] Hereditary degeneration theory considered micro behaviour, such as sexual perversion, to be symptomatic of broader social problems" (Walters, 2012: 27 – 29)

Accordingly to this theory, he opposes normal sexuality to the perverted one of sadism and masochism (Walters, 2012). He coins the terms 'sadism' from de Sade and 'masochism', from Sacher-Masoch (Krafft-Ebing, 1886; Hekma, 2007)[5,6]; these concepts

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[5] Richters *et al.* (2007) reports that "Krafft-Ebing did not coin the word 'sadism', which was first recorded in a French dictionary of 1836 (Bongie 1998: 283) but he did invent a category of criminality and mental illness and apply the word 'sadism' to that construct" (Richters *et al.*, 2007: 4).

are described as perfect counterparts to one another (Walters, 2012). For him masochism is the "idea of being completely and unconditionally subject to the will of a person of the opposite sex; of being treated by this person as by a master, humiliated and abused" (Krafft-Ebing, 1886: 89); "the sexual instinct is directed to ideas of subjugation and abuse by the opposite sex" (Krafft-Ebing, 1886: 90). Conversely, sadism is described as "the association of lust and cruelty [...] at the moment of most intense lust, very excitable individuals, who are otherwise normal, commit such acts as biting and scratching" (Krafft-Ebing, 1886: 58). Once again: "Masochism is the opposite of sadism. While the latter is the desire to cause pain and use force, the former is the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force" (Krafft-Ebing, 1886 : 89).

Even though his case-studies comprise only men (Walters, 2012), clinical studies and historical illustrations (Taylor, 1997), he draws conclusions about a supposed 'gendered' analysis of sadism and masochism.

> "Sadism in Woman. – That sadism – a perversion, as we have seen, frequent in men – is much less frequent in women, is easily explained. In the first place, sadism, in which the need of subjugation of the opposite sex forms a constituent element [...] represents a pathological intensification of the masculine sexual character; in the second place, the obstacles which oppose the expression of this monstrous impulse are, of course, much greater for a woman than for a man. Yet sadism occurs in women; and it can only be explained by the primary constituent element, the general

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[6] Detailed and in depth are the notes 1 and 2 of the book by Eisler (1951) describing the life of de Sade and Sacher-Masoch, the work and the mutual influences between both.

hyper-excitation of the motor sphere. Only two cases have thus far been scientifically studied" (Krafft-Ebing, 1886: 87)

"Masochism in Women. – In woman voluntary subjection to the opposite sex is a physiological phenomenon. Owing to her passive role in procreation and long-existent social conditions, ideas of subjection are, in woman, normally connected with the idea of sexual relations. So to speak, they form the harmonics which determine the tone-quality of feminine feeling. Any one conversant with the history of civilization knows in what a state of absolute subjection woman was always kept until a relatively high degree of civilization was reached; and an attentive observer of life may still easily recognize how the custom of unnumbered generations, in connection with the passive role with which woman has been endowed by Nature, has given her an instinctive inclination to voluntary subordination to man; he will notice that exaggeration of customary gallantry is very distasteful to women, and that a deviation from it in the direction of masterful behavior […] is often accepted with secret satisfaction" (Krafft-Ebing, 1886: 137-138)

He wrote for professionals' eyes only, and his style is differentiated from previous medical writings by its detachment (Hawkes, 1996)[7].

Also Hirschfeld (Taylor, 1997), as well as Krafft-Ebing, describes SM as a result of the inversion of gender roles, since the male masochist acts the passive and feminine

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[7] Despite this intention however, the high number of editions of *Psychopatia Sexualis* makes Eisler (1951) conjecture that non-professionals also read the book.

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role of the woman, and the female sadist acts – accordingly and oppositely – the aggressiveness and masculinity of a man.

Emile Kraepelin published a fundamental work that systematises and organises psychopathologies in 1883, three years before Kraff-Ebing's *Psychopatia Sexualis* (Aragona, 2006). Although his work did not have a great impact in establishing a new paradigm in the field (Aragona, 2006), several editions and translations followed. In the sixth German edition of his work we find explicit references to the categories of sadism and masochism by Krafft-Ebing (Kraepelin, 1899: 225). It is impossible to say if in the first edition of the 1883 Kraepelin dealt with sadism and masochism. Scholars usually consider Krafft-Ebing as the father of these two 'perversions', but it is possible, although not verifiable, that Kraepelin too dealt with these two categories in his work[8].

In general, these authors dealing with sadism and masochism are examples of the general interest in perversions within the psychiatric and medical field of the late 19th century.

Ellis, a British physician and contemporary of Freud, touches on sadism and masochism in his *Psychology of Sex* (1903). He provides several definitions of this term; quoting several of his colleagues who had analysed sadism in previous works; he gives different definitions of sadism, from the simplest by Krafft-Ebing (1886) to the most complete one by Garnier (1900):

> "Perhaps the simplest and most usual definition is that of Krafft-Ebing, as sexual emotion associated with the wish to inflict pain and use violence, or, as he elsewhere expresses it, 'the impulse to cruel and violent

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[8] Richters *et al.* (2007) reports that "Krafft-Ebing did not coin the word 'sadism', which was first recorded in a French dictionary of 1836 (Bongie 1998: 283) but he did invent a category of criminality and mental illness and apply the word 'sadism' to that construct" (Richters *et al.*, 2007: 4).

treatment of the opposite sex, and the coloring of the idea of such acts with lustful feeling.' A more complete definition is that of Moll, who describes sadism as a condition in which 'the sexual impulse consists in the tendency to strike, ill-use, and humiliate the beloved person.' This definition has the advantage of bringing in the element of oral pain. A further extension is made in Féré's definition as 'the need of association of violence and cruelty with sexual enjoyment, such violence or cruelty not being necessarily exerted by the person himself who seeks sexual pleasure in this association.' Garnier's definition, while comprising all these points, further allows for the fact that a certain degree of sadism may be regarded as normal. 'Pathological sadism,' he states, 'is an impulsive and obsessing sexual perversion characterized by a close connection between suffering inflicted or mentally represented and the sexual orgasm, without this necessary and sufficing condition frigidity usually remaining absolute.'"

(Ellis, 1903: 188)

Nevertheless, in his opinion, even the most accurate definition could not catch the whole meaning of sadism as intended by de Sade in his works, far more cruel and devoted to a generalised desire for destruction and corruption (Ellis, 1903). As regards masochism, Ellis relies on the "most valuable" (Ellis, 1903: 197) contribution he has: the one by Krafft-Ebing; in fact he directly cites his colleague's *Psychopatia Sexualis* in order to define masochism:

"By masochism I understand a peculiar perversion of the psychical *vita sexualis* in which the individual affected, in sexual feeling and thought,

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is controlled by the idea of being completely and unconditionally subject to the will of a person of the opposite sex, of being treated by this person as by a master, humiliated and abused. This idea is colored by sexual feeling; the masochist lives in fancies in which he creates situations of this kind, and he often attempts to realize them." (Ellis, 1903: 197-198)[9]

In contrast to Krafft-Ebing however, he wrote for "the (educated) lay person" (Hawkes, 1996: 58).

2.1.2 Psychological Approaches

While a contemporary of Krafft-Ebing's, Freud's approach to sadism and masochism is different; in fact, Freud moves from Krafft-Ebing's genetically based model of sexual perversion to a psychical model (Walters, 2012). On the other hand, similarities between them are present: Freud understands sexuality in terms of normal and perverse, but positions the two extremes on a continuum; people could occupy positions along this continuum. In his vision, a perverse sexuality applies only to males, since females could not have a perverse sexuality (Walters, 2012). He understands sadism as an active form, and masochism as a passive form. Although he states that they are regularly encountered in the same person (Freud, 1905), it was not him who coined the term 'sadomasochism', but Sadger (1913).

"The most striking peculiarity of this perversion lies in the fact that its active and passive forms are regularly encountered together in the

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[9] For a more complete analysis of Ellis' and his predecessors' works about sadism and masochism see Crozier (2004).

same person. He who experiences pleasure by causing pain to others in sexual relations is also able to experience the pain emanating from sexual relations as pleasure. A sadist is simultaneously a masochist, though either the active or the passive side of the perversion may be more strongly developed and thus represent his preponderate sexual activity." (Freud, 1905: 26)

Sadger (1913) states the strict connection between sadism and masochism starting from the very title of his essay: "The reader will find that I always speak about the complex, rather than treat it as usual, separating passive and active algolagnia. The reason is that both are almost always united." (Sadger, 1913: 157).

Throughout the 20th Century, the idea that BDSM-like practices reflect the internalization of objects taking place during childhood was sustained by several scholars. Sadger (1926; in Taylor, 1997), for example links breastfeeding to the desire of the infant to incorporate the breast into itself, thus developing a desire to bite the nipples off; this is a sadistic primary instinctual drive. The withdrawal of the breast causes anger and hatred which, combined with love and attachment, generate a link between sexual arousal, pain and power. This kind of link is the model for the subsequent relationships, since it is under the age of five that the original relationship is established.

Similarly to Sadger, Mollinger (1982; in Taylor, 1997) underlines the role of the first years in shaping sadomasochistic tendencies. The infant in its omnipotence and inability to distinguish object representations and self becomes both the sadist and the

masochist at the same time. Since it is unable to keep together love and hate, they are split apart and directed outwards – sadism – or inwards – masochism.

"1. When the self-object images are fused and there is little differentiation, then both sadistic and masochistic behavior sustains that self-object representation. Since this organization of experience by pain is what is important, any behavior which stimulates that affect is sought. […] 2. When the good self and good object images are differentiated, masochism occurs as a way of retaining the good object. The aggressive or sadistic impulses are defended against because they are unacceptable to the object; but they are present. […] 3. When the oedipal level is reached, with its differentiation of self and object images and their consolidation into psychic structures, then the superego plays a role. It turns the sadistic, triumphant impulses into masochistic ones. The person goes through the following mental processes." (Mollinger, 1982: 386 – 387)

Psychoanalytic object relationists also focused on the importance of an interpersonal mechanism in the maintenance of SM practices (Taylor, 1997). SM could also be, according to Mollinger (1982), the result of a fear of object loss, a loss that is ultimately a loss of the self.

Other theorists focused on the relationship between SM and the difficulties in the realm of sexuality (Glasser, 1979; Schnarch, 1993; Taylor, 1997).

It appears that the psychoanalytic discourse about SM is neither clear nor univocal, as exemplified by the works of the authors above. Following Taylor (1997), there is no account of a psychoanalytic formulation of SM based on empirical research:

"Perhaps because of their tendency to 'essentialise' the phenomenon, to try and isolate it and root it in the individual's psychological structure and establish a single aetiology, psychoanalytic discourses on SM appear conflictual and, it could be argued, overly confident in their speculation. […] There are no accounts of psychoanalytic formulations of SM being based on, or corroborated by, empirical research. […] Perhaps because of this tendency for analytic theory to be based on SM-devotees who present for therapy, the 'psychological unhealthiness' of SM and therefore of its practitioners is often assumes as *a priori*." (Taylor, 1997: 113-114)

The authors, whose work has been outlined and described until this point, constitute the pillars of past and contemporary scholarships that analyse BDSM-like practices. The baton of sadism and masochism, analysed within a psychiatric or medical frame, is subsequently taken over from the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

2.1.3 Discourses on the Aetiology of BDSM

To investigate the 'cause' or 'causes' of BDSM and BDSM-like practices is not the aim of this thesis; nevertheless, modern and contemporary scholars deal with these narratives and reconstruct the discourses about the causes that led individuals to engage in such practices (Breslow *et al.*, 1985; Taylor, 1997; Baumeister and Tice, 2001). These discourses about the aetiology of certain practices or identities – consider, for

example, the recent discourse about the 'insurgence' and 'causes' of homosexuality[10] – are nowadays rarer and rarer, since the scientific community as a whole has either lost interest for this subject, or perceives BDSM practices as non-threatening and BDSM as a simple sexual variation among others; thus, the research about causes of BDSM has been almost entirely abandoned.

Breslow and his colleagues (1985) give a short account of the aetiological discourse on BDSM, focusing on Freudian and Neo-Freudian perspectives, which concentrate on early childhood experiences as the causes of sadomasochistic behaviours in adult life. The underlying assumption is that SM practices constitute something different from the norm.

Taylor (1997), as far as I know, gives the most complete account of the aetiological theories of BDSM. He devoted his article to the reconstruction of discourses on non-normative sexualities. According to him, Krafft-Ebing (1886) described sadism and masochism as caused by "a congenital hereditarily tainted constitution" (Taylor, 1997: 109). As previously stated, this explanation falls within the degeneration paradigm, which was so wide-spread at the time of Krafft-Ebing's education and work. The next to investigate the causes of sadism and masochism was, according to Taylor (1997), Sigmund Freud: sadism and masochism would be neurotic distortions of instinctual drives resulting from regression and fixation. After this, continues the author, object-relation theorists identify the cause of SM behaviour as an early internalisation of objects; for example Sadger identifies it as the breast of the mother for the infant (1926). Other object-relation theorists focus instead on the primitive unification of love and hate for the infant: being unable to overcome their fixation on this binary, the infants develop either sadism or masochism. Followers of Freud focus attention on intrapsychic conflicts

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[10] See for example the recent book *The biology of Homosexuality* by Balthazart (2011).

as the causes of SM; nevertheless, states Taylor (1997), psychoanalytic discourses appear incoherent as a whole regarding sadomasochism.

Behavioural theories rest upon the idea that all sexual behaviour is learned[11] (Jaspers, 1963; McGuire *et al.*, 1964; Rachman and Hodgson 1968; Taylor, 1997), thus one can assume several different causes for the engagement in SM behaviours, some even accidental. For others, SM would be determined by genetic, hormonal or chromosomal abnormalities (Goodman, 1987; Marshall *et al.*, 1990). None of these theories, according to Taylor (1997), are corroborated by empirical results, since the results derive from small clinical samples. He continues his review dealing with the theories that concern the nature of pain as sexual arouser. In fact, pain would be reason for which people engage in BDSM practices (Ellis, 1903; Tomkins, 1962; Sack and Miller, 1975; Weinberg and Falck, 1980; Weinberg *et al.*, 1984; Mains, 1991; Polhemus and Randall, 1994) since it may stimulate sexual arousal just as anger, fear or other emotions (Ellis, 1903); it can amplify sexual feelings (Tomkins, 1962); pain could also be perceived as sexual by those experiencing it (Weinberg *et al.*, 1984); pain is arousing since it releases endorphins (Mains, 1991); and eventually pain could help in reaching heightened states of consciousness (Polhemus and Randall, 1994)[12].

Baumeister and Tice (2001) propose three theories that in the history of sexuality dealt with the insurgence of sadomasochism. Firstly, Freud believed that people want to dominate others for several reasons, but this desire can cause them a sense of guilt. Thus, thanks to a psychological defence mechanism, they switch roles; according to this perspective, sadism should be far more widespread than masochism.

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[11] The unlearning process of sadomasochistic behaviour seems to be not well scientifically demonstrated, also due to the fact that samples have been mainly small and clinical (Taylor, 1997).

[12] With regard to the similarities between the act of whipping in religious and sexual contexts as a means to reach heightened states of consciousness see Schneider (2009); about the links between body modification and BDSM-like practices and shamanism as well as trance-like states see the life and work of Fakir Musafar (2002), thought to be the father of Neo-Primitivism.

The authors maintain that this is not true, since data points in the opposite direction. Another theory, a variation of Freud's thought, is that people feel guilty about sex and consequently they desire to be dominated to be freed from guilt. Again, state the authors, data do not confirm this guilt about sex (Baumeister and Tice, 2001). The third and last theory proposed is based on opponent-process by Solomon and Corbitt (1974): "the body steady-state (homeostatic) mechanisms set off opposite reactions whenever the body departs from its normal condition" (Baumeister and Tice, 2001: 63). Consequently, the body's response to pain would be a perception of pleasure. The authors conclude that this theory fits best masochism than sadism.

The authors conclude the chapter on theories about sadomasochism with the theory of Baumeister; that seems more a theory about the reasons for which people engage in sadomasochism rather than a theory about the 'insurgence' of it:

> "Masochism appeals to people as a way of escaping from self-awareness (not unlike alcohol). Individuality and selfhood acquired a special, overgrown, burdensome nature in modern Western societies, and so modern Western individuals periodically have the need to escape from self-awareness, a need that is different and stronger than what it has typically been in other cultures" (Baumeister and Tice, 2001: 64)

2.1.4 Contemporary Paraphilias: DSM and ICD

In 1948 the World Health Organisation published the sixth edition of the *ICD,* the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (WHO,

1948), in which for the first time a classification of mental illnesses was present; four years later, the American Psychiatric Association published the *DSM,* the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (APA, 1952). From the first editions of these manuals, the APA and the WHO collaborated continuously on the development and standardisation of common diagnoses (Aragona, 2006)[13].

Krueger (2009; 2010) reconstructs the evolution of the diagnosis of sadism and masochism throughout the different editions of DSM. Sadism appears in the first edition of the DSM (APA, 1952) as a sexual deviation (Krueger, 2009). Sixteen years later, masochism, again as a sexual deviation, is included in DSM-II (APA, 1968) (Krueger, 2010). Aragona (2006) considers, for several reasons, DSM-III (APA, 1980) to be revolutionary within the field of psychiatry since it developed a new way of categorising mental illnesses. From then on, its use among health professionals increased sharply. In the 5th and latest edition of the DSM (APA, 2013b) there is an important distinction between sadism and masochism as "consensual atypical sexual behaviour" (APA, 2013a: 1) and sadism and masochism as mental disorders.

As explained by the APA (2013b), in the sections regarding the diagnostic features of sexual masochism disorder:

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[13] In the last edition of DSM, the diagnostic criteria for sexual masochism disorder are similar to sexual sadism disorder. Sexual masochism disorder's criteria: "A. Over a period of at least 6 months, recurrent and intense sexual arousal from the act of being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer, as manifested by fantasies, urges, or behaviors. B. The fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning." (APA, 2013b: 694); sexual sadism disorder's criteria: "A. Over a period of at least 6 months, recurrent and intense sexual arousal from the physical or psychological suffering of another person, as manifested by fantasies, urges, or behaviors. B. The individual has acted on these sexual urges with a nonconsenting person, or the sexual urges or fantasies cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning." (APA, 2013b: 696). ICD-10 is more concise in defining sadomasochism, whose treatise is unified: "Sadomasochism. A preference for sexual activity which involves the infliction of pain or humiliation, or bondage. If the subject prefers to be the recipient of such stimulation this is called masochism; if the provider, sadism. Often an individual obtains sexual excitement from both sadistic and masochistic activities." (WHO, 2010: n.pag.).

"The diagnostic criteria for sexual masochism disorder are intended to apply to individuals who freely admit to having such paraphilic interests. [...] If these individuals also report psychosocial difficulties because of their sexual attractions or preferences for being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer, they may be diagnosed with sexual masochism disorder. In contrast, if they declare no distress, exemplified by anxiety, obsessions, guilt, or shame, about these paraphilic impulses, and are not hampered by them in pursuing other personal goals, they could be ascertained as having masochistic sexual interest but should not be diagnosed with sexual masochism disorder." (APA, 2013b: 694)

The same is valid for sexual sadism disorder:

"The diagnostic criteria for sexual sadism disorder are intended to apply both to individuals who freely admit to having such paraphilic interests and to those who deny any sexual interest in the physical or psychological suffering of another individual despite substantial objective evidence to the contrary. [...] If these individuals also report psychosocial difficulties because of their sexual attractions or preferences for the physical or psychological suffering of another individual, they may be diagnosed with sexual sadism disorder. In contrast, if admitting individuals declare no distress, exemplified by anxiety, obsessions, guilt, or shame, about these paraphilic impulses, and are not hampered by them in pursuing other goals, and their self-reported, psychiatric, or legal histories indicate that they do not act on them, then they could be ascertained as

having sadistic sexual interest but they would not meet criteria for sexual

sadism disorder." (APA, 2013b: 696)

The distinction between a sexual practice and a mental disorder is an answer to

the widespread demands of scholars and associations (cf. for example ReviseF65, n. d.)

to revise these categories, in order to differentiate between a consensual and

pleasurable sexual activity and a mental disorder (Kleinplatz and Moser, 2005; Moser

and Kleinplatz, 2005; Connolly, 2006; Reiersøl and Skeid, 2006; Krueger 2009; 2010;

Wright, 2010; Powls and Davies, 2012).

Similarly, Reiersøl and Skeid (2006) analyse the corresponding diagnosis in the

different editions of the ICD. Sadism and masochism are included as sexual deviations in

the sixth edition of the ICD (WHO, 1948). Since the eighth revision (WHO, 1967) they

underline critically that there has been little development of diagnostic criteria (Reiersøl

and Skeid, 2006).

2.1.5 Therapist and Counsellors: Contemporary Research in the Medical Sphere

The contemporary research on BDSM is quite different. In this chapter I will

analyse the research from the beginning of the 2000s onwards, which directly addresses

BDSM, from several perspectives. The first stream of research follows the tradition

started by Krafft-Ebing: scholars question the psychological well-being of BDSM

practitioners. Although the discourse about the pathologisation is nowadays diluted or

has disappeared, this research is within the medical sphere, in the broad sense

(Connolly, 2006; Gross, 2006; Moser, 1999; Powls and Davies, 2012; Richters *et al.*,

2007; 2008). Other contemporary works fall within the fields of sociology and

anthropology, and I will discuss them in the following chapters (Beckmann, 2001; 2005; 2009; Taylor and Ussher, 2001; Langdridge and Butt, 2004; Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011).

In recent years, several scholars have started to investigate the psychological well-being of BDSM practitioners (Connolly, 2006; Gross, 2006; Moser, 1999; Powls and Davies, 2012; Richters *et al.*, 2007; 2008). As a whole, they maintain that the psychological and psychiatric well-being of BDSM practitioners is equal or better than non-BDSM practitioners. These results pair with the arguments of several scholars and associations for the removal of diagnosis of sadism and masochism as mental illnesses.

Other scholars maintain not only that BDSM practitioners are sane, but put forward and discuss the potential therapeutic nature of BDSM itself (Barker *et al.*, 2013; Easton, 2013; Henkin, 2013). Barker *et al.* (2013), for example, deal with the ambiguities of promoting health narratives of BDSM. On one side, the pathologisation of BDSM is challenged, while on the other the risks of reifying such narratives are accounted for. In fact, it could appear that the healing motivation is the only reason for people to engage in SM. Stressing the healing power of BDSM, moreover, could suggest that only therapeutic BDSM is viable and acceptable. Easton (2013) and Henkin (2013) both analyse the power of BDSM in exploring our deepest self through the discovery of Jung's archetypes. They both stressed the fact that BDSM is not therapy, but it could be therapeutic. The view of these practices as therapeutic is shared by Hadjitarkhani (2010) that underlines the potentialities of BDSM for long-term couples in stating that these practices should help in resolving conflicts and pursue a fruitful coexistence of love and sex:

"How, for couples who wish to engage in depth work to address these issues and who have (or are open to) BDSM experience, structured BDSM play, including dominance and submission, could serve as one therapeutic modality to catalyze the processing of unresolved conflicts and undigested psychological material in the relationship, opening the way to the successful co-existence of love and sex over time." (Hadjitarkhani, 2010: 5)

The last section within the psychological approach I want to examine is the analysis of the relationships between therapists and BDSM practitioners. This relationship could be shaped by the fact that therapists think about BDSM as an illness; on the other side, BDSM practitioners could perceive the social stigma against them on behalf of the therapists. Therapists and counsellors that identify as 'kinky-positive' describe their kink-aware attitude as positive for BDSM practitioners as clients and at the same time encourage colleagues to increase their openness towards these sexual practices (Barker *et al.* 2007). Nichols (2006) describes the most common issues and challenges that therapists can face in dealing with BDSM practitioners:

"Before therapists can help kinky clients with these problems, they must first examine their own beliefs about BDSM. The counselor must discard most pathology-oriented paradigms of sexuality; adopt new models that allow for neutrality and, at times, celebratory attitudes towards diverse sexuality. Therapists must also learn to analyze countertransferential feelings that are based not only upon ignorance but sometimes on fears about their own "darker" sexual desires. In addition,

therapists wishing to help "kinky" clients must undertake to educate themselves, not only about BDSM, but about all sexual minorities, because there is considerable overlap between the BDSM community and gay/lesbian/bisexual populations as well as with the polyamory movement." (Nichols, 2006: 299)

Others, drawing on their professional experiences as therapists, deconstruct common beliefs about BDSM and address BDSM practitioners' friends and family members to help them understand what constitutes BDSM and how they can support their loved ones in the process of coming out (Ortmann and Sprott, 2013). Other scholars keep more neutral positions, underlining the necessity for clinical practitioners to remain neutral towards BDSM, dropping prejudices and understanding BDSM as a sexual practice and a specific culture (Powls and Davies, 2012).

"As already noted, a 'psychologically neutral stance'' to SM is required among clinicians. Psychiatry and society at large has a troubled history in relation to understanding and recognizing (minority) consensual sexual practices, as reflected in the history of considering homosexuality as a mental illness and illegal practice. Clinicians need to be mindful of the evidence here that the majority of SM practitioners represent a non-deviant, well-adjusted, and well-functioning majority. For those seen in clinical practice an appreciation of this information is important to prevent further marginalization and reinforcement of stigma. Further, it is paramount that clinicians recognize the existence of the SM culture with its own rules and practices, which represent no greater

intrinsic deviance than celibacy, or heterosexual or homosexual sexual practices." (Powls and Davies, 2012: 231)

On the other side, not all therapists are either competent in treating clients who part of a sexual minority or accepting of their sexual behaviour as a sexual variation, as showed by Kelsey and colleagues (2013). Interestingly, the role of the therapist is sometimes claimed for themselves by prodommes and used to describe their work with male clients (Lindemann, 2011).

2.2. Sadomasochism as a Practice: Kinsey and Colleagues

Despite the great importance of Kinsey and his staff within modern sexology, they do not say a lot about sadomasochistic behaviours (Bullough, 2004). One of the differences between Kinsey and his predecessors is that, influenced by his work as a biologist, he considered BDSM as a set of practices to be measured and observed, rather than an illness to be cured. He employed a value-free approach and used taxonomy to study human sexual behaviour (Hawkes, 1996). He thought that assigning value judgements to sexual behaviours was a way to control sexuality (Donnelly *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, until the Kinsey research, data on sexual behaviours derived almost exclusively from fictional literature or from psychiatric case histories (Reiersol and Skeid, 2006).

Kinsey and his colleagues wrote two books on male and female sexuality (1948; 1953). In the volume dedicated to female sexuality, they state that 12% of females and 22% of males reported having an erotic response to a sadomasochistic story, and 55% of females and 50% of males reported having responded erotically to being bitten;

furthermore, 11% of men and 17% of women reported trying bondage (Kinsey *et al.*, 1953).

2.3 Sociology of Deviance and Subculture

Since the late 1970s, a corpus of quantitative studies on BDSM developed among social scientists and within the field of medicine. Several scholars conducted quantitative analysis on BDSM practitioners progressively moving away from the deviance paradigm. As a whole, they investigated socio-demographic characteristics of BDSM practitioners. Factors such as age, gender, roles in BDSM, education level and self-acceptance were taken into consideration; their aim was to describe the behaviour and the characteristics of this subculture. Studies on deviants and deviant behaviour spread during the 1960s and 1970s (cf. for example Becker, 1963; Donnelly *et al.*, 2004)[14].

One of the first scholars to deal with sadomasochism within this paradigm of deviance is Spengler (1977). He studied this behaviour that he, along with his contemporary colleagues' researchers, perceived as different from the 'norm' and thus perhaps bore an implicit negative moral judgement; expressions such as "realization of the deviance" (p. 441), "deviant subculture" (p. 449), "manifest sadomasochistic deviance" (p. 455) show this. Nevertheless, his study in West Germany was one of the first, along with the one by Gebhard (1969), based on fetishism and sadomasochism, to account for such practices and practitioners within modern sexology. Spengler (1977) relies on a questionnaire to study the sexual orientation and sexual habits, as well as education and social status of "sadomasochists" (p. 441). Few women were present in

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[14] A contemporary reading of erotic spanking through the lens of deviance is given by Plante (2004), who focuses on the ways in which BDSM practitioners redefine deviance and neutralize stigma.

the scene, and since the majority of them were prostitutes, he excluded them from the research. Several quotes confirm that: "There are hardly any nonprostitute ads and very few women in the clubs. As a result, we investigated men only" (Spengler, 1977: 443); "we consider the assumption that manifest sadomasochistic deviance among women is very rare (at least within the subculture) to be essential for an understanding of the situation of heterosexual sadomasochists" (Spengler, 1977: 455).

The following year, 1978, Moser and Levitt (1987) collected their empirical data in San Francisco. They provided socio-demographic characteristics of sadomasochists and at the same time account for the large number of women in the subculture, although the female subsample was small. Female presence seemed to have increased – or their presence was noticed by researchers:

"Spengler [1977] believes that women involved in S/M activity do so only at the request of the male partner or for monetary reasons. [...] Despite these beliefs, we found evidence of a large number of women in the S/M subculture. The present study includes 47 women [and 178 men], and several S/M organizations include substantial numbers of women." (Moser and Levitt, 1987: 332)

Not only are females present within the subculture, but they are different from their male counterparts:

"These women tended to be more inclined to bisexuality than the men and to consider themselves more submissive than the men. They appear to be somewhat more experimental than the men, experiencing

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more different behaviours, both S/M and other sexual behaviours. The female subsample 'came out' and engaged in their first S/M behavior at the same approximate ages as the males." (Moser and Levitt, 1987: 333)

Another study regarding the sadomasochistic subculture is the one by Breslow and his colleagues (1985), who reconstruct the careers of people within the sadomasochistic subculture, as well as analyse their first contact with it and their preferred practices[15]. An important conclusion of their research is that non-prostitute females do exist in the scene. Since the beginning of the study of BDSM-like practices until the late 1970s, women were thought not to be engaging in such activities, at least not as non-prostitutes. In this regard, the later participation of women in the Italian scene is also accounted for by Brumatti (2011)[16]:

"1980 – 1995. There is an interest [in SM] but the start is slow and difficult. And also it is an all-male starting. Today, all these proud female slaves, all these contemptuous and self-confident mistresses must in fact acknowledge the role of the man in having explored first the unknown ways of the planet SM. Women were the big absent of those years [...] The real disease was solitude, was the lack of communication, lack of correct information, the absence of a minimum of culture and philosophy SM, the absence of relationships between lovers of matter. And the absence of the woman! [...] The road is drawn and then finally the woman enters, albeit

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[15] The idea of a career as a "sequential model of deviance" (Weinberg, 2014) has been adopted precisely by Becker (1963) who used it within the same deviance paradigm we are discussing.

[16] At present, the only reconstruction of the development of the Italian BDSM scene has been done by Brumatti (2011). The lack of publications and empirical data forces us to rely upon activists' and key witnesses' testimonials such as the one quoted.

very tentatively, into this world. They are wives, lovers, and friends. For many, fantasies can finally translate into reality and the real games can start." (Brumatti, 2011: n. d.)[17]

More recently, Ernulf and Innala (1995) studied the discussions within an international computerized discussion group on sexual bondage. They analyse discussion themes, socio-demographic variable, sexual orientation and preference for roles in bondage.

In a later study, nevertheless, Sandnabba and colleagues managed only to reach a few women for their study, and therefore excluded them from the data elaboration (Sandnabba *et al.*, 1999). Their study is similar to the others briefly presented here; socio-demographic variables, practices preferred, etc. are investigated.

Eventually, at the beginning of the 2000s, the presence of women within the scene is taken for granted. Alison *et al.* (2001) analyse a mixed sample, although women constitute one out of eight of the total sample.

In general, these last studies about BDSM – called more often SM, starting from the late 1970s – account for: differences between heterosexual and homosexual sadomasochists (Spengler, 1977; Breslow *et al.*, 1985; 1986; Moser and Levitt, 1987; Ernulf and Innala, 1995; Sandnabba *et al.*, 1999; Alison *et al.*, 2001)[18]; the role of SM

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[17] To an online female user complaining about the nature of the text that seems critical towards women in general, Brumatti replies: "The article […] do not deals with the causes of this absence. As said, all started with several periodical publications obviously sold at newsstands. Women, for reasons more than known reasons, could not freely access to that wide portion of the publications labelled 'hard'. They could have been looked at with sarcasm by the newsagent and by whoever was seeing them buying that kind of journal. Besides that, in general women are with no doubt less interested in images than men, building up her excitement in other ways. Since the first phases of SM in Italy passed through publications sold at newsstands, women are cut out from an autonomous active role in this field." (Brumatti, 2011: n. d.).

[18] Entirely devoted to the differences among hetero-, bi- and homosexual male sadomasochists is the research by Breslow *et al.* (1986).

clubs in gathering and helping people manage the stigma (Sandnabba *et al.*, 1999; Alison *et al.*, 2001) and finally, the investigation of BDSM among non-clinical participants.

Only some scholars account for the female interest in SM, among them Comfort (1972), Green and Green (1973), Hunt (1974), Byrne and Byrne (1977), Victor (1980), Wolfe (1981), Breslow *et al.* (1985) and Moser and Levitt (1987). Amid them, Breslow *et al.* (1985) analyse the differences between males and females: the first are more likely to develop a sadomasochistic behaviour earlier than the latter, who are usually introduced to this behaviour by a partner. Moser and Levitt (1987) state that, although their female population was small, some differences with males could be underlined: women were more likely to be bisexuals and slaves than their male counterparts.

In general, the scholars cited, writing since the 1970s about sadomasochism, consider SM practitioners as part of a subculture – although in some cases deviant – and study them accordingly. There are some parallels drawn between SM practitioners and homosexuals: being part of the SM subculture is explicitly compared to being part of the homosexual subculture; the role of self-acceptance is important for the "mitigation of conflicts arising from the deviant sexual orientation" (Spengler, 1977: 449-450); Spengler wrote about "sadomasochistic coming out" (p. 453) as the first awareness of sadomasochistic desires. The comparison between BDSM practitioners and homosexuals arises from the fact that both are and were perceived as a deviant and stigmatised subculture[19].

To sum up, starting from the Seventies, BDSM has undergone a normalisation process: it is understood as practice or identity, not (almost) anymore as a perversion or illness. This process of normalisation is clearly still ongoing. In this process, BDSM

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[19] More recently, parallels between BDSM's and LGB's coming out has been drawn by Simula (2014), who states that people she interviewed found something innate or hardwired in both cases, and thus made a comparison between them. The existence of the same relationship has been states by BDSM practitioners I interviewed and met during participant observations.

assumed the characteristics of a cultural model available for a broad public. Clear examples of this cultural model – called also commodified BDSM (see for example Weiss, 2011 and Beckmann, 2009) – are: the production of self-help manuals about what BDSM is and how you can do it safely; BDSM-themed novels, starting from the famous trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey, Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed* (James, 2011a; 2011b; 2011c) and the associated parodies; erotic lingerie that evokes imagery based on domination and submission; famous singers who make clear references to BDSM in their lyrics or music videos, etc.

2.4 Contemporary Socio-anthropological Approaches

The contemporary research on BDSM covers several topics. In this chapter I will analyse the research that directly addresses BDSM from socio-anthropological perspectives, which has been produced since the beginning of the 2000s[20]. We have already seen the contemporary research on BDSM in the medical field, in the broad sense, in the previous chapters.

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[20] With the exception of the work of Robert Eisler, *Man into Wolf. An Anthropological Interpretation of Sadism, Masochism, and Lycantropy*, which was written in 1951. His exceptionally detailed and erudite book has been defined by Eisler himself and some contemporary scholars (Doni, 2011; Giannetto, 2011) as anthropological. Nevertheless, this kind of anthropology, deep and almost resulting in archetypology (Doni, 2011) has nowadays been abandoned, and is perhaps more similar to philosophy in the contemporary meaning. His aim was to find the historical or evolutionary causes of every crime and violence (Eisler, 1948). His thesis is that at the very origin of sadism and masochism – that do not constitute perversions, he thought and which he calls *algobulia* – stands the great symbolic change in the diet of the prehistoric man, who imitating other beasts abandoned frugivorous habits and become omnivorous. The relationship between pain and pleasure, one of the core points of sadomasochism, has been recognized since ancient times; the author gives the examples of *luperci* in ancient Rome during which women were beaten with leather straps "*per ludum et lasciviam*" (Eisler, 1951: 288) and quotes the Kamasutra, in which were described erotic scratches and pinches. To become omnivorous was a conscious change for the prehistoric man, and was accompanied by a sense of guilt and remorse, since it implied the dismemberment of other animals – a more violent activity than harvesting; this modified not only his diet and habits, but also the relationship with the Other (Giannetto, 2011). It is difficult to systematize the work of Eisler within the schema employed in this thesis, since it falls out of these categories; nevertheless and especially for this reason, it remains unparalleled and without symbolic heirs.

I will now focus on the contemporary sociological and anthropological research on BDSM; it deals as a whole with the reasons people engage in BDSM practices, from the desire to test their own physical and psychological limits to the search for new sexual experiences (Truscott, 1991; Taylor, 1997; Beckmann, 2001; 2005; Taylor and Ussher, 2001; Langdridge and Butt, 2004). Some ethnographic accounts of local BDSM communities are included in this research (Beckmann, 2009; Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011).

Truscott (1991) states that people engage in SM practices for four reasons: "The endorphin high, the spiritual experience, the individual psychological benefit and pure play" (Truscott, 1991: 21). She links the endorphin high to what athletes and dancers experience during their exercises:

"The endorphin high is recognized, experientially if not by name, by runners, bodybuilders, and aerobic exercisers as well as by consensual sadomasochists. This experience, only recently identifies, involves the release of endorphins and other naturally produced opiate-like chemicals. The chemicals cause the person to be flooded with good feelings." (Truscott, 1991: 21)

The search for spiritual experience in SM is linked by the author to the different religious movements across Europe and beyond in which people find ecstasy through particular practices:

"In some cultures, the ingestion of particular substances facilitates the onset of altered states of consciousness. [...] In some places,

consciousness is altered for ritual purposes with movements such as Sufi and group circle dancing (Native Americans, some Africans), where people move rhythmically for long periods of time and individuals achieve ecstasy. There is reason to think that the flagellants who wandered around Europe during the years of the Black Plague were experiencing religious ecstasy from all the endorphins they were pumping up." (Truscott, 1991: 23)

As regards the psychological benefit for BDSM practitioners, the situations could be different and also depend on the roles during the play. The last motivation analysed is SM as pure play:

"Least understood by society at large, is the fact that consensual sadomasochism, like more conventional sex, is a form of play for some adult. [...] S/M, as sexual expression, can be adult play. It can be a hobby. [...] S/M is closer to hobbies that involve intense physical activity, such as dancing, tennis, and aerobics, that it is to 'calmer', tabletop hobbies. In other active hobbies, as in S/M, many people seek and get the endorphin 'high'." (Truscott, 1991: 26 – 27)

These reasons for the individual to engage in SM, as explained by Truscott (1991) will be reprised and further elaborated by other scholars.

For example, Beckmann (2001) elaborates a set of five reasons for which people engage in BDSM practices. She bases her analysis on sixteen interviews conducted in London. The first reason is to find in BDSM an alternative to normal genital sexuality;

she links this reason to the shortcomings of Sexual Revolution and its excessive focus on heterosexual intercourse: people found the 'normal' genital sexuality unsatisfying and limiting and thus explored new possibilities with their body; among them BDSM. In this respect, she draws a parallel with Foucault's (1976) criticism of the genital fixation within human sexuality.

The second reason is that BDSM practices provide a way to engage in safer sex in the era of HIV and AIDS epidemic; in fact, BDSM allows avoiding the exchange of potentially contagious bodily fluids. The third reason is the exploration "of the dimension of the lived body" (Beckmann, 2001: 85): sensuality, liberation from taboos, and transgression of the limits of political correctness:

> "Jane's motivation is the exploration of sensuality. [...] Consensual 'SM' also serves Anthony as a space for exploration of 'bodily' possibilities and choice. [...] For some practitioners consensual 'SM' provides a space which is free of taboos and the ordinary conventions of keeping a 'face'. [...] Some informants regarded consensual 'SM' as a possibility to transgress set limits of 'political correctness'." (Beckmann, 2001: 85-86)

Another reason is that homosexual people engage in BDSM since they want to overcome gay and lesbian stereotypes of sexuality. The last reason she explores through her interviewees is the transformative potential of the lived body, that is, the spiritual dimension of BDSM and the transgression of one's own limits.

Years later (Beckmann, 2005), she again puts forward the five reasons to engage in BDSM; this time positioning them within the framework of a rejection of capitalist and consumerist society on the part of BDSM due to the fact that these practices distance

themselves from the commodified normality. The idea of western societies not appreciating those bodily practices which do not fit into specific requirements of commodification is also present in her former article (Beckmann, 2001). It is a pity that the conclusions she draws are as a whole apologetic towards BDSM: she perceives those practices as liberating, freeing practitioners from constraints, and bearer of resistance to the consumerist power; she fails to acknowledge that the normalisation and commodification are present within BDSM itself[21]. As I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, BDSM is a sphere in which stereotypes – with regards to gender roles and sexual attitudes – can be challenged as well as reinforced[22].

Taylor (1997) and Taylor and Ussher (2001) similarly to Beckmann (2001), identify eight reasons for people to engage in BDSM. They rely upon a sample of 24 interviewees conducted in London, Brighton and Amsterdam. The authors firstly outline the nature of SM as a form of dissidence against patriarchal heterosexuality within a feminist discourse and describe SM as a form of dissent, a parody of abusive and conformist sexual relations:

"SM as deliberately, consciously and militantly antithetical to a sexual hegemonic, to patriarchal heterosexuality. Its most common form, expressed primarily by female participants, was within a feminist discourse in which SM was regarded as parodying sexual relations considered as traditionally subjugating, oppressive and exploitative of

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[21] Several scholars, in fact, draw a line between the 'good' and the 'bad' BDSM: the line is constituted from time to time by different concepts, for example the respect of the 'Safe, Sane and Consensual' safety protocol or the refusal of what is described as edgeplay – for example some forms of breath control.

[22] This double possibility has been recently captured by Luminais (2014) who focuses on the role of the state and the kinky communities in disciplining sexuality; the state through laws and the establishment of a cultural hegemony, the communities through the adherence to them.

women. [...] SM was positioned as a parody of abusive, divisive sexual relations; it turns it on its head, ridicules it, undermines it, exploits it, exposes it with the ultimate intention of destroying it." (Taylor, 1997: 122)

The second reason is the giving and receiving pleasure, characterised also as fun. The third motive frames SM as escape from the mundane, from the ordinariness or alienation of everyday life: "there was an emphasis upon SM as in some way compensating for a perceived lack in their life, such as countering feelings of aloneness, drudgery or boredom" (Taylor, 1997: 123). The fourth reason echoes the one identified by Beckmann (2001; 2005): SM as transcendence, as the search for a heightened state of consciousness. Some practitioners interpret this heightened state of consciousness as the result of endorphins released in the organism by different practices. This explanation parallels the analysis of Schneider (2009) and Synnott (1993) regarding ecstatic conditions reached within religious orders through rhythmic whipping. The fifth reason to engage in SM practices is the association between pain and arousal, learned usually during childhood. Furthermore, SM as related to intra-psychic processes constitutes another explanation given by BDSM practitioners:

"SM being in some way related to certain psychological aspects of their personalities, often understood as the result of experiences in childhood. [...] The most dominant 'intrapsychic' discourse was on the importance of control and its role in SM as a continuation, re-enactment or reversed re-enactment of earlier power issues. [...] A further discourse was around SM as retribution, or as somehow related to guilt or unhappy or abusive childhoods." (Taylor, 1997: 124 – 125)

This explanation is most closely linked to the next, that is, SM as pathology. In fact, other practitioners identify their interest in SM as potentially indicative of pathology and being similar to a symptom of an illness. The final category the authors identify is when SM is not explicable in terms of the person's background and thus defies comprehension (Taylor, 1997; Taylor and Ussher, 2001).

Comparing the analysis conducted by Beckmann (2001; 2005) and Taylor and Ussher (2001) I acknowledge that the former falls within a paradigm that highlights the interdependence between individual narratives and the social and economic context, while the latter focuses specifically on the social actors and their internal narratives.

Other monographic studies deal more specifically and extensively with ethnographic accounts of local BDSM communities (Beckmann, 2009; Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011).

Beckmann (2009), in her account of the London SM scene, focuses on the topic of transcendence inherent in SM practices[23]: "the institution of transformation through ritual ordeal and/or sexual ecstasy has an ancient tradition in many cultures and some have striking parallels in the 'bodily practices' of consensual 'SM'." (Beckmann, 2009: 177). She describes to which extent SM practices could be approached through the category of transcendence, since they are understood by her and her interviewees as potentially spiritual. Although she analyses other reasons for people to engage in SM practices, the most important seems to be the search for transcendence.

The concept of transcendence, at the core of her argumentation is defined in different ways, and by approximation. She acknowledges her quest for transcendence:

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[23] Beckmann's (2009) work consists of an ethnographical account of the London BDSM scene, comprised of 10 months of participant observation, 16 interviews and a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The sampling methods are snowball sampling and relational outcroppings. It is not clear if the total amount of interviews is equal to 16 or if the follow-up interviews are excluded from this sum.

"the difficulties implicit in a research on 'transcendental states': the problems of wording" (Beckmann, 2009: 199).

She gives first a methodological definition of transcendence:

"The vagueness and therefore the difficulty in describing experiences of a 'transcendental' nature and the fact that these experiences do have many varying features did not allow me to work with any kind of prefixed replies if I aimed at collecting meaningful data. [...] As the terminology had to be field-oriented, I decided not to use the word 'transcendence' within my questionnaire." (Beckmann, 2009: 68-69)

Further on in the book, Beckmann gives a more operative account of the concept of transcendence, analysed in the light of different ritual practices. First, transcendence is defined through the lens of institutionalised religion: "this Christian notion of 'transcendence' is therefore (erotic) pleasure through suffering. The ideal of 'religious suffering' has a long tradition in Christianity, be it Catholic or Protestant." (Beckmann, 2009: 179). The second definition is taken from a similarity with Dionysian cultural practices: "a fundamental Dionysian practice common to all but the Pueblos, Benedict argues, is that they '...seek the vision by fasting, by torture, by drugs and alcohol' [...] By transcending the senses one sees the truth, becomes powerful, and finds the unique 'self'." (Beckmann, 2009: 180). The subsequent explication of what constitutes transcendence is given through the concept of mysticism: "the 'bodily practices' of consensual 'SM' could be interpreted as one form of mysticism in which the 'lived body', and in particular its sensuous capacities, are used as a medium." (Beckmann, 2009: 184).

Finally, later on in the book, she declares her intention to follow Foucault's notion of transcendence – also in the formulation of the questions of the interview:

"Guided by Foucaults's project to find out about the way 'truth' is formed in relationships between knowledge and power within social practices [...] I intended to explore his notion of *the only way* to go beyond this 'truth' ('transcendence'). [...] To *go beyond* the moral imprisonment built within us [...] Foucault believed that we have to abolish the 'internal supervisor' [...] possible through 'limit-experiences'." (Beckmann, 2009: 195-197)

Despite from the quest for transcendence, which is after all a gained motivation, that is, a motivation learned after having tried SM for the first time, there are other motivations thanks to which people engage in SM. Other alternative ways in which she interprets SM practitioners' experiences could be grouped under the category of "practices of resistance" (Beckmann, 2009: 229). SM could incarnate resistance towards the 'tradition' mainly in two ways: on the ideological level and on the level of bodily practices themselves. These two ways of resisting the *status quo* manifest in several ways: undermining traditional dualism, e.g. male as active *versus* female as passive; focusing on non-genital bodily practices which challenge the modern concept of sexuality; appropriating the traditional modes of power; challenging the social construction of gender.

Ultimately, Beckmann (2009) perceives SM practices as positive and valuable *a priori* due to the challenge they pose to traditional modes of power and social narratives. Her research constitutes one of the first monographic accounts of BDSM practices and

communities within contemporary social sciences. It shows, in my opinion, an apologetic attitude towards SM practices: the absence of discussion of critical stances present within SM groups and communities is evident. This apology, or apologetic tendency partially reflects the efforts made by several scholars and activists to depathologise these practices. As I show further, BDSM practices and practitioners do have the possibility to challenge several socially shared stereotypes regards role and gender, but at the same time they may replicate them within the SM scenes and in interactions between practitioners. The BDSM community is formed by individuals who are embedded within a particular social context, and it is likely that the inequalities present in this context are reproduced throughout their interactions. Similar criticism has been raised by other scholars (cf. for example Barker, 2013; Luminais, 2014).

The work by Newmahr (2011) analyses the SM scene of an unspecified city of the United States. In contrast to Beckmann, she took part in the scenes by sharing BDSM activities with different partners. The main characteristic of the community members is their relationship with the margins of society, in the broadest sense. From several points of view – social, gendered, professional, and recreational – they occupy positions near the margins of what is usually considered mainstream. For example, narratives of the body are built around deviation from the hegemonic gender standards.

She arrives at the conclusion that SM is paradoxical: "it is subversive and conformist, liberating and constraining, performative and authentic, and misogynistic and feminist" (Newmahr, 2011: 168). SM practitioners and groups seem, in her opinion, to move along a continuum between these several pairs of opposed concepts. Particular scenes at particular times could be read as subversive, while others at different times and places could be perceived as and represent more conformist social interactions.

In conclusion, she proposes the concept of intimacy as the key concept to better understand SM practices; an intimacy deprived of positive values but concerning the "access to emotional and physical experiences of others" (Newmahr, 2011: 171).

"What is experienced as intimacy is what is understood as somehow *distinguishing the relationships from others*. [...] [The (potential) transformation of intimacy] lies not necessarily in marriage, disclosure, or sex, but anywhere that people experience each other differently enough than other people experience them." (Newmahr, 2011: 172)

SM is about intimacy, more than it is about sex, or power; while power is present in SM, the key concept she proposes in analysing SM is intimacy:

"Much more than it is about sex, SM is about intimacy. That sex is also often about intimacy does not mean that SM should be understood as an alternative kind of sex. SM is about constructing intimacy through social interaction. It is about obtaining access, securing it, granting it, promising it, daring one to take it, and testing it. The eroticism of SM is thus intertwined [...] with ideas of power and access." (Newmahr, 2011: 186)

Within one of the last chapters of the book, she proposes a feminist reading of SM practices, trying to escape the dichotomous debate between anti-SM and pro-SM feminists that developed in the United States since the 1970s, known as the sex wars.

She proposes the concept of feminist edgework linked to the notion of risk-taking as a way to overcome this binarism.

Her argumentation becomes clearer if we follow its unfolding step by step. First of all, she states the starting point: "SM play is a path to victory in the competition for intimate access to another. This is, on one level, easily read as consistent with heteronormative eroticism" (Newmahr, 2011: 182). The second step of the reasoning is "women's engagement in SM can be framed differently if we understand SM as edgework." (Newmahr, 2011: 182). To consider SM as edgework means to acknowledge that binaries between subject and object are blurred, and that, for example, dominants risk more than subs in declaring publicly their desire for sadism. SM relies on binaries and dichotomies, but also challenges them. The following step of her argument is the consideration of these dichotomies as intertwined with the notion of risk-taking. Women take risks in engaging in SM:

"The immersion in spaces of potential violation, then, may constitute and construct women's bravado. Through bottoming, women confront and withstand and symbolically survive male violence. [...] These women are not *celebrating* violation, but actively defying the cultural proscription to live and fear of it." (Newmahr, 2011: 183)

SM could constitute edgework also from an emotional perspective: "this emotional edgework is not the attempt to maintain control over emotions that threaten to overwhelm, [...] but the negotiation of the boundary between emotional chaos and emotional order." (Newmahr, 2011: 184). The last step of her reasoning is the less clear since she states that one cannot argue that women engage in SM plays as a calculated strategy in order to cope with male violence, but "we can simultaneously recognize the

social contexts in which risk-taking acquires meaning and reject the notion that risk-taking is always a coping mechanism with some (ostensibly unfortunate) social condition." (Newmahr, 2011: 184).

The author does not clearly define this third option, which falls outside of the dichotomy created during the sex wars, a divide that in my opinion still remains quite unchallenged by scholars and activists. I will analyse the subject of the feminist sex wars and in particular the debate around SM more deeply in chapter 6.

The last work I will analyse is the research by Weiss (2011); her aim is to analyse BDSM sexuality as a social relation that links subjects to socioeconomics. She conducted open-ended interviews and participant observations of BDSM practitioners in the San Francisco Bay Area:

"Combining socioeconomic and performative analytics, performative materialism insists on a method of reading that pays careful attention to the dynamic ways subjects are produced in and through social power. In order to read the effects [...] of BDSM scenes [...] we must analyze the rationales, the cultural formations, that link a particular scene or individual practitioner with the larger social landscape." (Weiss, 2011: 25)

She tries to avoid falling into the divide between the positions claimed as justifications by the practitioners: the first position sees a separation between the private and the public – BDSM being part of the private sphere; the second position read BDSM as a "public and political problem, a form of racism, sexism, or fascism" (Weiss, 2011: 188).

"Instead of this binary analysis, this chapter marshals the performative materialism methodology developed in this book to read the politics of BDSM scenes. This entails considering the material conclusions of SM performance, alongside the material [...] effects of SM play. A political reading of SM must [...] emphasize the conditions of performance. [...] These conditions – social location, audience reception, and discursive and ideological production – are central to an analysis of any particular scene. But these particularities are also central to the way scenes *work*: the effects of a scene, political or otherwise." (Weiss, 2011: 188)

Her conclusions are open: the reading of a scene – and consequently, of BDSM practices in general – is ambivalent and dependent also on the means and tools to which the audience and the practitioners have access to:

"What happens next, however, depends. Sometimes [...] making sex public can disrupt fantasies of autonomous individualism, personal pathology, individuated responsibility, the privateness of desire, or sex removed from the social. Sometimes, too, circuits can reproduce, reinforce, even establish forms of disavowal and unknowing that enable social privilege and help to justify it. There is no single reading of the SM scene." (Weiss, 2011: 230)

Notwithstanding the interesting questions she tries to answer to throughout the book, I agree with Hekma (2013) in saying that her work is informed by too much theorizing at the expense of abstracts of interviews and participant observations;

furthermore, it seems that nobody and no BDSM groups at all could pass her political test:

> "Weiss never suggests how they could pass her political test: how could anyone accept the PC [politically correct?] line on sexism and consent, or on consumerism, as Weiss does, and still have an erotic or even social life – as BDSM-er, as straight or gay, or as consumer – given the pervasive sexism, homonormativity, neo-liberalism, and many other activating factors of social inequality?" (Hekma, 2013: 750)

Apart from more or less harsh critiques, the conclusions are open. The political act of analysing the BDSM scene – and, as a consequence, BDSM practices in general – and understanding its underlying meaning, is left to the reader.

2.5 BDSM-related Subjects: an Analysis of Peripheral Concepts

BDSM is a complex social phenomenon. It intersects with several categories, concepts and topics. In the present chapter I will conduct a brief analysis of the concepts that allow a better understanding of some aspects of BDSM – I do not intend to be either comprehensive or exhaustive in approaching these topics. Although they do not constitute the primary focus of my research, these issues highlight dimensions of BDSM present in the Italian scene. Furthermore, throughout the following sections, I will better define the concepts employed in my thesis.

2.5.1 BDSM as a Subculture

The study of subcultures was firstly established during the 1970s in the United Kingdom. Originally, a subculture was intended to mean a social class that through different means resisted the hegemony of power of other social classes. The first subcultures studied were the English working classes (Magaudda, 2009). Soon, other works on specific youth subcultures such as hippies, bikers, and skinheads followed. The practice of resistance in youth subcultures was seen as primarily symbolic, since through appropriation and consumption these subcultures created meanings opposed to the hegemonic social and cultural norms (Santoro and Sassatelli, 2008). Among the critics of the classical study of subcultures, Bennett (1999) states that along with practices of resistance, subcultures also employ mainstream cultural expressions, and that these expressions are linked with the global cultural industry. Thus, subcultures could be seen not only as places and practices of resistance, but also as expressions of mainstream culture enacted through consumption.

Postmodern approaches to subcultures underline the modification of the core aspects of a subculture – as well as mirroring the postmodern paradigm within social sciences. Subcultures are perceived as different from the past: the presence of multiple memberships and identities; the fluidity of social relations within the group; a diminished interest in social class membership; the pre-eminence of consumption as a way to realise individual autonomy (Magaudda, 2009). As a consequence, Magaudda (2009) suggests abandoning the term 'subculture' for more appropriate terms, such as 'neo-tribe', 'lifestyle', and 'scene'. The term 'scene' is in fact often used by BDSM practitioners to describe a particular local context in which groups of individuals gather to attend BDSM-related activities (munches, play parties, workshops, and so on).

Newmahr defines specifically what constitutes an SM scene: "a social interaction that involves the mutually consensual and conscious use, among two or more people, of pain, power, perceptions about power, or any combination thereof, for psychological, emotional, or sensory pleasure" (Newmahr, 2010: 393).

The contemporary approach to subcultures has partially recovered the legacy of the first studies of the 1970s: the influence of social and material inequalities is recognised, but the role of subcultures as means of collective politically oriented expression has been lost in favour of an individual aesthetic choice (Magaudda, 2009).

Talking about scenes and tribes, Watters (2003) focuses his analysis specifically on the urban tribes that are spreading throughout Europe and the United States. They are constituted by individuals who belong to several groups and fluidly enter and leave depending on personal conditions – e.g. the place in which they work, the existence of a partner, etc. The analysis of Watters (2003) states the importance of Granovetter's weak ties in constructing and shaping these tribes, similar to contemporary subcultures.

Maurer, in Gelder (2007), focuses on the language spoken within small groups: the argot, that it is almost exclusively spoken in the presence of members of the groups and seldom with outsiders. Gelder underlines the importance of Maffesoli's work (1988) in the study of subcultures: he states the role of Dionysian values in binding specific social groups, the so-called emotional communities; these groups are able to resist the massification and dehumanisation of the modern world (Gelder, 2007). The sole purpose of an emotional community is, according to the author, to confirm a group's view of itself through community rituals.

Mains (1984) explicitly analyses the tribe – for him tribe is a synonym for subculture – of the leathermen. Among the available terms, for him 'tribe' best defines

leathermen and their activities: they have a cultural unity and a common language; they identify with a territory, formed by body, mind, the playroom and broader mental spaces; they rely on oral transmission of culture; their tribal space is strongly linked to basic animal instincts within the human psyche. Further, the author analyses three characteristics of leathermen that qualify for being a subculture: self-identification as a group; a network within which individuals focus their primary relationships; a frame through which they filter larger cultural values (Mains, 1984).

A direct link is then made between BDSM practices and the concept of subculture. Describing BDSM practitioners as a subculture seems possible even nowadays, due to the fact that these practices are at the basis of identities and identifications – based on language, rituals, practices, spaces – for some of the practitioners.

At the beginning of the 19th century, people engaging in BDSM-like practices were perceived as perverted, isolated individuals to be cured. A sense of community, or group, among them was missing. Cataloguing the perversions was nevertheless the starting point of a process that years later lead to the recognition of these subcultures. Ironically, the very moment in which these 'perversions' were isolated and recognised was the point at which the formation of the subculture became possible[24].

To conclude, as far as BDSM practices define groups of individuals and distinguish them from non BDSM practitioners in terms of spaces, practices, language and rituals, we could say that the category of subculture or urban tribe could be applied to BDSM.

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[24] It appears to be more precise to speak about subcultures (plural): "There is no homogeneous S&M culture, but a heterogeneity that becomes increasingly apparent as sexual stories elaborate and proliferate in the late modern world" (Langdridge and Butt, 2005: 72).

2.5.2 Sexing Bodies, Feeling Bodies

> *"Always already a cultural sign,*
>
> *the body sets limits*
>
> *to the imaginary meanings*
>
> *that it occasions, but is never free*
>
> *of an imaginary construction."*
>
> Judith Butler

BDSM clearly involves the body: it is done with the body and leaves marks on it. Although it seems easy to define what the body is, and consequently the ways in which it interacts with BDSM, sociologists have difficulties in identifying what the body is (Shilling, 1993), mainly because the human body intersects different topics: medicalisation, sexualisation, discursive and material bodies, talking bodies, etc.

I do not intend to explore all these definitions of what constitutes the body; certainly I can say that BDSM practices are strongly related to the body: signs are made on it; it is the means through which a particular relationship – e.g. master/slave[25] – manifests itself through the signs of the whip, or the cane; particular clothes adorn the body according to the dress code of the club; bodies are naked to symbolise the submissiveness of a person within a scene. In some ways, BDSM is an embodied practice.

The body has a particular role for the members of a subculture: Sweetman (2001) states that within subcultures, the emphasis on physicality and the body is a manifestation of moves towards neo-tribal forms of sociality, where a sense of being in

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[25] I encountered the practice of branding just once in my participant observation. A BDSM practitioner told me that one of his acquaintances, a slave, has been branded by his mistress with her name. The slave himself told me that "when they branded me with fire I did not moan [because of pain] at all" (Interviewee Ulrich, 2014).

the right place and affection is produced more by affective proxemics than by formal relationships:

> "The emphasis that many subcultural figures place on the intimate physicality of the procedures and practices involved suggests that their popularity may be seen, in part, as a manifestation of moves towards 'neo-tribal' forms of sociality, where a sense of belonging and togetherness is engendered more by affective proxemics than by any formal or contractual relationship between the parties involved." (Sweetman, 2001: 194)

Although it could seem that by displaying naked bodies and activities that for some are sexual or sexually arousing – such as whipping, caning, piercing with needles, etc – the divide between private and public has been removed, still, some bodily activities remain private and segregated: female and male bathrooms are separated in the clubs, the door of the dressing room where people make up an dress for the party has to remain closed dividing the front stage by the back stage. The space where the party takes place and the bodies – more or less naked – are whipped, tied or spanked is separated from the spaces in which such bodies are prepared or checked and controlled for the performance. Following Elias (1939), the enclosing of the naked body and its organismic functions in particular enclaves is one of the results of the civilizing process.

I will show in the thesis, by analysing the ideas of beauty and desirability of the body within the scene, to what extent these subcultures may and often do re-frame the meaning of bodies (Monaghan, 2006). A beautiful female body within the scene is not always slim, tall and toned as in the commercials; sometimes big thighs and buttocks are

considered valuable since they allow a gratifying spanking experience or a wider surface to be hit with the whip.

Bodily practices or adornments indicate relationships of dominance or submission: collars on men or women indicate that they belong to a dominant[26]; kneeling females show their submissiveness towards their dominant. Nevertheless, relations of dominance or subordination are embodied in different ways, for example through chivalry and deference (Shilling, 1993; Bourdieu, 1998). These two practices are particularly widespread within the scene, especially enacted by dominant men, young or old.

The desire to alter or modify – even temporarily – the body is part of what Shilling (1993) calls the body as a project: "growing numbers of people are increasingly aware of the body as unfinished entity which is shaped and 'completed' partly as a result of lifestyle choices" (Shilling, 1993: 174). The body has become an integral element in the process of the self, shaping and altering the body is (also) a matter of lifestyle choice (Hawkes, 1996). Pitts (2003) states that new body projects that see the body as a personal projection of the self have a different social significance than the traditional ones, where the body is a canvas on which social hierarchies are inscribed.

To sum up, there is circularity between the concept of subculture or lifestyle and the body: the subculture modifies – even temporarily – the body through clothes, signs, body modifications, etc; and the body is an entity that is finished and polished also according to lifestyle choices.

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[26] Several different degrees of trust between the dominant and the submissive can be symbolically expressed by the material with which the collar is made. This is better explained by Ginger, a 22 year-old female: "At the beginning, the first collar is the chain with the snap hook, that everyone can open…Then you are a bit 'you have your role but…', that is, if someone comes along and dominates you is like if anyone can do it. Then you receive the padlock with the key…and this is the other level. And still…you do a number of things that probably make…who dominates…satisfied and proud of what you are doing; the dominant is helping you grow […] Until [the final step when] you get the leather collar." (Interviewee Ginger, 2013).

Within the issue of the body, I should mention the topic of disability. Disability and BDSM is an issue almost totally neglected by the scientific community (Langdridge and Barker, 2007), with the exception of the article by Reynolds (2007). He argues that BDSM is an important mode of personal empowerment for people with disabilities. The article deals with the artist Bob Flanagan and his BDSM performances; he was affected by cystic fibrosis and his BDSM practices are analysed by the author within this context. He states that the pairing between disability and BDSM "can be psychologically and physically therapeutic for some people with disability" (Reynolds, 2007: 42). There are, nevertheless, obstacles to the creation of change, as the author demonstrates: 1) social policy is inscribed within a heterosexual framework; 2) the shame of sexual desire for many people with disabilities "who may not have adequate access to the education or resources they need to maintain a positive body image or sexual health" (Reynolds, 2007: 48-49); 3) the shame associated with BDSM and other alternative sexualities; 4) the shame associated with disabled people trying to express their sexuality; 5) the ethical dilemma policy makers face between the duty to protect vulnerable people versus the responsibility to provide equal access to all resources, including sexual; 6) the double disadvantage disabled people face when comparing their access to health care to that offered to able-bodied people; 7) policy governing appropriate sexual behaviour – this point is indeed valid also for non-disabled people.

2.5.3 Power, Play and the Feeling Self

Power seems to be one of the defining features of BDSM practices (Weinberg *et al.*, 1984). The expression 'Total Power Exchange' (TPE), used as a synonym of BDSM, is

a clear example of the importance of power in defining what BDSM is. The definition of power is consequently essential in order to comprehend one of the core aspects of BDSM. Power, in its strictest sense, is relational and consists in power over others; it could operate through force, coercion, manipulation, authority, or rational persuasion (Lukes, 1996). For example, according to Foucault, medical discourse (in a broad sense), disciplines rather than describes human sexuality. Its power is a mix of authority and rational persuasion, exercised through the ritual of confession (Foucault, 1975; 1976). In the Italian BDSM scene a mix of all the ways in which power could be exerted is present.

Monceri (2010) states that an asymmetry of power, rather than of pain, is the centre of BDSM:

"The difference between a normal sexual interaction (that is, respectful of heteronormative principles) and a SM interaction is not determined by its being enacted within a 'community', or by virtue of the awareness of who practices it that it belongs to a SM context. In general, it is possible to speak of a SM interaction in any case in which the exchange of power becomes the focus of the sexual practice, beyond the awareness and the self-definition of the individuals involved in it." (Monceri, 2010: 112-113)

The power she describes as the core part of BDSM practices is neither sacred nor unchangeable, since symbols and figures are negotiable:

"In SM scenes we resort to the entire classical repertoire of visible symbols of power and also to the stereotypical images of the characters

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involved in power relations: teachers and students, guards and prisoners, cowboys and Indians, torturers and tortured, etc. Nevertheless, the use of these symbols and figures is freely available to the individuals involved, and designed to achieve the erotic/sexual satisfaction. Thus, the idea of the *sacredness* of power and especially of its *immutability* dissolves – in particular the immutability of the power relations conceived as 'structures', because they appear modifiable *from within* thanks to the individual choice." (Monceri, 2010: 116)

Langdridge and Butt (2005) argue the importance of power within these practices, stating in quite a simple fashion that "the exchange of power is a feature of the world that readily affords a sexual meaning" (Langdridge and Butt, 2005: 67): for them the interpretation of the exchange of power is primarily sexual.

2.5.4 Gender and BDSM

Gender has been defined in several ways and following different paradigms – essentialist and social constructionist, to mention just two of them. I do not intend to reconstruct the history of the concept, but simply to present the definition I intend to use throughout my thesis. I refer mainly to Raewyn Connell (2002) who describes gender as the structure of social relations centred around the reproductive arena, and the whole set of practices that link reproductive differences in bodies to social processes.

"Gender is the structure of social relations that is centered on the reproductive arena, and that set of practices that do fit reproductive differences of bodies in social processes. Said less formally, gender is about the way in which society relates with human body and their continuity, and the different effects that this has on our personal lives and on the destiny of our community" (Connell, 2002: 47)

Gender is a form of "social embodiment" (Connell, 2002: 128) that considers the body as a reflexive bodily practice, that is, the body is object and subject at the same time. Gender is a methodical, routine and recurring performative construct; it is profoundly relational (West and Zimmermann, 1987). Accordingly, Butler (1990; 1994) defines the gendered subject as the product of reiterative practices in which discourse produces the effects that it names.

As I will say further on, the BDSM practitioners I observed and interviewed were mainly heterosexual. This definition of sexual orientation takes gender as the primary element: the gender of the person is the most important characteristic in the choice of a sexual or emotional partner. But, what if gender is not the most important element in choosing a BDSM play partner? This is what Simula (2014) suggests, that is, that the BDSM role is more important than gender in the choice of a partner "their BDSM orientation (e.g., dominant, submissive) was more important to them than their gendered sexual orientation" (Simula, 2014: 170). She relies on the work of Yost (2013) about the consistencies of BDSM roles as "meaningful identities" (Yost, 2013: 152), that seem to be consistent with sexual fantasies. Although Yost's data analysis seems not to be entirely coherent with the characteristics of the data (Zambelli, 2014), the

conclusions – if valid – are fascinating, even if my data do not suggest the primacy of BDSM role over gender and provide a different pattern, namely one in which both gender and BDSM role are almost equally important, the importance of BDSM role is assessed.

2.5.5 The Role of Pain and Pleasure

One of the major works on pain within the sociological perspective is the one by Scarry (1985); in her work she concentrates on the inexpressibility of physical pain, on its role in torture and interrogation, and analyses how it is transformed into "the insignia of power" (Scarry, 1985: 51).

In his paper, McIntyre (2014) conducts a deep analysis of the work of Scarry, proposing some critiques. They concentrate around three main arguments: pain is defined as having an aversive nature and the author leaves out of the analysis cases in which pain is pleasurable (BDSM, sports, body modification, eating highly spiced food, etc); pleasure is described simply as the absence of pain, thus not having a positive content but simply the absence of a negative feature; finally, that pain and pleasure are mutually exclusive for Scarry, while McIntyre states that they are positioned along a continuum, in which one could become the other and vice versa.

Herself critical towards Scarry's (1985) notion of pain as nonvoluntary, Newmahr (2010) analyses the multiple meanings attached to pain in BDSM practices. She identifies four narratives around physical pain within the Caeden community in the United States[27]. Three types of discourses replicate the hegemonic understanding of pain as a negative experience: transformed pain, sacrificial pain and investment pain.

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[27] The same community which she dealt with in the other work cited in this thesis (Newmahr, 2011).

Transformed pain is pain changed instantaneously in pleasure: since it is pleasant is not experienced as pain; sacrificial pain is undesirable and remains undesirable: the suffering is an offer made by the bottom to the top; finally, investment pain frames pain as unpleasant but also as an investment for future rewards, it is a means to a particular end. As a second thought, these three types of pain that the author describes as different appear in fact as constituting a single category, that is, the one that describes pain as a means to reach something – a future reward, pleasure or the satisfaction of the dominant within the session.

Newmahr describes a fourth ideal type, the only type of pain perceived as positive by the subject: the autotelic pain; it consists of framing the experience of pain as a positive experience: people like pain for the pain's sake; pain is appreciated and valued as pain.

> "Ultimately, this discourse appears to disentangle the enjoyment of pain from the understanding of pain as bad. While the end result of transformed pain is pleasure, it becomes, posttransformation, pleasure *instead* of pain. Autotelic pain begins as pain, ends as pain, and is enjoyable nonetheless." (Newmahr, 2010: 407)

Other scholars, cf. for example Collins (2004), focused on pain as sexually arousing:

> "Exciting or dramatic activities start off the individuals (separately, not yet in shared buildup) to bring the initiating emotional ingredient to a sexual IR [interaction ritual]. These can include the drama of sexual

negotiation, chase, and play; conflict and pain; and the antinomian excitement of breaking taboos." (Collins, 2004: 249)

It is generally recognised that the perception of pain is subjective or depending on the culture. Melzack (1973) underlines the role of cultural and individual variations in pain responsivity, while others state that pain and pleasure are different qualities of experience often blurred by cultural and individual models of perception (Sack and Miller, 1975; Mains, 1984).

The concept of a link between pleasure and pain, so close that they are perceived as a unique stimulus is explored by Mains (1984). He dedicates an entire chapter to the neurological perception of pain, exploring the role of endorphins in SM sexuality[28].

Collins (2008) states that undergoing pain and injury can be ritualised "when they occur at the focus of social attention that conveys a strong sense of membership in an exclusive group" (Collins, 2008: 74).

2.5.6 Polyamory and BDSM

Polyamory is a form of non-monogamy in which people openly establish multiple sexual and/or emotional relationships (Sheff, 2014). The freedom of choice and a utilitarian principle are at the basis of the decision to engage in polyamory. Sheff and Hammers (2011), as well as Bauer (2010), document the affiliation between polyamory and BDSM and the overlap in membership; my data confirm this trend: several BDSM practitioners were practising or interested in polyamory and vice versa. Furthermore,

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[28] Endorphins had been recently discovered, and Mains dedicated in-depth analysis to their role thanks to his Ph.D. in biochemistry (Thompson, 2002).

many BDSM practitioners have multiple relationships without identifying as polyamorous (Sheff and Hammers, 2011) or are non exclusive in their relationships (Richters *et al.*, 2008).

Haritaworn *et al.* (2006) underlined how the polyamory discourse emerged at the crossroads of several social categories: feminists, gay males, bisexuals and BDSM practitioners. Notwithstanding the fact that polyamory is not a new social phenomenon, the poly culture that has emerged within BDSM communities has been understudied. The authors state that the literature on polyamory is comprised mainly by two genres: self-help manuals and esoterism. *The Ethical Slut* (Easton and Hardy, 1997) is described as the self-help seminal work on polyamory[29]. Although the works on esoterism are not discussed in the article (Haritaworn *et al.*, 2006), several critiques of self-help manuals are stated: they create a new normativity; they rely on individualism instead of criticising the power structure; they suppose universal kind of ties; they psychologise and individualise social processes and divisions and finally they emphasise free personal choice and agency while instead locating their advice in the context of a political critique of hegemonic gender and sexual cultures. That is, self-help manuals appear to be ground-breaking in terms of political and social rules, while instead they incite the single social actor to achieve a new social status and break free of social norms related to monogamy.

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[29] Recently, a second edition expanded and updated has been reprinted. In 2014 there has been the first Italian edition of the book (*La zoccola etica*); in Italy several presentations and discussions of the book followed, especially within polyamorous groups and LGBT associations and collectives.

2.5.7 Selves, Subjects and Identity

Many scholars report that several define themselves as BDSMers, highlighting the fact that BDSM constitutes an identity, or at least a remarkable part of their identity – in contraposition to BDSM intended as a set of practices (cf. for example Brown, 2010).

The concept of identity is at least problematic within social sciences. Many scholars deal with the definition of what constitutes the identity of an individual; others criticise the very use of this concept since it denotes essentialism: "identity means to sustain that […] there is something that remains" (Remotti, 2010: 107); for others, identity means too much, too little or nothing at all (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Monceri, 2010; Remotti, 2010).

Some post-structuralist theories define identity as built around the notion of power and constituted in terms of discursive exclusions and binary oppositions; for example heterosexual *versus* homosexual, monogamous *versus* polyamorous, etc (Roseneil and Seymour, 1999). Queer theory, for example, is heavily critical towards the very concept of identity and pays attention to the process of categorisation (Monceri, 2010). Seidman *et al.* (2003), in this regard, states that not all societies have a culture of sexual identity, this category being particularly widespread in the United Kingdom and its former colonies.

The usefulness of the category of identity as analytical tool has been questioned: identity is not only built, but also something fake and illusory (Sciolla, 2000; Remotti, 2010). In this regard, Monceri (2010) states that it is built by and for normal individuals, while for the others different models of abnormal identities are available.

Teresa de Lauretis (1999) instead of identity speaks about the concept of female subjectivity as something constructed and not natural. Within the context of the theory

of difference, the social subject has not an innate or natural sexuality, but rather it is constructed as the result of the continuous interactions with the gender representations available in a society (de Lauretis, 1999).

Remotti (2010) and Monceri (2010) propose, as an alternative to identity, the concept of identification. As with identity, identification is the starting point for the act of claiming rights but does not carry the negative aspects of using the category of identity. As a synonym and with this same meaning, Phelan (1995) suggests the concepts of coalitions and fluid affinities among social actors. Consequently to this idea of coalitions and affinities, some scholars state that to speak of citizenship usually also implies an identity (Plummer, 2003a; Langdridge, 2006).

The chief and most complete critique of the concept of identity comes from Brubaker and Cooper (2000). They cleverly analyse the different meanings of the category of identity within social sciences; their thesis is that identity "tends to mean too much, […] too little […] or nothing at all" (p. 1) and thus suggest to go beyond identity proposing some valid alternatives. One of the strongest criticisms of social constructionist and post-structuralist interpretations of identity is that "it is not clear why what is routinely characterized as multiple, fragmented, and fluid should be conceptualized as 'identity' at all" (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 6).

The authors identify at least five uses of the term identity, referred to as strongly ambiguous: i) the basis of social or political action; ii) identity as a collective phenomenon, as denoting sameness among members: in this sense it could be the basis of the sexual or intimate citizenship claims explicated above; iii) the core aspects of selfhood, this use is typical psychological; iv) the product of social or political action, typical of the social movement literature; v) the fragmented, instable and multiple nature of the contemporary self, employed by post-structuralism and especially

Foucault; it rejects notions of fundamental sameness. Not convinced that this category is indispensable to social analysis, the authors provide some alternatives without reifying connotations: identification, self-understanding and commonality / connectedness / groupness; they state stating that it would be useless to look for a single alternative.

> "'Identification' lacks the reifying connotations of ''identity'. It invites us to specify the agents that do the identifying. Ad it does not presuppose that such identifying [...] will necessarily result in the internal sameness. [...] Identification – of oneself and of others – is intrinsic to social life. [...] Yet identification does not require a specifiable 'identifier'; it can be pervasive and influential without being accomplished by discrete, specified persons or institutions." (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 14-16)

The authors subsequently analyse the second alternative proposed, self-understanding:

> "'Self-understanding' [...] designates what might be called 'situated subjectivity': one's sense of who one is, of one's social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act. [...] The term [...] does not imply a distinctively modern or Western understanding of the 'self' as a homogeneous, bounded, unitary entity. A sense of who one is can take many forms. [It] lacks the reifying connotations of 'identity'. " (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 17-18)

The third word proposed as substitute for identity is in fact a set of three words:

"Commonality, connectedness and groupness could be usefully employed here in place of the all-purpose 'identity'. This is the third cluster of terms we propose. 'Commonality' denotes the sharing of some common attribute, 'connectedness' the relational ties that link people. [...] 'Groupness' – the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solitary group." (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 20)

The critiques of the concept of identity highlighted above and the vocabulary employed by the interviewees themselves are the reasons according to which I refer to 'BDSM practitioners' rather than 'BDSMers' throughout the thesis – apart from when interviewees explicitly use the term 'BDSMers'.

2.5.8 Violence and Symbolic Violence

It has been argued that BDSM constitutes violence due to the brutality of the actions and the similarity between some of the practices and torture. The first argument used to counter this point is that BDSM is different from violence because violence, unlike BDSM, is *per se* non-consensual (Monceri, 2010)[30].

Others like Donnelly (2004), state that the difference between BDSM and intimate violence is not easy to tell; thus, she implies that there are similarities between them, and that to confuse them is possible. Nevertheless, she suggests a criterion to distinguish between them: if one or both partners (I will say 'all the partners') feel trapped, used, angry, afraid, then it is probably violence; if, on the other hand, they are free, trusting, creative and valued, than is likely that it is consensual play.

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[30] For a more complete definition of violence in social sciences see Jervis *et al.* (1998).

Now I will present an example of criteria to distinguish abuse from BDSM found in internet (Sir Bamm, n. d.) and show to what extent using them it could be difficult to discern between violence and BDSM; as Donnelly (2004) states, in some circumstances it is difficult to distinguish BDSM from abuse. By examining the following example, I will show that applying the criteria to the empirical data collected, it is indeed difficult to tell the difference between abuse and BDSM, especially because the criteria appear confusing and ambivalent.

The criteria for BDSM are the following: 1) a BDSM scene is a controlled situation; 2) negotiation occurs before the scene; 3) consent is given to what will and will not happen; 4) presence of a safeword; 5) everyone involved is concerned about desires, needs and limits of others; 6) participants should not be impaired by alcohol and drugs; 7) after a scene, people involved feel good (Sir Bamm, n. d.). As regards point 2) and 4) empirical data showed that the safeword is not always present – it constitutes a narrative employed with people external to the scene or new BDSM practitioners in order to provide a positive image and a general idea of the principles on which BDSM is based; secondly, explicit negotiations do not always take place: people who have known each other for a long time are in general less likely to negotiate practices; even some practitioners who play for the first time together happen not to negotiate or to decide on a safeword together.

A different means to analyse the differences between BDSM sex from violence are provided by Jozifkova (2013): BDSM is characterised by voluntariness; communication; a safeword; safe sex and access to information about BDSM. Even in this case, applying these criteria does not encapsulate the difference between BDSM and violence; in fact, empirical data suggest that a safeword and access to information about BDSM are not always present, making the distinction between BDSM and violence – if based on these

elements only – more blurred. For Jozifkova (2013), the main differences lie ultimately in the perceivable dissimilarity between everyday life and a BDSM scene with the partner: they should be clearly distinguishable one from the other for both the BDSM practitioners; furthermore, the disparity in power after the scene should decrease and disappear.

The concept of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998) better expresses the concerns of those who see BDSM as an internalisation of the male imaginary about sexuality – in particular, as I will show in the following chapters, the concern expressed by anti-SM feminists both in Italy and abroad – rather than physical violence. Symbolic violence is the acceptance a dominated gives to a dominant when thinking about the dominator or oneself; it cannot be done without using a common framework of references with the dominant; since these tools are the embodied form of the domination, they make this relationship appear natural (Bourdieu, 1988). Symbolic power, symbolic violence and symbolic force are words used by Bourdieu (1998) to describe the relationship based on the collaboration of the dominated with the dominant; they are exercised without relying on coercion or physical force. To be able to read relationships of symbolic violence and power, "it is necessary to analyse the social construction of the cognitive structures that organise the construction of the world and its powers, since this construction is the effect of the power embodied in the dominated as dispositions and perceptions that make them *sensitive* to certain symbolic manifestations of power" (Bourdieu, 1998: 51)[31].

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[31] "Occorre prendere atto e render conto della costruzione sociale delle strutture cognitive che organizzano gli atti di costruzione del mondo e del suoi poteri. [...] Questa costruzione pratica [...] è [...] l'effetto di un potere, iscritto durevolmente nel corpo dei dominati sotto forma di schemi di percezione e di disposizioni [...] che rendono *sensibili* a certe manifestazioni simboliche del potere." (Bourdieu, 1998: 51).

Collins (2008) criticises Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence since it is tension-free, non-confrontational and repetitive, while violence is shaped by tension and fear, and is usually brief.

Raj (2010), in analysing lesbian BDSM, suggests that marking the body in violent ways in BDSM is an affective process that generates erotic intimacy and creates new possibilities of pleasure different from heterosexual genital penetration. Thus, violence – a word that he uses to describe BDSM practices – could be both productive and oppressive; he does not think that violence is *a priori* negative: it depends on the context, its embodied specificity and its conditions of production (Raj, 2010).

"[Sadomasochism] should be considered as a disparate set of culturally and materially contingent erotic practices. This is not to suggest that sadomasochism is always ethical. In some circumstances it can be harmful when overdetermined by abusive relations of power. In fact, it is crucial to distinguish between the different kinds of bodies and subjectivities implicated in these practices." (Raj, 2010: 135)

2.5.9 The Social Stigma

Weinberg quotes Goffman, in defining a stigma as a relationship between "a person's virtual social identity (what we believe him to be) and his actual social identity (what he could be shown to be if we possessed all the facts about him)" (Weinberg, 2014: 229). BDSM practitioners could face social stigma due to some features of BDSM. This could result in hiding these sexual practices – or one's own identity, if intended as such – from partners, family, friends, colleagues, medical doctors and health

professionals; moreover, this could result in harassment, physical attacks and discrimination against BDSM practitioners (Wright, 2006; Meeker, 2013)[32].

Brown (2010) describes four ways in which BDSM practitioners could experience stigma: negative public portrayal, value diminishment as patients in health care, mockery and shunning, discrimination and prejudice (legal discrimination, denial of services, stereotyping and scapegoating). Stigma management strategies employed include concealment, disclosure, collective action, reappropriation of negative labelling and disengagement from mainstream society (Brown, 2010).

Stiles and Clark (2011) analyse specifically concealment among BDSM practitioners and the strategies employed to that end. The more widespread reasons for concealment are, according to the authors: self-protection, protection of others and enhancement, that is, for example, to create a bond with others through sharing the secret with them, or to increase the excitement related to these practices. Despite concealing their interest in BDSM, practitioners employ several strategies "to make them more acceptable to others or to improve their interpersonal outcomes by decreasing the costs of the stigma" (Stile and Clark, 2011: 178).

Sheff and Hammers (2011) focus on the discriminated among the BDSM practitioners: in particular, they deal with ethnicity, race and gender to highlight the differentials in social power within the BDSM community and the high levels of discrimination to which some groups are exposed, due to the colour of their skin or their social class: "although everyone involved in 'perverted' sex risks social censure, people unprotected by social advantages are more vulnerable to the discriminatory impacts of

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[32] Wright, in the *Survey of Violence and Discrimination Against Sexual Minorities* (2008), states that 37.5% of respondents had either been discriminated against, experienced some form of violence, or harassment or discrimination aimed at "their BDSM-leather-fetish-related business" (Wright, 2008: n. pag.).

this sexual stigma than are those shielded by racial and/or class privileges" (Sheff and Hammers, 2011: 199)[33].

2.5.10 Sexual Citizenship

The idea of citizenship as related to sexuality emerged during the 1980s. Weeks (1998) states that sexual citizens exist because of the new primacy given to sexual subjectivity in the contemporary world; three aspects contributed to its development: the democratisation of relationships, the emergence of new sexual subjectivities and the development of new sexual stories (cf. for example the work of Plummer). Nevertheless, the idea of the sexual citizen is a contradiction in terms: the sexual is traditionally an intimate aspect of our life, away from the public gaze; on the other hand, citizenship is about the involvement in a wider society (Weeks, 1998).

"Historically, of course, the separation of sexuality from the public sphere has only intensified our interest in it, yet we still tend to regard the erotic as an arena of intensely private and personal experience, however noisy the public resonances. Citizenship, on the other hand, if it means anything, must be about involvement in a wider society […]. The citizen operates in the public sphere, carrying rights and entitlements but also responsibilities to fellow citizens and to the community which defines

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[33] In this regard, Langdridge and Barker (2007) note the absence of academic literature dealing with race/ethnicity, disability and transsexuality in BDSM; in the introduction to their book on sadomasochism, they state: "We attempted to garner submissions that addressed this important issue [ethnicity] but managed to secure only one preliminary agreement from an author, who found himself subsequently unable to submit the chapter." (Langdridge and Barker, 2007: 5); "the overwhelming whiteness of writing on S/M is something that deeply troubles us" (Langdridge and Barker, 2007: 6). Despite this concern, in the second edition of the book (Langdridge and Barker, 2013a) the chapters constituting the book are the same and no mention of the lack of material on these issues is made in the introduction (Langdridge and Barker, 2013).

citizenship. The sexual citizen, therefore, is a hybrid being, breaching the public/private divide which Western culture has long held to be essential."
(Weeks, 1998: 36)

The concept of sexual citizenship is, according to the author, an attempt to remedy the limitations of earlier notions of citizenship – which did not include the interconnections of class, gender and sexuality.

Weeks (1995), speaking about social movements, argues that all the new movements are characterised by two moments: transgression and citizenship; they both are necessary for the recognition and respect of rights: this has been true, for example, for LGBT movements in some western countries.

Several other scholars further elaborated on the notion of sexual citizenship, and applied it also to BDSM practices and identities (Langdridge and Butt, 2004; 2005; Langdridge, 2006). An interpretation of BDSM practices using the notion of citizenship proposed by Weeks (1995), see them as "an extension of vanilla sexuality rather than an outright rejection of it" (Langdridge and Butt, 2004: 43). Thus, the inclusion of the BDSM-sexual-citizenship would pass through its inclusion into the vanilla-sexual-citizenship, rather than through the proposition of a new category of citizenship.

In a later article, Langdridge and Butt (2005) state that BDSM practitioners are too sexual and too transgressive to qualify for sexual citizenship within a still conservative wider sexual community. They are concerned by the possible conservatism underlying the call for sexual citizenship: BDSM practitioners could seek to assimilate themselves into the wider sexual community rather than provide a radical and transgressive transformation of the concept of sexual citizenship itself.

Langdridge (2006), in his last work on sexual citizenship, describes BDSM as boundary test for the notion of sexual citizenship. One of the reasons is that, as stated by Evans (1993), existent notions of citizenship are based on heterosexist patriarchal principles. In fact, Bell and Binnie (2000) propose a more transgressive form of sexual citizenship that the one proposed by Weeks (1998), Giddens (1992) or Plummer (1995; 2001; 2003a)[34].

> "In our reading of sexual politics, rights claims articulated through appeals to citizenship carry the burden of compromise in particular ways; this demands the circumscription of 'acceptable' modes of being a sexual citizen. This is, of course, an age-old compromise that sexual dissidents have long had to negotiate; the current problem is its cementing into rights-based political strategies, which forecloses or denies aspects of sexuality written off as 'unacceptable'." (Bell and Binnie, 2000: 3)

As does Weeks (1998), speaking of queer identities, Langdridge (2006) states that to speak of citizenship means to speak about identity, and that the concept of identity implies essentialism. In this regard, Butler (1990) and Phelan (1995) suggest that instead of speaking of identity, we could speak about coalitions and affinities, which are fluid and changing, and involve from time to time different subjects and groups. Langdridge (2006) proposes to refer to Ricoeur's (1981) distinction between ideology and utopia to better understand and describe the fluidity between Weeks' (1998) moments of transgression and citizenship: "ideology is that aspect of the social

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[34] Plummer (2001; 2003a), in the opinion of Langdridge (2006), suggests that intimate – rather than sexual – citizenship describes more accurately the relationship between the personal and the public.

imaginary concerned with identity preservation and utopia the aspect concerned with rupture, novelty and difference" (Langdridge, 2006: 385). Thus, those concerned with recognition, rights and responsibilities can make their claims for integration, identity and citizenship, while those who prefer the "thrill of dissidence" (Langdridge, 2006: 382), can work outside as transgressors.

3. Studying BDSM: Methods and Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In the present chapter, I will outline the methods and the methodology of the research. By methods I mean the employment of particular research tools and practices (Harding, 1987a); by methodology, the theorisation about research practices and the subsequent implications for the people studied (DeVault and Gross, 2007).

In order to collect empirical material I conducted in depth semi-structured interviews with BDSM practitioners and participant observations, or ethnographies, of BDSM parties and related events, as well as munches and private social gatherings where BDSM practitioners used to meet.

The sample selection was carried out through snowball and convenience sampling as well as the publication of posts on a BDSM-themed social network, Fetlife, inviting people to contact me and recount their stories and experiences with BDSM.

Interviewees' profiles have been selected through a typification process (Cardano, 2011) mainly centred on the categories of gender and BDSM role. The intention was to diversify as much as possible the sample, thus including both male and female submissives, both male and female dominants, and so on.

I chose to conduct the research mainly in Milan for two main reasons. First of all, the usefulness for the research: the BDSM scene in Milan is one of the most active in the whole country, since it hosts clubs that periodically organise BDSM parties and gatherings, as well as an active and frequented community, meeting both online and offline. Secondly, for some characteristics of the research itself: I preferred to focus my attention on a delimited geographical space in order to have more time to spend for the research rather than travelling across the region or the country.

The city of Milan at the time of the research appeared to host the biggest BDSM scene in the whole country. Unfortunately, there is no academic literature on the variety and quality of and the different events offered by the BDSM Italian scene. Moreover, there is no academic literature at all regarding BDSM from a sociological perspective. The importance of research on this topic is thus apparent. The assumption of the centrality of Milan is well founded: it is confirmed by interviewees and BDSM practitioners, both during and outside the interview setting, as well as verified by the online research conducted on the web.

Although being based in Milan, the research showed that the BDSM practitioners interviewed or with whom I interacted were somewhat mobile: they attended parties in other cities in the nearby regions – or came to Milan from other cities or regions to attend them. Some of the practitioners, for several reasons, occasionally attended parties abroad, especially in Germany, France and the Netherlands. The mobility of the practitioners could be based on several reasons: for example, either they lived in that place at the time or they preferred to go where BDSM practices were generally far more accepted by mainstream culture and where more choice is offered to clients in terms of the variety of clubs. Some BDSM practitioners look abroad for something different, 'more serious', something that does not exist in Italy; others follow particular key figures in the scene (especially riggers, that is, rope bondage experts) or combine their holidays or work missions with the search for local BDSM parties and events.

The fieldwork, including interviews and participant observations, was conducted from February 2013 to February 2014.

I want to briefly reflect on two aspects before dealing with methods and methodology, interviews and participant observations: the feasibility of the research and one important ethical issue.

The feasibility of the research relates to the access to the fieldwork. In my case it has been relatively easy to gain the access to the fieldwork, both with and without the help of the gatekeepers. I received help from several gatekeepers, for I had access to several sub-fields. I consider the presence of different sub-fields since I attended several different series of events, Kinky Pop, the 'under-35' munch, First Fridays, the regular munch, and so on. As regards the BDSM-themed social network, Fetlife, no gatekeeper was necessary to gain access to other users, since the creation of a profile was the necessary and sufficient condition to do so. Once people meet face to face, it is usual for them to look for one another on Fetlife and remain in contact.

The second aspect to be considered is the ethical issue related to the research; in Italy this aspect is entirely left to the conscience of the researcher, neither ethical committees or written and ethical standards exist within academia. Ethical evaluations and reflections are left solely to the researcher.

"In our country – I cannot say whether fortunately or unfortunately – there is no regulation of the ethical aspect of social research. Restrictions and obstacles are encountered mostly when our research touches other scientific communities' domains, such as when the research regards health or crime." (Cardano, 2011: 83)

I guaranteed practitioners the confidentiality as regards their names and other details that could lead to their identification. They trusted me, regardless of ethical protocols or contracts to be signed. As a consequence, throughout the thesis I employ fictitious names and have slightly changed some personal details.

3.2 Studying a Subculture through an Idioculture

The sample selection led to the observation of small groups and individuals who gather for BDSM-like purposes and other social events. They constitute, using the tools of the sociology of culture, an idioculture. This term, coined by Gary Alan Fine (1979) and developed throughout modern and contemporary sociology of culture, signifies that particular system of knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, and I would say tacit knowledge, that are present in every group. "Idioculture consists of a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction" (Fine, 1979: 734). An idioculture is developed by the group repeatedly through continuous interactions among members. It is expressed, for example, in the action of assigning nicknames, as Fine demonstrates in his work on the Little League (Fine, 1979; Sassatelli, 2009).

Although his main purpose seemed to be that of defining the concept of culture (Sassatelli, 2009), Fine developed an analytic tool that proved to be useful for several sociologists: the concept of idioculture has been widely used and discussed[35]. Culture, for him, originates at the micro level of the small group: members of the groups keep interacting with each other and thus continuously assign meaning to actions – and continuously change them through small recursive adjustments. They create culture. What Fine observes in particular are the interactions among members of these small groups and the ways in which, *à la* Goffman, they produce meaning and hence culture. One of the theoretical influences of Fine is in fact constituted by the symbolic interactionism, especially of Goffmanian memory.

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[35] See for example Seongtaek *et al.* (2011) for the concept of idioculture applied to the Information Technology field; Attridge (2011) for its application in the field of Literature and Bolon and Bolon (1994) for its application within the organizational studies.

An idioculture, though, does not constitute an absolute reality untied from the social context: it is influenced by and at the same time produces effects on it. The particular groups and practitioners I interviewed are not disconnected from the social reality around them, they are embedded in it. The ways in which external constraints are 'brought in' to the group, enacted, re-enacted and dismantled/deconstructed, is the subject of the chapter 6. In that chapter, I will analyse the appropriation of discourse and its embodiment into definite practices by practitioners. These constraints take the form of relations of power, and are brought into the group more or less unconsciously. The fact that this appropriation could be unconscious is for example apparent when considering that, although they followed the wake of the feminist and queer discourse of the sex wars, BDSM practitioners are happily unaware of this link.

The particularity of the idioculture is that, by observing how it is created within groups, it allows us to infer conclusions about broader society (Fine, 1979). This is what has been similarly stated by Collins (2008) in his attempt to link the micro and the macro context through the interaction of ritual chains, and by Santoro and Sassatelli (2009a) in stating that it is in the very movement from the micro to the macro that culture is a practice continuously realised by social actors, more or less consciously.

To conduct a generalisation from the micro to the macro, though, the group need to be somewhat representative of general society (Sassatelli, 2009). We are not talking about the statistical representativeness of a random sample, obviously, but of a more loosened and broader definition of representativeness. This is what is discussed in chapter 3.3. I show that the groups followed in this research are comparable to those usually approached by sociologists. Their socio-cultural and economic level is relatively high and they show a good level of self-awareness as regards the possible interpretations of BDSM practices. This good command of various interpretations of

BDSM – from the medical to the philosophical and sociological ones – seems to me an indirect effect of the stigma they face or fear facing: being prepared to properly answer attacks seems to be a good reason to be aware of possible interpretations of such practices.

By stating that this research allows the study of the BDSM subculture through an idioculture – the precise and definite groups I observed – the question about what differentiates a subculture from an idioculture arises. The contemporary study of subcultures, as argued by Magaudda (2009), highlights the importance of consumption as a means of expression of one's own identity, identification or membership to a particular group: a subculture. While subcultures themselves appeared to have ceased being a way of expressing politically oriented actions, the study of subcultures seems to have brought focus back on social and material inequalities (Magaudda, 2009). Thus, even though through consumption choices, the members of a subculture remain distinct from the mainstream culture – however such a culture could be defined. The study of subcultures, though, has broadened its range, moving away from youth groups as the preferred 'topic'. For example, Thornton (1995) analyses subcultures based on different music genres and their relationship with the mainstream and the marginal. The list could obviously continue.

On the other hand, the description of the idioculture made by Fine (1979) seems to bypass all the analysis of social or other inequalities as well as the sense of expression of identity or identification in favour of a more neutral account of how culture is born within small groups and how it could reflect broader social dynamics. Far from saying that his account is politically neutral or sits on the fence, however it seems in some ways more abstract and distant from contingencies related to economical, political or social inequalities.

In all cases, idioculture relates to some specific groups, formed by particular social actors with a name, a profession and certain characteristics rather than others, while the category of the subculture is more general and broader. The reason due to which the small groups are the basis of the social actions and the primary source for the production of culture is twofold, according to Fine (Sassatelli, 2009); first of all, they constitute the primary, most widespread and common human experience: almost everyone interacts with a group in his or her everyday life; second, small groups constitute realistic objects of study – as opposed for example to big organisations located across multiple geographical areas.

If we imagine the concepts of subculture and idioculture as sets, I would say that idioculture is contained inside subculture, and that both of them are related with the mainstream culture in different possible configurations. Fig. 1 shows the possible relationships among mainstream culture, BDSM subculture and the specific idioculture studied in this research. This figure shows the areas in which BDSM subculture overlaps mainstream culture and thus reproduces mainstream stereotypes (area A: yellow and green); and the ones in which the idioculture, that is, the specific groups and social actors observed and interviewed deconstruct those stereotypes within the BDSM subculture (area B: light blue). The representation is obviously abstract.

Fig. 1. Relationship among BDSM subculture, mainstream culture and the BDSM scene in Milan, idioculture. A possible configuration.
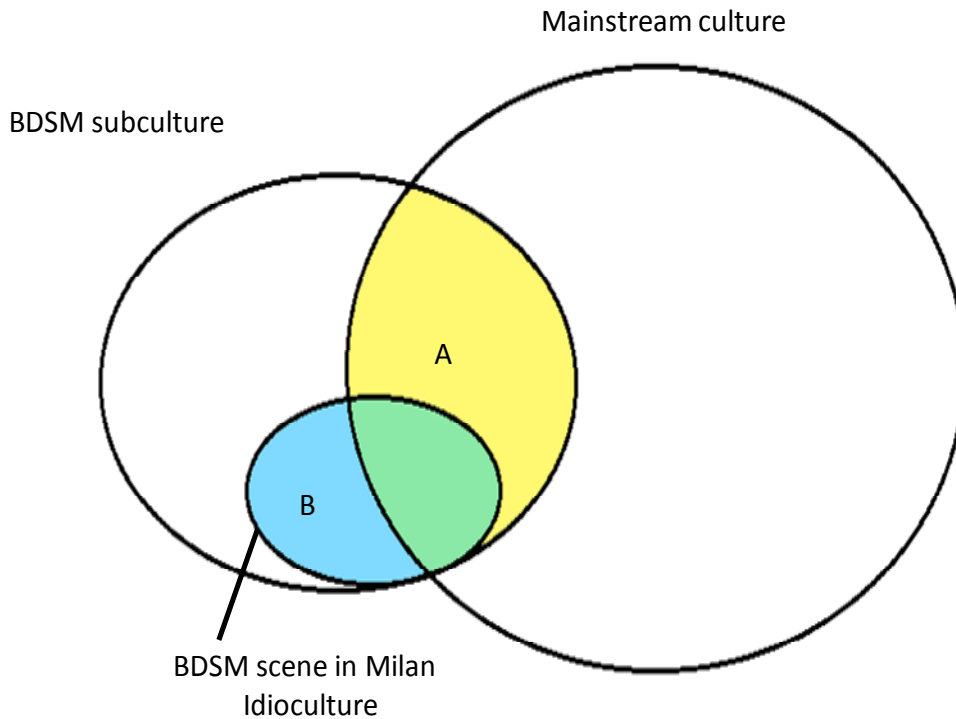
Legend: area A (yellow and green) represents the overlapping between BDSM and mainstream subculture (both in general and in the BDSM scene analysed, that is the reproduction of mainstream, stereotypes. Area B (light blue) represents the deconstruction of those stereotypes within the BDSM subculture.

For example, in area A we will find specific BDSM scenes that reproduces gender and power imbalances present in societies. An example could be that of a slave auction with black slave and white owners; while in area B we will find specific individuals observed who reproduce gender and social norms; this is the case, for example, of Ursula who explores different gender identities or sexual orientations through the use of BDSM (cf. chapter 6). It has to be noted that the specific groups observed both reproduce and challenge social stereotypes related to gender and gender roles.

3.3 BDSM practitioners' Portraits

In order to understand to what extent the data collected are representative of the BDSM groups in general – clearly I am not speaking about representativeness in statistical terms – I compared some characteristics of the practitioners interviewed with those of practitioners studied in other research in the field. The external validity of the arguments made is in some ways connected to understanding whether or not the 'sample' collected is eccentric or closely aligned with the others; in other words, to what extent a given participant's profile is commensurate with the comparative potential of the 'sample' (Barbour, 2007; Cardano, 2011). The data, though, are in general very difficult to compare (see appendix A for such an attempt) since categories for variables are different from one another, either due to the research design or because of structural differences. Among the latter, consider for example the differences between the Italian and the United States educational systems.

The data collected cover the decades from 1960s to 2014. They have been obtained from many countries, from Australia to United States (cf. appendix A). Sampling methods employed by authors were usually qualitative, mostly because other options were not available due to either time or money constraints. Sampling procedures were, as said, not statistically representative, with the exception of an Australian study (Richters *et al.*, 2008).

Not all the surveys targeted BDSM practitioners: in some cases the interest of the researchers was directed toward "24/7 slaves" (Dancer *et al.*, 2006: 85) or homosexual BDSMers. Nevertheless, in general all the interviews dealt with BDSM, even if considering different degrees of involvement at once.

Two characteristics emerge clearly when comparing the BDSM practitioners through time (1960s-2014) and across different places (mostly western countries). First of all, they are middle aged, covering the range between 30 and 40/45 years old. Secondly, they have on average a quite high level of educational qualification, since most of them have a college or university degree. Notwithstanding the socio-cultural changes that developed throughout this time-span, such as the changes in secondary education models and the access of certain socio-cultural classes, BDSM practitioners achieved medium-high levels of education throughout different countries.

3.4 In-depth Interviews

As obvious as this may sound, the aim of conducting interviews is to discover the interviewee's point of view on a certain subject, experience, or worldview. Nevertheless, it would be naïve to take his or her account as a straight report of an actual experience: it is necessary to employ a critical approach to informants' accounts (DeVault and Gross, 2007; Cardano, 2011). The importance of telling a story, of constructing a narrative, is a method that people employ to make sense of their worlds and lives (DeVault and Gross, 2007). Consider for example Plummer (1995) whose work is devoted to this phenomenon.

This new perspective in the practice of oral history emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, when the interview was perceived as a dialogically constructed text, rather than a factual document. Grele (2007) underlines the main consequences of this change in perception. First of all, the role of the interviewer is accented, since he or she actively co-creates the oral history with the interviewee; indeed, it has been described as a "dialogic interview" (La Mendola, 2009); as a corollary, the researcher needs to be clear

about his or her position towards the issue researched. Secondly, the interviewee becomes a creator and an interpreter of history, role that was previously assigned solely to the interviewer of the historian. Third, the interview is a performative event thought of as taking place in front of an audience: it is negotiated and the rules of the game are set by both parties. Finally, the interview is deeply dependent upon remembering: memory is more about the reconstruction of information rather than a matter of accurate recall. This is true also in the sense that "memory is above all a form of representation" (Passerini, 2007: 238), constructed by a multiplicity of layers.

The importance of the context in which interviewees and the interviewer are embedded is remarkable, since the narratives employed by both are shaped by the formats available to them. Grele describes the interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer as "a conversational narrative created by the interaction of the interviewer and the interviewee and determined by linguistic, social and ideological structures" (Grele, 2007: 11).

Gender, too, influences memory and the available categories to describe it: "memory is gendered, and women's memories and silences offer different continuities and repetitions, through the specificities of their experiences in different times and spaces" (Passerini, 2007: 248).

Moreover, the researcher has to be aware of the fact that interviews are not simple encounters, rather they are embedded in cultural constructions and categories, as well as dynamics of power.

As for the target population, I interviewed BDSM practitioners within and outside of the scene[36]. Interviews dealt with their experiences with BDSM as well as the meanings they gave to their practices. BDSM practitioners had to be of legal age, which in Italy means being more than 18 years old, and currently or formerly involved in BDSM at the time of the interview.

In total, I conducted 44 interviews. I contacted the first practitioners through Fetlife, a famous BDSM-themed social network, and reached the others both using the snowball sampling technique and by meeting them during events and asking them directly about their interest in being interviewed. At the beginning I interviewed whoever was available, regardless of gender or role, while after some tens of interviews I balanced the sample in order to account for gender differences, role differences (top, bottom and switch) and possible combinations of the two. In particular, it has been difficult to approach female dominants: there were few in the scene, and it was rare to see them playing with others, and even more difficult to be introduced to them, or to obtain their attention.

As a result of the selection procedure as well as the characteristics of the gatekeepers and the events attended, the sample is almost exclusively formed by heterosexuals. Some of them, however, especially women, seem to perform bisexuality as part of the play or as an expression of their sexual orientation. I had the opportunity of observing that the Italian heterosexual BDSM scene appears to be socially and spatially segregated from the homosexual one. As far as I know, only one lesbian girl

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[36] By 'scene' I mean different and more or less organised groups that attend BDSM-related events in a particular location. They are not necessarily organised as an association, or attend the same events together. The scene is a fluid social phenomenon – it does not have specific headquarters – which has porous borders through which people enter and exit. There is neither a member list, nor a membership card.

(out of the medium number of clients practitioners at a typical party of 50/60 people) regularly attended the BDSM play parties that I attended.

As a whole, BDSM practitioners show a variegated play configuration: some play both in public (clubs) and in private (private houses or parties, accessible only by invitation), or only in private; others play only online – for example on Second Life, the virtual world – or else do not play but actively attend BDSM themed social networks and websites; others perform their activities in front of a public both in their country and abroad.

The interviews have a minimum duration of 1 hour and a maximum of about 7 hours. The majority of them have been digitally recorded. Where this has not been explicitly allowed by practitioners, I took notes by hand. Among the people interviewed, 22 are women; their ages range from 22 to 56 years old. The majority of them self-define, explicitly or implicitly, as heterosexual. Their ethnicity is white and they usually are part of the educated middle-class[37].

As regards the protection of the privacy of the interviewees, I always informed them that I was going to record their interview, that I was the only person that would ever listen to that audio, and finally that I would change their names and not reveal

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[37] Non-white BDSM practitioners did not attend these parties, gatherings and events. I am not saying that their involvement in these practices is inexistent, simply that I imagine that their social and spatial segregation is stronger than the one experienced by homosexuals and transsexuals and thus they follow other channels. Even the academic contributions from countries where the BDSM scene and communities are more organized and 'older' than the Italian one do not deal with the ethnic identity/identification of practitioners (Langdridge and Barker, 2007).

This is the acknowledgment of one of the most recent and informed book on the topic. "We attempted to garner submissions that addressed this important issue but managed to secure only one preliminary agreement from an author, who found himself subsequently unable to submit the chapter. [...] We would very much have liked to see such analyses of race, ethnicity and sexuality in this volume, for the overwhelming whiteness of writing on S/M is something that deeply troubles us." (Langdridge and Barker, 2007: 6). In the second edition of the book, there is not even mention of the ethnic issue (Langdridge and Barker, 2013; Zambelli, 2014). Other contributions on BDSM dealing with the concept of ethnicity/race are produced by Weiss (2011) and Sheff and Hammers (2011).

personal details that could lead others to identify them – even within the BDSM community.

Except in two cases, where I interviewed two couples, in all the other interviews the interviewee was alone and not accompanied.

The interviews were semi-structured: I identified some core issues I wanted to talk about in order to reconstruct the career of the practitioner within the BDSM scene and I left the interviewees the possibility of highlighting other issues that were relevant or important for them. Thus, the draft of the interviews needed to be flexible.

I already discussed the research questions in chapter 1 (cf. appendix B for the final version). Considered as a whole, the research questions could essentially be brought down to two: the first general question relates to the meaning BDSM practitioners give to these practices and the ways in which such practices are lived and thought about against the background of the Italian and European contexts; the second concerns the attention to the reproduction or the deconstruction of societal gender stereotypes in connection to gender and sexual roles within the BDSM scene.

The first question – the attention given to BDSM practitioners' careers into the BDSM scene as well as the meaning they attached to these practices – calls for the employment of the face-to-face interview as the best method to collect such data. The second question, relative to the reproduction or deconstruction of gender roles through BDSM is better researched through observation rather than directly asking BDSM practitioners. Such reproduction or reconstruction could be observed in small gestures, the dynamics of interaction and the analysis of the discourse. The observation, in this case, resembles what Cardano calls naturalistic observation:

"It is a technique conceived to examine every day social interactions, containing as much as possible the perturbation due to the presence of the researcher in the field. [...] deliberately non participant observation, in which the researcher tries to become the proverbial 'fly on the wall' that sees, without the others noticing her glance and her attention to what is happening around her" (Cardano, 2011: 30)

As an example of the flexibility of the interview I could cite Eric. He plays out his BDSM fantasies exclusively online – especially on a famous online virtual world. I had not thought about this possibility, and had to drop the questions about face-to-face interactions focusing instead on virtual exchanges and relationships: how many hours per day did he play online? What was the relationship between the BDSM played 'virtually' and his desires? etc.

In fact, it is up to the method – and thus to the researcher – to adapt to fit the participants in the research, not the opposite:

"It is not the participants of a qualitative research who have to adapt their behaviour to the method used to detect it; it is quite the opposite what normally happens. [...] The researcher [...] coordinates his 'moves' with those of the people participating in the study, these moves [...] are largely unpredictable, imposing to the researcher the discipline of the flexibility" (Cardano, 2011: 18-19)[38]

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[38] Translation by the Author; here and wherever the original text is in Italian.

In this sense, interactivity and context flexibility are the distinctive features of qualitative research.

In order to comply with flexibility, I conducted a test of the interview, with the aim of trying out the adequacy of the questions for the purposes set: the first interviews allowed me to shape and adjust the draft in order to better focus on the issues I was interested in as well as avoiding redundancies and facilitating the flow of the practitioners' narration.

In order to favour the flow of the narration, I asked 'how', rather than 'why' (Becker, 1998). This expedient was aimed at reducing the possibility that the interviewee feel judged. The word 'why' seems more profound and intellectual; 'how' could be thought as more simplistic. Becker describes such prejudices:

"Somehow 'Why?' seems more profound, more intellectual, as though you were asking about the deeper meaning of things, as opposed to the simple narrative 'How?' would likely evoke. This prejudice is embodied in the old and meretricious distinction, invariably used pejoratively, between explanation and 'mere' description" (Becker, 1998: 85)

The action of asking how a certain behaviour developed, instead of why the participant engaged in it fits my intent, which was descriptive and interpretive rather than normative and discriminatory.

In order to put the interviewees at ease, I allowed them to choose the place in which to conduct the interview. They usually chose a public place – a restaurant, a café, a park, if the temperature was favourable – and there spoke with me. Some of them suggested their homes, and I usually accepted.

I realised that the best place in which to conduct interviews is the one which ensures anonymity and allows the interviewee and the interviewer to go unnoticed; moreover, it must not distract the interviewee from the talk and finally it must not put the interviewer in a relative position of advantage and power as opposed to the interviewee. For example, places like my home, in which I appeared too much at ease and likely to further dominate the interaction have been in general avoided, although with a few exceptions.

Nonetheless, I put some conditions on the choice of the place: I expressed clearly my intention to audio record their voice, thus the place had to structurally allow for that by providing a sufficient amount of silence, or low volume noise; the other condition, which I did not mention explicitly, was that the place had to be safe for me. In some cases, I employed some expedients commonly in use within the communities in order to guarantee my safety[39]. In cases where I knew the participant fairly well, I accepted an invitation to come to their place for the interview. In the other cases, I managed to divert the meeting to a more public or frequented place.

3.5 Participant Observations

Since the participant observation is characterised by proximity with the object studied, it is the best technique to approach social interactions especially within restricted groups. At the same time, as researchers we have to remember that "the reconstruction of an event attended is always necessarily partial" (Cardano, 2011: 93).

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[39] For example, I set phone meeting with a friend and left details of the place of the meeting and personal details – like the phone number of the participant – with that friend.

The proximity to the object and the partiality of the reconstruction are only superficially in contradiction with each other: the proximity of the gaze narrows the field of view.

To engage in a participant observation means that cognitively the researcher is socialised in the culture studied – she learns the vernacular, the implicit rules, the dos and don'ts: in a word, the tacit knowledge. Pragmatically, it means that she is able to test the appropriateness of her interpretations of the phenomenon – when there is a hypothesis to test – and form new ones.

The aim of the participant observation is to reconstruct the profile of the culture of the people involved in the research, to "reconstruct the point of view of the participants, the ways in which everyone represents his or her own experience" (Cardano, 2011: 102). This approach, if taken further, is similar to the feminist and post-colonial approach to the research[40]. in fact, the aims of these paradigms is to give voice to marginal groups – or speak as members of marginal groups – and propose accounts of social phenomena that would disrupt the supposed monism and compactness of mainstream paradigms.

I conducted two series of participant observations plus a series of other scattered events, such as rope bondage workshops and polyamorous happy hours. The first series was conducted in clubs hosting BDSM play parties; the name of the club I attended most often is Cornucopia. The clubs were identified through internet research and later directly asking BDSM practitioners. Once identified, several elements concurred in the choice of these clubs: presence or absence of a gatekeeper for that particular club and

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[40] For a sharp and yet detailed account of feminist methodologies and methods see DeVault and Gross (2007). I intend the term post-colonial in the sense attributed to one of its founders, Antonio Gramsci. In order to give voice to marginal groups he wanted them to breed their own intellectuals, not to give them rights and privileges from above (Gramsci, 1975). For details on the confidence and faith of Gramsci in the ability of marginal groups to do this, and especially on his attitude that was neither paternalistic or in favour of a concession from above, cf. Buttigieg (1995) and Liguori and Voza (2009).

the impossibility of attending the events of other clubs due to the overlapping of these events with my working hours[41]. Typically, these play parties were hosted once a month.

The second series of ethnographies were on happy hours – the so-called munches – organised once a month. Two were the main series of happy hours. First, the First Fridays, organised by some BDSM practitioners around a famous BDSM-themed social network[42]. The second, Kinky Pop, was organised by young BDSM practitioners under 35 years of age[43].

The aims of both happy hours – that are hosted by different clubs on different days of the month, in order to allow the younger practitioners to attend both meetings – are first of all to socialise, that is, to meet BDSM practitioners and sympathisers. Secondly, to welcome new members or people simply curious about the practices; furthermore, to strengthen social bonds among community members and finally to hand over technical knowledge and safety rules to the less experienced.

Whenever possible, I also attended 'unofficial' events, which are outside of the circuit of activities directly connected with BDSM play parties and that involved members of the groups I was observing/studying. For example, I attended dinners in private houses, happy hours and various gatherings either in private homes or public places, all involving BDSM practitioners I knew and by whom I had been invited.

Differently from other scholars who have researched BDSM, I did not participate in the practices themselves; I attended parties and happy hours but did not use whips, clamps, ropes or other tools either on myself or on others. This has been a choice I made

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[41] In order to guarantee an acceptable level of anonymity and to avoid advertising I will not reveal the names of the clubs and other businesses or use fictitious names.

[42] They were authorized to use the official trademark of this social network during these happy hours, provided certain conditions regarding the organization and the absence of commercial activities and purposes were respected.

[43] The 'under-35' series, the Kinky Pop, started being organized by some young regulars of the older happy hours in September 2013.

before the beginning of the fieldwork, and have thus far respected. I believe that a certain distance is necessary, between the researcher and the research[44].

Whenever a dress code was requested, my decision was to dress in a way that would not immediately be identified with a precise BDSM role; my purpose was to blend in with the environment and the other BDSM practitioners. This has been described as interactive disturbance, that is, when the researcher modifies other's attitudes and behaviours simply due to the fact that he or she is present:

"When the simple presence of the researcher – not perceived as such – in the observed contest alters other's behaviour, simply for being there (we experience this kind of disturbance every day, every time when we share the lift with others that we know or that we do not know)" (Cardano, 2011: 28)

The opposite would be the observational disturbance, which happens every time the subjects are aware of the attention of the researcher and for this reason they might modify their behaviour.

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[44] Clearly, the appropriate distance is far from easy to establish once and for all, and I think that it is highly subjective. Once the fieldwork was completed, I found an interesting and funny quote that describes the choice I made months before. It is actually not explicative, but this is probably the reason for which I like its immediacy. It is taken from an interview released by Gary Alan Fine (Sassatelli, 2009). He was narrating his first steps into the academic world, and was thinking about what to research next, suddenly, he comes up with an idea: to study his own wedding as part of his research. He then quoted what Goffman, one of his professors, said "I don't think it is wise to study one's own private life. After the graduation I wanted to get married with a great ceremony and I thought that that could have been a perfect occasion to do ethnography. Goffman said that only a schmuck would have made his own private life an object of study." (Sassatelli, 2009: 172).

3.6 The Ethics of the Research

For ethical, personal and utilitarian reasons the participant observations I conducted have been 'uncovered': I revealed my role as a researcher. This choice brought up the issue of my body and its unchangeable and evident characteristics: being white instead of non-white, having a certain age, gender and other elements that could have influenced both the access to the fieldwork and the process of construction and collection of data. The decision to conduct and uncovered research has several remarkable consequences of which I provide a short summary.

First of all, uncovered research is more ethically respectful towards the research participants than covered research. At the same time it is practically easier for the researcher, since she or he does not have to lie. Subsequently, my refusal to participate in BDSM plays was accepted and understood on one side, and on the other I did not have to spend emotional and organisational energy in order to act as a BDSM practitioner 'alter ego' would have done in order to 'save my face' during BDSM events.

Secondly, the presence of the researcher could be revealing of otherwise invisible rules. Rules and values of the groups/community, as well as the dynamics of power and the personal inclinations (e.g. congeniality and antipathy) of the practitioners, have been shown through the employment of uncovered research. An example of this happened during a regular munch at a First Fridays night.

> *By now, the majority of the people attending the munch and especially the organisers and the regulars, know me. I am waiting outside of the pub, as always early, looking at some shop windows waiting for the organisers to arrive – I do not think that entering before them would be*

polite – when my mobile phone rings. It's Abigail, and she tells me that Carl,

one of the youngest BDSM practitioners who attend First Fridays regularly,

invited a journalist to the meeting: this person must not enter. She tells me

that if I see the others, I should tell them to not let the journalist enter.

(Ethnographic diary, First Fridays happy hour, Milan, 1ˢᵗ November 2013)

She later explains to me that this journalist seemed to have promised an appearance on a television show to Carl in exchange of the possibility to attend one of the munches. Several details of Abigail's account do not seem logical, and I heard only her version of the story, and not Carl's one: the reconstruction of an event attended is necessarily partial (Cardano, 2011). Nevertheless, this episode showed some rules, dynamics of power – the trick of Foucault, as Cardano (2011) calls it – consisting in analysing the power relations behind a discourse. The rules revealed are quite basic, some explained by organisers and others not.

First of all, if a person wants to attend the munches they must introduce herself or himself to the organisers first – this is clearly stated on Fetlife, where the munch is advertised. Secondly, the privacy of the participants is taken seriously by the organisers: one of them, Peter, explained his agreement with Abigail's refusal saying that BDSM practitioners should have the possibility to decide whether to attend the munch knowing that a journalist is present. In fact, they might be concerned with their own privacy and not make an appearance. Thirdly, the fact that I was warned put me in a position similar to the one of the BDSM practitioners: I was perceived as 'one of them' rather than someone 'external', like the outsider journalist. Was this a demonstration of my being accepted into the group, or at least a sign of the organisers' confidence in me? I think so. I was to some extent considered as a member of the group: what distinguished

me from the journalist was my significant knowledge and acceptance of the group idioculture, thing that the journalist did not possess in sufficient amount (Fine, 1982). The fourth element I want to point out is the dynamic of power behind the decision to leave out the potentially harmful outsiders: the organisers of the munch are also among the oldest members of the groups, and their decision to keep out the journalist prevailed over the younger BDSM practitioner's one.

The choice to uncover my role as a researcher brought a further advantage: the motivation of practitioners in favouring a 'scientific', that is, non-pathologising, account of their BDSM practices[45]. I was seen as the means through which a serious, non-defamatory, impartial and ultimately scientific account of their practices could be made available to a wider public. It was common for some BDSM practitioners to explicitly underline the necessity of making available such an impartial account, and to try to teach me about first of all, the techniques and the precautions to be employed in practicing BDSM and secondly, the history of the BDSM community worldwide and in Italy since its beginning. Finally, they gave me several examples of the strong ethical sense present in the actions of whoever practices BDSM.

The desire for a scientific – and sometimes apologetic – account of these practices is fully comprehensible given the stigmatisation BDSM practitioners often encounter[46]. On the other hand, this desire constitutes also a strong motivation – at least for some BDSM practitioners – to avoid mentioning the more or less blurred cases in which BDSM

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[45] Some of them used the term "scientific" to qualify my work on BDSM practices. I read this as an expression of the scepticism on the accountability and representativeness of the works present on such topic.

[46] Examples of discrimination were apparent. Bridget, a woman in her thirties, was not selected for a job she applied for since some of her acquaintances spread the world within the work environment that she used to practice BDSM on a regular basis (Interviewee Bridget, 2013). In general, it was only the minority of all the BDSM practitioners who were open about their involvement in BDSM practices with friends, family and in the workplace.

practitioners appeared not to be so respectful, consensual and empowering towards other practitioners[47].

To carry out uncovered research brings one more advantage: the opportunity offered the researcher to learn. I had the possibility to conduct – in some occasions voluntarily, in others involuntarily – what has been defined by Garfinkel (1967) a breaching experiment. I broke some explicit or implicit rules of the groups and this had two effects: first, since I was a researcher and not a competent member of the group yet, I was only lightly sanctioned or not sanctioned at all, and second, I learned the rule itself, since there was always someone around to explain it to me. For example, I was speaking with one BDSM practitioner and inadvertently used the name of another one instead of using her nickname or pseudonym. In this case, I was kindly warned not to do this again for privacy reasons. The hidden rule behind this warning is that everyday and BDSM life are separate and have to remain separate. Even if someone is recognised in both frames, one is strongly encouraged not to speak about it.

The last element to consider is the greater mobility I enjoyed while conducting this uncovered research. I was allowed to move among groups who were not in good terms with each other without being sanctioned or frowned upon. Unsurprisingly, subgroups, formed around sympathies, idiosyncrasies, old quarrels, different worldviews, etc. do exist in the Italian BDSM scene, and I could move around – almost – regardless of them.

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[47] I explore this topic more deeply in the chapter on the analysis of the feminist accounts of BDSM practices (cf. chapter 6).

3.7 The Body of the Researcher

"Oggi leggiamo nel libro dell'esperienza.

Dovete rivolgere la vostra attenzione all'interno;

ognuno deve prendere nota della sua conoscenza

particolare delle cose di cui parliamo." [48]

San Bernardo di Chiaravalle

The body of the researcher influences the research. First of all, the body of the researcher – my body – is gendered. It has been the first means through which I understood and questioned several assumptions of my research and the social environments I explored. Apart from being a heuristic – and very useful, being prêt-a-porter – means of knowledge I was carrying with me all the time, both during interviews and participant observations, it has also been a cognitive and emotional stimulus for the practitioners I was interacting with. My (gendered) body was in fact influencing the interactions by communicating with the (gendered) body of other BDSM practitioners around me. My body has sometimes been the stimulus for BDSM practitioners to engage in a conversation with me. Nevertheless, it was also not accessible to them in the sense that I did not play.

A body that was not-accessible, within a context in which a large part of every interaction is conducted through the body, sometimes constituted something visible and evident, like an elephant in a room. Furthermore, the interactions carried on by

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[48] "Today we read in the book of experience. / You have to turn your attention inside; / everyone should take note of his own particular / knowledge of the things we talk about." Bernardo di Chiaravalle in Leclerq, Talbot and Rochais (1957) and Matter (1994). Translated by the Author.

practitioners were mostly more or less based on the eroticisation of the body and mediated by seduction; they tried to also involve my body. Thus, several inquiries were directed at me about the reasons due to which I did not play, or I did not 'want to try out' a particular role or instrument.

Furthermore, more or less overtly, some BDSM practitioners – especially dominant or switch males – tried to direct the communication either verbally or through gestures, and in so doing enacted again their role with me. This, after having said that I did not want to play.

Thinking about the body as a cognitive instrument or heuristic means of knowledge reminds me of a participant observation during which I had the impression of feeling the whip on my own body – even if I was looking at the scene from the dark, distant from the man and woman who were playing:

> *I see Abigail moving around the room, naked, and Kyran who whips*
>
> *her, once she has leaned against the small and red sofa – this time near the*
>
> *DJ station, at the bottom of the club. I see her expression of pain and ask*
>
> *myself whether this pleases Kyran, whether it is the expression on her face*
>
> *that he loves; what pushes him to provoke such a look in the woman he loves,*
>
> *and what drives her to do this. I do not have answers yet.*
>
> (Ethnographic diary, Cornucopia Club, Milan, 7th April 2013)

My body, though, remained almost completely inaccessible to BDSM play, and I think that this was a further motivation for some of them either to engage in a conversation with me or to explain things and dynamics as to a new member. In some cases, this pretext led to an interview with them.

PART TWO. DOING AND BEING: THE BDSM COMMUNITY IN MILAN

4. Folk Narratives of a Sexuality Subculture

In this chapter, I review the folk narratives circulating within the BDSM community concerning both the birth of practices and the appearance of the first communities in western societies. I use the expression folk narrative in the sense of Fine (1982), who described it as a culture that develops within a group. This concept is similar to that of idioculture (Fine, 1979). In fact, many narratives about the origin of BDSM practices as coming from the Far East (cf. chapter 4.3) do not have academic references or sufficient support among scholars. Thus, even if some scholars reported these narratives, they acknowledged their status as folk traditions (Luminais, 2014).

A closer look will reveal that, for example, the idea that rope bondage originated in Japan, namely from the Samurai propensity to handcuff prisoners with particular knots could be thought in terms of folk traditions. This legacy is part of the idioculture of the group. Several elements explain the presence and characteristics of a group tradition (Fine, 1979; 1982). First of all, the fact that it is known by at least one member of the group. This story of the Japanese origin of rope bondage has been encapsulated in the form of a book which a member of the community translated it and posted on a website (Master "K", 2008; Scuola di bondage, n. d.). Secondly, this origin story of rope bondage is useful to the group: it is mentioned and "mentionable" (Fine, 1982: 51) in group interactions, even with non-practitioners. In fact, it is prestigious to follow such an ancient tradition. In particular, those referring to *shibari* instead of rope bondage seem to reinforce the usability and prestige of such heritage. The third element that characterises the inclusion of an element into the folk narratives of a group is its functionality. The fact that rope bondage has such exalted origins is a reason for members of the BDSM community to claim a prestigious and ancient legacy, which could

increase their social status. The fourth element is appropriateness. Within a frame that stigmatises BDSM practitioners, to claim that such practices are as ancient as the word is a way to cast away doubts about the legitimacy of such practices. Finally, a triggering event should have favoured the inclusion of a particular element into the folk traditions of a group. I do not know the specific reasons for such an inclusion, but it is possible that it answered the necessity of the group to follow an existent tradition. The story of the Samurai's use of knots is intriguing, fascinating, likely true in part, and old enough to sound mythical: why not use it as part of the story of the group?

Other elements, on the contrary, did not manage to be included in the folk narrative of the groups examined. Recently, there have been attempts to give BDSM subculture some cultural shared emblems, which failed.

In 1995, an individual nick-named Quagmyr (n. d.) embarked on the project of creating a symbol to be used by BDSM practitioners worldwide in order to recognise one another. He was the spokesperson of a group interested in creating a discreet yet recognisable symbol inspired by the novel *Histoire d'O* and similar to a triskelion. The existing Leather Pride Flag, created half a dozen years earlier (Leather Archives and Museum, n. d.) was not adequate. The flag's references to the gay leather subculture were probably uninteresting for the group. Eventually, Quagmyr copyrighted the emblem to protect it from commercial exploitation (Quagmyr, n. d.). Similar versions of such emblem circulate freely and undisturbed adorning BDSM tools and jewellery; Quagmyr's patented version, though, failed to spread worldwide. Was such element unnecessary? Was it known to nobody in the group? Was the release of *Histoire d'O*, in 1954, too far away in time, thus lacking a triggering event? I do not know; the fact

remains that "the Emblem Project" seems to have been suspended, and the website is no longer updated.

A similar discourse could be made for polyamory. There are, around the web, different versions of a supposed flag of the poly movement (cf. Grinberg, 2013). Yet, during my fieldwork I observed no example of it. Even though we know the name of the supposed author of the polyamorous flag, there is no trace of him on the internet. A similar attempt to that of Quagmyr? I do not know. Yet, the outcome is similar: there is no shared cultural symbol for either BDSM or polyamory.

In these two cases, the attempt to create folk narratives including these symbols failed. Cultural elements could be included, or not, into the folk narrative of a group. The reasons for such an inclusion or exclusion are to be looked for in the interactions and the performance context of the group (Fine, 1982). In this chapter, I will propose some folk narratives developed and brought forward by some BDSM practitioners along with some historical reconstructions of the subculture as offered by some scholars.

4.1 Europe and the United States

Almost all extant literature on the birth of the first SM groups is focused on the United States (Sisson, 2005; Wright, 2006). Wright (2006), citing Rubin (1981), claims that the first SM groups in the world were formed in the United States. They were apparently born from the legacy of the gay liberation movements of the 1960s. Since the LGBT movement did not officially claim rights in the name of SM practitioners, specifically dedicated groups were born – the NCSF, the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, is one of the most active and famous groups (Wright, 2006).

Sisson (2005) provides the description of SM groups through the lens of the sexual culture. A sexual culture usually provides certain functions for members (creating boundaries between members and non members, providing a story of origin – a founding myth – establishing a code of conduct, creating shared meanings, providing a means of social reproduction and finally generating sexual identity), and develops through certain stages, which Sisson indentifies in her article. The first one is characterised by contact among individuals who share the common interest in BDSM-like practices, and covers the range from the 17th to the 19th century (Sisson, 2005); first historical evidence of this kind of contact dates back to the 17th century. Brothels specialising in flagellation as a means to facilitate male erections and as a remedy for female lack of desire appeared throughout Europe and the United States during the 18th century[49]. With the second stage we are thrown into the 20th century: from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1960s, the first networks formed by SM practitioners appeared in the United States. The space in which to practice these activities shifted from brothels to private houses; the range of behaviours and specialised equipment expanded to include leather and metal. During this period, the first advertisements were placed in underground magazines by SM practitioners with the aim of meeting and playing together. The production of SM equipment and publications increased sharply throughout the entire period. At the end of the 1960s, SM practices are so well-known that they transitioned into mainstream pornography; in parallel, legal prosecution of SM in the United States increased (Sisson, 2005). The author continues with the third stage which covers the decades from the 1970s to the 1980s, and is characterised by the formation of SM communities in the United States,

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[49] Eisler (1951) declared that during the 1930s in Paris he has been invited to visit brothels which offered clients of both sexes a wooden cross as a whipping-post.

especially in San Francisco and New York. These networks provided the functions of supporting members and organising play parties, and encouraged female participation in these groups; until that moment, in fact, males outnumbered women.

The fourth stage covers the years from the 1980s to the 1990s and is characterised by the formation of a social movement centred on SM groups, practices and practitioners (Sisson, 2005). The cultural visibility of these groups increased and they proliferated internationally. Even the media presence of SM increased sharply throughout the entire period. The arrival of the internet provided new sources for acquiring and sharing information about BDSM worldwide. New periodical gatherings started to be organised, replacing the 'old-fashioned' ways SM practitioners employed to contact one another, like poste restante or personal ads. In the fifth and last stage – the year 2000 to the present – the social phenomenon has acquired the form of a sexual culture, which performs certain functions for members (Sisson, 2005). How the shift from 17th century first encounters among BDSM-like practitioners to the contemporary sexual culture has been possible has been variously interpreted (Weinberg, 1994; McClintock, 1993; Sisson, 2005). Weinberg (1994) thinks that it is due to the existence of several criteria: embedded power relations, social acceptance of aggression, unequal power distribution, leisure time, imagination and creativity. Others attribute the possibility for the formation of a sexual culture around SM to the very characteristics of SM – that is, being post-modern and post-procreative (McClintock, 1993).

4.2 The Development of BDSM Communities in Italy

The development of SM communities has been – and still is – a slow and locally fragmented process[50]. It appears that this process is influenced first of all by geographical factors. In the north of the country, in fact, there have been more events and gatherings than in the south. During the Seventies the first contacts among SM practitioners were established through pornographic journals and erotic comics[51]: they contained a few BDSM elements – pictures, BDSM-themed VHS for sale, and hosted personal ads for play partners. Other periodical publications specifically addressed BDSM practitioners[52]. During these years, the level of organisation of BDSM practitioners in groups and clubs was low, since encounters and gatherings were mediated by journals usually through the poste restante[53] (Brumatti, 2011; Interviewee Malcolm, 2013). The encounters took place almost totally in private spaces, such as private houses, in small groups.

During the Eighties, the above-mentioned journals acquired even more importance in establishing relationships among the practitioners, creating networks, providing play partners and information about safety and events. Gradually, women entered the scene, which was previously populated mainly by men (Brumatti, 2011).

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[50] To reconstruct the history of the development of the BDSM scene in Italy I have to account for the problem of sources, since there is no academic or non-academic literature on the topic. Thus, information is fragmentary and incomplete; to reconstruct the steps of this development, I will rely on written and oral recollections of some key witness of the BDSM scene in Italy.

[51] "Isabella", "Biancaneve", "Zora la Vampira", "Lando", "Sukkia", "L'Uomo Supposta", "Vartan" and "Satanik" (Brumatti, 2011; Interviewee Malcolm, 2013; Interviewee Sybil, 2014).

[52] Such as "I Moderni", "SM" and "Club" (Brumatti, 2011; Interviewee Malcolm, 2013). The first BDSM elements represented in pictures were latex and rope bondage (Interviewee Malcolm, 2013).

[53] For example on the still existing "Secondamano", the periodical journal for the sale of used items (Interviewee Malcolm, 2013).

At the beginning of the 1990s the first public parties and series of events – for example periodical dinners and happy hours[54], sometimes centred around specific online communities[55] – were organized, with the aims of engaging in BDSM plays and meeting new partners (Interviewee David, 2013; Interviewee Malcolm, 2013; Interviewee Red, 2014). The first groups founded in bars and clubs places in which gather together. BDSM events in the northern Italy, especially in Milan, were and are numerous and varied[56].

With the arrival of Internet, at the end of the 1990s, some periodical gatherings slowly started disappearing, in favour of online discussions on forums, online communities and more recently BDSM-themed social networks[57].

Within the Italian context, the core of the BDSM activity and community-building is and has been the north and the centre of the country, both for the quantity and quality of BDSM events and for the quantity of practitioners attending parties.

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[54] Munches were held at Trezzo sull'Adda (Lombardia), Mortara (Lombardia), Mestre (Veneto), Bologna (Emilia-Romagna) and the area of Porta Romana and Porta Genova in Milan (Interviewee David, 2013; Interviewee Malcolm, 2013). Since the 2000s, the newly formed "Kinky Pop" and the older "First Fridays" are the most famous munches in Milan.

[55] Some happy hours, such as the one of "La Chattina", "Legami" and "Fetlife", were born around the online communities of some BDSM-themed websites or social networks (Interviewee Peter, 2013; Interviewee Quianna, 2014).

[56] A famous periodical 'femdom' (female domination) play party held in Milan was named "Il Piedistallo", probably after the similar and more famous event in London; other series of femdom play party were organised by the community of Femdom Italia and by specific mistresses – for example the "Bacaro Sadico" party. Some unique events, never repeated, have been organised, such as the "Secret Fetish Party" and "Revolution" (Milan) (Interviewee Red, 2014). Other bars, near the Navigli area, in the centre of Milan, organised BDSM events, for example BDSM performances, openly during daylight attracting even non-BDSM and non-fetish practitioners to enter and participate. In the same city, some discotheques organised BDSM-themed events, such as the fetish night at the "Hollywood", at the "Depot" and at the "Black Hole", or hosted particular events such as a corset fashion show (the "Black Hole"). "Feetaly" was a fetish community centred around the foot fetish which existed during the first years of the 2000s and which has now disappeared. Nowadays, several BDSM play parties are held in Milan, the "Sadistique", "L'Ultimo Lunedì", "Makabra" and near Rimini "Tref Point" (Emilia-Romagna)(Interviewee Malcolm, 2013; Interviewee Maud, 2013; Interviewee Red, 2014; Interviewee Sybil, 2014).

[57] Some mailing lists were created during the first 2000s with the aim of discussing BDSM issues and meeting new partners (Interviewee Garrett, 2013).

4.3 'Founding Myths' about the Origins of Rope Bondage and BDSM

Usually, BDSM practitioners say that BDSM practices are 'old as the world itself', and that only recently they have been formalised and classified. This is a quite common narrative in BDSM groups. Some scholars trace the origins of contemporary BDSM practices to different ancient or simply old attitudes – the self-infliction of pain using flogs among Christian believers during medieval times (Hekma, 2007). BDSM communities or academic scholars provide various different reconstructions about the origin of BDSM. These folk narratives answer to different necessities (Fine, 1979; 1982). The action of constructing a history, that is, tracing the origins of a phenomenon, allows the individuals involved to claim a legacy from ancient or older times and to consequently acquire legitimacy within societies and prevent social stigma. In fact, claiming heritage from other groups or ancient practices is a common means to legitimise one's or one's own group's behaviours. I call these histories 'founding myths', whether they are describing historical and social facts or not, since they provide an ancient legacy for practitioners and thus a form of legitimacy.

There are two main reconstructions of the origins of BDSM practices that circulate nowadays; these founding myths are partly quoted in the academic literature (cf. Luminais, 2014) and also circulate among practitioners. As regards rope bondage, the founding myth is better recollected and proposed by Master "K" (2008). He links contemporary bondage to the techniques of imprisonment and immobilization used by Japanese Samurai starting from the 17th century. These techniques became rapidly associated with pleasurable aesthetic elements such as embellishing knots, through particular cultural products, namely the *shunga*, representations of erotic art, and Japanese theatre. Photography was born at the beginning of the 19th century and, along

with the first pornographic cultural products, acted as a vehicle to spread the art of bondage throughout Japan. After the Second World War, some western countries showed their interest in this 'Japanese' art of rope bondage as they became aware of its existence through movies and other pornographic cultural products and were eager to try it themselves. From then on, rope bondage, also called *shibari* or *kinbaku*, has been represented within western fields of art, literature, pornography and many more.

The founding myth about sadomasochism within western societies is less consequential; several practices are assimilated to sadomasochism, or BDSM, in 'old' or 'ancient' times, such as the early flagellants' movements, but there is no historical of narrative link with the contemporary BDSM practices. In fact, the 'contemporary' origin of BDSM practices has been identified in the United States of the Second World War (Luminais, 2014). Scholars have highlighted the similarities between traditional, old or ancient practices and sadomasochism, for example observing the presence of practices of self-punishment within different religions and cultures (see for example Truscott, 1991; Polhemus and Randall, 1994). In fact, to self-inflict pain using flogs and the cilice and the practice of fasting has been for Christian believers a means to reach god through the mortification of the flesh, the main source of sin. Another founding myth recalls the rite of passage to adulthood or the public demonstration of a social status within Asian or African cultures marked by painful proofs or ordeals (cf. for example Bean, 1991; Norman, 1991).

Luminais (2014) reports the most recent founding myth circulating within SM communities[58]. The birth of organized leather groups started happening in the United States and was linked with the end of Second World War. Homosexual soldiers and officers coming back from the front are supposed to have recreated the frame of

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[58] Also some Italian BDSM practitioners told me this story.

discipline they were used to during the war, since they were missing it as a behavioural framework. Thus, they started to associate in clubs and bars creating – or joining existing – groups based on sexual interactions framed around discipline, domination, and submission. Shortly thereafter, this interest for BDSM starts to also involve heterosexual people, spreading throughout the United States, and later Europe.

Mains (1984), underlines the similarities among SM and religious elements: what he calls leathersex resembles the existence of other Dionysian cults within an Apollonian society, for example orgiastic and bacchanalian rites, witchcraft and the Gnostic Christianity of the 1st century.

Even if some elements of the Japanese origin of rope bondage constitute historical reconstructions documented by academic literature, the 'founding myth' about rope bondage seems to enjoy the status of folk narrative, despite the fact that few events which make up this narrative are historically documented (Luminais, 2014).

5. Bodies of Excitement, Stories of Participants

As an introduction of the empirical material and in order to familiarise the reader with it, I present here some excerpts from the fieldwork notes. The events described, the first participant observation and the first BDSM play party, took place right at the beginning of my ethnographic research. This introduction serves several purposes: first of all, it allows the description of typical interactions and dynamics occurring among BDSM practitioners, as well as the introduction of some of the most well-known members of the community, and secondly it allows a description of the environments – the colours, the furnishing, and the typical sounds – in which the observations took place, giving a general impression of them. The first ethnography consists if my participation in a happy hour – people chatting, eating and having drinks together – at one meeting of the series of events that I call First Fridays. During that evening I was invited to attend the next BDSM play party, which took place two days later: that party, at the Cornucopia Club, is narrated in detail in this introduction as well.

The First Ethnography

The first round of participant observation I did was already uncovered and declared to the other participants. Thanks to a BDSM-themed social network, I created a profile through which I approached the first interviewees. Having joined several groups centred on the geographical area of Milan and neighbouring areas, I started posting very brief requests about my activity of researcher and the fact that I was looking for someone willing to tell me about her or his experience with BDSM – past or present. Responses varied, from friendly availability to open doubt about me being really a

researcher – and not a malicious writer looking for spicy details for her next book. Suddenly, an invitation arrived: it was Peter, one of the main gatekeepers and the organiser of the munches. He strongly encouraged me to come to the next munch in order to introduce myself to the BDSM practitioners and to explain what I intended to do. I immediately accepted the invitation and began preparing for the first ethnography.

> *I enter the field on a Friday evening in March. I come out from the underground and walk for almost 2 km before reaching the building that resembles a villa, right in front of an empty car park. I am a bit frightened – alone, with unknown people in a new place – and early, as usual. The space is empty. I wait for a few minutes in front of the building; then I see three girls getting out of a crimson van and walking towards the entrance of the bar. I wait for another minute and enter myself, climbing the ten stairs, covered by red carpet. Just above the last stair and before the wide double door in glass, I see a worrying wooden object, shaped in the form of a square of one meter per side, with a hole in the centre. I immediately think of a pillory, and get more frightened, thinking about what I will find inside.*

(Ethnographic diary, First Fridays happy hour, Milan, 1st March 2013)

As a matter of fact, the evening was completely successful, and I gained full access to my fieldwork, plus an invitation for the subsequent ethnography, a BDSM play party to be held in a famous club two days after. I met all three of my "institutional" (Cardano, 2011: 129) gatekeepers that night, Abigail, Kyran and Peter[59].

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[59] An institutional gatekeeper is the one formally invested of the role of entertaining relationships with the outsiders, as is the case of Kyran and Peter, who apparently formally took on this role of their own volition. They usually act as guardians and identify closely

First, I introduce myself to Abigail, a 40-year-old woman who is in charge of welcoming the guests. She is one of the three women I saw coming out from the van previously. She has a strong handshake and two clear and smiling eyes; she is the leading lady for this evening that just begun and is sitting at the head of the table.

The wide room at the second floor is entirely reserved for our happy hour; about 60 people filled it during the entire evening. Couples, groups, and singles arrive continuously, greeting each other, sitting around the numerous tables that dot the entire room, drinking and eating from the trays constantly carried in and out from the kitchen by the silent and patient waiters. The guests formed small groups of people chatting, laughing, telling each other what happened since the last time they met; the groups are fluid, they break and form again with different people involved; some people, like bees, fly from one group to another, in order to greet all their friends or acquaintances.

I am involved in a dense dialogue with a 60-year-old man, Brian, who is giving me information on his work and asking about my research, when suddenly I catch Abigail's movement: she drops the conversation she was involved in, stands up, and, smiling with joy, goes to welcome another important guest, just arrived: Peter. He's a tall man around 55, with dark eyes and a serious and hard expression – calm but hard. I have the immediate feeling that he's a man of few words – both spoken and written – as he demonstrated by inviting me to this evening with only the few words

with the group (Cardano, 2011). In this case, they acted as guardians when, presenting myself as a researcher on a BDSM-themed social network and asking for volunteers to be interviewed, they immediately asked me to present my references.

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necessary to do so: his post on the social network was brief and sharp,
almost an order. We shake hands – Abigail must have called me to meet him
– and I shake his hand firmly, in order to give an impression of decision and
resoluteness. I feel his eyes studying my expressions and my facial
movements, my gestures; he had found information about me on the
internet, he told me; it had to be my curriculum vitae, I think, available to
anyone capable of a minimum of internet research. He says I have been
heroic to have come here, that it is not for everyone. He immediately feels
free to talk familiarly with me and asks why I am not involved into BDSM
and what I intend to do for my research; then he immediately makes
allusions to my sexual orientation, that he thinks is bisexual, and mentions
that there are people who would be willing to pay to take me to the seaside
and take pictures of me. I decline the invite, smiling, and realise I have been
accepted into the group.

But the third gatekeeper still is missing. I am going out of the club
with Abigail and another girl who are going to smoke a cigarette and relieve
the tension – as well as to breathe some fresh air, since the temperature is
high in the club, and certainly the drink I had helped to raise it – when I am
introduced to Kyran. I come back into the club with Abigail and move
towards Kyran, who is sitting in an armchair: I sit near him, surprised by the
fact that Abigail remains there, sitting with us. I realise, during my talk with
Kyran, that they are a couple, they are together. Kyran starts inquiring
about my research and the reasons that brought me to choose BDSM as a
subject for my research. I feel as if I am being examined by Kyran and
Abigail, my interlocutors, and am slightly intimidated by Kyran's attitude

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and tone of voice, which resembles that of a professor. We take turns speaking in the dialogue that developed around my research and he adopts a professorial tone explaining things to me. Abigail intervenes two or three times in the dialogue, that flows more calmly towards general topics related to BDSM and away from my research. I realise I have been accepted again by this gatekeeper.

(Ethnographic diary, First Fridays happy hour, Milan, 1st March 2013)

Usually, these happy hours take place once a month. The location is a large bar in the city of Milan, chosen to fit some prerequisites: it has to be large enough to host 30/60 people, near a metro station, so that it is easily accessible, and it has to correspond to the taste of the three organisers, that is, middle class. The appointment is set for early Friday evening – so the day after is not a working day. In order to attend the munches, people have to confirm their presence to one of the three organisers. Newcomers are welcome and they have to follow the same procedure; they are encouraged to introduce themselves to the organisers once arrived. People in a professional capacity are not welcome – prodommes, especially[60].

The role of the organisers is primarily made up of the reservation – and the choice – of the club in order to make such spaces available to people interested in or practising BDSM. Attending the event is free, but food and drinks are to be paid at the counter – as in any other club. The prices of food and beverages are medium-high – and this is reflected in the typical customer of the club: white, apparently middle-high class,

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[60] Prodommes are not welcome due to the Italian legislation that punish the exploitation of prostitution; the presence of people in a professional capacity is strongly discouraged due to a sort of exclusive agreement signed by the organisers and the owner of a famous BDSM-themed social network. Nevertheless, since the munches happen in public spaces – a bar – the organisers cannot officially limit the entrance of any individuals.

aged from 30 to 60 years old with an average age of approximately 50 years old[61]. People meet there to chat, make new acquaintances, find a BDSM play partner: they socialise and bind themselves together as part of a group or groups. In fact, some of the older members of the community[62] have known each other for many years, and also met for reasons other than BDSM play; in fact, they often meet to have dinner or lunch together at one or the other's house. Moreover, for them BDSM play could be mixed with a friendly encounter: they could meet with the purpose of eating together and end up playing BDSM. This happens both for the older members and in general for their closer friends from the scene.

The happy hour could last until the bar closes. Once chosen, the location is usually maintained, unless the club shuts down, as happened in October, after 8 months of participant observation. The organisers usually say that this series of munches, that from now on I will call First Fridays, started 10 years previously.

Later in the afternoon, Peter, together with Abigail and Kyran, invite me to the play party on Sunday afternoon, at the famous club Cornucopia. Kyran took out a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote his mobile number on the back of it and the address of the club as well as the time. They explained me that a dress code is requested and immediately made a joke that embarrassed me. Their sudden invite was unexpected so soon, I was not ready, especially with the dress code.

(Ethnographic diary, First Fridays happy hour, Milan, 1st March 2013)

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[61] The price for a long drink or a basic cocktails ranges from 8 to 10 euro with a small buffet included.

[62] I use the word community to indicate the BDSM practitioners as a whole; they do not necessarily organize workshops and similar events, or lobbying activities.

The following passage is taken from the fieldwork notes of the BDSM play party at the Cornucopia club that took place two days later.

The First BDSM Play Party

When I arrive, I immediately check the address, since the building I am staring at is so anonymous and devoid of signs that I am sure of facing the wrong one. But the address is correct: a two-story, salmon-coloured building, on the right side of a minor street, with rectangular windows without any curtains or shutters that resemble those of a typical industrial shed, stands above me. I am early, again, and wait a few minutes before entering the building; in the meantime, I observe 6 people chatting and standing near the black door, divided in two groups: they seem like old, close friends. Suddenly, I see a man approaching, with a gym bag in his right hand. He heads for the door, presses a button on the right side of it, and after a buzzing sound, pulls the door open and enters the building. I pluck up my courage and approach the door, I read "Cornucopia" – the name of the club – on the bell and ring it. Immediately after the buzzing sound, I pull the door open and enter.

After another flight of stairs and another black door, I am in. Once in the hall, near a curved bench for the reception of the guests, I am immediately welcomed by a 45-year-old man, dressed in black from top to toe, who says hello to me with energy – that man for that afternoon is my chaperone. He is medium tall, and his outfit strikes me for the abundance of black buttons on the front.

The sightseeing tour starts with the toilettes, different for men and women – over there – the dressing room, just one for both genders – on your right – and the entrance to the club – right in front of you, beyond that double door with two rounded glass in the upper part. After the check-in procedures, documents, payment, card of the club and so on, I go towards the door of the dressing room to get changed.

(Ethnographic diary, Cornucopia Club, Milano, 3ʳᵈ March 2013)

In fact, a dress code is requested for all the guests, in order both to signal the difference between everyday life and the BDSM context, as well as to set up a barrier against the simply curious who do not intend to take part in the practices: if everyone has to be dressed in a certain way, those not 'really' interested in attending a party would abstain from it.

Club membership is to be paid once a year, and is valid also for other clubs in the same circuit, which includes very different clubs from this one, clubs that for example offer cultural activities and live music. Entrance fees vary depending on the guest: a man, a woman or a couple pay differently amounts, the more expensive being the man entering alone, the less expensive the woman entering alone. This is an explicit policy of the club that intends to encourage women alone to attend their parties – and consequently men that hope to find female play partners there. Moreover, the same policy is in general applied by another club in the city and by discotheques all around the country.

Once the formalities are dealt with, I aim for the door of the dressing room, but it is half-closed and it allows me to see a half-dressed man. I think

that it is the male dressing room and look around for other doors, but the one opposite says 'private', the other one on the right is closed, then, after looking around for another second, I understand that the dressing room must have been that one, since there are no other doors; so I push it and cross the threshold. "Obviously" I think once inside, "men and women are together. What sense does it have to separate dressing rooms when after a few minutes we are likely to see each other naked or having sex[63]?"

The dressing room is 20 square meters wide, with a four-seat salmon-coloured sofa on the right and opposite three dressing tables with light bulbs around the upper part of the carved mirrors, with three chairs standing in front of them. Between these tables and the sofa, there is a wardrobe with wheels intended for raincoats or other clothes. The dressing room is occupied by 10 people, males and females, who dress or put on makeup in front of the mirrors. I remember a woman wearing a black corset, which pressed her breasts against her chest and upright, like in the costume dramas.

After having changed my clothes, I go out of the room. I decide to opt for a generic dress code, so that others could not tell if I am a sub or a dom. Kyran, just arrived, comes near me and after having looked me up and down from head to toe says with his long-trained eyes: "Yes, they are going to let you in". I am relieved and at the same time notice his interested glaze.

My chaperone is already there to guide me into the club. He goes before me pushing open doors and explaining the uses of the different areas of the club. Immediately on the right, after a narrow, two-metre long

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[63] Here intended as penile penetration of the vagina.

corridor separated by some hanging ribbons that almost touch the floor, a privé *of 20 square meters with a black doctor's bed and a St. Andrew cross for flogging sessions. The wall that separated the* privé *from the main room has three rows of small holes in it, which allow people in the main room to look inside without physically being there. After the* privé, *the emergency exit. Continuing on the right, the small counter with "a nice bartender" behind it, the counter has 4 or 5 stools in front of it. He then explains the use of the different areas of the club to me. Disinfectants and cloths for people playing with wax are available.*

Beside it, and three stairs high off the ground, a doctor's bed surrounded by small sofas; curtains are available to be drawn all around the sofas in order to protect the privacy of the participants. Beyond and on the right, a similarly elevated area with a metal cage – in which an adult can easily enter and remain – surrounded by sofas. The centre of the stage is constituted by a mirror as large as the wall and a rectangular area of 20 or 25 square meters signalled on the ground by beige linoleum. On the stage there is a dark vaulting horse and a black big chair with metal studs that decorate its cushions. To the right, a Dj post in the corner. Beyond that and on the right, other small areas encircled by the same small sofas with a short table in the centre. Prevalent colours are black and dark red. The floor, too, is dark.

(Ethnographic diary, Cornucopia Club, Milano, 3rd March 2013)

Lights are usually diffuse and disco-like coloured lights effects are put to use during the parties, as well as heavily rhythmic music.

The first session on which my attention is concentrated is between a female sub and a male dom named Tom. She keeps their hands clung to a bar above her head, the bar is linked to the ceiling with two chains. She is almost naked, just her genitals are covered by a red thong. She wears high heels, and her legs are spread apart. She is looking downward. Her wide hips and medium size breast help her to remain rooted to the ground, just as if she were a tree, immovable. She resists all the lashes given by her master, Tom, even the smallest ones, with the extremity of the whip, the ones that – Bridget told me – are the most painful. When she seems not to be able to bear any more lashing, she makes a rapid movement of her thigh, in an attempt to throw off the pain – it reminds me of the gesture of a cow driving flies away with a small rapid muscle contraction. This gesture is accompanied by expressions of pain on her face, which remains facing the floor. Every now and then Tom interrupts the whipping, and keeping the whip in his right hand, goes to her and leans against her back, and with the other hand caresses her stomach, her breasts reaching down into her thong to touch her genitals. He is clearly masturbating her, in order to alternate the pain of the whip and the pleasure of being touched. She never drops her grasp from the bar.

Once the session is over, through a mutual yet mute agreement between the two players, Tom clothes her, putting a cloak on her shoulders. The attention of part of the public which they captured now evaporates. (Ethnographic diary, Cornucopia Club, Milano, 3rd March 2013)

As Bridget explains to me while watching this session together, comfortably seated on the red sofas, the master who knows what he is doing, increases continuously and slowly the force with which he whips the sub, in order not to 'burn her out' but to accompany her towards the endurance of pain. This accompanying should be preceded by – at least in the opinion of another slave, Ulrich whose advice comes from first-hand, physical experience– the discipline training, which is the main element that prevents the sub from exhibiting unwanted behaviours, such as for example, trying to avoid lashing in public.

Even though I am not a player, but a new member anyway, several people check in with me during the day; Kyran, one of my gatekeepers, for example, simply touches my shoulder and asks with his eyes if everything is fine. He introduces me to other BDSM practitioners – explaining briefly what my work consists of.

It has been difficult to see players of the same sex on a session together; throughout all the participant observations this happened just once, and it was in order to teach and learn some technical skills related to bondage. On this day, nevertheless, I had the opportunity to observe an interaction between males – based on the same motivation.

> *Kyran has just bought a new snakewhip – a long whip, entirely made*
> *by leather and with the final part, the cracker, changeable, for use or*
> *hygienic reasons – and is eager to try it out. He is occupying the entire stage*
> *– the whip is long and several meters of space around him are needed in*
> *order not to hit anyone that does not want to be hit. Tom, a whip expert is*
> *explaining to him which movements impress with the wrist to the whip in*
> *order to make the whip sound, that particular crack that signals that the*

cracker, the tip of the whip, has broken the sound barrier[64]. The teacher goes side by side to the disciple, Kyran, and putting his right hand on Kyran's right hand directs the movement of his wrist. The disciple, like a happy kid with a new toy, has an expression of attention and happiness on his face. The teacher, Tom, with a solemn air of expertise and authority – but keeping in mind that both are masters, so their relationship is between equals – walks around him and checks if he's doing well, while Kyran starts cracking the black snakewhip and manages to make it sound. Captured by the action and the sound of the whip, another disciple reaches the stage and follows the instruction of the teacher.

(Ethnographic diary, Cornucopia Club, Milano, 3rd March 2013)

The interaction among them is highly non-sexualised, and as such it is both differentiated from the intimate contacts of the subsequent session and from other more informal interactions among men that could happen during the party – a chat at the bar or during a break to smoke a cigarette.

Later, I see Kyran trying out his whip with his girlfriend, Abigail. She is leaning naked on a red sofa, with her back to the stage, and is receiving whiplashes on her back and buttocks. His expression is concentrated, and his eyes are intent on her back. On the contrary, her grimaces of pain are visible – I am in front of her, slightly on their left, and a few meters away – and audible, her eyes are closed; sometimes her hands cover her face. I see her

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[64] This explanation has been advanced since the first years of the 20th century by Lumer, as Goriely and McMillen (2002) states, while the first experiment on whips has been performed thirty years later by Carrière (1927).

sufferings. Every now and then Kyran stops and approaches her, embracing and kissing her mouth. I can see her letting herself go on his shoulder, the expression of suffering finally relieved, she appears comforted.
(Ethnographic diary, Cornucopia Club, Milano, 3rd March 2013)

In that occasion, my expression must have been of suffering since my guide and John, the dungeon monitor – the person in charge of both making sure the house rules are respected and ensuring a minimum amount of safety for the BDSM practitioners, or as Luminais (2014) suggests, minimising aspects which may be perceived as less acceptable, like heavy drinking or in the Cornucopia case, sex during sessions – approached me and ask what could have been so striking as to justify my expression.

This first participant observation offers me several unique occasions for observing the activities of the DM (dungeon monitor), both when carrying out his duty and acting for his personal pleasure.

John, the DM, at first appears reluctant to receive me and places conditions on my presence. He is highly surprised every time I show up for a participant observation at the Cornucopia club. He is one of the community's oldest members, it is said by him and others that it was he who brought SM – the BDSM acronym was not used at that time – to Italy, when 'there was nothing and contacts with the United States were still not established'. He claims to be one of the founders of the first SM Italian journals. John explains to me that his task is to maintain order in the club, and that he has been doing this for several years, and thrown out several people in that time. While talking to me, in one part of the club, he is called to intervene twice. I

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decide to follow him. The first time John approaches people playing with needles. It is not clear who called him to intervene; he speaks in a soft voice in the ear of one of the practitioners involved in the session, probably explaining how to use needle safely and limit possible contact with biological fluids. John seems calm but steady: his voice is quiet, his gestures show calmness and mastery of the situation, his intervention is fast, and comes back to me to continue the discourse as if nothing had happened. While speaking with me I notice that he is keeping an eye on the people around him, whilst still paying attention to our interaction. The second time he is called, he goes to one of the privés, *the one with the St. Andrews' cross. He squats and speaks with one of the guys who is in front of the cross, looking at a girl who is bound to the cross itself. He is probably suggesting how to untie her in order to avoid a sharp decrease in blood pressure. Again, he demonstrates calmness, steadiness and expertise and gives professional appearance. John comes back to me and we continue our conversation on male chivalry.*

(Ethnographic diary, Cornucopia Club, Milano, 3rd March 2013)

In fact, John questioned me about my first impressions about the ongoing party as well as about the BDSM practitioners I met. I explained to him how I was struck by the prevalence of male chivalry – in the form of actions directed at some of the females present at the events, such as buying drinks, opening doors and making way for them and other traditional acts that demonstrate this particular attitude.

The second time I have the opportunity to interact with John is towards the end of the party, when I find myself leaned against the back of a second-row red sofa watching the stage. I am observing what is happening on the stage when suddenly I realise I have a 35-year-old woman next to me – her thigh almost touches mine – whose nipple is being tortured by the hand of John. I had seen her before, playing on the stage, and I know she is a sub. He is now moving his other hand towards her genitals, and from her expression of pain and the movement of his hand I realise that he is squeezing her vulva, pinching it. She moans in a whisper, with a guttural sound that expresses pain, the will to endure it and a particular sound that seems to have the power of soothing her, like an animal moaning. He switches hands, but his main actions remain torturing her nipples and, alternatively, her vulva. She is and remains dressed, while John, raising or lowering depending on the intensity of his gestures, remains right in front of her, at moments touching her body with his. He murmurs something about the fact that she likes to suffer in silence, he knows it – it is clear to me that they must have been played together before that moment, since they seem to have familiarity with one another and this way of touching.

(Ethnographic diary, Cornucopia Club, Milano, 3rd March 2013)

Despite the fact that observing without participating is permitted – from a respectful distance – this episode puts me in the embarrassing position – both metaphorically and literally – of being so close to them that I could have been part of the session. I do not know where to direct my gaze, in order to avoid both interrupting and disturbing them. They seem not to be affected by my proximity, anyway.

Sometimes the sessions – or post-sessions – are carried out outside of the proper space of the Cornucopia club, in the small corridor that leads to the stairs of the emergency exit. Usually, this place is used as an unofficial smoking room by the customers of the club, who can there find an ashtray and some seats in order to recover from the energy demanding practices. There, I find an example of how the power relationships constructed during and through the BDSM play are carried on, even if in a lighter mode, as were the roles.

I recognise her, it is Sibyl, now smoking eagerly. She is the one who was whipping a girl, before, inside the club. Now she is keeping in her hand a collar, tight around the neck of what I discovered to be a man covered by a black burqa. Sibyl trails him towards a precise point of the corridor used as a smoking room, and leaning against the wall, stops. He uncovers himself, lifting the burqa from the bottom and, as requested by her, licks her boots, black and high heeled, putting his face near the floor. He also licks the boots of another woman, who, together with Sibyl, his mistress, forms a trio against the wall, slightly isolated from the others. Then, as ordered by the mistress, he lights up the cigarette in her mouth and offer his hand as an ashtray, in which Sibyl, while speaking with him or with her friend, puts the ash of her cigarette. There is a clear contrast between the familiarity, the relaxed and ordinary nature of the chat the three are having, and the fact the he is keeping his hand at a convenient height in order to allow Sibyl to use it as an ashtray. She is laughing, relaxing from her recent exertion, and he is, in keeping with his submissive role, relaxed too, in some way participating the break they are taking, but always paying attention to the

difference between their roles, embodied by the tension of the arm muscles

culminating in his hand, rigid, used as an ashtray.

(Ethnographic diary, Cornucopia Club, Milano, 3rd March 2013)

In this case, the use of a *burqa* as a synonym of submission is clear; not only a man is feminized, a practice, as underlined by Foucault (1984a), which symbolises the lowering of a man's status in contemporary western societies, but also he is hidden in such a vestment, that covers the body as a sheet and leaves just space, for the eyes veiled by a net, which is usually associated, in the popular Italian discourse and iconography, with ultimate submission.

Another interaction I experienced that day, during my first participant observation, involved me directly. I am sitting on a sofa, surrounded by new and older acquaintances (older meaning going back to two days before), around 6 or 8 people, when suddenly Brian, a male dominant in his fifties, arrives with a woman in her early thirties at his side and enters the conversation that we are having seated around a small table. They are standing on my left side, and, lost in thought/unthinkingly, Brian, while speaking with the others, touches my shoulder. In a gesture that I assume is the result of his forgetting that I am a researcher, he starts moving his hand downwards, caressing my shoulder and the area immediately under my shoulders. In the meantime, he is keeping his other arm around his submissive shoulders, and speaking with the others. I attribute his gesture to his having forgotten my role as a researcher, I think that in that moment, he thinks of me as a BDSM practitioner. Suddenly, he must have realised that he

was touching me in a way that our degree of mutual closeness did not justify and moved his hand, without a word. I do nothing both during the contact and after it.

(Ethnographic diary, Cornucopia Club, Milano, 3rd March 2013)

I perceived this contact that, at least for the duration of it – a minute? 30 seconds? – which demonstrated either that he felt some closeness with me or that he is particularly inclined to touch people, as something inappropriate and annoying: he mistook me for one of his young submissive females. Was I irritated by his assumption of a status difference between us (Hall, 1984; Henley, 1973)?

I want my role, once declared, be remembered. Several other factors could have caused my irritation: my expectations about the quality of the physical contact among BDSM practitioners and between them and me have proved wrong: I expected more heterosexual sex – intended as genital penetration with a penis – and find none of it[65], and I thought that BDSM practitioners would have touched each other and me – for the ones who did not know that I did not intend to play, as a researcher – more often and explicitly sexually or at least erotically. Neither this second aspect has been proved to be true, at least towards me; thus, being touched as happened just at the end of the party surprised me – as a researcher – and irritated me somewhat – as a human being.

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[65] I had the chance to observe, throughout all the period of participant observation – just some sexual episodes like cunnilingus, fellatio, and a man masturbating his female partner. The policy of the Cornucopia club toward sex is not clear: the two DMs told me that usually people do not have sex while at BDSM play parties, since they probably prefer to take advantage of some specific tools and spaces that they could not have in other places; on the other side, some practitioners that attended the parties stated that they have been interrupted abruptly by the same dungeon monitors while 'just' kissing.

The Bus Episode

An episode that turned out to be amusing happened at the end of the first play party, just outside the club. It helped me to reflect and review my expectations and beliefs I had before the BDSM play party. While waiting for the bus in a quite populated area of the city in the early evening a man approached me and tried to start a conversation and me, asking me about my origins, where I live, etc and I realised that he was subtly trying to pick me up. This episode annoyed and frightened me a bit – while before at the party nothing so disturbing happened: interactions were declared and issues such as sex and sexual contact were so present and visible that there was no shame. In contrast, small and quick hints as to a possible sexual contact were insinuated into the conversation by the man – at a bus stop, a de-sexualised space – and rendered the approach unpleasant.

I leave the Cornucopia Club, at about 8:30 p.m., and go to the nearby bus stop. It's dark, but there are still several pedestrians walking down the street. I reach the bus stop and a man, I would say about 55-60 years old, starts chatting with me, and after a few jokes at which I laugh, he asks me if I live nearby and if I am Italian. I wonder why on earth he wants to know if I am Italian – and also what reasons I am giving to him to imagine that I'm not, but I don't have the time to answer. I understand that he's trying to pick me up. I get immediately annoyed and even a little frightened – is it possible that I just left a place where interactions were explicitly sexual or erotic without feeling either threatened or annoyed, and now here, in the middle of a busy street, with a long and black coat on, I am approached in a not so

elegant way by a gentleman with an attitude I would definitely define as slimy?

I realise that we are about to hop on the same bus, and I decide to get away from him with an excuse: I head to the front of the bus pretending to answer my phone; meanwhile, I continue to observe him sideways to see whether he's approaching again.

Once off the bus, a few stops later, while I cover the last few hundred meters that separate me from my home on foot, I start laughing, alone and loudly, realizing the paradoxical situation that I just experienced. (Ethnographic diary, Milan, 3rd March 2013)

5.1 BDSM Practitioners' Positionality and Narratives

As stated in chapter 3, the idioculture studied in Milan represents somewhat a micro and local version of the BDSM subculture. The BDSM practitioners interviewed and observed constitutes in general quite a homogeneous group from several points of view. In chapter 3 I compared some of the socio-demographic characteristics of the BDSM practitioners interviewed with those studied in other research, and showed that, despite the fact that a comparison might be carried out cautiously, some elements correspond, especially with regards to education level, which is relatively high, and age, which most often ranges between the thirties and the forties. Furthermore, almost all the practitioners were middle class, or more precisely the highly educated fraction of the middle class, with a high cultural capital; in fact, their education attainment is usually tertiary: the majority of them having the equivalent of a bachelor or master degree. Their command of the English language, which I consider to be a good proxy for the educational level and cultural capital – is in general quite good. They mostly lived and were raised in the northern part of the country.

As regards gender, I decided to interview almost the same number of men and women, thus half of them is female, half male.

5.1.1 Compelling Heterosexuality

The sexual orientation of the BDSM practitioners interviewed and observed, was in general heterosexual, with the exception of some females, who declared or enacted bisexuality during play parties and usually for the sake of the play, and some young males. Homosexual and non-homosexual BDSM practitioners seem to be socially and

spatially segregated within the scene. Females who perform bisexual plays and partly erotic interactions mostly as part of the play constituted the few exceptions to this. The sexual orientation of the person usually corresponded to the preferred gender of the play partner. Unlike what Luminais (2014) claims, the gender of the partner, besides of course his or her BDSM role, is fundamental in choosing a play partner. Some men do not even consider the possibility to play with other men, like Kyran:

Today there are few people at the Cornucopia Club. It seems like the last day at school, the energies are low and few people are feel like playing. At some point, for fun or perhaps out of boredom, Bridget, Abigail and Ginger decide that they want to tie Kyran like a salami – their words; they approach him, try to tell him what they want to do, while laughing and smiling, but he does not want to. He refuses as if he had been asked to do something incredibly strange or inappropriate; as if considering his own role as not suitable to that proposal. The three take control of the scene, and sit astride the leapfrog, each wearing only a black thong; they play, laugh, and joke with each other while being whipped by Kyran, on their sides or their backs – they are all facing the same direction, Abigail is the last in the row – Bridget is the first. Meanwhile, while being whipped, Abigail, Ginger and Bridget play with each other – Abigail joking slaps Bridget's breast – and laughs enjoying attracting attention at the centre of the stage. They look like three girls on a school trip, enjoying themselves away from their parents' eyes. Kyran smiles, like he is finally in the right place at the right time.
(Ethnographic diary, Cornucopia Club, Milan, 1st December 2013)

Other men, like Quincy, play with other men purely for teaching purposes: during a meeting focused on improving technical skills for rope bondage, I saw Quincy tying Victor's limbs. Quincy was patiently and competently explaining Victor how to tie a forearm or an ankle without affecting bloodstream or pressing nerves. Their non verbal language – the position of Victor's eyes, fixed on a point on the wall in front of him, the physical contact reduced to what was strictly necessary, the professional and serious expression on Quincy's face – indicated a non erotic BDSM interaction.

As Nick, one of the younger interviewees who likes to define himself as a 'little bit queer', said, it is not that the community is homophobic; it is simply that a homosexual person would probably not feel at ease attending the play parties or the happy hours, because the narratives and the interactions are clearly and explicitly homosexual.

"Then um, um [there is] no particular presence of these elements [gay people] in [pause] in the community [...] that is, of those groups that are present and active that I attend in Milan [...] [pause] Why? I don't know. Then, there isn't really homophobia. Simply somehow, um, I guess, that if a homosexual comes to a happy hour as the one we did just yesterday, [pause] well, he will not feel so [emotionally] charged, and he will not feel so warmly welcomed, but he will be nevertheless welcomed without any problems. But, well, and now? [pause] it's that a very few [gay] people are drawn in that direction [toward attending BDSM events], there are few practitioners, few people to relate to and interact with, that's all." (Interviewed Nick, 2013)

The same could be said as regarding gender identity: a transgender person would not be excluded from the events, simply he or she is not encouraged to attend them – where they would find a white-heterosexual-cisgender[66] environment in which they would likely not feel completely at ease. As regards the ethnicity of the BDSM practitioners, it is white, Caucasian without exception.

As explained in chapter 3, the comparison among certain characteristics of the practitioners studied and that of practitioners in other research has been carried out in order to try and ascertain to what extent the conclusions of this work could be generalised; the main characteristics were similar, hence the BDSM practitioners selected are not 'eccentric'. One of the distinctive features of the current work, though, is the social and spatial segregation between homosexual and non-homosexual practitioners.

In this chapter, I will deal with two major categorisations of BDSM practitioners, which will allow me to summarise the massive amount of information I collected. The first is characterised through an analysis of their positionality within a frame composed by the categories of identity – either modern or postmodern – and their proximity to the BDSM 'Old School'. I will discuss their beliefs about BDSM as constituting either a core part of the self or a playful activity, and also their approach to the BDSM frame (events, play parties, rules and code of conduct) as more or less structured, rigid or fluid.

The second categorisation relates to the trajectories through which they came to BDSM. The personal narratives employed by practitioners are very different from one another but they share a search for internal coherence. The majority of the practitioners,

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[66] Cisgender is a person whose gender assigned at birth matches with his or her body and personal identity; it is usually used in opposition to 'transgender.'

though, reconstruct and present their narrative about BDSM as a discovery that happened at a young age; for example, the first memory Hector recollects, about his desire of being trampled, dates back at when he was three years old:

> "I remember [...] I assure you that the desire to support an adult woman in her entirety is my first memory [pause] My first memory ever. [...] She was my neighbour. I was three, she was hardly fifteen [pause] and I remember the desire I had to feel this girl on me." (Interviewee Hector, 2013)

Finally, I will introduce the concept of intimacy – in light of work by Newmahr (2011) – as a useful tool in describing what BDSM practices are about, besides all the roles, rules and rituals. I will frame intimacy as the access to the innermost part of a person, an access created by BDSM interactions. At the same time, this intimacy, this access, is what is looked for through repeated BDSM interactions by practitioners.

5.1.2 Practitioners' Positionality between Sexual and Identitarian Dimensions

As expected, BDSM practitioners develop different and varied personal narratives and choices on which their trajectories are based. In order to understand the similarities among them, beyond their BDSM roles and preferred practices, I constructed a schema that enables us to position them within a frame (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Cartesian coordinate system describing BDSM practitioners' positionality.

Postmodern identity — Playfulness, self-irony, superficiality, multiplicity of selves, incoherence, no essence

Oliver

Tradition, 'Old School', discrete sexualities

Peter

sexual · identitarian dimension · dimension

Social innovation, fluidity, sexuality as ongoing practice and experience

Cecil

Modern identity — True self from interactions, coherence, seriousness, naturalness, essence of oneself

Ulrich

To this end, I employ a Cartesian coordinate system. The first axis shows the continuum between the 'tradition' of the BDSM 'Old School' and the innovator groups usually formed by younger practitioners within the frame of sexuality in the broad sense.

5.1.2.1 The Sexual Dimension

This axis describes the relationship between practitioners and BDSM in the realm of sexuality. On the left extreme, we find the normative solidification of discrete sexualities, on the other extreme, lies sexuality intended as an ongoing practice, an experience. This left extreme is marked by fluidity and the rejection of discrete categories. This is somewhat similar to the absence of discrete categories and the rejection of binarism in queer theory (Arfini and Lo Iacono, 2012; Epstein, 1994).

Consider for example the position of Quincy, in Fig. 3: he is nearer to the left end than to the right end, which means that he displays more characteristics of the 'Old School', for example a certain rigidity in structures and segregation of social relationships, than characteristics typical of younger generations.

Peter, the 'Old School' Master

Peter is an example of sexuality and BDSM intended as relying on discrete categories and informed by the codes of the 'Old School', on the left end of the in Fig.1. He is a man in his fifties, exemplifies the classic 'Old School' traditional guy: he is highly concerned with his privacy, keeps work contacts separate from BDSM ones, usually does not reveal his real name or telephone number; he has, or had during his first years as a BDSM practitioner, a clear perception of the stigma attached to those practices and those practising them, thus he kept BDSM as something private and intimate. Peter enacts and replicates quite rigid and structured behaviour towards the other members of the community: for example, he once told me that he wanted to go out with a female slave 'owned' by another person, thus, before asking her, he asked the permission of her

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master, who gave it to him. Peter told him where they were going to go having dinner and other details. The master granted Peter his permission and he and the female slave enjoyed their night out.

Peter, taken here as example of this ideal type, perceives himself as part of a group that with efforts overcame the difficulties of meeting and finding play partners: personal ads in magazines were, during the 1980s, almost the only way to contact one another (Brumatti, 2011). He lived through the difficulties of the first phases in which the BDSM subcultures were organising and systematising themselves. Moreover, he feels a certain sense of belonging to his reference group. He feels the responsibility and the authority of regulating the functioning of the community and monitoring access to it, for example questioning newcomer's interest in BDSM and listening to their stories, in order to prevent incidents and 'bad' behaviours – such as for example heavy forms of self-harm. Finally, he feels a responsibility to provide privately technical expertise and safety advice to those who do not possess them. He is one of the pillars of the community – if such a term could be employed – and this is apparent both observing interactions during happy hours and the endless online discussions on Fetlife, the BDSM-themed social network. Peter is practically part of that generation who developed a code of conduct based on the respect of some specific rules that later became codified into the famous acronyms SSC or RACK; finally, his experience in BDSM practices is well established and his technical skills are developed at least in one or two areas, for example needles and impact play with the whip. He tends to describe his sexual orientation as something discrete, fixed and 'true' over time. Referring a discrete sexual orientation, rather than changing or being fluid, is part of his formation and personal narrative.

Cecil is the ideal type of fluidity, experimentation, dynamism and even recklessness in approaching BDSM. Consequently, he is positioned on the right end of the axis in Fig. 2. He is also the ideal type of the social innovator; his interest in BDSM encompasses different approaches to it – either 'mental', 'physical' or a mix of the two – and he practices polyamory as well. He is part of a recently formed group that intertwines BDSM with polyamory, traditional penetrative heterosexual sex – what it is referred usually to as 'vanilla sex' – and friendship. Part of the fluidity is his questioning about his own sexual orientation: he declares himself as bisexual. He is almost totally out and open with others about his interest in BDSM and sometimes polyamory; different social groups know about it: friends, some of his family and partners, as well as people on different social networks and platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc). His being out about BDSM and polyamory implies also that all his online personae – the profiles on the different social networks and other platforms – bear the same nickname; his different accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Fetlife, Meetic, etc) are connected. His different personae are merged and fused together.

The dimension of social innovation is exemplified by Cecil. He, along with other young members of the group organised a new happy hour, a monthly event called Kinky Pop, after 6 months of fieldwork observation. The event was reserved for the young Kinksters and curious under 35 years old; this was done in order to create a space reserved for the younger members and new people interested in BDSM, separately from the older members. While the older members cannot attend Kinky Pop, the younger members can and usually do, continue to attend the other series of events, the First Fridays.

5.1.2.2 The Identitarian Dimension

The Cartesian coordinate system drawn in Fig. 2 is also constituted by another axis, which describes the conception BDSM practitioners have about their 'identity' connected to BDSM. In fact, some of them think of BDSM as something they do while others think about it in terms of identity, identification and so on; the latter usually define themselves 'BDSMers', rather than 'practitioners'.

This axis describes importance, depth and rootedness of BDSM for each and every one of them. In other words, the social actor is described in his or her entirety; in this case, BDSM is highly personalised, and the subject is reduced to its conceptions of BDSM.

Undoubtedly a problematic and multi-faceted category (cf. chapter 2), the postmodern conception of identity describes one of the two extremes of this axis. The upper end of the axis in Fig. 2 is marked by the postmodern category of identity. The lower end, on the contrary, is described by the modern concept of identity.

In the postmodern paradigm, identity is described as something incoherent, or fragmented in a multiplicity of selves, without a proper essence to be discovered (Sullivan and West-Newman, 2007). This conception is in some ways near the queer refusal of categorising subjectivities into discrete categories (Arfini and Lo Iacono, 2012).

On the other hand, the modern concept of identity relies on the existence of an inner truth as constituting the true nature of a person. Thus, this nature is something that sooner or later could be discovered by searching for the true self.

Oliver, a man in his late forties, better illustrates what I mean by postmodern identity. For him, BDSM practices are part his erotic frame, and constitute an enrichment of the usual 'vanilla' sex he engages in with his partner. His attitude towards BDSM is playful, he alternates it with 'traditional' sex – heterosexual intercourse characterised by him penetrating his partner's vagina with his penis. His attitude towards BDSM roles and rigid rules, as well as life in general, is filled up with self-irony, and even a hint of superficiality I would say. He looks for a form of deep-rooted entertainment in erotic and sexual life throughout all BDSM and social encounters. He attends all BDSM play parties with a hint of cynicism and playful arrogance. For him BDSM play parties are an occasion also to meet friends and 'travelling companions'.

He could well renounce to BDSM without feeling any sense of emptiness, abandonment or loosing of his meaning of life. BDSM is for him just another thing he does, among others, and from which he derives joy with his partner and the happiness of having found friends as well.

Ulrich, the "True" Slave

On the lower end of the axis, I positioned the modern concept of identity. Modern identity is characterised by the presence of – and the search for – a true self, coherent and located at the core of the person. It has to be discovered through social interactions and one enacts it and brings it to life through continuous interactions.

This conception is quite similar to an essentialist categorisation of identity: the difference, though, lies in the fact that in the modern conception, the identity emerges through interactions, it is not given once and for all. This means that the other social

actors are fundamental in defining 'what' one is: identity is in this case a relational concept. On the contrary, essentialist conceptions of identity focus on the absolute nature of identity, something given (at birth?), to be discovered and that could exist even in the absence of social relationships.

Ulrich, a man in his late forties, well resembles the modern conception of identity. He is the perfect example of the modern concept of identity: he is a 'true' slave, not a submissive, and through BDSM, discovered in his early childhood, he progressively unveils his real and inner self to others and to himself. BDSM for him is natural and serious, it is not a play, or an enactment, a parody or a way to spice up sex; on the contrary, it is his very essence. Through the work he does on himself, he intends to make his true self emerge. His work consists of a journey into himself, a mystic path toward self-discovery. His journey is solitary, and even if he attends play parties, he is and will remain clearly isolated in his quest for The Mistress, with whom he can express his love, affection and inner slave nature.

BDSM is reserved for the elite, in his conception. Only a determined few practitioners can reach a certain level of depth in BDSM: they have to be motivated and find their own path by themselves. He agrees to transfer only a certain kind of knowledge to others: that is technical information on how to avoid, for example, contagion by avoiding others' bodily fluids. He is against giving advice to others on whether or not to engage in risky practices. Ulrich thinks that that is a personal decision, and he feels compelled not to push anyone 'down that slope'.

5.1.2.3 Reuniting the Identitarian and Sexual Dimensions of BDSM

As a whole, the two axes explained so far, capture two major divisions among BDSM practitioners and their relationship with BDSM: they describe their positionality within a sexual-identitarian frame. The sexual dimension indicates to what extent practitioners experience a traditional or innovative relationship with their own sexuality. On the right end of the axis, a fluid and fragmented notion of sexuality interlocks BDSM with polyamory, sex and play; on the other end, more discrete categories of sexuality, more rigid borders between private and public profiles exist. As regards the identitarian dimension, I have laid out the opposition between two ideal types of the modern and postmodern concepts of identity; on one side, the true, inner self and on the other the postmodern merging of different selves experienced and enacted in the playfulness of multiple interactions, frames and situations.

Practitioners can be positioned along these two dimensions in order to better visualise their positionality (Fig. 3). Practitioners' positionality is based on the information collected through interviews and the months of fieldwork. Graphic illustrations allow us to immediately see the characteristics of BDSM practitioners, such as age, BDSM role among others. We can observe that these four categories are scattered around the Cartesian coordinate system.

Fig. 3. The relative positionality of the BDSM practitioners.
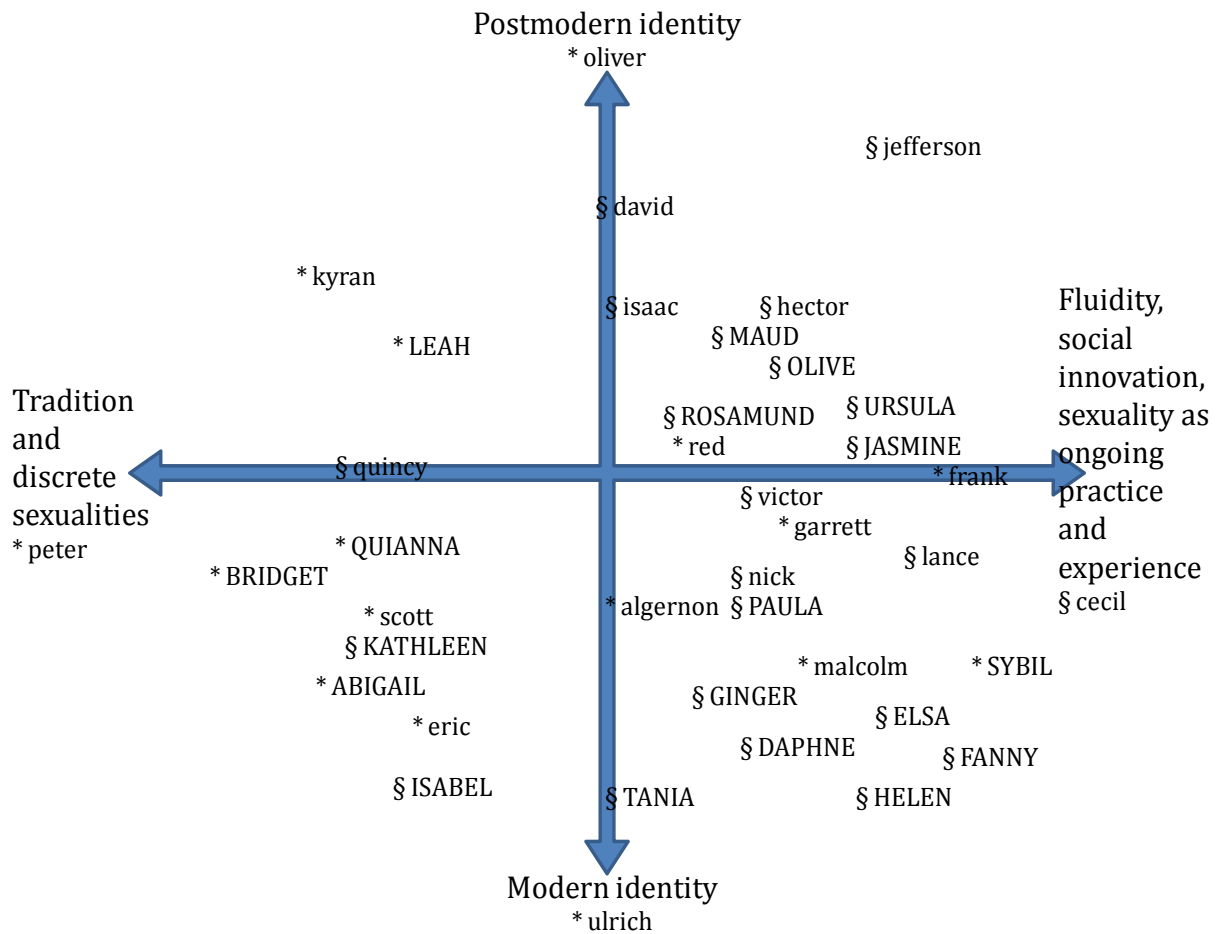
Postmodern identity
* oliver

§ jefferson

§ david

* kyran

§ isaac   § hector
§ MAUD
§ OLIVE

Fluidity, social innovation, sexuality as ongoing practice and experience

* LEAH

§ ROSAMUND   § URSULA
* red   § JASMINE

Tradition and discrete sexualities
* peter

§ quincy   * frank

§ victor
* garrett

* QUIANNA
* BRIDGET

§ nick   § lance
* algernon § PAULA

§ cecil

* scott
§ KATHLEEN
* ABIGAIL

* malcolm   * SYBIL
§ GINGER
§ ELSA

* eric

§ DAPHNE   § FANNY

§ ISABEL

§ TANIA   § HELEN

Modern identity
* ulrich

Legend: male; FEMALE; * ≥ 35 years old; § < 35 years old. The actual position of the practitioners is defined by the symbol preceding their name.

For example, Paula is a young masochist in her thirties, who considers BDSM practices as something deeply rooted in her, something intimate and belonging to her inner self. The same could be said for Scott, who is positioned mirroring her position in another quadrant. Scott is a bisexual man in his fifties, who, in contrast to Paula, is more of a follower of the 'Old School' rules. He is part of the forerunner generation who first experienced BDSM in Italy in a quite organised and codified fashion during the 1980s.

Another interesting example is given by the position of Jefferson, a male foot fetishist. He plays with his fetishism, and joyfully and with lightness explores the

possibility of encounters with women to fulfil his desire of observing female feet. In the meantime, aside from this search that constitutes part ofthis work, he is challenging his deep-seated ideas about the primacy of monogamy over other forms of relationship: he is taking in information about groups gathering to discuss polyamory. He recently left his partner and child as a rejection of the traditional monogamous couple in which he felt trapped and suffocated. Thus, I positioned him on the top right, where a sense of playfulness accompanies BDSM and where the experimentation of different ways of staying together coexist.

5.1.3 Who Spanks Who? Reading Sexual, Play and Other Relationships

Practitioners are linked together by different kind of ties. They can have sex with one another; they can engage in BDSM sessions, they can form polyamorous groups, and so on. They share different degrees of social relations, that is, different kinds of bonds: every kind is marked by a different colour in Fig. 4. For example, the green line stands for a BDSM play partnership. People in a couple usually have sex and engage in BDSM practices together, sometimes they live together as well; they are marked by a violet line. Finally, those engaged in a polyamorous relationship who also play together are connected by a red line. Here, by polyamory I mean a relationship which includes different forms of emotional attachment – being a friend, falling in love – and various forms of sexual or erotic contact – petting, vaginal penetration, anal penetration, masturbation, oral sex.

Fig. 4. Interactions among BDSM practitioners.
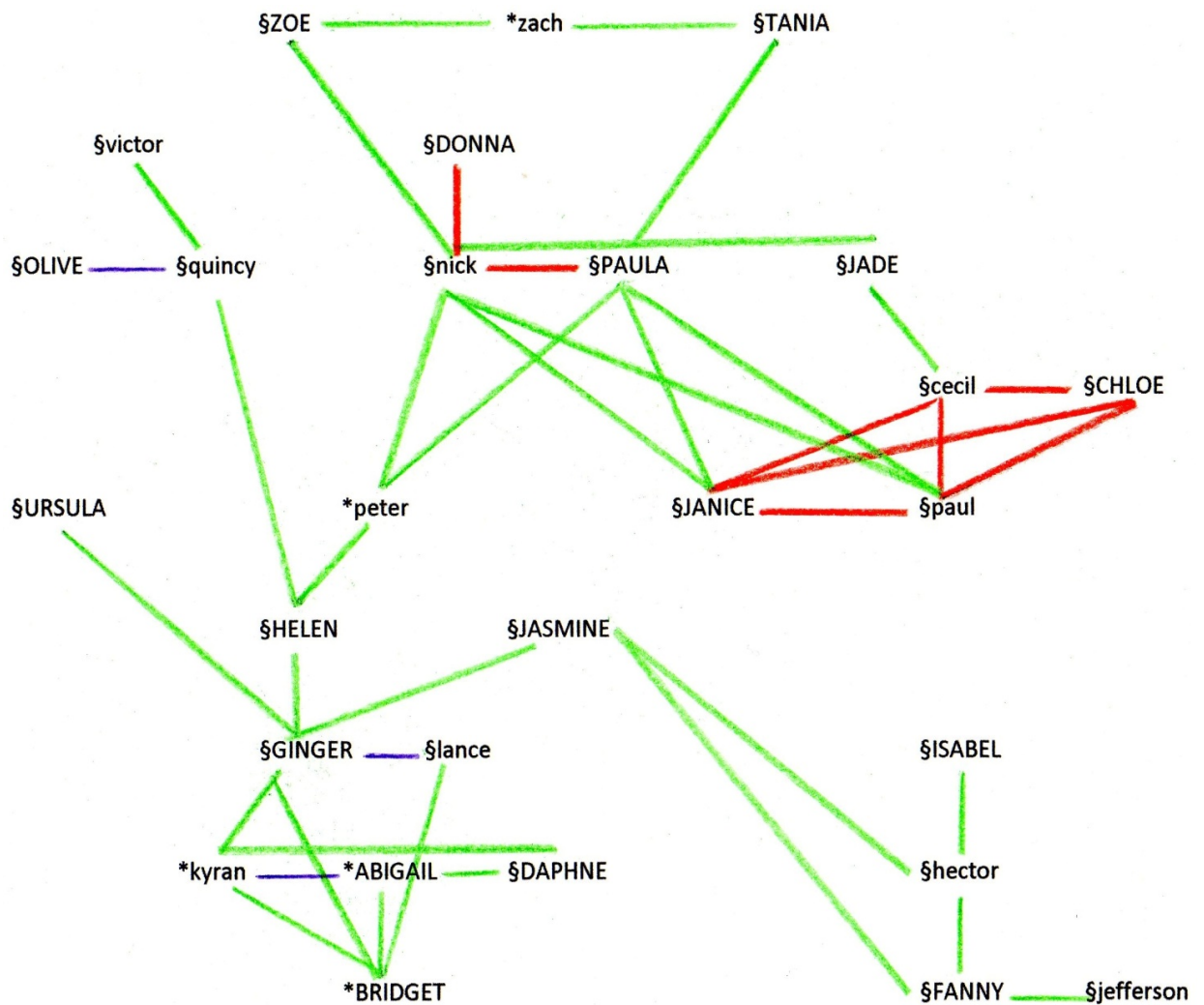
Legend: male; FEMALE; * ≥ 35 years old; § < 35 years old; ■ they usually/sometimes play together; ■ they are in a couple and usually/sometimes play together; ■ they are in a polyamorous relationship and usually/sometimes play together.

Fig. 4 constitutes a basic example of network analysis, which is usually a descriptive technique (Collins, 1988). Although this particular network analysis is limited, since not all the existent links among practitioners are depicted, but only the ones directly observed or reported, it could be useful to understand the kind of links connecting different BDSM practitioners and group.

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Observing Fig. 4, it is evident that particular practitioners tend to be more cohesive than others. Two groups could be observed: the first, on the bottom left, is formed by Ginger, Lance, Kyran, Abigail and Bridget; the quantity of the actual links connecting them out of the maximum possible number of links is high – they are almost all connected with each other. This means that the group is tight, and one can expect a strong sense of membership, solidarity and shared outlook. The same could be said for the members of the other group: Nick, Paula, Janice, Paul, Cecil and Chloe, who share play and sex partners.

On the contrary, Peter, Helen and Jasmine have relatively low number of links with other practitioners (three), but occupy a strategic position, a position of power (Collins, 1998; Freeman, 1979), since they function as a bridge between different groups not otherwise connected. Collins and Freeman however, describe power as the ability to make another person follow orders within an institutional frame, thus, that conception of power is quite different from the one employed throughout this thesis. Nevertheless, their position is undoubtedly strategic since they constitute the sole link between groups that are not connected in other ways.

The position of Jasmine, for example, connects the group on the bottom left of the figure to the one on the bottom right; these two groups could be not linked otherwise.

5.1.4 How and Where it All Started: Narratives about Life Trajectories toward BDSM

One of the first questions of the interview related to the way in which people came to BDSM and became aware of it. In reconstructing the pathways following which BDSM practitioners come to these practices, we have to keep in mind that an *ex post*

reconstruction of one's life is likely to be presented in the most coherent way possible as well as progressively developing towards a final end – the point from which the person is speaking. I explicitly asked people to describe the way in which they approached, or came to BDSM practices.

In general, two answers were quite popular: the first touched on the idea that the person I was interviewing was 'atypical', different from the other practitioners, different from what constitutes the norm of BDSM – no such norm obviously exists. This means that practitioners perceived a sort of model path to follow within BDSM, a sort of typical career that in any case they did not follow. This is probably due partially to the desire to impress me, the interviewer and to tell themselves that they were somewhat different and perhaps better than the imagined others.

The second element that recurred among practitioners resembles the coming out narrative of non-heterosexual men and women. Practitioners, in fact, had the impression of feeling and being different from the others since they were children or preadolescent. Even when they were young – for example under 10 years of age – they did or thought or desired something that they now interpret as a BDSM-like activity, a precursos, a kind of seed of the practices in which they are now engaged. It is usually something that later fully developed and has been recognised as a type of erotic or – usually – sexual desire to engage in practices under the BDSM acronym. The example of Ulrich is in this regard quite clear when he speaks about his 7-years-old desires to be a slave:

"The first experiences in which consciously [...] the first awareness, the really strong ones, um I remember in elementary school, I learned how to make the bed when I was six so I could go to make the bed of my little friend [female] who was 7 years old [...] because I wanted to be her

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servant [smiling]. I learned on purpose to make - that's why I learned to make the bed [smiling]. I explained exactly what I wanted to be to that girl who was 7 years old; she was very cute, very smart, very lively, in a way she took advantage of the thing, laughing; she accepted the situation, partly because I was insisting strongly; I think we were caught several times, by her mother, I remember that sometimes... a year later when I was 7 years old and she was 8, she [the mother] had even laughed, having seen us, she looked perhaps a little bit surprised, I have memories in which her mother looked at us a bit puzzled, so..." (Interviewee Ulrich, 2014)

As regards the personal narratives employed by practitioners to explain their approach to BDSM, they are very different from one another, but they share, as said, the research for coherence. I identified three major elements which stood out in reading and analysing these narratives. The first is the earliest age at which practitioners experience their first conscious or unconscious attempt to engage in BDSM-like practices, this age varies from childhood to a more mature age. The second is whether they prefer the gender of the play partner to correspond to what they declare as their sexual orientation. Within a mostly heterosexual group, one would expect heterosexual interactions among practitioners both on the level of play and in the sexual interactions. This is only partially true, since there are some cases in which this correspondence between one's sexual orientation and the gender of play partner is not perfect. Though the majority of them declare themselves to be heterosexual and prefer playing with someone of the opposite gender. The third element which stood out is the occasion on which practitioners started became aware of their interest in or attraction to BDSM. I

will provide some examples of the diversity of the possible pathways that will allow a deep understanding the variety and richness of the practitioners' experiences.

5.1.4.1 Fanny and the Overcoming of Abusive Experiences in Her Late Teens

Fanny is a skinny young girl with brown hair and light blue eyes. She loves to dress in such a variety of ways that it is difficult to understand where she keeps all her outfits. Her smile is rare, but huge, and her laughs are like a set of small bells playing together.

During our interview at a café in one of the popular areas of the city, ambient music in the background prevented others from hearing her story.

She tells me that she remembers the first time she realised she enjoyed an abusive sexual experience. She did not 'start' practising BDSM willingly, instead she was introduced by a highly intimate experience. In fact, she physically explored with her body some experiences that later she realised could be source of fun and pleasure – but with other people and in other frames.

When she was 12, she was the victim of violence perpetrated by some other children who lived in the neighbourhood; this episode, along with the hospitalisation and surgery that followed, is the first step she recognizes in her path toward BDSM. Years later, another event, this time within the erotic frame, is labelled by her as the second step of that path. She experienced a form of violence that she realized she was actually enjoying:

Fanny: "I started having sex with men when I turned 17, because I was tied up and I even say almost raped, I was pretty drunk and almost in

a state of semi-unconsciousness, by a friend with whom I used to play together in punk group [pause] I was very small and I ended up in the hospital because of internal bleeding, he just broke me down physically; but in reality I liked the pain thing, which is a thing that has always been a problem for me, since I don't know why I like it. Out of guilt I stayed one year more together with this person [pause] just because I felt very inadequate and very dirty, because I liked something that actually was considered a rape, that [pause] um and actually when I feel physical pain I still find it enjoyable. And it's one thing I actually never could understand, even just having been depressed, having taken psychiatric drugs, having talked to psychologists and psychiatrists. I don't..."

Laura: "You don't understand why physical pain is pleasurable...?"

Fanny: "Yes. Actually, the thing psychologist told me is that 'because you don't love yourself you feel you deserve to be physically punished', but I don't [pause] actually right now I don't think I deserve to be punished for anything, but I like hurting myself, so..."(Interviewee Fanny, 2013)

What she defines as a rape is nevertheless a pleasurable experience which causes her a sense of guilt and remorse that gradually she is wiping away. This episode constitutes her introduction to BDSM, she reworked its meaning through emotional work and repeated BDSM interactions.

Considering her experience with BDSM as a whole, she left a frame, in which she desired objectification and submission, and approached BDSM practitioners and groups in which she feels that her sufferings and the search for pain have a positive meaning.

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Her explorations of pain, in the forms of self-harm, and the body modifications she did, are for her a means to explore her body and mind. Through BDSM, Fanny aims to demonstrate that she controls and owns her body. Pain acquires the status of a heuristic and cognitive tool to explore the social reality around her and to deconstruct the previous negative meaning she attached to her body and emotions.

The objectified body she desired to have, without holes, hair and deprived of its age and gender has now been substituted by a sexualised body, that she feel as cleaner than the a-sexualised one she desired for herself before. This paradigm shift she accomplished is accompanied by the attachment of positive values to painful and submissive experiences.

The presence of a reference groups has helped her in that process. In particular, she recognises the role of a younger woman, Helen, in awakening her sexual desire toward her, a woman, as well as her desire to engage in BDSM plays with her. Fanny's bisexuality is a characteristic she emphasises also in relation to the BDSM frame, since she recognises her desires to play with women as well as men.

5.1.4.2 Olive: the Myth of Shibari and how She Becomes a Mistress

Olive is a lively woman in her early thirties, always on the move and speaking with the highest number possible of words to express an idea. She is skinny, with no unnecessary amount of flesh on her body. At the beginning, I was interested in interviewing her boyfriend, who I met at a rope bondage workshop. When I met him on their beautiful terrace, I was told that she was actually both a rigger and a mistress. When I met him, I had encountered several difficulties in meeting dominant women – they were so few and so socially segregated from the people I was frequenting that it

was impossible to interview them. Suddenly, I realised I had just met one, and was quite surprised and happy.

She told me she started bondage out of curiosity. Without even having tried it, a friend told her that a class on rope bondage was about to start. Out of curiosity, she took the opportunity and brought her boyfriend along as well.

Their technical skills in tying up limbs and people has improved in the last few years, thanks to further classes and workshops. Unlike the majority of the couples I met, they seldom play together, tying one another. They prefer, in fact, to play outside of the couple. Olive told me that she and Quincy never play with bondage at an intimate level; they prefer to deepen their technical skills with other people.

Olive and Quincy are fond with the oriental narrative about *shibari*, especially since it constitutes a purer and more genuine form of rope bondage than the 'western' way. *Shibari*, she explains, involves very close contact and communication between the two people involved, and is far more intimate than western rope bondage. The pure and incorrupt East becomes infected by western values and commodification. This narrative of purity and beauty is the creation of a myth.

The process of mythopoiesis is largely widespread within the BDSM community, especially when it comes to the difference between *shibari* and 'western' rope bondage. I use the word myth not to indicate that historical facts are completely different to what is narrated, but to underline that the creation of a shared narrative constitutes an important moment for a shared identification with a group. Besides this, there currently appears to be no academic evidence of the link between *shibari* and 'western' rope bondage (Moser and Kleinplatz, 2007).

During one of the rope bondage courses Olive attended, she met a girl who worked as a professional dominant, a mistress, who asked her to be her assistant. Olive,

in fact, used to tie up both men and women since she does not connect the act of tying someone up to the sexual sphere. Olive accepted and her traineeship started. She preferred to assist her in BDSM sessions rather than working alone, since both the responsibilities and the commitment requested are smaller. She became more and more skilled and capable, and she enjoys her work as a prodomme. Lately she has started working at a club where she and other girls are requested to play with clients. Olive explains to me that private sessions of BDSM and sessions at the club are very different, since the latter are lighter and less extreme, due to the fact that the environment is less suitable and equipped for 'heavy' sessions, such as clinical plays.

She does not share with other practitioners a sexuality linked to BDSM. She does not mind tying, trampling and whipping, but that does not constitute her sexuality.

She has to face the stigma associated with being a prodomme. Clients and non clients either think that they are profiteers who take advantage of people's desire for confidentiality and the fact that they cannot play with their own partner, or think that they do not offer a 'real' form of domination: if the client pays and tells her what to do, what kind of domination is that[67]?

She employs a twofold narrative in order to overcome such a negative stereotype. The first argument relies on the fact that she does not sell sex – meaning as genital penetration, or any other form of genital contact – but simply the skills she acquired in rope bondage and other BDSM practices, like trampling or impact play. The second

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[67] The negative stereotyping of female dominants – and not switchs – has been illustrated by Ursula and Ginger during our interviews. Ursula defines them as haughty, arrogant and conceited. In particular, Ursula was been criticised by a mistress since she decided to switch, to mix her role as a dominant with the one as a submissive. Furthermore, she declared that this arrogant attitude is more common among dominant women than men (Interviewee Ursula, 2013). Ginger stressed the rude attitude of female dominants when addressing their own submissive male partners – or submissive males in general, it is not clear. She criticised it as being smarmy and slippery since they offer their feet to lick as a form of humiliation (Interviewee Ginger, 2013). Although this narrative seems to mirror what could be expected by a mistress, that is, to dominate and humiliate their submissive partners, Ginger, though, describes it as disrespectful, atypical and as a consequence a sort of abuse, or unjustified rudeness.

argument is constituted by a rejection of what she does: she admits not wanting to go too deeply into the argument of professional domination as a form of prostitution, even when reflecting on it alone; the reason is that she fears the answer. This is the "compromise" (Interviewee Olive, 2014) she reached.

Despite the respect she declares for clients, however, she says that for her BDSM has nothing to do with sexuality, and that she "is quite normal from that point of view" (Interviewee Olive, 2014). She is evidently connecting BDSM sexuality to an abnormal expression of one's own sexual desire. Despite having declared her total respect for those engaging in it, she still somewhat thinks that those doing BDSM are not totally normal.

5.1.4.3. Frank, or the Enjoyment of Trust

Frank teaches at the university. He accepted to meet me in his office, after all I could be one of his students, and I am quite amused by recognising some of the books on the shelves. His office is a corridor room in a crowded faculty in the heart of the city. He is not too concerned with privacy, some of his colleagues know he engages in BDSM practices; some of them in turn are into BDSM too, but if possible they avoid playing together. How could one recover one's face and maybe even teach together, after a BDSM session? These are the words hidden behind this separation between work and BDSM.

Frank shows a particular enjoyment and playfulness in experiencing BDSM. He is one of the few who speak about a trauma as the source for their interest in BDSM. He identifies the first step of his interest in these practices in his childhood, in particular in certain physically and emotionally painful experiences. He employed the psychological

frame, in particular the device of self-analysis, to explain his desire to engage in BDSM interactions.

"I think it all started with an early trauma; I actually did a little bit of self-analysis, I think there is a deep psychoanalytic origin, that in my past there is a situation where I was tied when I was two years old, in a children's hospital in [name of place] and I am sure of this because my mother remembers that I had just a strap around my neck and at one time they used to do this in hospitals for children, if you do it now you face a complaint, that's for sure. [...] Later, this probably resulted in a certain pattern [inaudible] psychoanalytic following a huge pain in my life, namely the illness of a person very close to me; in 1993 something changed, it's as if I had this interest in a certain type of situations. Incidentally, 1993 was also the year in which the Internet became available, and then looking at [certain] pictures I took that – and it was from that point on that I noticed that these things were exciting me." (Interviewee Frank, 2013)

Tracing back the origin of their interest in BDSM practices to childhood traumas is not common among the practitioners interviewed, despite what is commonly believed. It is true that in some cases, for example consider Frank, Fanny or Helen, there have been some painful – both psychological and physical – experiences, but they are not necessarily perceived as the origin of the interest in BDSM by the practitioners. Frank does perceive it this way, but at the same time he seems not particularly affected by it.

What Frank likes the most in BDSM is the trust of the people who play with him; since he tends to play the dominant role, this is favoured, but he enjoys every time like

the first. His role, though, depends heavily on the person he is playing with in that moment.

He enjoys creating certain bewilderment and shock in the others who play with him, as well as in imagined others. For him, in fact, BDSM is a form of liberated sexuality, in the sense, now almost disappeared, that was so common during the sexual revolution. The transgression he perceives is so high that he connects it to his maternal figure. In fact, every now and then he imagines how his mother would react in knowing that he engages in polyamorous BDSM; he likes the idea of shocking her.

Trust is what he tries to engender in others. He usually guides others through an intense BDSM session. That was the case, he tells me, when he played with two young girls. These girls could have been in danger when meeting an almost complete stranger and accepting to play with him on the spot. But what happened is that they offered to play with him, and trusted him to the point of coming to his hotel room on their first night together.

A different type of trust, equally important and wonderful to him is the one he enjoys with a particular male play partner. This man, Jude, knocks at Frank's apartment and before he opens the door, turns so as to not see Frank's face. Immediately Frank blindfolds him, and their session starts.

This form of accepting another's guide recognising the other's greater experience and maturity, reminds me of what by Italian feminist has been described as a particular kind of relationship. This kind of relationship, that could be translated from the Italian word as entrustment[68], might, in the eyes of feminists, overcome both the gender inequality between man and woman, since it can exist between two women, and the rivalry often lamented by feminist themselves (Milletti, 2008). This practice of

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[68] The original Italian word is *affidamento*.

entrustment imagines a usually younger woman who relies on the guidance of an older one, more expert of the things of life and most of all wiser; the latter is expected to guide the other woman through a journey into self-discovery in order to grow both together and autonomously (Milletti, 2008).

Frank's first complete experience with BDSM was mediated by the sentiment of love, since after years of marriage he discovered himself in love with another woman. He left his wife and for that new partner he started exploring some of the lighter BDSM practices.

With that woman at his side as BDSM play partner, he also started exploring the possibility of engaging in polyamorous relationships. He explores his 'heteroflexibility', that is, the fluidity of his sexual orientation as he knew it. The episode in which he becomes aware of his limits related to intimate and sexual contacts with a man calls attention to his deeply rooted beliefs.

He enjoys fighting for fun, so every now and then he looks in the personal ads for others to fight with. This is usually a form of light BDSM play, but on that occasion things went differently. He gradually left his conditionings to focus on the quality of his experience: is it pleasurable or not? The answer, as expected is quite positive and surprising at the same time.

"The first time a man – I met him to fight, but he told me that he had back pain and oh well, then he gave me a shiatsu massage. Oh well, I lie down, and 'but', he said, 'I'd rather rub you naked' and I did [undress] and he started. That man was truly fascinating, he kept massaging me, go here, go there, he kept massaging. At one point, I said 'well' [laughs] 'this can't

be the shiatsu massage' [laughs] 'this is not a massage' [laughs] So, I felt –

it was my first homoerotic experience – I felt distinctly the cultural

resistance in me, right? But I said, 'wait a moment, is this sensation

pleasurable or not? It is clear that we are not hurting each other, so is this

pleasurable or not? Let's forget about conditioning, right?' and gradually I

said 'oh well! Yes, it's nice!'. When he used his lips, wow! [laughs] 'it's

nice!': that was the feeling [laughs] I said 'that's great!' Here, I'd like to try

to overcome these constraints; I think that a lot of men have them."

(Interviewee Frank, 2013)

In remembering and telling this episode, his laugh sounded genuine as though he

was reliving the episode. BDSM is for him a way to explore his own conceptual limits,

and to deconstruct stereotypes about masculinity and sexual interactions.

5.1.4.4 Tania, between the Old Guard and the Younger Kinksters. On Exploring Polyamory

Tania is a woman in her thirties with a clear and evident knowledge of the

sociological categories I use as a sociologist. Her gestures are decided, free from

unnecessary movement. This fact makes the interview particularly dynamic and fast. We

are in her enchanted room, full of fairies, lights and wonderful books about art,

literature and exotericism.

Since I met her, I saw her position as quite at odds with both the Old Guard of

BDSM and the younger practitioners eager for new sex and play partners. Throughout

our interviews and during a couple of other meetings with her, she confirmed this

intuition. She is positioned just between the older generations who engage in BDSM practices and the younger ones, new to these practices and community (see Fig. 2). She is close to the 'Old School/Guard' in respecting the ideas of what she calls 'Old Guard': she feels the historical importance and burden of what they went through in the 1970s and 1980s. She feels respect for them, since they partially paved the way for the younger generations of BDSM practitioners.

For the same reason, she is angry with the young braggarts that provoke them. She compares this to the dynamic that she imagines between a 20 year old gay guy in San Francisco who sends packing a 60 year old who went through all the struggles of which he is enjoying the achievements.

Tania recognizes that what is now missing among younger practitioners is the concept of structure, of initiatory path; this concept in her opinion possesses an educational function. Structure and a certain degree of rigidity favoured a higher degree of social control among practitioners within the 'Old School'.

She occupies a middle position among the 'Old School' and the younger members not only since she attends both events – First Fridays and Kinky Pop – but since her background and attitude are somewhere in the middle. As a result, she does not fully recognise with either group.

She defines herself atypical in relation to BDSM – just like Bridget and several others did – since "she takes what she wants" (Interviewee Tania, 2014) from the group and the specific practitioners. Others decide to engage in all the rituals revolving around roles and the unwritten etiquette, she does not. Her absence of ceremony and obsequious reverence is striking.

The majority of social expectations implicit in BDSM play parties and events are for her unbearable. As a result, she does not attend them too often. In particular, she

describes to me the passive submissive female and the big bad male master as the worst social figures she ever met in the community. Since her late childhood she has been sensitive to social expectations linked to the female gender role. As a grown up adult, she is not at ease with some of the main social expectations about the female gender, and in fact sometimes she does not quite identify with it.

Through BDSM she managed to find a small reference group in which her – peculiar, for the Italian context – ideas and thoughts about gender identity, sexual and BDSM roles are shared and to some extent lived and enacted.

Tania: "[male name] tried to play with me on other occasions; however, the point is that in that period I already had my perception, I was 20 years old, and my perception was 'oh, well this is a place where men do what they want, and what women can do is stand half naked and get things done to them and not break balls'. And then I said 'well, no. I don't want to' [laughs] 'I don't give a fuck'; I did not like that attitude at all, and therefore I disappeared and started doing other things."

[...]

Tania: "Now [pause] I am really exasperated at being treated as a sex object, that is, I got to a point where I am really exasperated by this thing. Um, because I have a very feminine body, but I have not a very feminine head, in the sense that very often – well, some mornings I wake up and I think like a man"

Laura: "For example?"

Tania: "Well, [pause] in the sense that I am not comfortable with female gender roles, basically. So [coughs] in the scene [pause] um, having a body with tits [pause] is a pain in the ass, so I tend not to interact much with people because [pause] automatically they think it is an interaction that can lead to – that is, with a sexual purpose, and it is something that [pause] I am not interested in, then to avoid misunderstandings I keep myself to myself. [...] For a period in fact I stopped coming to the happy hours and I went to play parties only because [pause] when I got there and just for the fact that [...] I have boobs, having at least three people I never met who talking endlessly to me and showing off, well, no thanks, thanks but no thanks." (Interviewee Tania, 2014)

For Tania, as for Fanny, BDSM is, among other things, a way to reconceptualise earlier painful experiences into positive episodes. As a result, pain becomes a means through which she assesses her control over the body and over herself in general. To obtain the physical pain that she wants when she wants it, is a source of pleasure and satisfaction. She does identify as dominant masochist, a category that stresses the importance of physical pain, but administered by a submissive – either male or female there is no difference – in the ways she prefers.

Sex and BDSM are for here clearly separated spheres of the self. BDSM and sex are separated, BDSM is not even preparatory to sex, it does not have the function of foreplay. Consequently, she also plays with people she finds unattractive or is not attracted to; if it happens that she is attracted by them, the play is more intense, but this does not constitute a prerequisite for playing together.

5.1.5 Concluding remarks

By looking closer and again at Fig. 2, BDSM practitioners appear scattered around, and the difficulty of categorising them appears in all its entirety. Clearly, some simplification has been necessary in order to position them on a two dimensional schema; there are of course more dimensions to be studies, since it is with difficulty that their narratives and experiences are systematised.

Nevertheless, such abstraction helps to identify some of the features of contemporary Italian BDSM. In particular, what is striking is a sort of generational division between the 'Old School' and other groups. This division is only with approximation based on the recorded age of practitioners, it is, as a matter of fact, more a question of mental predisposition, attitudes and behaviours.

The dimensions employed to discriminate – in the sense of differentiating – BDSM practitioners are connected to the identitarian and sexual realms.

The identitarian dimension relates to the relationship of the practitioner with BDSM and the way it affects their self, image, character and social image. Two extreme positions are identified: one is marked by a conception of identity that is fixed, ordered categorically, defined and discrete. This is the modern concept of identity. The other is more fluid, less fixed, and liable to change. I have called it 'postmodern', aware of the possible complications regarding the use of such categories.

The sexual dimension relates to the way in which BDSM is perceived and enacted sexually, and its connections with the practitioner's eroticism and sexuality. Again, two extremes positions are identified, one that conceives fluidity, experimentation and the absence of discrete categories, which I would say resembles some of the positions of queer theory; the other is characterised by a higher degree of rigidity in the

categorisation of one's own sexuality, sexual orientation, gender role, and similar categories. What pertains to individual identity and sexual orientation is ordered in discrete categories.

In the next chapter, I am going to discuss the feminist and queer discourses as perceived by BDSM practitioners and the way in which they are employed as a tool for interpreting individual and collective narratives.

6. Sex Wars and the Translation of Feminist and Queer Discourses into Contemporary BDSM

"Categories of true sex, discrete gender, and specific sexuality have constituted the stable point of reference for a great deal of feminist theory and politics. These constructs of identity serve as the points of epistemic departure from which theory emerges and politics itself is shaped. In the case of feminism, politics is ostensibly shaped to express the interests, the perspectives, of 'women'. But is there a political shape to 'women', as it were, that precedes and prefigures the political elaboration of their interests and epistemic point of view?"

Judith Butler

One of the main issues commonly raised by people who oppose BDSM is that it involves pain and violence, and thus constitutes something very different from the norm, not sane, abnormal. As regards pain, I will show that pain for pain sake is not the only aim of those engaging in BDSM practices (cf. chapter 7). As regards violence, I already discussed its characteristic of non-consensuality as starting point for discussing violence in chapter 2.

I will now propose an analysis of some feminist and queer discourses that have been appropriated, often inadvertently and unconsciously, by BDSM practitioners.

The first feminist discourses about SM date back to the late 1970s; I will analyse those developed in the United Kingdom, the United States and Italy. In those contexts, BDSM is most commonly named SM, sadomasochism.

I will show throughout this chapter that BDSM practitioners appropriate the core arguments of these discourses and apply them within the BDSM frame, often without knowing that the same arguments have been discussed and picked apart by feminists thirty years earlier and by queer theorists and activists shortly thereafter.

These queer and feminist discourses about SM, known as the sex wars, were framed within the general argument against or for pornography (Chancer, 2000; Musser, 2014). By analysing issues such as consent and the influence of context on personal choice, such discourses have been appropriated by BDSM practitioners and subsumed in BDSM practices. They became – with an act of re-creation – the 'brand new product' of the BDSM community, and are now discussed, online or in person, without any reference to the feminist or queer contribution. This appropriation – or, as a matter of fact, a re-appropriation – has been unconscious and does not acknowledge the feminists and others who have dealt with these issue, and has been conducted in a quite widespread climate of indifference or overt hostility toward the feminist thought itself.

To begin, I will situate this feminist and queer debate. I examine it through an analysis of the most controversial issues, such as consent.

For example, the ways in which consent is articulated, deconstructed and altered within BDSM communities and most of all, personal and group narratives surrounding consent constitute an object of analysis. On the most apparent level, consent, which both practitioners and groups would like to be enthusiastic (several practitioners among the older members stated this), is the "permission to do something especially by someone in authority or by someone who is responsible for something; agreement about something" (Longman, 1978: 285). In general, the application of an abstract concept to a defined social reality takes effort and could produce distortions; similarly, this could happen

with the embodiment of consent into BDSM interactions. On an 'operational' level, in practice, it concerns the ability of the single individual to understand some nuances of the attitude of the submissive – who may want to interrupt the session and withdraw consent – or, on the other hand, the attitude of the dominant who could want to interrupt the session too, or slow down the rhythm, or simply change the activity; dominants have limits too.

In this chapter, I first discuss queer and feminist theories about SM situating them within the general frame of pornography. Secondly, I will show, through excerpts of interviews, that there has been a re-appropriation of these discourses on behalf of the BDSM practitioners; moreover, I will show that the act of re-appropriation has taken place despite an unawareness of the feminist premise and conducted in a climate of indifference or overt hostility to the feminist thought itself. For several reasons, to defend and quote feminist positions is challenging in the contemporary Italian context. This prejudice is reflected in practitioners' discourses and silences about the feminist discourse itself.

6.1 Situating the Feminist Debate about SM, from 1970s to 2000s

The feminist debate known as the sex wars of the early 1980s (Basiliere, 2009) centred on issues such as pornography, sex work, violence against women, sadomasochism (SM) and beauty (Chancer, 2000). The Barnard conference, held in 1982, was an important turning point for the US and UK feminist movements and debate (Gerhard, 2001). Scholars' and activists' positions in this debate were described as radical or libertarian, with some variations in between (Dymock, 2012; Ferguson, 1984).

In this chapter I will focus on feminists who have analysed SM in some western countries (the US, UK and Italy) since the 1970s up until the first years of the last century. This period is characterised by a rich feminist debate in western countries; in the last few years the Italian debate has been recovered and augmented (Ibry, 2008).

As regards the Italian case, there were a few contributions from activists. I will argue that the scarcity of authors dealing with SM in Italy is due to the specific characteristics of the Italian feminist movement, the SM groups, and the Italian context. I will examine the stories reported by SM practitioners as well as data from the fieldwork in order to show and analyse the re-appropriation of the feminist and queer discourse about SM, especially that revolving around the concept of consent.

On the whole, US and UK scholars and activists are positioned in three camps: pro-, anti- and in-between, whit Italian activists being mainly against SM. In the US and UK, the pro-SM position has been almost entirely – or at least initially – developed in lesbian contexts. The pro-sex argument in general developed also among heterosexual theorists and activists.

In this regard, a central argument in the lesbian framework about power and submission within the sexual frame revolves around the binary between butch and femme (Musser, 2014)[69]. Women identified as butch in some way bear some male characteristics, and their identity is closely linked to these characteristics (Arfini and Lo Iacono, 2012). Lesbian activists and theorists, defending SM, placed a clear political

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[69] "S&M was read as a (condemned) performance of patriarchy – regardless of the acts performed. These sentiments coalesced into anxiety about the butch, who was also figured as masculine and domination." (Musser, 2014: 32). Musser thus describes sentiments of rejection and worry about the butch, the 'masculine lesbian', who mirrored the man and his threatening figure. In the years of the sex wars, domination was masculinised and submission feminized (Musser, 2014; Rich, 1980).

positive value on such practices[70]. However, the SM scene in Italy proved to be a more nuanced frame than described by scholars and activists.

The main argument within the feminist debate about SM was constituted, ultimately, by the capability of the actor to express consent regarding these practices that were accused of reproducing the male patriarchal structure of society, a society that disadvantaged women.

I show that for neophytes and non-SM-practitioners, consent constitutes one of the core narratives about SM, while within the SM scene practitioners seemed not to discuss this topic much. Nevertheless, during the interviews, several critical positions about consent emerged. In particular, some practitioners expressed their difficulty in applying the notion of consent to a specific situation, while consent on a theoretical level was for them quite clear. In any case, the SM plays I attended appeared to be consensual.

Another feminist and queer argument about SM that has been appropriated and discussed within the contemporary BDSM Italian context is that SM proved to be a frame that involves an eventual transformation of individuals in terms of gender roles and identity, sexual practices and the structure of relationships.

6.2 The Sex Wars in the United States and the United Kingdom

6.2.1 SM as an Empowering Practice: How to Get Rid of Oppression by Enacting it

The feminist debate around BDSM in the US and the UK was polarised around three positions: anti-, pro- and in between. As regards the pro-SM front, different

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[70] In this regard, SM practices were, within the lesbian feminist context, inserted into non-commercial frames, thus SAMOIS could be thought as qualitatively different from the gay male SM experiences taking place for example in San Francisco, which were already organized around bars and clubs.

arguments have been raised by scholars and activists stating their theoretical, and sometimes personal, favourable position regarding SM.

First of all, even if based on strong power differential, SM could be a feminist practice: "overall, both dominant and submissive SM roles were presented as compatible with a pro-sex feminist agenda and as a potential to reveal and subvert gendered power dynamics" (Ritchie and Barker, 2005: 14). This resembles some of the commentaries surrounding *Histoire d'O* when it was published in 1954. The agency of O was emphasised as representing a general empowerment for women. A feminist claim of an empowered self through SM could nevertheless result in some tensions, since managing one's feminist identity with the involvement in SM practices could be difficult, as shown by Ritchie and Barker (2005).

On the contrary, for some feminists, the search for a non-equalitarian relationship is not acceptable at all; they are thought to be not compatible at all (Ferguson, 1984; Hopkins, 1994; Rian, 1982).

"If dominance and submission are inevitable, there is really no point to a feminist transformation of society [...] This is one sense in which I believe sadomasochism and feminism are not compatible." (Rian, 1982: 48)

Following on from the feminists just mentioned, Jeffreys (1993; 1996a) maintains that SM undermines the very basis of feminist thought, in particular the equality underlying sexual relationships and encounters; SM is an anti-feminist practice *per se*. Although, her argument revolves around the definition of equality and inequality, these are concepts that she does not define.

Some feminists explicitly underline the contractual nature of SM and the fact that is based on consent and choice, and thus is different from violence, which is per se non consensual (Hopkins, 1994; Ritchie and Barker, 2005).

"Fantasy then (24/7 female to male submission) is distinguishable from reality (patriarchal oppression and traditional domestic servitude) when it involves choice." (Ritchie and Barker, 2005: 17)

"The ability to choose submission was thus central to our participants understanding of SM as empowering and feminist. (Ritchie and Barker, 2005: 18)

"Some SMists have claimed that the contractual nature of SM not only ensures consent but allows it to flourish. In fact, SM is thought to provide a radically honest, democratic model of consent that can be beneficially applied to other situations." (Hopkins, 1994: 127)

This argument is quite widespread and employed. As a consequence of being based on consent, SM presupposes an equalitarian relationship as the basis for the negotiation itself. Califia (1981) illustrates this by putting forward the good example of the part time mistress against the bad example of the full time one:

"S/M relationships are usually egalitarian. Very few bottoms want a full time mistress. In fact, the stubbornness and the aggressiveness of the masochist is a byword in the S/M community. Tops often make nervous

jokes about being slaves to the whims of their bottoms. After all, the top's pleasure is dependent on the bottom's willingness to play." (Califia, 1981: 31)

In the end, the contractual nature of SM seems for those defending these practices to be the starting point for subverting gender roles. This happens for example when during a BDSM scene a practitioner performs the other gender (Hopkins, 1994). Note that Hopkins describes it as a partial subversion – not total.

"SM initially drew my attention because it seemed to be a site for the (partial) performative subversion of gender – one of the rare practices in which such subversion is often explicit (drag being another). Since I take great personal pleasure and great political hope in acts of gender subversion, SM seemed worthy of study. Gender subversion appears to be taking place in a variety of ways. First, positions in a scene are determined by factors other than the 'sex' of the participants. […] Second, even though the appearance of a power dichotomy is maintained in sex, it is not the same kind as in non-SM relationships. It is simulative, playful, funny, and all self-consciously so." (Hopkins, 1994: 135)

Hopkins thinks that throughout a session gender roles could be de-coupled from, and even opposed to the dominant gender order and the main gender attributions in most, especially public, social roles. A woman, in fact, could actively choose to submit as well as to dominate within an SM relationship, practice that could be empowering for her (Barker, 2013; Taylor and Ussher, 2001).

"Our research on women BDSMers challenged the perception of BDSM as inherently anti-feminist in similar ways to the female participants in Taylor and Ussher's (2001) previous critical psychological research on BDSM. Women spoke directly to the anti-BDSM feminist position highlighting the active and empowered position of dominant women in BSDM, counter to the heteronormative sexual script" (Barker, 2013: 23)

Another matter debated by feminists is the analysis of the expression of consent in a male dominated or patriarchal system (Barker, 2013; Ferguson, 1984; Hopkins, 1994). Is it valid? In general, consent is considered valid, even if expressed within a patriarchy or a male dominated society (France, 1984). One of the reasons is that the nature of SM is simulative, rather than a replication, of patriarchal sexual acts (Hopkins, 1994).

"SM sexual activity does not replicate patriarchal sexual activity. It simulates it. Replication and simulation are very different. Replication implies that SM encounters merely reproduce patriarchal activity in a different physical area. Simulation implies that SM selectively replays surface patriarchal behaviours onto a different contextual field. That contextual field makes a profound difference." (Hopkins, 1994: 123)

"Generally participants suggested that practices (even those which drew on gendered power imbalances) which were about fantasy were acceptable (and could be deemed feminist) but these were very clearly set

in opposition to the reality of male dominated society." (Ritchie and Barker, 2005: 15)

Although the distinction between reality and replication, simulation and authenticity is a slippery one, several theorists relied on it. For them, the differences between replication and simulation, fantasy and reality lie in the presence of limits, ethical values, the use of safewords and the presence of consent. SM is a fantasy, a parody, a performance, thus distinguished from reality, as stated by several authors and activists (Barker, 2013; Califia, 1981; Ritchie and Barker, 2005; Stein, 1999; Taylor and Ussher, 2001).

In this respect, the concepts of hyperreality and authenticity could be useful tools for highlighting some characteristics of BDSM practices. The feminist position which emphasises the fact that SM is a fantasy, a parody, etc. shows some similarities with the concept of hyperreality, meaning the impossibility to reach the authenticity (of a person, an experience, etc.) as an intrinsic characteristic of the object (here also intended as a person, or a frame, etc.).

The concept of authenticity has been variously discussed, both in touristic and subcultural terms (Chaabra *et al.*, 2003; Cohen, 1988; Hughes, 1995; Olsen, 2002; Sims, 2009; Thornton, 1995; Wang, 1999). The meaning of authenticity could range from 'authorship' in history of art – maximum level of individualisation, since it is usually an artist who paints or carves a statue – to a characteristic of an experience of consumption as a shared emotion – in this case it is more similar to a massification phenomenon (Thornton, 1995), to a negotiable rather than a primitive concept, as well as a characteristic acquired over time (Cohen, 1988).

In the end, the concept of authenticity as it has been employed by feminists to describe SM seems to be attached to the object – SM practices – rather than to the subject – the SM practitioners. Several meanings of authenticity are possible, stressing either the intentions of the person engaging in SM practices or the practices themselves.

SM practices carry potentially positive values and benefits, since it is a consciousness raising practice, a way for alienated people to get in touch with themselves (France, 1984), as well as an expression of female liberated sexuality (Califia, 1981; Ferguson, 1984; France, 1984). The reason for it being so liberating is that it is negotiable, in particular through the switching of roles; this is not possible for other characteristics, for example one's ethnicity or socioeconomic status:

"I don't want to hear any more tragic stories from women who have repressed their own sexuality because they think that's the only politically acceptable way to deal with a yearning for helplessness or sexual control. […] The most significant reward for being a top or a bottom is sexual pleasure, if you don't like being a top or a bottom, you switch your keys. Try doing that with your race or your socioeconomic status." (Califia, 1981: 30, 32)

The nature of SM as allowing the deconstruction of sexual stereotypes is a strong point stated by feminist and queer theorists. Moreover, SM could deconstruct sexual stereotypes allowing practitioners to explore new sexual practices. In SM sexual pleasure is not only located in the genitals nor derived only by male penetration. SM practitioners could experiment with their bodies in new ways to achieve and give

pleasure (Califia, 1981; Foucault, 1984b). In the words of Foucault: SM "it's the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously. [...] those people [...] are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body – through the eroticization of the body." (Foucault, 1984b: 165).

6.2.2 SM as a Re-enactment of Patriarchal Oppression. Consent is Extorted

The argument of those opposed to SM is based essentially on the fact that within patriarchy consent is not possible. Consent is rooted in patriarchal societies (Linden *et al.*, 1982; Rian, 1982) and perpetuates male dominance (also unintentionally: cf. Ferguson, 1984) since it reproduces the hierarchical order of gender (Jackson, 1996; Ritchie and Barker, 2005). For those reasons, it supports rape culture (Linden *et al.*, 1982).

"Sadomasochism [...] is a mode of sexual satisfaction which has been learned in an alienating social context and which remains satisfying as long as its social context remains unchallenged." (Rian, 1982: 46)

"In defending sexual 'pluralism' it is often forgotten that feminist theories of sexuality began by questioning the relations of dominance and submission inscribed in conventional heterosexual practice, suggesting that such relations were neither natural nor inevitable but resulted from the hierarchical ordering of gender. Many of the 'sexualities' currently being defended or promoted reproduce these hierarchies whether in the form of sado-masochism or 'cross-generational relations' [...] There is no

questioning of where such desires come from […] Hence such arguments are at root essentialist" (Jackson, 1996: 25-26)

The eroticisation of power differentials related to gender is at the base of the patriarchal model, thus not to be encouraged (Jeffreys, 1996a; Ritchie and Barker, 2005). Consequently, the consent expressed in SM practices is meaningless, and constitutes an internalised degradation or brainwashing (Hopkins, 1994; Rian, 1982).

The centrality of consent in the argumentation is showed by the fact that anti-SM feminists criticised pro-SM feminists for the fact they did not explore it deeply enough (Dymock, 2012; Ferguson, 1984).

As Downing (2004) shows, taken to its extremes, the liberal discourse on which the notion of consent is based could lead to confused or unexpected positions, when SM takes the form of edgeplay. She discusses the example of the lust murder as incomprehensible and unacceptable since it is based on the enjoyment of the free choice of dying in a sexual context. To a certain extent this discourse could be applied to edgeplay, those practices that even for some members of the BDSM community are 'extreme' and somewhat 'wrong'.

"It seems, then, that the principle of respecting the individual's ability to consent to what he or she desires […] maybe tempered in this case by our aversion to the very idea of desiring death. And yet, that is not quite accurate either, as the case of social tolerance to certain claims for euthanasia shows. It is more specifically that we have a problem with the idea of validating the right to consent to a *sexually pleasurable death.* […] The problem comes when an act that we are taught to perceive as morally

repugnant is not only motivated by, but also productive of, an excess of enjoyment." (Downing, 2004: 10)

The pleasurable nature of the lust murder constitutes the ultimate taboo in Downing's opinion (2004). There are risks in invoking choice to defend one's own desires, as the example of the lust murder shows. The risk is to be labelled as ill, or crazy. Eventually, invoking choice to defend SM shuts down the discourse, since it prevents a critical analysis of these practices (Snyder-Hall, 2008).

"Seeking to prevent another divisive split within feminism, many women today embrace [...] 'choice feminism', a nonjudgmental position that accepts any choice a woman makes as feminist, just because she chose it. [...] Choice feminism [...] leaves women's socially constructed desires unexamined. [...] The logic of choice makes it difficult for feminists to examine how chosen desires are constructed and offers little recognition of how an aggregation of individual choices can have a negative impact on gender relations at large. The invocation of 'choice' often works to shut down critical discourse." (Snyder-Hall, 2008: 564-565)

The acceptance of choice as the basis of one's own behaviours switches off the understanding of that behaviour. More critically, the main problem with consent seems to be the presupposed nature of individual choice, since it is indeed produced – and has to be analyzed accordingly – within a specific social and historical context with precise structural forces (Casalini, 2011; Downing, 2004).

As an example in which the analysis of the context influences heavily one's own behaviour, Snyder-Hall (2008) describes wifely submission as produced and sustained by some strict interpretations of the bible. Snyder-Hall analyses the so-called wifely submission and links it firstly to the unfinished feminist revolution and more generally to the society, that being male-dominated, fosters the eroticisation of relationships of dominance and submission:

"[...] Our most personal desires may come from the internalization of societal norms, which are often rooted in structures of inequality. In a male-dominated society, the social construction of sexuality can lead to an eroticization of male dominance and female submission" (Snyder-Hall, 2008: 581)

Casalini explicitly addresses the issue of the relationship between a choice and the context in which it is produced. She states that there is a gap between the nature of the choice – and thus of personal consent – and that of responsibility, that is qualitatively different but is treated as isomorphic. In as much as individual choice is influenced by the context – social, economical, cultural, etc constraints – the consequences of that choice must be borne collectively. The responsibility of a choice cannot be entirely in the hands of a single human being:

"An analysis of the structural, social, economic and cultural dimensions of inequality and power distribution is essential to understand the choice individuals make. An abstract call to the freedom of choice, as it emerges from the so-called *choice feminism,* on the one hand seems to

overlook the different meanings that consent can take in widely separated areas [...] on the other, in an equally simplistic way, moves too quickly the attention from society to individual, by shifting to the single woman, to every single human being, the whole responsibility of a destiny that is never entirely in her/his hands." (Casalini, 2011: 364)

In addition, the fact that these practices are consensual does not warrant that they are not pathological, or that they are morally permissible (Hopkins, 1994) or acceptable (Ferguson, 1984). People engage in all sorts of activity that they choose to, for that reason they are not automatically 'good', acceptable or empowering.

For some, SM constitutes a form of human degradation. The objectification of a man or a woman that happens every time fetishism is enacted is described as an abuse, a negation of the individual (Hein, 1982).

"This instrumentalization of self differs in quality from that indicated by the putting to use of one's skills and abilities. [...] if my utility to you lies exclusively in the fact that I have objectified myself – made myself your object and subordinated myself to you – then my use is a negation of me. (To be negated is not the same as to be used up. The latter, a state of total exhaustion, may nonetheless be an exhilaration and a fulfilment.) [...] But by reducing myself to your object or allowing you to do that to me, I demean the two of us regardless of either of our pleasures." (Hein, 1982: 86)

The author traces a difference between being put to use, a good and sometimes even economically profitable activity, and being abused, a despicable practice not to be encouraged.

Furthermore, despite the claim that SM can deconstruct gender roles and encourage the fluidity of practices and power differences, it was noted that SM practitioners tend to be essentialist and binary in their encounters (Hopkins, 1994). The supposed gender role exploration and subversion does not actually take place. In this case, reading such interactions could be tricky, since the analysis must be conducted at multiple levels (individual meaning, local and global context) in order to understand practitioners' positionality.

The last argument employed by anti-SM scholars and activists relies on an attempt to apply a social constructionist paradigm to SM. For example, Jeffreys (1996b) tries to avoid an essentialist position by focusing her and our attention on the social construction of sexual practices. Since the construction of sexuality around mechanisms of dominance and submission is far from natural, the eroticization of fear, dominance and submission could be unlearnt, she states. Jeffreys (1996b) relies on the 'good will' of BDSM practitioners as the starting point for the abandonment of such practices. In an argument that echoes both the reparative therapies[71] proposed to LGB people and the Catholic Church's position on homosexuality (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975; 1986; Presidency of the Italian Episcopal Conference, 2003), she asks of them a sort of abstinence and redirection of their desire toward more suitable objects. In this way, she judges the abnormality of the practitioners. It is far from being scientifically demonstrated that this behaviour could be unlearnt (Taylor, 1997); furthermore, such

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[71] Reparative or conversion therapy is based on the assumption that homosexuality constitutes a mental disorder and consequently has to be cured by helping the patient to change his or her sexual orientation. This therapy has been enhancing ethical concerns worldwide since its formalization.

so-called reparative therapies are not recognised by the major psychological and psychiatric associations, both due to their failure and their inhuman treatment.

6.2.3 *Tertium Datur*: In-between Positions in the Debate

Some scholars proposed in-between positions in order to overcome the binarism of the feminist debate on SM (Barker, 2013; Ferguson, 1984; Rubin, 1984; Wood, 1996). They addressed non-debated points (Barker, 2013), underlined critical issues of pro- and anti-SM (Ferguson, 1984; Rubin, 1984) or pointed out the non-cohesive nature of the feminist community (Queen and Comella, 2008)[72].

Among the former, the self-defined "sex critical" (Barker, 2013: 25) stated that although consent is at the core of SM practices, it has not always been respected, and that the consequent denouncements of the SM practitioners have often been silenced in an attempt to produce a positive image of the community to an external observer.

"Also, BDSM mantras such as Safe, Sane, Consensual (SSC) and Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK), failed to recognise the complexities around consent negotiations, particularly where social power dynamics were present (such as differences in gender, age, race, class, etc.)." (Barker, 2013: 24)

"[...] There was also a challenging of the idea that only certain people perpetrate abuse, to a sense that everybody could engage in non-consensual practices, and that everyone was responsible, collectively, for

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[72] Aside from criticising both sides of the debate, the pro- and the anti-SM, Rubin (1984) contests the possibility of a third in-between position at all.

reflecting on their own behaviours, for calling out others, and for creating cultures in which it was possible to speak openly about abuse, to get support, and to educate others on consensual practice. [...]Sexual communities and experiences are not assumed to be without problematic practices or assumptions by virtue of their being marginalised." (Barker, 2013: 25)

Barker seems to suggest that the reflection on consent should be done at the level of the group, not at an individual level. Concerning the difficulties in doing so and the ostracism encountered even within BDSM communities, Dymock (2014) presents an interesting contribution from an insider. In this article, Kitty Striker approaches the SSC mantra critically and highlights the ways in which it also served the purpose of avoiding discussions on the concept of consent among BDSM practitioners.

Chancer (2000) is another scholar who believes in the possibility of a position that overcomes excesses of the two extremes, saying that such a conception of the feminist debate is fruitless and unproductive.

"[...] More synthetic third positions are both possible and needed if feminists are not to become distracted from making agreed-upon external changes by spending energy attacking each other's divergent views. The rigid character of these ongoing divisions makes it difficult to discern commonalities as well as differences between feminists, and it has led to the paying of greater attention to the political weaknesses of this incipient social movement than to its strengths." (Chancer, 2000: 80)

Actually, Chancer (2000) fails to explicitly describe a third alternative, which she sees as already present in the scientific literature in an embryonic state. Chancer relies on two main arguments: first of all that power has a relational quality– *à la* Foucault (1982)[73] – and consequently the oppressor and the oppressed are not distant but linked by a relationship of power (Bordo, 1993). Power is not something possessed by individuals or groups; it is present within every relationship. Secondly, she calls attention to the false splits between feminists in the sex wars debate, such as the one concerning sex work (Chapkis, 1997) and the differences between feminist attitudes towards sex work.

"Within a Foucauldian/feminist framework, it is indeed senseless to view men as the enemy: to do so would be to ignore, not only power differences in the racial, class, and sexual situations of men, but the fact that most men, equally with women, find themselves embedded and implicated in institutions and practices that they as individuals did not create and do not control—and that they frequently feel tyrannized by. [...] Moreover, such a framework forces us to recognize the degree to which women collude in sustaining sexism and sexist stereotypes." (Bordo, 1993: 28)

Besides being linked by a relationship of power, men and women are co-responsible in shaping their own constraints: Bordo (1993) here again proposes the argument of symbolic violence to describe this relationship. This sort of collusion could

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[73] "The term 'power' designates relationships between partners (and by that I am not thinking of a zero-sum game but simply, and for the moment staying in the most general terms, of an ensemble of actions which induce others and follow from one another)." (Foucault, 1982: 786).

be expressed in terms of symbolic violence, as proposed by Bourdieu (1979; 1998). Nevertheless, others like Rubin, years before Chancer's article yet providing a response to her call for a third position in the feminist debate, explicitly rejected the possibility of resistance through practices, of an inbetweenness. The reason is that the dichotomy is based on false positions.

> "[…] The fact remains that feminist thought about sex is profoundly polarized […] Whenever there is polarization, there is an unhappy tendency to think the truth lies somewhere in between. […] The most recent development in the feminist sex wars is the emergence of a 'middle' that seeks to evade the dangers of anti-porn fascism, on the one hand, and a supposed 'anything goes' libertarianism, on the other. Although it is hard to criticize a position that is not yet fully formed, I want to draw attention to some incipient problems. The emergent middle is based on a false characterization of the poles of debate, construing both aides as equally extremist." (Rubin, 1984: 167)

Another in-between position has been expressed by Ferguson (1984). She criticises both radical and libertarian feminists for being essentialist, but in my opinion fails to put forward a valid third option, since her proposition of a hierarchical taxonomy of sexual practices is explicitly linked to value judgements. To distinguish among acceptable, risky and forbidden activities is a way of re-proposing a norm, different from the patriarchal model, but still a norm that feminists – and women in general – should follow without deconstructing it. This argument, based on the proposition of a *prêt-à-*

porter set of norms, seems to be the opposite of choice feminism, but equally dangerous in shutting down discourse and criticism.

"I think we must adopt a transitional feminist sexual morality that distinguishes between basic, risky, and forbidden sexual practices. [The last] are those in which relations of dominance and submission are so explicit that feminists hold they should be illegal. Such practices include incest, rape, domestic violence, and sexual relations between very young children and adults. The difference between a forbidden and a risky practice is an epistemological one: that is, a practice is termed 'risky' if it is suspected of leading to dominant/subordinate relationships, although there is no conclusive proof of this, while forbidden practices are those for which there is such evidence. Sadomasochism, capitalist-produced pornography, [...] are all risky practices from a feminist point of view. [...] basic feminist practices [...] are distinguished by self-conscious negotiation and equalization of the partners in terms of the different relations of power [...] that hold between them. A feminist morality should be pluralist with respect to basic and risky practices. That is, feminist should be free [sic!] to choose between basic and risky practices without fear of moral condemnation from other feminists." (Ferguson, 1984: 111-112)

Apart from the difficulties in categorising every practice as basic, risky or forbidden, who is going to control the controller? Who is going to decide whether a

practice is risky or not? The danger is that of applying one's own subjective scale to others and obliging them to follow.

To conclude this analysis of the feminist debate in the United Kingdom and the United States around issues of sadomasochism, I want to call attention to three points. First of all, scholars and activists are positioned along a three-side debate, pro-, anti-SM and in-between. Secondly, the context in which consent is given is believed to influence consent, and yet is not analysed by the same authors who claim the context renders consent invalid. Third, the arguments employed by the three fronts have been in general well developed and articulated.

6.3 The Italian Feminist Debate around SM

The sex wars also spread in Italy (Gramolini, 2001), if in a somewhat condensed and reduced version. The first feminist documents discussing pornography and SM within the Italian context were produced during the 1980s (Bettini and Nestola, 1986; Ibry, 2008), although it is only more recently, namely starting from the 2000s, that scholars and activists have been dealing with SM and feminism.

In general, the scarcity of resources related to feminism has to be acknowledged: feminist groups were not interested in leaving written documents, such as working papers or flyers, of their activities and debates. This was due, according to Lussana (2012) and Rossi Doria (2005) to the very characteristics of the feminist Italian movement.

"From the methodological point of view one has to deal with two aspects [...] the structural propensity of the majority of the groups to not to leave written traces of their practice and therefore the need to turn to sources of memory or subjective sources to account for the different experiences; the failure of the sources of memory themselves, where available, of expressing the richness and the depth of self-consciousness practice, the early practice distinctive of the feminist movement." (Lussana, 2012: 14)

In general, the debate about SM, within and outside a feminist frame – not to say queer! – is and was neither developed nor homogenously widespread in the country; it was concentrated in particular cities, such as Rome, Milan, Padua, Bologna, and a few others. The debate involved almost exclusively lesbian activists. Scholars – lesbian or not – dealing with this topic emerged only recently (Ibry, 2008).

The pro-SM side of the debate counts a few contributions of lesbian activists. In general, SM is deemed as acceptable only as an individual sexual or erotic practice, but not as a political theory. If SM is heralded as a lesbian-feminist practice, it is not acceptable. The split between private and public issues is very apparent here, although it expresses more a desire than a fact. Thus, anyone could claim SM for herself as a private practice, enacted within the privacy of the bedroom. On the other hand, SM as a political theory, that is the pleasure of being dominated as theorised in US, is not acceptable at all (Bettini and Nestola, 1986; Pinto, 1996).

"I still consider dangerous the 'theorists' of SM and I am ready to distance myself from their delirium: I come to speak of the usual

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Americans [female form in original] who invented sadomasochism workshops and theorize the pleasure of the domination; these are the typical childish things made in the USA to which we always give too much weight. I'm talking about the game, the playfulness, the sexuality, the confidence in the other, about the limits that are known and that are consciously (though consensually) broken and, why not, about catharsis and liberation that the tension can give. [...] I am a woman with a strong sense of ethics and extremely respectful, and especially for this reason I respect every expression of one's being a lesbian." (Pinto, 1996: 20)

"[...] Lesbian sadomasochism. Lately it has become a topic of great fashion, clearly borrowed from the male culture and imported from overseas." (Bettini and Nestola, 1986: 7)

"It may also happen that some lesbian women claim sadomasochistic theories and practices as their own. In this case we would think, with a bit of irony, that 'the world is beautiful because it is different'; but nothing more. When it happens that – dear us! – sadomasochism tries to creep into lesbian-feminist politics, as a pleasurable practice for women, then the irony passes altogether. We read with attention a document sold during the last lesbian congress in Rome. This paper reported (mostly uncritically) excerpts of articles from American magazines [...] These articles offer analysis on lesbianism and lesbian practices that are at least questionable." (Bettini and Nestola, 1986: 8)

"Within the house and/or in their own bed each woman is free to live her lesbian sexuality as she prefers. She can 'play' everything she pleases. But she should have the decency not to claim it as lesbian-feminist analysis. Otherwise these fifteen years of feminism would have gone in vain." (Bettini and Nestola, 1986: 12)

In some ways, criticisms of SM as a lesbian-feminist practice – instead of a personal and private sexual preference – seem to take the form of anti-American sentiment. The determination with which Bettini and Nestola (1986) attack US theorists serves as an example of this.

As expected, some arguments employed within the Italian debate are similar to those in the US and the UK. For example, in Italy the importance of consent within SM practices has been highlighted, since consent is the element that differentiates it from violence (Gramolini, 2001; Pinto, 1996). I will not linger on this argument, since it has been broadly analysed in the previous chapters. Nevertheless, some quotations from Italian texts are useful in order to understand the differences in language and word choice.

"We should move from the research of the 'true female sexuality' to the 'free sex relationships', and the dividing line between freedom and abuse is consent. Consent legitimates the practice, otherwise we open the door to those who want to save someone against her/his will." (Gramolini, 2001: 13)

In particular, the use of inverted commas could be read in this excerpt as a reconsideration of the whole debate on SM itself; the debate is made relative, confined to the background of more serious problems. Gramolini seems to say that yes, consent is important, but actually nobody believes in the possibility or existence either of a true female sexuality or of a free sex relationship.

An argument that seems not to find a place in the US and UK debate is linked to the goodwill and essential goodness of lesbians. Pinto states that as a whole, lesbian SM would not reproduce male domination, since lesbians are essentially good and respectful:

"There is a reason, a very simple reason why I refuse to consider the sadomasochism between lesbians as bearing a message of violence, which instead has its origins with men: it is in direct contradiction with the socio-sexual behaviour of the heterosexual and violent male. He mistreats his woman every day and then makes amend with sex and sweetness between the sheets, while instead a lesbian practising sadomasochism always respects her partner and 'is naughty' only between the sheets" (Pinto, 1996: 20)

She states that for the very fact that only women are involved, lesbian SM *per se* does not reproduce patriarchal domination. The essentialisation of the bad male and the good female is here apparent. Furthermore, lesbian relationships are given a higher positive value than others.

Echoing Gramolini's (2001) argument, Polo (2001) minimises the influence of SM within lesbian lives, stating that within a lesbian artistic production, the interest in SM is

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limited to clothes and accessories. The attention of lesbian is not devoted to the relationship between pain and pleasure or between submission and power, just to some fashion accessories and to the aesthetic of SM.

> "Even in the lesbian artistic production there is the same difficulty [in talking about our sexuality] [...] It seems to me, however, that photos, films and videos produced by lesbians, while they have variously erotic content, represent mainly penetrative practices. [...] Some attention is devoted to **sadomasochistic** representations, however these are more focused on the exhibition of clothing and accessories (leather clothes, military uniforms, collars, handcuffs, whips) than on the communication of relationships between pain and pleasure, submission and power, and role play, which are in fact at the core of these practices." (Polo, 2001: 12)

Di Rienzo (1998) is a voice outside the chorus when she analyses a UK phenomenon. In fact, she occupies a particular place within this debate. Her article deals with Aristasia, a female-only community in the UK. This community was based on the use of sexual discipline among members. The relationship among members resembles the one between a female teacher and her pupils. The founders of the community described it as a place where the girls, through discipline, were given a structure in which to live, that helped them to overcome the difficulties of the real world (Channel 4, 1996). It resembles the structure of a college for young women where discipline is intertwined with eroticism and sexuality. Their choice of dresses and accessories is based on 1950s and 1960s fashion.

In general, the pro-SM side counted a few lesbian activists who either defended the individual choice in practising SM or dealt with SM-related phenomena which took place abroad.

The anti-SM side of the debate seemed to count more members than the other; its positions are more developed and articulated. In general, the anti-SM side counts authors who distance themselves and even the Italian culture in general from SM practices: such practices are deemed to be imported from the US. Moreover, such scholars and activists do not conceive the fact that a woman could be interested in engaging in SM practices: they think that SM is borrowed from male culture (Bettini and Nestola, 1986), since patriarchal sexuality is inherently sadomasochistic (Travers, 1974), founded on female masochism and passivity "so natural in women" (Bettini and Nestola, 1986: 11). There is full complementarity, here, between the masochism of the woman and the sadism of the man.

"The patriarchal society is based on an authoritarian-exploiter relationship [of men towards women] and its sexuality is of sadomasochistic kind. Values such as power, domination of one over the other are reflected in the sexual domain where historically the woman is given to the man for his use. Even sexual language incorporates this concept: not surprisingly we say that the man 'takes' the woman, and she 'gives herself' to him, or that a man 'possesses' a woman. [...] To reduce sexuality to a sadomasochistic model of power and submission means to suppress any form of sexuality that will not fit in this context." (Travers, 1974: 107)

"We denounce as a new form of oppression the concept of 'sexual revolution' in some countries where the woman is induced to move from being an object of one to being the object of all, and where sadomasochistic pornography in movies, magazines and all the mass media that brutalize and rape the woman, is called a triumph of sexual freedom." (Travers, 1974: 110)

"Masochism, as it is usually defined – and in particular the masochism so natural in women – has nothing to do with pleasure, but a lot with the passivity, the habit of suffering, the addiction to violence." (Bettini and Nestola, 1986: 11)

Masochism as a way to reach pleasure was not considered possible; SM was an imposition of male fantasy on females. Thus, women practising SM were identified with males and consequently seemed to justify male oppression of women. This analysis resembles some of the fears linked to the figure of the butch as expression of masculinity and activity (Arfini and Lo Iacono, 2012). In conclusion, SM practitioners were above all against the feminist analysis as a whole (Bettini and Nestola, 1986).

Another argument raised by the anti-SM side, mirroring the US debate, is that consent to such practices expressed within a male patriarchy is not valid (Bettini and Nestola, 1986; Travers, 1974). Despite the fact that this argument has been taken apart in the previous chapters, the use of inverted commas – again – signals here the fact that even the argumentation of the pro-SM side was not taken seriously, since it was seen as inherently anti-feminist and thus unacceptable.

"The women who are the most shocked by prostitutions are the ones who live the 'feminine mystique' created by male society, that is, the mystification of the inferior role of women, due to which all the acts of subservience, of annihilation of one's being required of the woman, are seen as an expression of her choice as a subject, sometimes even 'superior' to another subject-man. In the case of sexuality her function as a woman in a patriarchal society to serve, to 'give herself' to the man is mystified as participation in an act of love." (Travers, 1974: 108)

"mutual consent in lesbian sadomasochism deserves a separate discussion. First of all, this discourse presented as a 'lesbian' innovation begins to spread within 'heterosexual' relationships as well. Some [pornographic] movies [...] extensively demonstrate that in the representation of sadomasochistic relationships the woman is now increasingly 'consenting'. Feminists have always denounced violence; even more so when it passes for 'consenting'." (Bettini and Nestola, 1986:11)

"Besides, to use the word 'consent' in a manner so superficial can also justify the recurrent patriarchal theory according to which raped women are – some more than others – consenting. In this regard, we just want to remind you that a lot of women experienced oppression with the excuse of an alleged consensuality." (Bettini and Nestola, 1986: 12)

As regards the criticism of choice feminism, it has been articulated properly only more recently by Casalini (2011). She states that while appearing open and pluralistic in accepting different sexual practices, choice feminism did not reflect on the structural

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conditions in which this choice was expressed. Furthermore, choice feminism left the responsibility of the choice to the single individual (Casalini, 2011; McRobbie, 2004) when on the contrary, the choice was influenced by the context itself. Casalini states that a middle position within the debate was missing due to the "prostitutional context" (Casalini, 2011: 346) of capitalism, that is, the trend to show oneself in the best possible light.

In general, there was within the Italian feminist debate about SM an essentialisation of roles, gender and sexes (Travers, 1974); male sexuality was depicted as violent, the male role as dominant and sadistic. On the other side, female sexuality is perceived as submissive, with masochistic women fulfilling male partners' desires (Bettini and Nestola, 1986; Travers, 1974).

"The magazine [...] 'Lesbian in bondage' is a litany of horrific photos of 'lesbian' couples who hurt themselves in every possible way. [...] The sadist enjoys torturing her (masochist) partner by tying, whipping, squeezing her nipples, penetrating her violently in order to give her pain. This pain is the pleasure of the sadist and the more resistance is offered the greater the pleasure. It is clear to us, however, that it is not lesbian women those who enjoy this filth, but males to whom these magazines are addressed." (Bettini and Nestola, 1986: 7)

"[...] Sadomasochism is a product of the male mind." (Bettini and Nestola, 1986: 8)

As a whole, the front has been quite united in refusing SM as a lesbian and liberating practice for the woman, except in the case where SM is practiced privately. This distinction echoes the artificial division between a private sphere and a public one. What this anti-SM front failed to realise is that anything taken out of the public debate is something that is hidden from a critical analysis. Their suggestion to ignore the 'private' issue of SM mirrors their incapacity to consider at one time both the fact that SM intertwines with social and economic power and that it is indeed practiced also in private contexts.

Finally, the total absence of an in-between position within the feminist debate about SM in Italy should be noted, with the majority of activists being against these practices. In the following chapters I will analyse the reasons for this absence, and suggest that they are, as a whole, linked to the Italian feminist and cultural contexts.

6.4 Comparing Discourses: United States, United Kingdom and Italy

Several differences emerge when comparing the US and UK feminist and queer debate with the Italian one. First of all, this debate in Italy was almost only conducted and developed by lesbian activists. On the contrary, in the US and the UK it was populated also by scholars and non-lesbian women (Ardill and O'Sullivan, 2005; Gerhard, 2001; hooks, 2000).

> "Practically all radical feminist discussion of sexuality ceased when
> women within the movement began to fight over the issue of whether or
> not one could be a liberated woman, whether lesbian or heterosexual, and
> engage in the practice of sexual sadomasochism." (hooks, 2000: 89)

Secondly, in Italy few authors dealt with the topic of sadomasochism, compared to the higher number of scholars and activists in the US and UK; above all, few people engaged in these practices within their political communities. In fact, it seems that in the Italian context, lesbian, feminist or similar movements did not take charge of the topic at a political level; thus, the analysis of SM related issues was left to the single individual, or has been valued as a private practice, hence less politically relevant.

Thirdly, in Italy positions in the debate around SM were almost totally against it, with the partial exception of Pinto (1996), who claimed to open up the debate, moving away from the monolithic position of refusal of SM. She nevertheless showed some contradictions in her claims. On the contrary, in the US and UK the debate was built around a three-side position. The Italian debate lacked an in-between position, and the polarization was more pronounced than in the US. Only recently, Casalini (2011) proposed an in-between position, critical towards both parties.

Not surprisingly, some of the arguments employed by feminists in the US, UK and Italy were the same. In fact, Italian scholars and their cultural production were for the most part established in the first phase of Italian feminism, from 1968 to 1972, when it was more open to cultural influences from abroad, namely, contact with US and French activists (Arfini, 2015; Rossi Doria, 2005)[74]. Some authors and feminist groups translated documents from English into Italian to make them available to Italian feminists (Guerra, 2005; Ibry, 2008[75]; Melandri, 2005). On the other hand, US and UK feminism, as well as French feminism, were mostly unaware of Italian feminist texts, since they were not translated, nor discussed or cited (de Lauretis, 1989).

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[74] Arfini, A. G. Elisa, personal communication: she stresses the crucial importance of the contact between the Italian second wave feminist movement and the French feminists of Psych et Po; moreover, in her opinion the Italian first wave feminism was more oriented towards France than the USA.

[75] During the 1980s several articles about lesbianism, sexuality and feminism were translated and published on Italian feminist journals; among others the works of Adrienne Rich, Joan Nestle and Audre Lorde were published in the journal "DWF" (Ibry, 2008).

"Italian feminism (the word is strictly singular there, for all the variety of feminist positions and practices it covers) is virtually unknown here [in the United States]. With very few exceptions, its critical texts are not translated, discussed or cited by American or British (or French) feminists." (de Lauretis, 1989: 13)[76]

There may be several might be the reasons for this situation. Of course we cannot take the UK and the US as the benchmarks or as the normal context and merely look at how the Italian context deviates. However, there are some specificities of the Italian context that stand out as important when making a sound comparison with the UK and US. In particular, the peculiarity of the Italian context is due to the fact that SM was systematised later than in the US. The first groups built around SM as a practice in the US dated back to 1960s-1970s within the gay community (Sisson, 2005), while in Italy the first groups appeared during the 1980s (Brumatti, 2011).

Secondly, some characteristics of the Italian feminist movement and of the social and political context would account for some of these differences. The Italian movement was atypical compared with other western ones: it was against emancipation as expressed by laws helping and protecting women. These laws, in fact, implied an acknowledgement of the female subaltern position in saying that they needed protection from the state (Lussana, 2012). This was clearly, in the eyes of some feminists, against the autonomy of the woman.

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[76] "Two recent books have been published in the United States on Italian feminism (Chiavola Birnbaum; Hellman), and one in Britain on feminist film (Bruno and Nadotti). Also in Britain some extracts from a Milan Bookstore publication (Catalogue Editorial Collective) were recently edited and introduced by Rosalind Delmar, translator of the Italian classic feminist novel, Sibilla Aleramo's A Woman. An earlier article by Mary Russo is a rare example of American feminist theoretical writing dealing with the Italian women's movement in the '70s." (de Lauretis, 1989: 33). In this excerpt, de Lauretis refers with all probability to the works of Chiavola Birnbaum (1986), Adler Hellman (1987), Bruno and Nadotti (1988) and Russo (1977).

"The [...] Italian feminism of the 1960s and 1970s developed a radical critique against the conquest of legal or formal equality between the sexes [...] To emancipate meant to obtain the same rights as men [...] without giving up domestic and family work [...]." (Lussana, 2012: 32)

"The preferential treatment provided by the laws to protect women approved after the World War II [...] does not recognize [...] an independent possibility of affirmation and realization of women starting from their natural specificity. The feminist movement criticizes a law which protects and defends women considering them the more disadvantaged sex [*sesso*]: this means legally sealing their alleged weakness [...]. Feminism originates from a simple consideration: the female 'difference' does not ask for legal protection or safeguard, but the right to exist." (Lussana, 2012: 33)

In addition to what seems as a partial contradictory statement – feminists want the state to recognise their existence and at the same time they do not want legal protection from it since it would have been read as an acknowledgement of female inferiority – different feminist groups had different claims. This meant that sometimes all these groups failed to unite their forces to ask for certain political reforms. For example, they were divided around the question of abortion (Lussana, 2012). The groups were divided also accordingly to the political parties they were following at the time; for example, the Movement for the Liberation of Women, MLD, was affiliated with

the Radical Party, while on the other hand the Union of Italian Women, UDI, was affiliated with the Communist Party[77].

Furthermore, the political instability of the 1970s and 1980s must be considered in tracing the differences between the Italian and the other contexts. The so-called "Years of Lead" weakened the Left-wing politics as a whole, and they also influenced the feminist movements (Braidotti, 1986). In fact, it has been argued that to fully comprehend the Italian feminist movement during the 1970s and the 1980s, a deep analysis of the historical and social context of the country is necessary (Bertilotti and Scattigno, 2005; Lussana, 2012).

Another factor to take into account when analysing the relative scarcity of debate around SM in Italy is the fact that there were few relationships between feminist and lesbian authors and academia. In the majority of cases, Italian authors dealing with SM were activists. Relationships between academia and feminism started later and are still ongoing (Di Cori and Barazzetti, 2001). On the contrary, in the US and UK the majority of authors who dealt with feminism and SM were either scholars (e.g. Vance) or activists (e.g. SAMOIS, 1981), or both at the same time. This was partially due to the fact that feminism in Italy was not an academic discipline, thus not taught in universities.

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[77] Lussana (2012) is clear and detailed in tracing the genealogies of the feminist discourses to the political parties that backed them. "[…] For the radicals of the MLD [Movement for the Liberation of Women] the liberalization of abortion is a step towards the liberation of women and at the same time represents both an individual struggle and a political objective; for Rivolta Femminile and other groups […] the freedom to abort is not a 'question of freedom': to solve the tragedy of abortion there is no need for a law. […] Only by recovering an unconditioned sexuality that is not aimed at procreation, will the freedom of women be really authentic" (Lussana, 2012: 66). "It is better a simple decriminalization that breaks down the crime of abortion leaving women the freedom to have or not an abortion. UDI's communists and socialists [Union of Italian Women] disagree and by appealing to the social value of motherhood and the principle of self-determination of the woman, they invoke a law that would put an end to illegal abortions and control abortion in public facilities. The MFR [Feminist Movement Roman] of Via Pompero Magno and radicals of MLD, on the contrary, mobilise to practice abortion in self-managed facilities" (Lussana, 2012: 68). "Harshly criticised was […] the so-called 'law of women' [proposed to the House of Representatives by] Avanguardia Operaia and Lotta Continua. The law allowed for the unlimited extension of the concept of self-determination of women, allowing them to terminate a pregnancy without time limits, even in the ninth month." (Lussana, 2012: 71).

Moreover, almost all the Italian authors were activists in lesbian groups – although it is difficult to account for this information, it is likely that they were also lesbians – while in the US and UK the participants were also heterosexuals (Gerhard, 2001; hooks, 2000). Italians made reference to US and UK articles and cultural products related to SM, at least until the 1990s, when the first small lesbian events and workshops about SM appeared in the country (Ibry, 2008).

Besides, Italian feminists exhibited less concern about sexuality. During the 1970s and the 1980s the main issues debated within feminism did not concern sexuality or sexual pleasure; with a few exceptions. Sexuality was debated with regard to the birth control pill, abortion laws and the right to detach sexuality from procreation (Lussana, 2012; Melandri, 2005). Debates centred on sexual pleasure, like for example the Barnard Conference held in 1982 did not find a place within feminist and lesbian activism.

It should also be noted that activists and scholars in Italy came into contact with queer theory later. As Arfini and Lo Iacono (2012) state, in Italy the normalisation of queer theory in the academic environment is far from complete; what happened instead was its entrance into the media sphere as well as its commodification. This could explain part of the delay in the feminist debate about SM in Italy and the lack of familiarity with the arguments of queer theory at that time.

The last factor I want to consider is the influence of Catholic culture on society. Notwithstanding the process of secularisation within Western societies, Italy was and still is one of the countries in which religious sentiment is most widespread; the importance of Catholicism as the traditional Italian religion is apparent even for the non-Catholic population (Garelli, 2011). This sentiment seems to have a negative influence on the flourishing of debates around issues linked to sexual diversity.

6.5 The (Unconscious) Reappropriation of Discourses. Practitioners Discuss Feminist and Queer Theories

I have discussed the main feminist and queer arguments against or for SM in the Italian, UK and US contexts and the differences among them. Now I will show how BDSM practitioners re-appropriated these discourses in their personal narratives related to BDSM as well as in the discussion internal to the various BDSM groups. This re-appropriation has taken place, in the majority of cases, without awareness of the feminist and queer roots of the discourse. An exception is constituted by the case of Leah who, only upon request, explained her position with regard to the feminist discourse.

In particular, I will focus on consent as first issue and its embodiment and the cognitive tools employed to discuss it. Secondly, I will show how negotiation among social actors is enacted. In particular, I will focus on the difficulties that practitioners encounter once they apply negotiation to lived BDSM sessions. The third issue regards the use and non use of safewords, their importance and the discourses on them. The fourth issue debated relates to gender and the relative roles as enacted throughout BDSM sessions as well as outside of them. The practice of and debates on polyamory are also included in this section. Finally, a reflection on the overcoming of one's own limits will be highlighted by an example concerning rapeplay.

6.5.1 The Embodiment of Consent and the Discourses on SSC and RACKS

The importance of consent is underlined both by detractors and by supporters of SM. The former argue that it is meaningless since expressed in a patriarchal system; the latter that it is the very foundation of the ethics of SM and at the same time is what

differentiates it from violence. In this section I will explore the notion of consent as analysed and enacted by BDSM practitioners[78].

In general, consent seemed to be at the core of the narratives on SM when it came to neophytes or non-SM-practitioners. Neophytes are instructed on the importance of consent by older practitioners or in the never-ending online discussions on social network, websites and forums. Non-SM practitioners are presented a notion of consent by BDSM practitioners and communities that underlines the importance of consent in differentiating BDSM from violence.

Remarkably, as emerged from the fieldwork and the interviews, within the BDSM community almost nobody discussed the topic of consent. While all the SM scenes in clubs I observed were clearly consensual, there are critical and remarkable points about consent to focus on.

Consent could be granted before the session or in an ongoing manner within the session itself. The BDSM scene is separate from everyday interactions, and thus, as the example of Ulrich illustrates, some practices are accepted during sessions and not outside of them. Ulrich does not like to have intimate contact with other men, but agrees with his mistress that she could force him to do that during a BDSM scene (Interviewee Ulrich, 2014).

In general, the people I observed in the SM scene did not talk explicitly about consent; it was taken for granted that only consensual play and players would have been

[78] Throughout this chapter, I use the acronym 'SM', sadomasochism, when referring to feminist or queer discourses that explicitly employed that acronym, and 'BDSM', bondage, domination, sadism and masochism, when referring to the contemporary Italian context and the empirical data collected – since it is this the term usually employed. A useful distinction has to be noted, though: it is usually common for older members of the BDSM community or groups to use the 'older' acronym, SM, probably much more common when they entered the scene during the 1970s or 1980s; on the other hand, younger or new members tend to employ the expression 'BDSM'.

respected and accepted by others. Nevertheless, an interviewee, who had been in the SM scene for 30 years, focused my attention on the existence of "monsters in the scene" (Interviewee Peter, 2014) without giving further details. These monsters were likely not to respect consent of others or to force its interpretation and boundaries. Notably, the same person told me a "story" (Interviewee Peter, 2014) which described a rapeplay organised for the partner of one of his friends without the consent of the woman involved – who in the end seemed to have enjoyed it. This episode is difficult to interpret, since several narratives overlap. First of all, the attitude of Peter in general is aimed at impressing the people he encounters, in this case me, the interviewer. Secondly, the absence of an audio recording, as requested, granted him further anonymity and thus a sort of impossibility to actually 'demonstrate' that the episode really happened. Third, his disclaimer given at the beginning of the "story" (Interviewee Peter, 2014) weakens the possibility of attributing the role of the protagonist of the episode to him. Thus, what I ended up with was a story, a narration which probably happened and probably with him as a protagonist. This was likely to be his main aim in granting me an interview.

He began his speech by saying that what he was going to tell me was a story, a story that he would not say whether it was true or not. Several years ago he organized a rape play[79]. He knew a woman who, according to her partner, had rape fantasies.

Peter asked me if I knew that women commonly have rape fantasies; I said I did not know.

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[79] I am not able to reconstruct whether or not he used the word "rapeplay" during the interview.

Her partner asked Peter to help him to organize something to do about it. Peter went out with her, to a dinner or similar, and investigated whether her rape desires were real. He concluded they were. Thus, with his friend [the partner of the woman], a medical doctor and perhaps some other people, he organized this rape play.

They kidnapped her at the supermarket, while she was shopping, put her in a van and tied her. She was sedated by the M.D., thus in absolute safety, Peter says. She woke up two hours later tied, gagged, and with earplugs. From there on, she was "tortured" [word he used] and raped [word not used by him], and Peter said he had never seen a woman enjoying herself so much. All that was done to her, genital penetration and so on, however, was done by her partner, while the others were simply holding her immobilised. To avoid being recognized, they changed their perfume and shower gel. After a certain period of time [it is not clear if hours or days] the men were gone and just her partner remained. He untied her and revealed his identity. She was very happily surprised.

The problem was that he was jealous of himself, as he had seen her enjoying so much with a person she did not know, not knowing that it was him. For Peter this was an example of how far you can go with BDSM in touching sensitive parts of the human soul, that you do not know where it can lead you. And that is also an example of the fact that BDSM is not for everyone[80]. (Interviewee Peter, 2014)

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[80] Peter did not want me to record the audio of the interview, so this excerpt is a reconstruction of the interview done right after the interview itself, starting from notes taken during our conversation. Note the absence of quotation marks "" that indicate a literal quotation. Only in a case, for the word "tortured", they are present to signify a literal quotation of what Peter said.

In this case, consent was not explicitly asked, but investigated by Peter through a deep discussion between him, who did not reveal his and the others' intentions, and the woman. The interpretation of this episode is quite difficult, since it touches critical topics such as consent and rape, and because of the contrast between the quiet and peaceful attitude of the narrator and the fast action one imagines reading this excerpts of interview. Also in this case, Peter did not talk explicitly about consent, he was involved at the point of investigating whether her interest was deep-seated, and how deep.

Similarly, while not talking explicitly about consent, online SM communities and scholars discuss the two mantras about safety: SSC (Safe, Sane and Consensual) and RACK (Risk-Aware Consensual Kink) (Jozifkova, 2013; Stein, 2002; Switch, 2001). It is difficult to discern the differences between them, if any at all; nevertheless the typical discourse of certain BDSM practitioners appears to consider them as different, in particular RACK is supposed to be less hypocritical than SSC regarding the possibility of (involuntarily) harming others, thus taking into account the likelihood of incidents. I would say that BDSM groups find RACK more realistic than SSC.

I discussed these topics with two interviewees, two dominant men, in the scene for two or three decades. They pointed out that both acronyms were born as a political stance to underline the difference between 'good' and 'bad' BDSM. At the same time, they emphasised that making a distinction between SSC and RACK was almost meaningless, since according to them, their creation was largely born of people having too much time on their hands. As a consequence, their account somewhat minimises the importance of both SSC and RACK: stating first of all, that they were created 'just' for the people outside of BDSM communities, to offer some simple formulas to help them to

understand what BDSM practitioners were doing; and secondly, that SSC and RACK were created 'just' as a way to pass time, a product of spare time to be occupied.

The birth of SSC in the 1970s was due to a political problem: it was necessary to differentiate it [SM, BDSM] from sadomasochism [understood in a pathological way] by focusing on consensuality. [...]. The RACK is a slippery slope, but cool, for him it constitutes the next level [superior]. (Interviewee Peter, 2014)

"Consent [...] must be an enthusiastic consent [pause] [...] There is this distinction that [pause] the US Old School time-wasters from the internet created between the SSC that was this thing created to [...] give legitimacy to this thing [BDSM], that, I think, [implicitly] means that it is against the law and no good in itself; and the RACK, which is something a bit more realistic, because, however, when you get up in the morning and have a shower you take the risk of slipping and breaking your head; when you go to the park, you take the risk of being struck by lightning; when [pause] you go out to have an ice cream you could be hit by a shingle or a pot of geraniums in the head, in the same way when you do anything you take a risk. The point is to be aware of these risks and uh, and that in this awareness there is a place for consent." (Interviewee Kyran, 2013)

Red follows them in affirming that despite the existence of such safety protocols, they sometimes serve as excuses to justify one's own abuse and attempts to take advantage of others. He says that some people while stating that they were following

these rules, took advantage of the younger girls and beat them hard (Interviewee Red, 2014).

Red: "Consensuality is comprised in both acronyms [SSC and RACK], while it is clear that if [consensuality is] abused, if betrayed, if not understood, well, this is another matter, but it doesn't concern this [the difference between SSC and RACK]. Keep in mind that there is also a lot of hypocrisy in this, ok? What I just said to you is what those who invented these acronyms said, you can check it. Um, there are people that precisely with the excuse of saying 'hey, I do SSC, not RACK', get 18 years old girls, tell them stories like the Fifty Shades of Grey [the novel] and beat them hard"

Laura: "Well, this is not very…"

Red: "No, it has nothing to do with it [BDSM], these are fucking idiots, this is not BDSM culture, these are morons who infiltrated here because they think it is easier for them to fuck in order to vent their frustrations. This is quite ugly." (Interviewee Red, 2014)

The discourse that insists on the importance of consent seems to answer to the supposed fear of the non BDSM practitioners of these practices. Thus, BDSM practitioners needed a simple and direct way to address their fears, and created such acronyms.

Garrett underlines the rigid nature of safety protocols: if respected in their entirety they lead to immobility and paralysis. He states that it is virtually impossible to fully apply SSC coherently within BDSM interactions:

"A lot of things we [BDSM practitioners] do put at risk physical and mental health. They are not at all safe [...] As regards consent, this is, if you want, the biggest paradox of all: shit, I should know a thing to consent to it! [...] Then, it is the violation of SSC that makes the situation intense from a BDSM point of view. But it is self-evident that you can't start [a scene] with the intent of violating the SSC, because otherwise it is bullshit and paradoxical." (Interviewee Garrett, 2013)

The paradoxical nature of consent is apparent when thinking about the impossibility of listing all the possible details of the scene that is going to start; the need to generalise and abstract practices to simplify and understand each other is apparent as well. Thus, consent lies in the compromise between the most detailed list of practices and the necessity to keep the negotiation within certain time limits.

Another critical account of SSC and RACK as the best possible ways through which make consent meaningful is provided by Sibyl. She is an experienced mistress in her fifties who discussed with me, in her cosy kitchen, the question of consent along with the safety protocols SSC and RACK. She is quite critical of them, and pointed my attention toward the hypocrisy of BDSM practitioners, just as Red did. Such hypocrisy could be interpreted as the gap between what is said to the outside, the public, and the practices that are not either safe or sane.

Sibyl: "Like when they say 'safe, sane and consensual'. I laugh at them! There is fucking nothing sane there. Nothing safe, too [...] Perhaps the only thing that there is, is consensuality, and that sometimes is missing too, many times, you know, the slaves, they even do things they don't like

so as not to disrespect you. So... [laughs] But all [say] 'I follow the 'safe, sane and consensual'. Well, I don't!"

Laura: "That is, are you saying that they are making a fool of"

Sibyl: [interrupting] "They fuck around![81] It is an excuse that we give ourselves [pause] Do you think that licking my shoes that I just walked on the streets with is safe and sane for you? So what! [pause] And those who love scat, is it is safe and sane? For the love of god! I am vomiting at the mere thought! [pause] But in the end even pissing is not sane because urine therapy is fine if you drink your own urine, not if you drink that of another [pause] then there too, there is nothing sane! Do you understand? That is, stubbing out a cigarette on another's butt is not sane! [chuckles and coughs] It's a way to fuck around..."

Laura: "So why did this kind of [...] formalization?"

Sibyl: "Probably to justify the things we do. This is the explanation that I've given myself, you know... [...] [coughs] because anyway, oh well, we have to be consensual, that is the only thing that matters. About the rest, it really makes me laugh [...]"

Laura: "So we can say that one tries to do something in the more sane way"

Sibyl: "In the more sane"

Laura: "Safer and more consensual way possible"

Sibyl: "Exactly. Exactly!"

Laura: "Rather than seeing it [the terms safe, sane and consensual] as absolute."

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[81] Original version: "È una presa per il culo!"

Sibyl: "Exactly!"

Laura: "Well, then, there was also the question of the RACK, wasn't?"

Sibyl: "Yes [...]"

Laura: "Even in that case, it's not clear what should be the difference between [RACK and SSC]"

Sibyl: "[interrupting] But none! [...] None. In the end there is no difference. Because all [the BDSM practitioners] do RACK. You know who does not do RACK? Someone [in the feminine form, in the original] who goes to the party with a [trademark name[82]] whip and whips you giving you four lashes on your ass, you understand? Or the one who takes the strap on and, if you are going to have a strap on used on you it means your ass is already broken, and then, ok, that is sane and safe. [pause] All the rest is neither safe nor sane. Or the wax [is also safe and sane]. Then there too if you mess up with the candles, girl [smiles], I saw such heavy burns, fuck, done with the wrong candles[83] [...] RACK and SSC are the exact same thing."

Laura: "There are plenty of debates"

Sibyl: "[interrupting] Oh! [meaning 'yes, of course, I know'] [...] In fact, I also stopped reading and commenting [them] [...] We all are hypocrites, we hide behind labels, behind little rules, who the fuck knows who wrote them anyway? [...] But then we don't follow them, you

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[82] A famous French chain store, present also in Italy, that sells sports clothes and items not of the best quality; it is also known for being quite cheap.

[83] Only some candles could be used on the human skin without the risk of burns; it depends on the ingredients and the relative melting temperature.

understand? But we bear them as the Italian flag, you understand? 'Ah, hurray for SSC! Down with the RACK!' [...] It seems to me all a great hypocrisy. And I count myself in the middle of it, right? In the sense [pause] um, probably this is why I stopped going to the parties, because you saw things and pfff [exhales puffing] you don't know if you want to quarrel about them anymore…" (Interviewee Sibyl, 2014)

Sybil's account is quite lively and animated. The choice of words and expressions such as "it means our ass is already broken", "who the fuck knows" are indicative of her heart-felt participation in the BDSM communities as well as for her disillusions due to the hypocrisy of these same communities. She is expert and skilled enough to include herself in such a company: her hypocrisy stands in the fact that besides preaching for the respect of SSC and RACK, actually nobody – according to her account – does it, since it is virtually impossible to engage in BDSM from a perfectly safe, sane and consensual standpoint.

Another young man discussed the concept of consent with me. In his opinion, the meaning of consent has been emptied and transformed into another rule to be followed. For him, in fact, the high level of attention dedicated by the community to consent shifts the focus from "understanding the other's limits, their comprehension and the communication of them to others" to the simple act of following a rule: "if you reject consent you are a bad person" (Interviewee Victor, 2014). If you do not respect consent, you are first of all a bad person, possibly excluded from the community. Simply following a rule for the sake of the rule was not enough for him, he deemed it necessary to understand the underlying motivation on which the rule of consent is constructed.

Consequently, the violation of a rule for him means to reach intimate parts of the other that the other was protecting.

Victor: "Consent simply means [pause] to understand what the boundaries are, and that the border, the person, to figure out which of my actions is going to interact with some aspects of the other person."

Laura: "Ok."

Victor: "A violation of consent is not a violation of a rule, to breach consent means that I'm going to touch a part of you that maybe you were protecting. [...] The fact that consent is preached, to the point that it becomes something that must to be respected, to the point that it becomes a rule [pause] is something that emerges from the cultural context when... [confused, stammering]"

Laura: "[When] you have to protect yourself, yes, [...]"

Victor: "More importantly [you must] protect other people, protect yourself and other people [pause] this in my opinion [long pause] is a cultural shift [pause] that [pause] does not necessarily lead in the direction of liberation, is a cultural shift that can lead in [pause] different directions; actually you are not changing the paradigm, you're still in the paradigm, you follow that rule, you're just changing the rule itself."

Laura: "The problem is that you want to confront people in that paradigm, and they remain there independently of what you do."

Victor: "Exactly."

Laura: "So when you want to communicate ..."

Victor: "Exactly."

Laura: "Outside [of the BDSM group of practitioners] who you are and what you do, you have to [pause] interact with them following that paradigm, if you want to be understood [...]"

Victor: "Mh-mh." [Indicates approval]. (Interviewee Victor, 2014)

Ulrich is more old-fashioned, and thinks that as first thing, consent must be respected in all occasions. The idea that Ulrich, a male slave in his forties, has about consent is clear. Consent has to be informed, since as a slave you have both the right and the duty to understand and fully comprehend what your mistress is asking of you, and during the negotiation you must answer according to your decision whether or not to grant your consent. Once the limits are set you have to respect them. Not respecting them could lead to a loss of trust between the mistress and the slave, thus spoiling the relationship.

"The concept of circles [...] is that they are getting bigger and bigger, that is [...] at the beginning we [slave and mistress] do not know each other [...] thus, we agree on some limits, and these limits constitute the first circumference. The relationship is real, that is, one is convinced of what one says and is serious about oneself and the other, once it is decided what is inside the first circle, the slave [he] is no longer entitled to say not to it, because it is inside the boundaries. [...] To everything inside that circle that the mistress says, he is obliged to say yes. Otherwise he is cheating, denying himself, etc. He has the right to say no, and usually this never happens [...] when the dom is asking something out of the circle. [...] At some point, taken full awareness of what one is, and having lived all that is

inside the circle, the mistress [...] proposes a second level of limits, that is, a larger circle; that is the true moment when the sub has the right, the slave has the right, to say no. Then a new negotiation starts." (Interviewee Ulrich, 2014)

Consent has not been recognised by BDSM practitioners as a feminist legacy. They were not aware of the feminist and queer discourses about consent and other issues that follow in this thesis; at least, they did not touch on such arguments in their interviews. The feminist legacy has not been named. In fact, in general, nobody discussed the subject of consent within the feminist frame neither during the interviews nor the ethnographies. Even the SM practitioners who could have been exposed, due to their age, to the feminism of the 1970s and 1980s did not mention the possible connections between their SM practices and feminism.

An exception is constituted by Leah, to whom I directed a question about feminism, a question I imagined would not remained unanswered, given the age of the interviewee and her background. Interestingly, since I was interviewing her together with her play and life partner, Oliver, he changed the subject to the supposed rape fantasies of women – just as Peter did, although in another context. Thus, a question about feminism becomes the occasion to discuss rape fantasies between the two partners. She, at the end of his intervention, explicitly returned to the original question about feminism, and answered it[84].

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[84] I decided, whenever possible and when both participants agreed, to conduct interviews of the couples – couples meaning BDSM-play couples and/or couples in the sense of emotional and sexual relationships. I asked questions of both of them, and they alternated in answering. I had the possibility to observe their discussions and dynamics of interaction – it sometimes happened that they almost forgot about my presence and kept discussing and even arguing between them.

Laura: "[Let's talk about] feminist theories."

Leah: "Mh. Aaa! " [meaning 'this is going to be interesting!']

Oliver: [laughing] "You found the right one!"

Leah: "So, it was a real dilemma [for me at one time]!"[85]

Laura: "There is everything and even more [in the feminist debate about BDSM]; [some think that] BDSM is liberating for people, that BDSM empowers women by putting them in a position to act and increase their agency to control situations even if they are sub; or, on the other side, BDSM is thought of as pure evil, since it continues the long male domination over women, etc etc."

Oliver: "I think the first is the right one."

Laura: "What do you [both] think about it?"

Leah: "My position is similar to the first you've talked of. I've obviously thought about it [pause] I wanted to create a group for Communists BDSMers with [name of a friend] [...], a leftist, with a typical Left culture [pause] and also a cultural background of a certain kind. Imagine [smiling]. [...]Because, I actually had [pause] this doubt, I felt this contradiction, that I am a cultivated woman, Leftist, in the past I was near the feminists, not too close to them, but ..."

Laura: "...You belong to a generation which lived and experienced feminism."

Leah: "Exactly. [...] Not at the very beginning of feminism, but in 1977 there was [pause] 'the uterus is mine and I manage it!' and 'a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle' [reporting famous feminist

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[85] Original version: "Me la sono menata un sacco!".

slogans] and all that, right? Then, I wondered, especially as long as I was defining myself as a sub of a man, I said 'but what ...?' [in the sense of 'how is it possible...?'] [pause] and I came to the conclusion that I am mature [adult], in the sense that even in my being obliging – because I am obliging anyway – I came to the conclusion that I can allow myself to be obliging [pause] because I am structured. And being obliging [helpful] is indeed a position of strength [pause] [...] I can afford to take care of others [pause] because I'm strong. This is more or less [pause] the justification I gave myself [smiling] but in the end – what the fuck are you doing, are you laughing?" [to Oliver, laughing herself]"

Oliver: "No, I was listening."

Leah: "Then from an erotic point of view [long pause] we can drop some *clichés*, right? So, if I like um [pause] my hair being pulled and other things, is not that I am diminished; I mean, I must acknowledge several things, that is, some drives or fantasies about [long pause] being erotically submitted I have had since I was a child. That is, in fact, one thing that came out early..."[86]

[...]

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[86] I cut the part of the interview that refers to the desire to be raped to lighten the excerpt of the interview. I report it here.

Oliver: [interrupting her] "Who is it that – what woman would not want that, what woman would not like to be raped, at least once in her life, just to experience that sensation?"
Leah: "No, not raped."
Oliver: [laughs]
Leah and Laura: [almost simultaneously] "Being raped is different."
Oliver: "Yet I think there are many women who want it in their fantasies"
Leah: "Yes, and in fact there are also some that act upon them [fantasies]"
Oliver: "Then it is true that being raped is something different."
Leah: "Yes! Exactly!"
Oliver: "Yes."

Leah: [bringing back the discourse on the question about feminism]
"I am very flexible, I separate my love, emotional and erotic life from what
is my life as a person, of my being a person, so [pause] I am a person, I am
educated, I am in a certain way at work, and with friends; then in the
relationship with a man [...] there are times when [pause] I give you the
power: it's fine. This does not affect who I am in the other contexts, in the
other situations, in the other moments of my life [pause] It is true that very
often people identify me, within a BDSM context, with a lady, they call me
'divine', 'mistress'... [unintelligible] I simply say 'I am Leah' [smiling] and
that's all." (Interviewees Leah and Oliver, 2013)

Leah constitutes a partial exception to the silence on feminist and queer issues.
She told me about her troubles and doubts about the reconciliation of her feminist
position and BDSM desires only after I encouraged her a little.

Another mention of feminist theory and feminists themselves was unsolicited and
was involuntarily raised by me: I was telling a couple about my intention to deepen the
study of feminism for my research and while the girl of the couple said nothing, her
boyfriend and master declared "feminists...know your enemy!" (Interviewee Lance,
2013), meaning that I should know feminists' points of view in order to better
undermine and/or avoid them.

6.5.1.1 The Management and Perception of the Violation of Consent

Consent is usually respected within the community, but some violations do occur. The fact that Peter (2014) warned me about the existence of people who take advantage of others in the scene is a clear example of that.

Two different examples of violation of consent – one seeming more explicit than the other – led to two different reactions on behalf of the two women involved. The former case is constituted by a less explicit violation of consent; the latter is more striking, even in the narration of the protagonist.

Helen did not define what happened as a violation of her consent. She defined the episode as a negative experience. The couple she was playing with encouraged her to drink wine before a session, and tried to force her to eat meat – she is a vegetarian – and to engage in anal sex with another participant. She refused to swallow the food, and as regards anal sex, she clearly told them no, she was not interested. The fourth participant refused to penetrate her, and this is the only reason thanks to which she was not penetrated anally. Helen did not speak about that episode as a violation, or violence, even months later. She stopped seeing the couple when a new acquaintance suggested her to distance herself from those interactions; before that she was uneasy in those interactions with a couple who were dominating her. It was as if she were stuck, and even months after the episode she did not use the word 'abuse' or similar.

The other case regards an older female submissive, Kathleen, who has admitted to herself and others that she had been abused. The way in which this event has been managed – without the intervention of the police – shows the strategy employed by some members of the BDSM community – or of her reference group of friends – in

dealing with these kind of events, which could make them look bad. This episode could be one of those denounced by Barker in her sex critical account of BDSM practices (Barker, 2013).

Both the episodes involving Helen and Kathleen show a session in which consent has been expressed before the beginning of the play but somehow during the session it has been violated.

Helen is a woman in her twenties, exploring BDSM as well as other bodily communicative tools such as dance and photography. Accordingly to her explorations, her role in BDSM is not defined yet.

Helen: "And then they [this couple with whom she was playing] brought me in this dungeon [...] and made me drink. And in the end, like, they forced me to play with another guy that I could not see because I was blindfolded and they wanted him to sodomize me, that is, I did not even know if he had a condom or not..."

Laura: "Did you stop them?"

Helen: "I tried to stop them, but no. And in the end he did not sodomize me. It was him, because he decided not to do this, while the others [the couple] would – would have wanted him to sodomize me, and for me that was devastating, because they did not have the slightest respect of my personal obligations, that is, for example, the next day I had an appointment [to work] and they made me skip it, like, saying 'no, you must stay here'. I am a vegetarian, and they forced me to eat a sandwich made of meat, which I threw up right away; these are aspects with which

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you should not joke around, and now in retrospect I see it in a detached way, but, like, at that time they [pause] hurt me a lot, like [pause] It was tough at the time."(Interviewee Helen, 2013)

Helen then speaks about her new acquaintance, made in another BDSM group; attending that group saved her, since she had the possibility to meet different people. In fact, the couple who was playing with her was trying to isolate her from other possible contacts within BDSM.

The other woman, Kathleen, during a session that started as consensual, was tied up, and verbally abused by her male play partner. She met him online and two weeks after they were playing together. He told her about his fantasies about immobilisation and she was enthusiastic. Kathleen admits she was impulsive in meeting him after only two weeks of online chats. She was terrified during the session, and even several months after, at the time of the interview, she appeared still shocked, moved, even traumatised.

Kathleen: "The thing did not go at all well, in the sense that um [pause] he did violence to me. [Pause] Well [pause] [sighs and takes a breath, exhales]

Laura: [exhale breath, the tension is broken]

Kathleen: "[...] I was in an hotel [room] with him, um, I repeat, since he [was] a lover of these fetishes, of restraint fetishes, and then, imagine, I was completely immobilised, with a straightjacket with a gag, with no possibility to speak [...] um he clearly tried, clearly without my consent, um, tried to rape me, um, he beat me, um, he did things that, we know that,

um, within BDSM one can freely play how and with whom he or she wishes…"

Laura: "Yes …"

Kathleen: "… [in BDSM] you take responsibility for what you do etc.; but we know that certain things should not be done, he [...] – a big man, however – with the intention of hurting me, um, threw himself on me squeezing my kidneys [...] and so many other things. At the same time [he carried out] a considerable brainwashing, in the sense that I was blindfolded listening to him [...] for at least an hour he repeated that I was born to suffer, that I would have suffered all my life, um, that, um – um, that in any case my life could have not been better, um, that I needed him, that only through [him] I could reach catharsis [...] because I was dirty, because I this, because I that. He repeated this into my ear for an hour, I was immobilised, and could not do [with emphasis] anything! No matter how hard I tried, and I said 'enough is enough! I don't like this game anymore!' But he didn't give a fuck, um [pause] When he took off the gag, um [pause] I was afraid to die, because he has also tried to choke me, actually, I cried a lot and thought 'I am not going to come out of this hotel alive' [...] He then asked me to repeat all those phrases [he said to her for over an hour] [...] and I spent an hour repeating them [she repeats them, clearly she knows them by heart], and on top of it, I had to go along with all his manoeuvres [...] in a game that clearly was not consensual, because there was not consensuality [...] He arrived at the point of telling me, um, 'you know what I want right now? [...] I want to drug you, I would drug you and take away every perception of the situation you have, I want to

have your entire mind for me, um, then, and to manage you as I wish and you don't know where you are, you do not know who you are'. [...] in the end, exhausted, I managed to convince him that I had to go home [...] I left shocked, how shocked! It was something really shocking." (Interviewee Kathleen, 2013)

Kathleen managed to leave the hotel room and alert some of her friends who could help her. She told them "tell me what I have to do and I will do it" (Interviewee Kathleen, 2013). At the time of the interview she was not processing the trauma, she trusted to her friends and waited for them to do something to stop the man. She did not denounce him to the authorities. She has been advised not to do it since he, in turn, could enounce her for defamation.

Kathleen: "[...] I wrote a message to [name of a friend] and texted '[name of the friend] I have a problem, I was raped and I need to talk to you.' [friend] texted me back immediately [pause] and understood the seriousness of the situation, [...] invited me to come immediately to [place] to distance myself from home [she lived with her parents] [...] [For the] psychological more than physical violence I was really upset and [name of the texted friend] immediately organized [laughs] a kind of [...] task force by contacting [name of a second friend] and [name of a third friend]. "

Laura: "Ok."

Kathleen: "[...] [name of her third friend] deals with violence, he attended and gave courses for people who had suffered violence etc. [...] I did not want to, like, know anything of their movements, because they

activated together to try to solve the nasty business, because, unfortunately, it did not end there, but he began stalking me, in the sense that I was receiving many daily messages on the phone [...] I do not know what happened [after] because, um, um, they organized among themselves, they really did everything, [name of the first friend] called me every day since he needed details [of what happened], and advised me to take pictures to my body that could have been useful [...]". (Interviewee Kathleen, 2013)

The episode is still not concluded at the time of the interview, with her friends moving behind the curtains and likely comforting her in the meanwhile.

To conclude the section on consent, I have demonstrated that it is a topic discussed among practitioners without making reference to feminist or queer arguments, authors and scholars in general. On the contrary, one of the few explicit mentions of feminism revealed (theoretical) hostility to it. The other case in which feminist thought has been brought up, involved Leah and her personal process through the acceptance of her feminist positions within a BDSM context in which she usually performs a switch role.

In the next session I will discuss the topic of negotiation, one of the core arguments of feminists defending SM, and show that although it does not happen explicitly and, moreover tends to take place within the session, negotiation does happen.

6.6 Negotiation: the Importance of the First Impression and the Ability to Read Partner's Bodily Signals

In order to respect consent it is necessary to negotiate that consent first. Negotiation constitutes both the putting into practice of consent and one of the means which eventually allows for the subversion of gender and sexual roles within SM play. Usually, throughout the participant observations and according to the interviews, practices are negotiated before a BDSM session starts. Nevertheless, this negotiation was not always as detailed and planned as is sometimes claimed and encouraged by SM practitioners. Negotiation can also be ongoing within the session, in this case relying on practitioners' ability to communicate and interpret the body language of the play partner.

Usually, partners observed each other before playing, made inquires about one another, before approaching each other. The example offered by Red describes the most common situation: people meet, chat about several issues, inquire about each other's state of health and then, if still interested, play together.

> "I try to obtain information by speaking, chatting, and then it depends on the context, how long this acquaintance has been established [...] The first thing you ask is 'How are you? Do you have any health issue?' [...] This is rather detached, if you have had time to get to know a person, you chat normally with him/her the same way as in any other kind of relationship." (Interviewee Red, 2014)

Red approaches a potential play partner the same way he would approach a potential friend or lover, he is clear about that.

This same routine is usually employed, with some variations, by BDSM practitioners. In one case, I witnessed a break of this non written rule. An unknown man arrived at the party and immediately asked to engage in a BDSM session. Nobody accepted; nobody knew him. Being acquainted is usually a prerequisite to playing together, at least for the people who usually attend play parties. This newcomer was consequently kindly told by *habitués* that it is usually considered polite and acceptable to approach other people before playing with them:

I sit next to them and start talking with Bridget; almost immediately a man in his forties, simply dressed with pale underwear, walks up to our sofa and starts talking in English with an accent that seems Greek or Turkish. He says to me and Bridget that he wants to 'try' with us, asking us to play with him [whether with me or Bridget it seems indifferent to him], and if he can start now, all in a direct and curt way. I observe Bridget, a bit intimidated, replying that he should proceed more slowly, getting to know people, observing interactions and people before asking someone to play. She makes it clear that he should not make direct requests in such a way, and that he should proceed more slowly. Her tone of voice seems surprised by his rush and directness, she smiles, and these are signs she is a bit annoyed. He looks a little disappointed, says that he is leaving tomorrow, since he is just here for work and for one day; he knows how it works, what the rules of the club are; he wants to play, his intentions are clear. I do not answer, waiting to see what Bridget will say. She tries to shut down the conversation, saying

that today she does not feel like playing, and continues her conversation with

me which his arrival interrupted; he asks me, while Bridget is distracted, if

she liked him, and I said that I did not know, that she has to ask her; he

finally gives up and goes to another sofa. I see him watching the others

playing on the stage.

(Ethnographic diary, First Fridays happy hour, Milan, 3rd November 2013)

Negotiation can also be ongoing within a session. Paula gives me an example of this "within our group, we decided that the safe word is when one swears, because if you are struck too hard you swear automatically, and then the play stops" (Interviewee Paula, 2014). She plays with her partner and with other friends. They hold private parties and all play together at the house of one among them; in addition to this, they also play together in the club I attended. The playfulness of their approach to BDSM is expressed by the fact that swearing constitutes a safeword. This desacralisation deriving from the act of swearing is reflected in their playful and self-ironic approach that the whole group has towards BDSM. Paula describes her relationship with her partner as strongly based on negotiation, since they both usually prefer different kinds of plays and have to make compromises:

"[name of the partner] is the person with whom I have negotiated the most, because to fulfil our desires we needed to decide all the steps within the session; I am going to do this, then I am going to do that, and then I am going to do this other thing etc. Clearly it is not poetic; and then, you know, doing mostly impact play [pause] there is not much to negotiate." (Interviewee Paula, 2014)

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Ongoing negotiation during the session can be tricky, since it could not be easy for an SM practitioner to understand the desires and limits of the other when not explicitly told. Victor, for example, manifests his doubts and fears about misinterpreting the body language of his partner. Would moaning being a sign of suffering or a manifestation of pleasure?

"Sometimes I have difficulties from this point of view, difficulties so to speak, but I would like to increase communication on this topic; for example, if I am increasing the intensity of what I am doing, and I see that the breathing rhythm of the other person is increasing too and she is moaning in a different way than before, I stop, I am alarmed, I fear harming her because clearly that kind of communication, that way of moaning, panting, I'm not familiar with it, I do not know if it is a signal that I am doing something that I want to do or not. It is rather difficult." (Interviewee Victor, 2014)

Victor' uncertainty is one of the reasons that makes him proceed slowly in his approach to BDSM. Others, more experienced and skilled, and perhaps with more self-esteem, do not negotiate what they are going to do. Peter bases his decisions on the intuition he has regarding the other player; this intuition is based on in-depth knowledge of the other established before their session. If he perceives that the play partner is not enjoying what he is doing, Peter says, he stops.

Another example of adjustments made during a BDSM session is offered by Lance. He is a dominant in his late twenties but quite experienced since he played with a lot of different partners and attended different workshops in order to improve his skills

and technique. Lance had several play partners, and realised that for him what works best is following the gestures and body language of his play partners and responding accordingly. When he thinks the other is experiencing some difficulties, he proposes a safe word to be used on the spot; "If anything is not ok, just tell me 'gramophone' and I'll stop."

Despite being against to agreeing on a safeword before the scene starts, if someone asks him for a safeword before starting to play, he will give them one. It is interesting to note that it is he who gives the safeword, rather than the submissive. He, as a dominant, has the right to choose the safeword. This also holds if he plays with people that he does not know much. Furthermore, this arrangement is that works best for him. These two small details mirror his chosen role as a dominant.

It is unsurprising that the role of the dominant sometimes manifests itself outside of the frame of the BDSM scene; this is valid also for female dominants.

Laura: "How do you find out whether a person likes a certain thing?"

Lance: "I do it [pause] in the right and proper way. What usually happens is that there are these advocates of negotiation, [imitating them] let's take a nice list of things [ironically] where we put all the possible things that I can think to do to you and 'you like this?' 'no', 'you like this?' 'no' [....] It's like a shopping list. As if I were writing a script. I don't like it. As [pause] I do not like the concept of safeword. That is, I give you the safeword when [inaudible] that is, if I see that you're experiencing difficulties, I notice that and... [pause] and I say 'look, tell me triangle [random word] and we stop here' [pause] but if I tell you 'when you say

triangle we end it all' at the beginning [long pause] it becomes a gymnastic exercise, that is, it is missing a part [pause] [smiling] It lacks the beauty of the live [live coverage] I do not know how to tell you!" (Interviewee Lance, 2013)

Lance: "I find negotiation and safewords to be radically linked to that system of 'we do not know each other, we do not know anything about each other, but we have these two rules and we are sure that neither of us will do anything that the other doesn't like' [pause] 'and we are sure that when there is a problem we stop everything'. But [pause] that is, this lacks a bit of poetry, in my opinion. [...] But I find that for me this way of doing things works better. Then if a girl tell me 'oh, but how come! We are going to start [to play] and you have not told me a safeword yet!' [Pause] 'Well, tell me'. Consider that in general I am very quiet, very gentle, and I don't exaggerate, especially with people who I don't know [...]" (Interviewee Lance, 2013)

On the whole, negotiation takes place. Either before or during the session, it entails previous encounters and knowledge of one another and/or a high level of attention to the body language of the partner during the scene. BDSM practitioners, especially when younger and less experienced, do explicitly express their concerns about their ability to interpret correctly the partner's signals.

The importance of a safeword is closely linked to the issue of negotiation, and although seldom used for various reasons, a safeword constitutes both a sort of guarantee – if I have the safeword I feel safer – and something to be avoided –

pronouncing the one partner is not able to read the other's signals. In the next paragraphs I will further explore the reticence of practitioners to call for a safeword. Safewords become one of the implicit limits of the session, since they should be never pronounced. Along with avoiding certain things that have been agreed upon – such as being blindfolded or not touched above the shoulders – the safeword itself constitutes a limit to be respected throughout a scene.

6.6.1 Safewords as Limits. Building Mutual Trust in Order to Avoid Them

The importance of using – or at least arranging prior to the session– safewords has been stressed by several scholars (Barker, 2013; Califia, 1981; Jozifkova, 2013; Taylor and Ussher, 2001). In an article in which she defends BDSM against other feminists' attacks, Califia explains clearly the function of a safeword as a device to let ones' imagination and control go.

> "The bottom is usually given a 'safe word' or 'code action' she can use to stop the scene. This safe word allows the bottom to enjoy a fantasy that the scene is not consensual, and to protest verbally or resist physically without halting stimulation" (Califia, 1981: 31)

The opinion of Califia is well settled and followed by scholars and BDSM practitioners, as stated in previous chapters. Nevertheless, I propose a reading of the safeword as an intrinsic limit of the BDSM session itself, given that practitioners prefer to avoid it.

Usually, those with a dominant role never give themselves a safeword. Why on earth would a dominant stop a session? Despite going almost unnoticed, the topic of safewords among dominants should be discussed. Dominant practitioners have limits too, and a way to respect them would be to agree on a safeword for them to use.

On the other hand, submissive practitioners do not usually call for a safeword since it would be a sign of their incapacity to endure the session and at the same time an implied accusation towards dominants.

The main function of a safeword differs from person to person. The use of the safeword as a safe means to immediately interrupt or slow down the BDSM session is a personal choice. Some, like Ursula, have never felt the necessity to set one, either while dominating or submitting to others. She relies on knowing the person very well before playing, or on the full respect of the declared limits from both sides:

Laura: "Do you use a safeword? Do you set it before playing?"

Ursula: "Well, you know? I never had one? I mean, maybe I had it at first, but I've never used it…"

Laura: "Because before playing you agree generally on what you are going to do?"

Ursula: "I say 'well, if you do this thing to me, I won't accept it and I'll leave. Full stop.' But it has never happened to me, because by plainly speaking I have always made myself clear, so no unpleasant situation has ever arisen. That is, if he sees that I am almost touching my limits, since he's my partner and knows me well, he will stop. But we don't have a safeword […] And I do not even impose one, because I rely on the limits of the person." (Interviewee Ursula, 2013)

The use of a safeword could guarantee a safe level of involvement in a BDSM sessions especially for the new acquaintances. Nick uses a safeword especially when playing with people he has just met. In this case, he employed the 'silent safeword' since the club in which they were playing was quite noisy:

"I remember once we played at a party at [name of place] where this girl came up to me and Paula and said 'huh, I'd like to – well, I'm a sub and I'd like to do a scene the three of us, with you two punching me a little'. And then we agreed to some things, we said 'okay, whatever you say, um, how do you like it?'. We sat her down on one of pieces of furniture that was available there, we had a few toys with us, we showed them to her, 'well, do you want the flogger, we have the cane, the paddle, this stuff here, so...' etc and [pause] for things like impact play it is all quite codified, because people do it very often, it is clear how things function and you can improvise a little. In the sense that you do a few things and set a safeword because [pause] typically in certain situations it's better to do it, because [pause] I remember when we played with this girl here, the club was very loud, so at one point I put a handkerchief in her hand, which is the typical silent safeword. Because if it's noisy, or you can't talk because or if you have a gag, etc, you put in the hands of the sub something that can be dropped and that is a symptom that [...] 'give me a break', 'slow down'..." (Interviewee Nick, 2013)

Quincy explicitly refuses to agree on a safeword. His safeword consists in asking how the play partner feels. Quincy is a rigger and does not use safewords since he does

not engage in extreme plays. He usually plays silently, without words or gestures – even when he performs at some clubs; he is concentrated on the rope, and does not want to speak to avoid get distracted. Thus, he keeps checking the other person, asking whether all is ok, if she needs a break, if some ropes are hurting her, etc.

Sometimes the use of a safeword is the result of a bad past experience. Abigail learned she would do better to use a safeword after a series of hard sessions. She was young, and at the beginning of her experience. After falling in love with a man, when she was almost 20 years old, she played with him. She took for granted that, since he knew her level of 'expertise', technical skills and pain endurance, he would stop at the right moment. But this did not happen, and he broke all her limits; from that moment onward, she learned to set limits before playing.

On the contrary, Bridget does not want to use the safeword. For her, the use of a safeword lowers her chances of fully enjoying the session. It must be said, though, that but she knows who she is playing with very well. She meets and chats for a long time wit her future potential play partners, or she asks others about their reputation and observes them playing with others. Not using a safeword makes her feeling more excited, and gives her more liberty to let everything go and abandon herself to the rhythm of the play:

> Bridget: "I can tell you what I feel, I have a terrible fear of having to put myself in someone else's hands, and at the same time I fear wanting […] when I am asked things such as 'do you want this?' and I feel – often I can hardly speak – and in the end I say 'yes' [pause] in my head I say 'what

the fuck am I doing? Why am I doing this? I am afraid, it'll hurt a lot, I don't want it!' [pause] while I'm in that situation I experience such a state of liberation, of freedom – yes, that's another key point of my approach: the liberation from the free will..."

Laura: "Ok..."

Bridget: "Chained, bound, um [pause] with wrist bands, under the blows of the whip, without having a safeword, there is no escape from anything, so stuck in this [situation], crushed by pain in this overwhelming situation [pause] you're not even given the chance to decide, anything. So I completely give up responsibility for myself. And ironically in that moment I have a complete sense of freedom, I fell a crazy sense of liberty". (Interviewee Bridget, 2013)

Bridget offers a clear example in which a safeword itself constitutes a limit like any other. She explicitly says she does not want to use it, like she would say that being hit in the face is a thing she does not want.

To indicate safewords as the markers of BDSM that differentiate it from violence, as stated by Jozifkova (2013) and Sir Bamm (n. d.) could be misleading for two reasons. First of all, a safeword is one of the elements that should help to distinguish BDSM from violence, but as demonstrated in chapter 2, this is seldom true. The second reason is that safewords are rarely employed. In some cases, like Bridget says, they are explicitly avoided.

6.6.2 Deconstructing Gender(s) and Gender Roles

The role of BDSM as a method of deconstructing gender identity, gender roles and preconstituted ways of being together intimately is perhaps one of its most striking features. As emerged from the fieldwork, it seemed that SM constituted for some practitioners a means to explore and experiment with gender identity, sexual practices and sexual and emotional relationships.

An analysis of the sex wars debate highlights the importance of the points debated in this section. In particular, the pro-SM side underlined the potential to empower women. On the other hand, the anti-SM side stated that SM reproduces and reinforces male domination.

Among practitioners, almost nobody thought about the relations between feminism and SM, and I even encountered anti-feminist attitudes, as previously shown.

Some attitudes and features of BDSM practices could seem at a first glance not to be empowering. For example, the attitude of some older dominant men who looked for younger women to patronize and to educate them as perfect subs. Secondly, the number of submissive women seemed higher than the number of dominant women – although it was difficult to estimate the percentage of roles related to gender, since the observations and interviews constitute a partial view of the phenomenon. At a first glance, these two examples could be read as anti feminist. Nevertheless, the meaning and attitudes of those involved must be taken into account without judgement. My intention is to understand to what extent feminist and queer discourses about SM are re-appropriated by practitioners.

Peter gives a clear example of the phenomenon of the patronage of young women on behalf by older men:

A girl who has been abused by her father was with him [at Peter's house] for a few days and they talked a lot, and he told her that it would have been better for her not to play with him due to what happened to her; [with emphasis] especially not with him, since he could have a role similar to that of her father; and so it was: they did not play together. He considered the fact of not having made her play as an achievement. (Interviewee Peter, 2014)

I encountered a similar patronizing attitude during a happy hour; Peter introduced me to one of his friends, a dominant man in his fifties. I briefly explained to him my research and my intention not to engage personally in BDSM practices. Probably accomplishing his role of dominant, since I was not giving him the possibility to play it out during a BDSM session, he tried to offer me his services in a way that seemed partly motivated by generosity and partly an attempt to help me financially.

If I needed something, I should ask him; if I needed a recommendation, he would help me; I would be welcome in his restaurant with my boyfriend, or boyfriends, since he supposed that I had several of them. His show of power happened in the end of the conversation, when I was almost leaving the place where the happy hour was hosted; the more the conversation went on, the more his body tried to approach mine, especially approaching my shoulders with his hands and indicating my face, with his hands and the palms up, while speaking to me.
(Ethnographic diary, First Fridays happy hour, Milan, 3rd May 2013)

My refusal was gentle but firm. His offer of help was so vague and general probably due to the fact that he did not know me well enough to personalise the offer better.

I want to return now on the main subject of this chapter, the experimentation with one's own gender identity, gender role and sexual orientation. As regards the relationship between gender stereotypes and gender roles, SM can lead practitioners to experiment with their masculinity or femininity.

An interesting example allows us to understand to what extent gender identity could be altered and changed through BDSM. Ursula is a young girl in her late twenties. She described to me, with a sort of pride, her experience with the subversion of gender roles; through BDSM SM practices she experienced at different times her desires to perform masculinity and femininity. Her doubts about her gender identity have been enacted through SM practices and sessions. After some experimentation that involved also her being in a couple with another woman, she become at peace with her femininity and is now fully embodying it.

> "I essentially hated my body, yes, I did not accept it as a woman; eventually I thought of becoming an FtM [female to male], to transition, then luckily I got out of this phase and identified again with the female gender [...] [by] having relationships with more people and widening my sexual vision I should say I understood that I am at ease with my body. [...] I had several experiences with women, I thought I was lesbian, that is, I just felt like a butch. Now I feel a lot like a 'femme' [very feminine, as opposed to butch, the masculine lesbian] instead [laughs]." (Interviewee Ursula, 2013)

She describes her desired masculinity of the past as overlapping with her desire to become a butch. This mirrors what Cvetkovich (2003a) underlines in her article, that is, the ways in which the butch enacted a particular kind of masculinity as part of her recognisable identity; such a masculine attitude was expected from her.

For Maud, femininity is coupled with domination and power. Her own interpretation of the female gender, although not explicit, is deeply rooted within and outside of her experiences as a dominant. She has experimented with the role of domination and described it as an empowering experience:

"A sensation of power, possession, authority to do [...] For me [SM] is a mental play. For me it is that this person is doing what I am telling him to do [...] I start to feel better when I realise that for the other person, during a party, in that moment, there's only me in his mind. [...] When I see that he's in ecstasy, that one is the moment in which I take control and I love to have like the power of life and death, like, you know, an emperor giving the thumbs down, a similar sensation." (Interviewee Maud, 2013)

She felt that she had power over the submissive men who trust her. She felt a power so strong that she describes it as the "power of life and death".

These two experiences of Ursula and Maud are examples of the subversion of main gender roles that see women as submissive, Maud, and the questioning of one's own sexual and gender identity, Ursula.

Nevertheless, the main social stereotypes related to gender remain valid, since several masters did not contemplate the possibility of switching to sub roles. An interesting example was that of Kyran, who on a particularly lively occasion refused

laughing but firmly to be "tied up like a salami" (Ethnographic diary, Cornucopia Club, 1ˢᵗ December 2013). His partner and other (female) close friends, in fact, probably lacking seriousness due to the scarce number of people at a BDSM play party, decided together to mock him and tie him up. Kyran, once aware of their project, laughing but firmly refused.

Among those not engaging in transformative practices as regards their sexual orientation, gender role and identity, I counted some of the older males and pillars of the community. Besides them, some younger girls as well enjoyed the pleasure of the submissive role, sometimes criticizing dominant females for their anti-feminine attitude, seen as a form of revenge on the male gender.

As regards the experimentation with sexual practices, the example of Garrett (2013) highlighted that SM could be a starting point to try out new sexual practices, even the ones more distant from one's expectations. He felt aroused when his mistress bid him to have an intercourse with another man, so aroused that he voluntarily repeated the experience of having sexual intercourse with a man.

> "I never felt aroused at the idea of having sex with another man [...] but I found it extremely arousing while I was the sub of a mistress and she bid me to do something simulated or real with another man, and I was so excited that after these experiences I said to myself 'Fuck! Could I be –at least – bisexual?' and I looked for [...] a gay man. [...] We tried [to have sex] but I was passive all the time [...] and I was aroused only twice or three times, very aroused, when I thought that I would be able to tell this thing to the mistress I had, to whom the idea of me having sex with another man was arousing." (Interviewee Garrett, 2013)

It is difficult to some up this chapter on the exploration and experimentation with genders and sexualities, since practices embodied by practitioners touch several of the numerous possible configurations.

What I note, though, is that nobody employs feminist or queer discourse to describe what I could label as 'reproduction' or 'deconstruction of gender roles, gender identity and forms of families', as if there has never previously been a conceptualisation of their attitudes and behaviours in these terms.

6.6.2.1 A Generational Issue?

The age of the practitioners is a useful tool to analyse BDSM practitioners' attitudes and behaviours as regards the disruption or the reproduction of such stereotypes. In fact, younger SM practitioners were more likely to experience gender and role changes over time than older ones. This is probably linked to a shift within the community, which as time has passed has dropped the rigid roles and the divisions between them. Another likely influence has been exercised by the shorter length of time that the younger people have been within the community. It was common, in fact, for beginners to explore different roles especially when they started to being involved in SM practices.

Tania, a sharp dominant woman in her thirties, highlights with lucidity one trend that I observed in the scene. She defines herself as a dominant masochist, and as I will explain in the next chapter, has some issues with stereotypes about gender and gender roles. She felt that a stereotypical model for women is the only one available in the scene. Tania shed light on the typical male attitude within the BDSM scene frequented by the youngest members, that she also knew and frequented herself. She describes the

differences between the older and the younger BDSM practitioners in a negative way, calling attention to the different mental framework they have from the different social and cultural configurations at the time they entered the scene or started practising BDSM. It has to be noted, though, that the border that divides the older and the younger members is fluid and some practitioners do attend both events.

> "The majority of people, that is, mostly men, um, have the big-master-very-masculine-man attitude – and then especially among the younger, that is, those who don't belong to the Old Guard[87], among whom the concepts of negotiation, limits, contracts and safewords are part of a more structured culture; I see that the younger generation tends to have this attitude 'yes, you have certain limits, but anyway I will force them and do to you even the things that you don't want to because I am a super-cool-big-master-very-masculine-man! [laughs]" (Interviewee Tania, 2014)

The division she traces between older and younger BDSM practitioners, though, does not take into account the cases in which the recorded age does not correspond to that division. There are numerous cases in which older members adopt an attitude and a behaviour more similar to the younger members, and vice versa.

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[87] The Old Guard, referred to also as 'Old School' throughout the thesis is better explained in chapter 5.

6.6.3 The Exploration of Polyamory as a Way to Overcome the Problems of the Couple

Another field in which BDSM practitioners tried out new experiences is the structure of relationships. The deconstructing enthusiasm of feminist and queer discourses is also in line with the promotion of polyamory. I observed a huge number of practitioners who got information about polyamory and were interested in experiencing it. At the time of the fieldwork, the group that used to organise gatherings for the polyamorous community was starting to organise them again. The poly community, to be fair, was actually constituted by a few individuals. A number of BDSM practitioners joined them in the gatherings, following a desire of the organisers to engage a discourse with that community as well. The former organisers of the poly gatherings, in fact, attended some of the events 'reserved' for the BDSM groups, such as Kinky Pop and First Fridays. On those occasions, they spoke with some BDSM practitioners who later turned out be interested in polyamory. The result was a partial overlapping of members between the poly and the BDSM community. In particular, the younger members of BDSM groups, rather than the older ones, also attended poly events and engaged in the poly discourses and debates.

The 'poly scene' as I would call it, was quite unpopulated and deserted at that time. Only a few poly relationships among three or more people living together permanently existed when I conducted the research, as well as other heterosexual open couples. One of these polyamorous relationships, just before the end of my fieldwork, broke up after 3 or 4 years of cohabitation.

The most common discourse developed and shared among BDSM practitioners interested in polyamory is that since they usually negotiate BDSM sessions, they are

more likely to do the same with the most common form of relationship: the couple. In a mix that is the result of their double membership, they usually looked for other BDSM practitioners to involve them in their newly opened couple or polyamorous relationship.

Some of them are sceptical about the very possibility of engaging in a pleasurable polyamorous relationship. Peter, for example, is one of them. For him, jealousy is a strong element that could invalidate such relationship. The ironic part of his account is that he was actually engaged in a polyamorous and BDSM relationship, thus actually living and embodying what he was telling me was something unrealistic and almost impossible. The excerpt of his interview is as a result quite contradictory in these terms.

He has many doubts towards polyamory, because jealousy is hard to eradicate. He sleeps with a younger girl in her twenties and his wife in her forties in the same bed. It is unlikely that night after night, the wife does not compare herself to the younger girl. So you have to be careful about what you do, careful not to touch the strings of the human soul that can lead you to unimagined territories, strings that you do not know how to manage. Polyamory is difficult to practice in Italy; he considers himself to be one of the few people who have no feeling of jealousy whatsoever. He defines himself pansexual to the highest possible degree. (Interviewee Peter, 2014)

For other practitioners the weight of social and cultural conventions is so heavy as to impede the development of polyamorous relationships. Quianna and Scott think that what is nowadays called polyamory is in fact something qualitatively different from the free love of the 1970s. Quianna and Scott are a couple interviewed for this research

and they think that the Italian cultural and social context is unfitting for these practices. They identify several problems that could be encountered in practising polyamory, especially when children are concerned. Their expression of doubts about the existence of people 'really' practising polyamory is wide: they observe more discourse circulating on polyamory than any actual and 'real' practice of it among their acquaintances. For them, the circulation of this discourse is like a fashion trend: a discourse spoken but not enacted.

The opinion of Bridget is quite different: she has several lovers at the same time, with whom she sometimes engages in BDSM sessions as well, or invites them to attend the parties in which she plays with others. She thinks, in a personal re-elaboration of the evolutionary theories, that both men and women are not meant to be monogamous, but that they have been monogamous for millennia so as to allow the species to survive.

Laura: "You usually have several lovers at the same time?"

Bridget: "Well [pause] It happens, sometimes I have some, yes, lovers, exactly; because maybe with a [name of a profession] that comes to town once every two years or every six months, we will see each other *una tantum* and then goodbye. And in the meantime, maybe I have another person I see most often. [...] I think that man is not a monogamous animal, nor woman! [laughs] [...] I think it has been a setting that has been socially necessary for millennia to allow the survival of the species; thus we gathered together, unity is strength, so you [man] go hunting, I [woman] give food to the children and take care of the vegetable patch and we all get along. It is the first time in history that men – the human being

[smiling] – have all these opportunities and inputs, and I think that the normal attitude towards polygamy, and polyamory, is coming out now. In fact, I recently learned how not to be jealous. Not at all." (Interviewee Bridget, 2013)

There are other ways, though, to mix BDSM and polyamory. Bridget thinks of them as closely connected.

Others become entangled in one while searching for the other, and vice versa. The example of Helen is illuminating. She found a new BDSM play partner in an engaged man. They 'fell in love' quickly and at the time of the interview they were arranging agreements that could fit all the three partners involved in such overlapping relationships.

Helen links BDSM and polyamory since in her opinion they both start from a desire to question the social and cultural context in which she lives. She thinks that BDSM is something that has the potential to change what we usually perceive the couple, a loving arrangement among people. Besides, BDSM changes the frames in which relationships and exchanges among people happen.

> Laura: "Is BDSM challenging something in you?"
>
> Helen: "Well, the perception of what is pleasure, at the level of [...] concepts imposed [externally]. [Pause] It shakes it up, because if before I was used to the idea of the traditional sexual intercourse a source of pleasure – and still am – well, [laughs] there is not only that way. If I had seen two people beating one another and enjoying that, if I had seen them before, as an outsider [pause] I would have seen them with completely

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different eyes; indeed, starting to experience it [BDSM] with one person made me change my perspective [pause] it questioned even the [pause] um [pause] the attraction of new relationships; I did not imagine that there was a defined relationship like master-slave, top-bottom, dominant-submissive, and instead there are, and they are not necessarily overlapping with a couple relationship: you can also play regardless of whether you are in a romantic relationship. And then, yes, it changes the way you perceive [...] relationships, in my opinion, the exchange [pause] among people." (Interviewee Helen, 2013)

She sees monogamy as limiting the potential of the people involved in a couple as well as a hypocritical stance that is not acted upon, when it constitutes simply a declaration of intent. The typical argument in sustaining polyamory is that many people betray their partner by having affairs with other, while those engaging in polyamorous relationship are open and sincere about it.

Several BDSM practitioners among the younger generation believe so. Others are heavily critical of polyamory in general, as Hector or Peter.

Others, like Tania, more specifically criticise the poly community in Milan for being highly hypocritical in discussing ethical issues that could be interesting but are sometimes acted out in a distorted way. Tania perceives clearly that those interested in polyamory are actually pursuing a different objective: having as much sex as possible.

"Just to say, in our circle lately polyamory is becoming widespread. And I find this hard to imagine. I cannot even find the time to properly get to know one woman at a time. All the way, as I'd like to. How can I have the

time for two, fuck?! I don't really understand. The only way I can conceive polyamory is the long 24/7 holiday together [pause] Why would I have to dilute you with someone else? Isn't it more logical to concentrate on one person at a time? [pause] If there is interest between us today and I'm busy, it can be another time in a month; that is not a problem." (Interviewee Hector, 2013)

Laura: "You know the polyamorous community here in Milan?"

Tania: "Yes, yes! [laughs] uh! [laughs] Yes, yes, I interact a little with the polyamorous [laughs] community [pause] um [exhales breath]"

Laura: "What do they say?"

Tania: "The community of Milan – well, Milan...the Italian community, because in the end here they are few [pause] they are interesting for many things [pause] obviously some of them experience it as a [pause] fish tank in which to fish [pause] – what can you do about it? – since it is not so big, which is why I stepped back from it because it soon becomes, how can I say it [pause] a flock in which in the end everyone is having sex with everyone [pause] because we are so few! [laughs] You know, at some point the combinations... [smiling]"

Laura: "End"

Tania: ""[laughing] You experience all the possible combinations, um [pause] there are people who have interesting ideas and organize nice events [...]. When the meetings are smaller [pause] yes, we talk, yes, you are face to face with others, but is a bit like looking around [for someone to have sex with [...]. Polyamory is something that I support because [...] I

appreciate the value it gives to communication, consent, to the ethics of relationships, which I find very interesting, and it can be educational even beyond the sexual behaviour that a person has [...]The polyamorous community tends to be very curious and supportive towards the BDSM community, because in BDSM the fact of managing multiple play relationships [like being the sub of one person and the dom of another simultaneously] [...] for years has worked on the management of multiple relationships basically, and so there is a reciprocal understanding from that point of view [between people involved in BDSM and polyamory]. Um, and then there are people who are very active in both [groups] like [name] [...]" (Interviewee Tania, 2014)

As a whole, it seems that the common discourse about polyamory among BDSM practitioners consists of two main arguments. The first is the encouragement of polyamory as a way to overcome the narrowness of the monogamous heterosexual couple as well as of heterosexual 'vanilla' sex. The second regards the impracticality of polyamory, due to social and cultural factors in the Italian context.

6.6.4 BDSM as a Consciousness Raising Practice

Another matter of contention debated by feminists is that SM could be a consciousness raising practice. The experience of Nick seemed to sustain this hypothesis. He was a practicing Catholic when his interest in BDSM started to show. As a result, he started questioning the legitimacy of the Catholic dogmas in addressing

sexuality issues and later the authority of the Catholic Church as a whole. Later, he abandoned the Catholic religion completely and lost interest for it.

"I was slowly losing interest in religion, because I saw the holes that it had, I had more and more questions with no answers that I asked priests and obtained bullshit answers. […] If you want, it was a maturation process, a process of intellectual progression and as a result I started to believe less and less in these things. […] There was this famous issue of the shield of faith, ok? All the religious incoherencies, you have to swallow them, why? Mystery of faith. […] You have this shield of faith that you interject, but one day I looked at this shield and it was all spoiled and rundown, and it was essentially a huge burden that I was carrying, and then I dropped it, and there was a sense of freedom." (Interviewee Nick, 2013)

Clearly, for him, his initial interest in SM was one of the elements that helped him questioning the acceptability of his faith within a Catholic frame. He progressively distanced himself from his former Catholic beliefs while he was becoming a skilled and experienced BDSM practitioner in the scene.

Throughout the last sections I discussed how BDSM could challenge one's own gender identity, one's own gender role and conceptions and beliefs about couples. The experimentation of polyamory lies behind its discourse; although scholars and activists debate the importance of deconstructing the heterosexual normative couple, the embodiment and the practice of polyamory are far from widespread.

Another kind of boundaries to be challenged – and in this case I would say disrupted, or at least strongly pushed – is the one between violence and BDSM: the example of a rapeplay, along with a discussion on female presence in the scene, contribute to the development of the last paragraph of this chapter.

6.6.5 Is it Pushing Limits or Rapeplay? How BDSM can Challenge Boundaries. On the Female Presence in the Scene

Other arguments employed by scholars and activists against SM are that it supports rape culture and perpetuates male dominance. Ultimately, SM practices were borrowed from male culture.

It is difficult to analyse the idea that SM supports rape culture, since there is disagreement over what constitutes a rape culture and to what degree a society could be described as a rape culture. Furthermore, the very definition of rape has been questioned and some common beliefs about it, dismantled (Gavey, 2004).

SM detractors also stress the fact that SM is borrowed from male culture; since it is so degrading and shameful for females, they could not have thought about being involved into SM practices at all. Considering this argument, which is rather essentialist and difficult to discuss, it does appear however that in the US, UK and Italy, SM was firstly organised by male groups – regardless of their sexual orientation. This is different, though, from saying that BDSM is a product of the male mind, since several other factors had a role in fostering male gatherings around SM.

As a matter of fact, that SM is a 'male' thing becomes 'truth' if one considers the academic literature, which since the first studies on the diffusion of SM among the population, reported that female practitioners as absent in the SM communities and

groups researched (Breslow *et al.*, 1985). Researchers stated that women constituted a minority and were exclusively prodomme – mistresses to be paid by clients (Spengler, 1977). More recently, scholars have acknowledged the presence of women within the SM scene (Alison *et al.*, 2001; Breslow *et al.*, 1985; Moser and Levitt, 1987; Sandnabba *et al.*, 1999). Nevertheless, even in some of the most recent studies (cf. for example Alison *et al.*, 2001), the number of female BDSM practitioners interviewed remains very low – 22 women out of 182 participants. Also in Italy women populated the SM scene later, at least according to the narratives of one of its oldest and more active members (Brumatti, 2011).

"There is interest [of behalf of people in BDSM], but the start is difficult. And also it is an all-male start. Nowadays, the many proud female slaves, and the many current hard and self-confident Mistresses must acknowledge the role of the men, who first explored the unknown ways of the SM planet. [...] Women were the big absence of those years [...]. The real disease was solitude, the lack of communication and of correct information, the absence of an SM culture and philosophy, the absence of relationships between lovers of SM. And the absence of women! [...] A lot of couples seek for other couples or a single [to play with]. Women alone still do not participate for some reason. [...] The arrival of the Internet and mobile phones revolutionized not only the modes of contact, but the same SM Italian scene, with the final appearance of the woman." (Brumatti, 2011: n. pag.)

Brumatti, in his blog that reconstructs the origins of SM communities/groups in Italy, links the absence of women to the initial presence of SM elements in porn magazines, so uncommonly bought by women. Thus, since women were not likely to buy these magazines, and would have been negatively judged by the newsagent and other people, they remained cut off. This comment at least reflects the common ideas about women being not interested in pornography. These ideas were probably more common some decades ago, but are still present.

Brumatti nevertheless continues his analysis saying that "besides this, in general, women are less interested in images than men, and women build up their sexual arousal in other ways" (Brumatti, 2011: n. pag.). He, in the end of his analysis, dates the increased female presence within the scene with the first years of the last decade of the 21th century. It seems that the effects of the sexual revolution within the BDSM frame have been felt decades later.

I do not agree with the idea that the supposedly later presence of women means that SM practices were borrowed from male culture, since several factors have to be acknowledged in analysing this reported delay. The fact that at first men organised SM encounters and groups, think for example of the leathermen, can be understood considering the different social, cultural and economic roles of women and men in western countries during the 1970s onward. It is commonly stated that women were usually confined to the private realm of the house and excluded from the labour force (although their presence in the labour force began increasing since the end of the Second World War); on the contrary, men were part of the public space, being involved in politics for example.

As regards the idea that SM supports rape culture and perpetuates male dominance, I will propose an analysis of the discourses of SM practitioners with regards to the issue of abuse. As a whole, they could be included in the paradigm that perceives SM as a pathology.

It is obviously in the interest of the SM community – or of SM practitioners – that a discourse of respect for the play partner be promoted. No one denied the necessity of being respectful towards the play partner. The discourse was so obvious that often SM practitioners did not feel the necessity to explicitly engage in it.

A paradox emerges when considering the limits of a person and the desire to push them. In fact, some people engage in BDSM practices also to test their own physical or psychological limits. As a consequence, some of them push these same limits, or push the limits of the play partner in order to acquire new experiences and sensations. This was true both for the dominant and for the submissive practitioners.

Thus, a paradox emerges between the discourse of respecting the partner's limits and at the same time attempting to push the same limits. Garrett thinks that BDSM could push your limits in several ways. First of all, growing older and more experienced and skilled, the person could expand his or her limits, trying new scenes and practices. This resembles for him a sort of physiological growth of the BDSM practitioner.

"Everyone has, in my opinion, the duty to himself and the people involved in his relationships of [pause] acting in a measured way and finding [appropriate] spaces, because I think it should be recognized that BDSM [pause] pushes your limits. When I was 13 or 14 years old I imagined things I thought of as the extreme limits of the things that I could

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do or impose; I said 'fuck, this stuff makes me horny who knows if I ever [will do] it!'" (Interviewee Garrett, 2013)

Everyone has the responsibility of knowing his or her own limits and giving BDSM the appropriate space to expand in terms of skills and practices. In fact, it seems to be intrinsic to the nature of BDSM of pushing one's limit, by requesting more and more emotional and mental energy from the practitioners who become increasingly involved in these practices – like falling in love with someone or being addicted to a substance:

"It is in the very nature of BDSM to push its own limits [pause] and this is true for the dom, for the sub, for the relationship itself, for [...] the things that happen, for the intensity, the strength and the majesty [laughs], the time and the space that these things [BDSM] take. I saw it happening several times, although to me this thing [pause] has never happened, [I know] couples in living BDSM within their relationship, have begun to face negative consequences, why? Because BDSM [...] by its own nature was going to take more and more space, to break bit by bit their limits and in the end they were aiming at a 24/7 [...] I know a couple who for example lives 24/7 after having spent years fighting on this issue, on this thing [BDSM], [BDSM] that eventually involved them pushing them closer and closer to this thing [a 24/7 relationship of domination and submission]. At the end they decided to live this 24/7, and they are happy, I think." (Interviewee Garrett, 2013)

Garrett thinks that BDSM is an activity that naturally tends to absorb mental and physical energies, and time. Hence, one has to not only set limits in terms of which practices are desired and which not, but also is careful to not give 'too much' to BDSM practices, that could easily absorb a relationship. The couple Garrett is speaking about were in a way 'sucked' into a heavier and heavier 24/7 relationship that seemed to have left them dried out and with low energy.

Ginger offers a clear example of what pushing one's limits could means: she is a young but quite experienced girl, and told me about the progress she has made in enduring whiplashes. She is proud of such improvements, since despite her being deeply engaged with BDSM as well as with her partner, she is at the beginning of her path into the BDSM community. In managing to endure more and more whiplashes, she is embodying the role of submissive the best she can. At the same time, as a new member of the community, she is learning how to behave properly in order to be fully accepted and to comply with unwritten codes of conduct.

"In the beginning he used to tell me 'count ten!' 'no! ten!' [whiplashes] [laughs] The other day I got to 150, what was I doing in the beginning?! [...] As I told you, there has to be a masochistic side [in me] [...] And slowly, slowly, slowly, I began to endure more. It is logical: physically, the body likes it. That is, every time I take the whip I get wet. [...] But now I like it more and surely stand it more. Then [...] every time I say 'now I will take another, I can do it!'. Also [name], when it seems I cannot take one more, I look at him and it's as if he tells me 'look, you are going to do it', and then I say 'ok, I'll try. I will do it'." (Interviewee Ginger, 2013)

Ginger is so proud and happy in her new role of submissive, which she is learning rapidly and with dedication that she even gets wet when whipped. Later on in the interviews she told me that she wondered why she gets wet when whipped; she thinks she is common for people to face such bodily reaction to certain kinds of physical stimulation. She is so absorbed in the requirements of her role and so eager to embody them that she thinks that anyone would get wet if whipped by someone. The excitement she experiences is made universal.

The discourse of respecting one another's limits is linked with the pathological discourse within the BDSM community and groups. In fact, BDSM practitioners and sometimes the community through a spokesman have distanced themselves from those not respecting such limits. These practitioners are perceived as dangerous and are thus separated from the community. This is the narrative employed by BDSM practitioners when speaking about or alluding to a member, or ex-member, whose respect of limits has been at least unclear.

During my fieldwork I never witnessed such situations. The silent reaction to the violence experienced by Kathleen, though, constitutes an example of the polishing function of BDSM groups. The friends Kathleen asked for help seemed to have warned those who need to be warned against the BDSM practitioner, mostly future possible play partners and silently manage the situation. What they did is not been clear, but she says that she has been discouraged to denounce the events to local authorities. Plus, Kathleen was angry at the person who gave her feedback on the perpetrator of the violence. She held him or her partly responsible for what happened to her.

This episode mirrors what Luminais (2014) defines as the polishing functions of the BDSM community. This act of polishing what is deviant from the norm affirms and

reaffirms both the norm internal to the BDSM context as well as the one external to BDSM groups. The point that Luminais makes, in fact, is that those two norms coincide. She gives the example of a community in the United States that self-censored about the use of alcohol and that has been reinforcing gender stereotypes. Though in her chapter she focuses mainly on the role of the state as actor that maintains the *status quo*, she stresses the fact that other social groups mimic its power, in particular through self-monitoring. Kinky communities have an ambiguous role in both contesting and embracing the dominant ideology in the United States. One of the effects of this role is that allowed practices in the clubs are the less risky, and with "different kind of play but it's always the same" (Luminais, 2014: 43).

The device of distancing oneself from the 'bad people' was employed to both acknowledge the existence of people who do not behave properly – since it would have been hypocritical to deny it – and to produce a positive image of oneself or one's group. This device produces a sort of normalisation of SM, showing an image of SM that could be acceptable – or not too despicable – for non SM practitioners.

The process of normalisation seems to have a physiological place in social change whenever a revolution, of any kind, takes place (Weeks, 1998). In this case, the normalisation would follow the explosion and subsequent establishment of BDSM practices in western countries. The divide between a good and a bad BDSM echoes the division between acceptable and unacceptable practices. Downing, for example, describes the bad, probably the worst as she defines it, practice of all time: the lust murder (2004). Empirical data collected, though, did not indicate that practitioners pushed themselves this far in the exploration of risky practices. Some forms of edgeplay, though, are perceived as bad and too risky. They have a negative stigma attached and those engaging in them are sometimes seen as excessive and dangerous.

The interesting fact is that not everyone engaging in edgeplay is perceived as a danger for the others or for the outside reputation of the community. Several factors could influence this perception, among them I would name age, the duration of membership in a more or less recognised BDSM group, the reputation among play partners and a general attitude and behaviour that does not have characteristics that could signal some psychological pathologies and the like.

Peter is the example of a case in which, despite engaging in edgeplay, the perception of him as dangerous or excessive is not present. In the interview, he focuses on the fact that thanks to his advanced skills, he has never sent anyone to the hospital. Despite having used fire, needles, and other objects, everyone has been safe and sound.

> He never sent anyone to the hospital. Even doing edgeplay – that is, playing with needles, making sutures, fireplay and breathplay, and thus coming into contact with the blood of others – he never sent anyone to the hospital. He tries to obtain some sort of medical history before playing with someone, either directly – asking the person what are his or her health problems – or indirectly – by asking others. He never plays with a person that he has just met. (Interviewed Peter, 2014)

Later in the interview, Peter explained me the two kinds of breathplay usually practiced. He knows the technique and the risks quite well. In doing so, he focuses on the best technique with which to engage in breathplay rather than on the risks that could attend it. Thus, he managed to shift the focus from the possible outcome of breathplay, death or effects of oxygen deprivation on the brain and other organs.

First, it can be done by putting bags over the head and ropes around the neck; the reduction of breathing occurs through the crushing of the larynx, which may, however, collapse and the subject may need a tracheotomy to breathe again. This is the most dangerous way to do breathplay. The second way, the one which he practices, is a sort of induced and controlled fainting that he gets by squeezing the carotid with his hands and so reducing the quantity of blood that reaches the brain, and then moving his hands to let the blood flow freely. He says that those, to whom he did this, described this experience as causing a sense of euphoria. (Interviewee Peter, 2014)

Another practitioner, David, engages in edgeplay. Despite his look as a young executive, elegant and charming, with his tailored suit and leather bag, he describes some relationships he had as a young man full of bodily experimentation, degradation, physical and psychological slavery as well as sexual practices. He describes his first experience with BDSM, when he was a young man, an experience that involved breathplay from the beginning:

His first time was with a couple from [city name], contacted through the poste restante; he was 18 or 19 years old. The male member of the couple watched [his wife and David], the woman was the mistress. She trampled him [walking on his body, lying down on a rigid surface] with her high heels... David at the time thought she was "crazy". This first experience was average, neither good nor bad. Looking back he now likes it. He did things that he now acknowledges to have been dangerous: the

husband of the mistress, who is a medical doctor, practiced a form of breath control on him due to which he fainted and when he woke up felt his energy increased tenfold; the medical doctor did this twice. David performed oral sex on her, but there was no sexual intercourse with penetration. This first experience happened when he was still a virgin, that is, he had not yet had sex. (Interviewed David, 2013)

Discourses on abuse are quite limited or non-existent within the BDSM groups. Peter was among the most active members in reminding me of that risk. Although he refused to be recorded as a matter of privacy, he declared that he usually controls people in the scene, since "monsters, predators" are around (Interviewee Peter, 2014), both in the scene and at the SM related events, and that everybody needs to watch out for them.

It is notable that it was more common among men than women to distance themselves from the 'character' of the abuser within SM. Women were generally not perceived as abusers, both within and outside of the SM community, thus the lesser necessity to distance themselves from this stereotype. The example of Peter is significant in this sense.

As regards being the 'victim' of an abuse, Peter again offers an example taken from his long membership into the BDSM community. One of the first of his experiences with BDSM was marked by his involvement in an SM party against his will. More precisely, he has been brought to that party without knowing it involved SM interactions.

During a happy hour, suddenly Peter told me – I should say ordered me – to ask him a question, one of the many I would have asked him during our interview. We were among other people, all drinking and chatting, laughing and moving around the room, but slowly I felt as we were isolated from the others. Standing in the middle of the room, facing each other, I asked him how he started doing BDSM. With his expression getting more serious as his story unravelled, he told me that in the 1980s he was in [name of a country]. He was 20 years old, and has been brought to a party without knowing it was a BDSM party. When a woman started playing with him [it is not clear what she was actually doing] he drew back since he did not like it, pushing her away in a bad manner and maybe even causing her to fall down. Suddenly, all the people around them came closer and realised that he had been brought at the party without knowing what he was facing [what kind of party it was]; they said that he had the right to punish her. I do not remember if they gave him a whip or a cane, but at the third stroke he gave her, he understood that he was enjoying it. "And that was the beginning of all" he says, meaning that his BDSM life started right there. The host asked him not to talk about the incident, while the woman who had brought him to the party was excluded from the circle.

(Ethnographic diary, First Fridays happy hour, Milan, 5th April 2013)

Peter's reaction to the woman's action of bringing him to that party seems disproportionate. The woman, in fact, was doing something with him that Peter does not reveal. What he focuses on is his initial doubt and agitation about being at an SM party. These emotions are followed by him taking pleasure in SM practices. By recounting fact

that he was subsequently offered the opportunity to punish the woman for the violation of a rule, and that he took that occasion with hesitation and then pleasure, he highlights his own agency, finally in his possession.

Throughout these paragraphs, I have shown how the feminist discourse on the 'maleness' and 'badness' of SM in relation with women is an argument that in contemporary BDSM Italian context has been appropriated by practitioners. The distinction that Peter makes about him and the other 'good guys' and the monsters in the scene is a process of construction of identity built on the exclusion of others. To engage in edgeplay means to occupy a place near a limit, a precipice. To engage in these practices means to be near the edge, to risk more than the others, to be different from the (BDSM) norm.

The instrumental use of others in order to produce a positive image of oneself, as well as the inclusion of some features that automatically produce the exclusion of others is nothing new. Butler denounces this attitude among feminists.

"The feminist 'we' is always and only a phantasmatic construction, one that has its purposes, but which denies the internal complexity and indeterminacy of the term and constitutes itself only through the exclusion of some part of the constituency that is simultaneously seeks to represent." (Butler, 1990: 181)

6.7 Conclusion: how BDSM Practitioners Discuss Feminist and Queer Issues

The presentation of the feminist and queer discourses about SM developed throughout the last thirty years of the last century in the United States, the United Kingdom and Italy, serves the purpose of tracing elements of this discourse into contemporary account of BDSM practices. The discourse on BDSM has been framed within the sex wars, a broad discussion involving feminists and non-feminists around the issue of pornography and SM (Chancer, 2000).

The comparison between the three contexts in which the feminist and queer debate developed revealed some differences. First, while scholars and activists in the United States and the United Kingdom produced a three-side-debate towards SM, anti-, pro and in-between, Italy's debate was organised around anti and pro-SM. Feminists were in general against it, with one exception, Pinto (1996), who tried to open a space for debate by breaking the thick front against SM.

Moreover, almost all the Italian feminists come from lesbian activism, outside of academia, while in the US contact between activism and academia has been more frequent and stronger. In contrast to the US and UK, in Italy feminism and in general gender studies were not taught in university courses, and nowadays are slowly and with difficulty gaining their space within the other fields of knowledge (Di Cori, 2001; Tota, 2001). In Italy, a few exceptions are now present, signalling the beginning of contact between the activists and the academic world with regard to feminism.

These differences are produced by both the specific characteristics of the Italian feminist movement that partially differentiate it from other Western feminist movements (Lussana, 2012) and the Italian social, political, cultural and economic context in which feminism was born.

Although unaware of it, and despite their sometimes personal unfavourable position against feminist and queer ideas, BDSM practitioners employed those very arguments to analyse their relationship with BDSM. Moreover, they actually apply some of the arguments into their sessions, interactions and discourses.

The feminist and queer discourses looked deeply into the topic of consent, especially whether or not it is valuable since it is expressed within a patriarchal system. BDSM practitioners re-appropriated these discourses and actively engaged with them. They reflect on consent and express their doubts about the correct ways to practice it. The example of Victor, unable to discern moaning caused by pleasure from that caused by unwanted physical pain, is clear in this sense. Consent is one of the most important elements, according to the feminist and queer analysis presented, which differentiates SM interactions from violence. Considering consent alone or the use of a safeword as clear markers of distinction is a mistake. I discussed as an example the criteria from distinguishing BDSM from violence produced by Jozifkova's (2013) and Sir Bamm's (n. d.) and demonstrated their limits. The discussion of Peter's account of a rapeplay is useful in highlighting this blurred division. Furthermore, it shed lights on the artificial discrimination between 'good' and 'bad' BDSM practices. Such discussion is actively carried on by BDSM practitioners themselves.

To reach consent, negotiation is necessary, and I discussed the way in which BDSM practitioners enact negotiation, as either a process preceding the session or ongoing during it.

The use of a safeword, although highly recommended, is quite rare, but this could be due to the fact that BDSM sessions take place between people who already know each other, since it is reported that safewords are thought to regulate play among people who do not know each other well. In any case, a safeword constitutes both a guarantee and

something to be avoided, since using a safeword it is an indicator of having not fully accomplished one's role of submissive or dominant. In this regard, a safeword could be read as a limit of the session itself, something that almost all practitioners implicitly agree to leave out of the scene.

In the last section, I showed how BDSM practitioners embody their explorations with gender identity, sexual orientation and also monogamy and polyamory.

7. Reconceptualising BDSM within Contemporary Intimacies

The common idea about BDSM is that is involves all the practices dealing with pain, pleasure and power. As I will show throughout this chapter, this is not entirely the case. What I question, in particular, is the idea that pain is the ultimate aim of those engaging in BDSM. Pain, while being correctly identified as one of the main features of such practices is nevertheless not the ultimate objective.

Pain becomes a tool: it is a communicative and cognitive tool that allows practitioners to reach other objectives. For example, pain could be a means through which a submissive man is submitted; on the other hand, it could be an offering to one's own dominant. Some examples on the various uses of pain will be given in order to clarify the idea that it is a means rather than an end in itself. The first part of the chapter will be a discussion on pain.

In the second part of this chapter, I will outline the relationship existing between pleasure and pain. While they are far from being always intertwined, pain and pleasure nevertheless occupy a central place for practitioners.

The analysis of the concepts of power and intimacy occupies the last part of this chapter. In particular, I discuss to what extent intimacy, in the sense of access, could be used as a larger frame in which to place BDSM practices.

7.1 Pain not for Pain's Sake. The Link between Pleasure and Pain

Pain is indicated as the main feature of BDSM, as what is sought by people engaging in it. The discourse shared by scholars as well as part of the mass media reproduces this idea. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, this is not entirely the case.

Pain seems to be a means or a tool to reach other things rather than an end in itself. The objective of a BDSM sessions or a series of them could be a reward, the pleasure of the dominant person, a particular relationship of intimacy, an orgasm, one's own pleasure, etc. Even what Newmahr (2010) calls autotelic pain has a pleasurable component in itself; even the practitioners who claim that they seek pain and they are masochistic – not dominant or submissive, but masochistic – seek pain because it is read and perceived as pleasure. A pleasurable component of pain is almost always present. Even the very definitions of the words sadism and masochism, as conceived originally in the 19th century, include a reference to the pleasure of inflicting or receiving pain, either physical or psychological (cf. Krafft-Ebing).

The undergoing of pain under certain circumstances acquires a ritualistic meaning. The importance of the role of pain is captured by, among others, Collins (2008). He states that the ritualisation of pain and injury is more likely to occur at the centre of the social attention of a group with a strong sense of membership. Although he does not deal explicitly with BDSM, it is appropriate to employ such a definition to describe it.

In general, the meaning of pain is dependent on the context in which it is experienced. Similarly, pain responsivity is subjective (Melzack, 1973; Benedetti *et al.*, 2013).

The perception and the meanings of pain differed hugely among BDSM practitioners, from those who say that their physiological response to pain is sexual arousal to those who admit they try to avoid pain in BDSM contexts, but accept it if inflicted by the dominant, to whom it is offered as a sacrifice.

What seems to constitute the basis for the societal discrimination against BDSM, though, is the supposition that BDSM practitioners in certain contexts find pain to be pleasure. The account of lust by Downing (2004) is a clear example of this discourse, even though if taken to its extreme. What empirical data suggest, though, is that only part of the practitioners search explicitly for pain because they find it pleasurable. For the others pain still has an aversive nature, but is variously accepted or endured as a means or a tool to reach other prizes or rewards (orgasm, higher consideration in the eyes of the dominant, etc).

The distinction between pain and pleasure is rather difficult. At a theoretical level, they are usually defined following a circular argument: one implies the existence of the other or each of them is defined by self evident propositions.

Pleasure and pain are linked to one another not only at a theoretical level, but on a neurophysiologic one. First of all, they both release the same substances in the body, opioids and dopamine (Leknes and Tracey, 2008) and secondly, the areas of the brain involved in processing pain and pleasure overlap. This second characteristics could partly explain the modulatory effects of one over the other (Leknes and Tracey, 2008). This means that a pleasurable sensation could push the pain to the background, thus it is not entirely felt. This intertwinement has been taken up by practitioners themselves and by sociologists as well (among others, Collins, 2004), who call attention to the nature of pain as sexually arousing:

> "Exciting or dramatic activities start off the individuals (separately,
> not yet in shared buildup) to bring the initiating emotional ingredient to a
> sexual IR [interaction ritual]. These can include the drama of sexual

negotiation, chase, and play; conflict and pain; and the antinomian excitement of breaking taboos." (Collins, 2004: 249)

The intertwining of pain and pleasure means that in some occasions it is difficult to distinguish between them. Even practitioners also emphasize the difficulty in distinguishing pain from pleasure. Garrett gives a clear example of one such occasion when speaking about the forced orgasm. A forced orgasm is something pleasurable but framed within a punishment or domination frame. Thus, to be forced to have an orgasm could become quite an unpleasant experience, or not; again, it depends on the context.

"[...] When in fact it's a bit more complicated, because sometimes with certain feelings it is difficult to define to what extent they are definable as pain or pleasure [...] precisely because there are forms of stimulation, to name [one] [...] a forced orgasm falls within the SM frame, that is where an individual, more likely a woman, but also a man, it can happen in certain situations, he is forced to reach an orgasm, perhaps repeatedly to the point of feeling it as annoying, violent, painful, even though it is an orgasm, and orgasms by definition are nice [...]" (Interviewee Garrett, 2013)

In the light of the discourse insofar developed, I would say that Newmahr's (2010) categorisation of autotelic pain as opposed to transformed pain constitutes a false dichotomy. The reason is that transformed pain relies on a fictitious differentiation and autotelic pain reaffirms what is one of the characteristics of pain itself, that is, its being tied to pleasure. "The end result of transformed pain is pleasure, it becomes, posttransformation, pleasure *instead* of pain" (Newmahr, 2010: 407): the category of

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transformed pain relies on a clear cut separation between pain and pleasure; this, which in the light of medical and sociological literature, as well as practitioners' own contributions appears unlikely. Furthermore, saying that "autotelic pain begins as pain, ends as pain, and is enjoyable nonetheless" (Newmahr, 2010: 407) means reaffirming the tight link between pleasure and pain, link that seems to exist both at the neurobiological and sensational level. Thus, autotelic pain seems to equal pain itself since it describes a situation in which these two states are blurred in the bodily perception.

7.2 Meanings of Pain and Pleasure among BDSM Practitioners

The conceptualization of pain as something positive or negative, or as a means to reach different ends varies widely among BDSM practitioners. In general, all of them are emphatic in their desire to be differentiated from 'the masochist', this social bogeyman, heavily stigmatised even within the community. This 'masochist' is a person who desires any amount of pain at any time under any circumstances since he or she enjoys that pain. This social persona actually does not exist, but this typified bogeyman will constitute one of the two extremes of the *continuum* (see Fig. 5) along which I will position the practitioners themselves.

On the other metaphorical extreme, I put the ideal type of the BDSM practitioner who endures or enjoys pain just for the pleasure of the partner with whom they are playing. In this ideal typical position, pain constitutes a sacrifice, a gift to the partner. In this sense, pain acquires the means of test, trial, ordeal; this is an ancient *topos* that could be found in philosophy (Natoli, 1986), myth and epic narratives.

Fig. 5 exemplifies the argument I am developing. On the lower end of the line represented, lies the ideal type of the person who enjoys pleasure in complete solitude, and who is the sole who enjoys such pain; no other person will witness or share the joy and pleasure. In this position pain becomes fused with pleasure. Pain is usually defined as something bad, that one desires to end as soon as possible; while pleasure, as something that one looks for, that gives joy and fulfilment. A short circuit between the two categories, pain and pleasure, is thus created: they are the same thing, and that is what this metaphorical hypothetical figure on the lower end of the line in Fig. 5 is experiencing.

On the upper end of the line lies the ideal type of the BDSM practitioner who experiences pain as part of a wider relationship with another person. This person experiences pain as a means to reach other ends: to increase the degree of intimacy with the play partner; to reach a wonderful orgasm, to fully and completely be submitted, and so forth. Pain, if pleasurable at all, it is so only for the other person involved in the session.[88] Even this end of the line clearly constitutes an idealisation, but is nevertheless useful in analysing the experiences and meanings of the practitioners.

The lower end of the line in Fig. 5 must not to be confused with self-harm. Although inflicting pain as something pleasurable and done in solitude for one's own sake could appear very similar to self-harm, different internal dynamics and explanations are at stake in those two situations: they constitute two different frames.

Mains (1984) in his account of leathersexuality underlines that pleasure is fused with pain. "To leathermen pain is no second-rate substitute; pain is enjoyable because it is pleasure" (Mains, 1984: 57). In this, he refers to the much debated Freudian theories

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[88] Within this argument I am mostly discussing the position of the person who experiences pain, not the one who inflicts it; the reason is that it seems that what is at stake in the stigma attached to BDSM practitioners is the incomprehension of the motivations which lead a person to desire pain – not to inflict it. The differentiation between the two positions can be seen in Fig. 6.

on masochism and sadism seen as impulses 'naturally' directed outward that are perverted and directed inward, against oneself. Mains affirms his disagreement with such theories, because "to leathermen pain is no second-rate substitute". He speaks about the pain-pleasure barrier to indicate the point at which physical pain and pleasure are connected and interdependent.

Fig. 5. *Continuum* between different and extreme experiences of pleasure and pain.

PAIN AS MEANS, TOOL
Pain as means to reach a prize or a condition (intimacy, pleasure, orgasm, relationship, submission, etc.)
Pain is pleasurable only for the other play partner (dom or sub)

PAIN FUSE TOGETHER WITH PLEASURE
Pain as something enjoyed alone, pleasurable only for the person who causes pain
Shortcircuit: pain and pleasure become the same
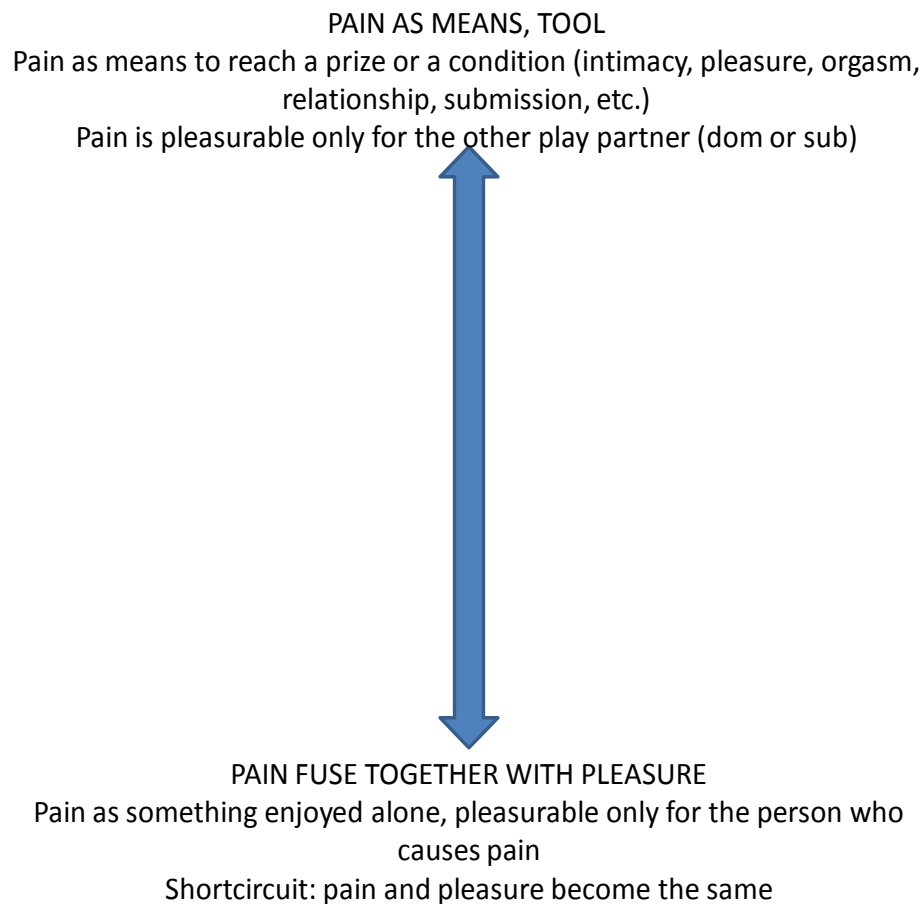
I will use the words of Tania in order to describe the differences between what is thought to be a self-harm and BDSM as a sexual variation. The World Health

Organisation frames self-harm as a risk factor (WHO, 2010), the American Psychological Association as a condition that may be a focus of clinical attention (APA, 2013b). Tania thinks of the search for pain as a means through which to reach something that could be thought as a sexual variation. She thinks that in distinguishing between self-harm and inflicting pain on oneself within a BDSM frame, the level of detachment and the motivations of those who practice these actions must be comprehended.

> "To say, self-injure as a reaction to [...] an emotional thing, it's a process not – how would you say – without the filter of the observer, because you have a trauma and you go beyond it in that way. To choose to experience physical pain in a moment when you don't have a problem, but you use it as a tool because you know you trigger a mechanism/reaction in yourself is already the process – is already a form of detachment."
> (Interviewee Tania, 2014)

She frames the difference between self-harm and chosen pain within the paradigm of free choice. To choose pain is the result of reflection and meditation, not a reflexive reaction to a trauma or earlier suffering. In this sense, to choose pain is to increase one's agency (Corradi, 2009).

The *continuum* that connects pain as a means and a tool and pain that creates a shortcircuit with pleasure allows a graphical representation of the positionality of practitioners. In Fig. 6, I have positioned some of the practitioners who expressed their narratives about pain and pleasure in relation with BDSM. They are positioned all along the line between the two ideal type extremes: between a conception of fusion and

annihilation of pleasure and pain, and the experience of pain as a means to reach other subjective emotional states or emotional or status-related rewards.

Fig. 6. Practitioners' narratives about pain and pleasure in relation with BDSM
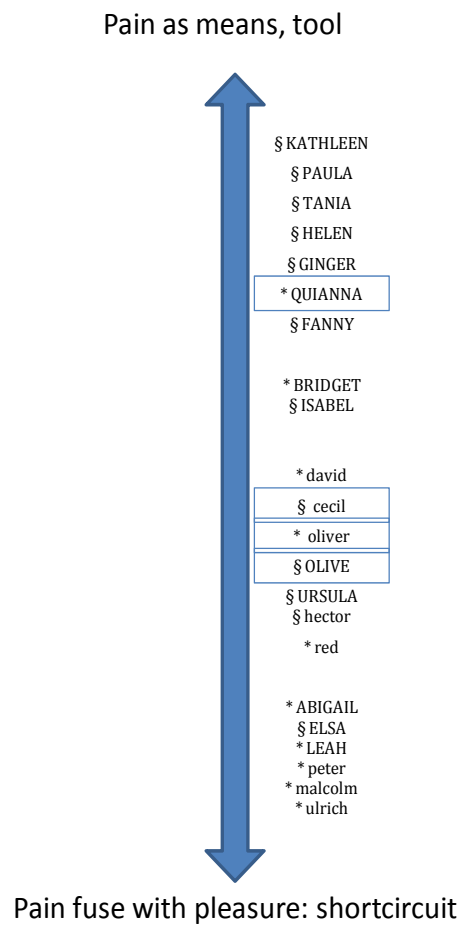
Pain as means, tool

§ KATHLEEN
§ PAULA
§ TANIA
§ HELEN
§ GINGER
* QUIANNA
§ FANNY

* BRIDGET
§ ISABEL

* david
§ cecil
* oliver
§ OLIVE
§ URSULA
§ hector

* red

* ABIGAIL
§ ELSA
* LEAH
* peter
* malcolm
* ulrich

Pain fuse with pleasure: shortcircuit

Legend: male; FEMALE; * ≥ 35 years old; § < 35 years old. The actual position of the practitioners is defined by the symbol preceding their name. The blue rectangle means that the person gives rather than experiences pain.

7.2.1 Malcolm and the Submission through Pain

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For Malcolm, a middle aged submissive man, pain is not an aim in itself. His brown eyes are always quiet and calm, like his voice. He used to offer me tea during our long interviews in his attic. He speaks directly and without reticence; though, he does not want to be audio recorded.

From the very beginning of our interviews together, he tells me he enjoys been involved into BDSM sessions with dominant women. He habitually combines BDSM relationships with loving ones. Once he was involved in a 24/7, that is, a relationship of dominance and submission with his mistress which continues all day long. They lived together, in his attic.

At the beginning of his experience with BDSM, he shocked the players attending a play party for his endurance of the whip. He even amused himself by the huge amount of strokes he bore. He was enjoying his high pain threshold, partly due to the fact that all practitioners at the party were staring at him. This story, which he tells me at the very beginning of our interview, is part of a general narrative quite widespread among BDSM groups and communities. It is the story of one's accomplishments with the abilities and skills required for the embodiment of a role within a BDSM group. A 'good' slave will endure a lot of pain and humiliation, while a 'good' top, will both know when to stop and will try what he or she is going to do with others on his or her own body first.

He accomplished his role so well during that occasion, that even years later his deed was well known within the BDSM *milieu*, and he has been recognised as the one who performed that session. He felt he was someone important and quite famous in the local BDSM community.

Nevertheless, he defines himself not as a "pure masochist" (Interviewee Malcolm, 2013), since for him physical pain is a means through which to be submitted, a gift to

make to his mistress. Despite trying to avoid pain, he becomes progressively accustomed with pain, and learns how to approach it. He learns that the skin must be progressively warmed up by the whip, and that the lashes should be increasingly strong, rather than the other way round: endorphins must have the time to circulate in the body. The technique of whipping was taught to him by the different mistresses and experiences he has had.

What he desires most is an emotional involvement with a mistress: a mental connection, a pleasurable feeling must be present before they play together. He is not interested in the merely physical aspect of such a connection. Since he is not a pure masochist, he must be involved mentally in the relationship – even if it lasts for just a play party. The narrative of the submitted man who seeks a mental connection with his mistress or dominant play partner is hugely widespread in the community, and several others rely on it.

Although trying to avoid pain, Malcolm is conscious that his ideal dominant woman should cause some pain and suffering. Malcolm likes to be a 'head hunter', since he loves helping women to discover their dominant side. He looks for the latent dominant aspects of a woman and enjoys making them develop and flourish in a sort of education in BDSM from the bottom side.

For Malcolm, physical pain is an element that has a precise role in a BDSM session: it helps to submit him. Through pain he is completely reduced to obedience. Since he is not totally passive, he says, he needs to be submitted by the infliction of pain. He is eager to say that he is not a masochist, since what he is looking for is domination, not pain itself. Pain is just a means. At best, pain represents a challenge, a play, and part of an erotic game he carries on especially in private. At the BDSM play parties, in fact, it

is the awareness of being observed that mostly helps him to endure a heavy session with a whip.

7.2.2 Cecil or Pain as a Natural Demonstration of Love

Cecil is a young dominant. He is one of the youngest members of the BDSM groups observed. He employs a lot of words to express a thought. Our interviews have been long and touched many topics. During interviews his brown eyes wandered around instead of staying fixed on mine, as he was looking for answers coming from the place where we were.

He told me that he gradually explored the role of pain throughout his sexual experiences in late adolescence. He understands the infliction of pain on his sexual partner as a means affirming his physical and emotional presence, as well as the fact that the partner is in some ways 'his'. Cecil feels he better expresses his involvement, passion, and physical participation in a sexual act by communicating it to his female partner through pain: "You hurt her to make her understand that she's yours; to make her understand that you're making her your property, see it this way, not to harm her" (Interviewee Cecil, 2013).

Physical pain is a means for sexual communication between the two people during a sexual encounter. He told me that, since words could be misunderstood, he employs pain as a communicative tool. For example, to say to a woman that she is yours could be misinterpreted by her; on the contrary, saying it through the infliction of pain constitutes a deeper form of communication, and it conveys a message that in his eyes cannot be misconceived. Pain carries the communication on a deeper and more instinctual level.

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Although he acknowledges the contradictions of communicating passion, love and emotional involvement through physical pain, he nevertheless thinks that this is effective. He cannot find other ways of expressing his thought. Cecil wants to communicate a sense of protection to his partner during sexual encounters. And he does it through pain. A sense of possession, in the sense of the desire to own and dispose freely of someone as long as the sexual act lasts, is something he feels is best communicated to his partner through pain.

He relies on the narrative of the return to the 'natural' or 'prehistoric' man through BDSM. Some dynamics that he imagines occurred thousands of years ago are re-enacted through BDSM. The profound need to belong to a herd as the only means to survive in prehistoric times he sees in the contemporary dynamic among people. For example, the female would be given pain during the mating by a male member of the same herd, who at the same time hunted to feed her; thus, being part of a herd, remaining alive and being taken care of, all became closely linked with pain during mating. This mechanism – or a similar one – might be, in his opinion, an explanation of the role of pain in BDSM, or sex in general. In fact, the slave is owned by the master but the master "acts in the interest of the slave, because in theory the slave is not able to take care of herself." (Interviewee Cecil, 2013). A sort of ancient *do ut des* is embodied within BDSM practices, which allow this to re-emerge in the recovery of the natural.

He tells me that after some very hard and long sessions, women often cry. They cry as if they found something that had been lost for a long time, something they have been missing: that is the sense of belonging to another person.

The idea of masculinity embodied by Cecil is quite traditional and stereotypical, even. The male who protects and care for his lovers is, though, more of a narrative than

an actual code of conduct for him. This narrative constitutes the frame within which he moves and acts, rather than his actual moves.

7.2.3 Isabel or Topping from the Bottom

Isabel is a quite lively young woman, who is always moving. Apparently her role is submissive, since she receives orders and physical pain from her dominant. Nevertheless, she defines herself as someone who dominates the session from the bottom to obtain physical pain. She is someone who others would call 'a masochist', with a sort of fear and incomprehension in their voice. In fact, she wants pain, but she wants the pain she wants: she has preferences, 'dos and don'ts'. Impact play is her favourite, and she avoids all those tools which pinch or sting, like all kinds of whips. Canes, bare hands, leather belts, pegs and similar tools are her favourites. On the other hand, when she receives the pain that she does not like she gets mad, and angry. She tells me this with joy; she must have been involved into such occasions recently, since she laughs, as if she was remembering something.

Outside of the sessions Isabel does not like physical pain; she needs to be into the play frame to endure and like pain. She told me that throughout her entire life she hasexperienced different painful situations – and this is entirely different from the kind of pain she looks for with BDSM interactions.

Some of her less experienced partners, both play and life partners, did not understand the separation of frames, and spanked her or pinched her nipples in everyday life interactions. As a result, she got angry and annoyed: the moment in which a painful interaction happens as well as the meaning attached to it by her are very

important characteristics and determine the quality of the experience, as well as its pleasantness.

She is into BDSM "just for pain" (Interviewee Isabel, 2013). Isabel perceives her essence as linked to BDSM. It is not something you not decide, but something that is in you, in your inner self. She compares herself to a homosexual: one does not engage in homosexual practices, one is homosexual. Consider for example her position in Fig. 3: she is far nearer the modern identity with its essentialism, rather than to the postmodern one and its expression of a plurality of selves.

Isabel's first experiences with sexuality, with relationships and love are closely linked to BDSM dynamics and sessions. Throughout her life, her preferences about roles and sessions have changed. She took the opportunity to learn about and deconstruct them by living in different places and enjoying the cultural differences of the BDSM scenes.

Similarly, her sexual preferences had the opportunity to change: through BDSM Isabel has enjoyed a higher degree of sexual and gender experimentation. Now she presents herself as a skilled and seasoned young BDSM practitioner. Isabel is fully aware of the meaning of 'topping from the bottom' and joyfully engages in such interactions.

7.2.4 Paula, the Physiological Excitement of Pain and the "Gender Irritation"

Paula provided me with the opportunity to explore the contemporary meaning of masochism. In fact, she is one of the few to define herself as a masochist. A masochist is for her a person who gets sexually aroused by receiving physical pain. Pain, therefore, is

just a means to reach sexual pleasure, it is something physiological. This is not an automatism, though, since the frame and the context are important in shaping the experience.

She likes pain to be "administered" (Interviewee Paula, 2013) in a certain way, a way that she does not explain in detail. Pain functions either as a psychological trigger or a learned association and produces a pleasurable experience.

One of the conditions in which she likes most to receive pain is when it is administered by women; she is almost a "fundamentalist" in this regard. Years before our interviews, she met a woman who impressed her, and since that time she enjoys and prefers women. With men, though, the relationship with pain changes, since at first she feels a sort of irritation, or annoyance, in being administered pain; she calls it "gender irritation" (Interviewee Paula, 2013). Thus, one of the conditions that helps her to enjoy pain administered by a man is first of all a close relationship with that man, or a deep knowledge, a strong mutual trust. Secondly, she acknowledges that enjoying pain with a man could be a learning process. She is actually in the middle of it, since her lover is a man and also a BDSM play partner. Paula is learning how to overcome this characteristic that she perceives as a limit both for her love and BDSM play life: with her boyfriend she is experiencing safe and loving interactions where she receives physical pain from him, thus gradually decoupling the male gender of her boyfriend from her irritation and anger. She does not recognise any previous problems with the male gender, though, thus the origin or a possible explanation for this gender irritation remains mysterious to her.

Paula embodies what is recognised as the sexual excitement deriving from physical pain (cf. Kama Sutra and Collins, 2004). Pain is neither a reward nor a punishment. It is something Paula enjoys since it produces physiologically pleasure.

"[Pain] is a means to get to pleasure and nothing more, it's just a physical thing, pure and simple, and really – well, it begins and ends there [...] I get similar reactions when I tear my pubic hair with tweezers. It's clearly less [laughs] fun because I'm alone, but it's just, for me is just a physiological thing. And in the sense that, once when I was hanging out with [female name] when anyway I had, that is, when I dreamed of these older women, well, there was also a little um [pause] [pause] a bit of that, well I don't know how to say it, well, actually not, pain has always been the same and that's it, I've never lived it either as a punishment, or as a reward, in fact, in the sense that for me um [pause] the idea of a woman who says to me 'come here, I'm going to beat you because I have to punish you, because you've done something wrong', well, what?! Because, well, you beat me since I love to be beaten, not for other reasons, not for – and so no, well, it is just a down-to-earth thing [laughs]" (Interviewee Paula, 2014).

It is interesting to note that the BDSM groups do not look kindly on people like Paula who define as masochists. As said before, the masochist who enjoys pain is frightening. This conceptual limit serves the purpose of drawing a line between 'bad' and 'good' BDSM within BDSM communities and groups. The idea of the masochist, though, is never embodied in the person next to them, in the person that they knew for a while and played with several times. It remains a theoretical and abstract construction that serves the purpose of producing a polished image of BDM practices. For example, Malcolm, Peter and other BDSM practitioners not named here – as well as other female practitioners – explicitly differentiate themselves from the social character of the

masochist. For them the masochist embodies the totally passive and completely submissive receiver of physical pain. They all, though, know who Paula is, and have played with her; yet, they fail to recognise her, and other practitioners, as potential candidates for the social character of the masochist.

The polishing function within BDSM is sometimes exercised by the older members of the groups. Practitioners like Kyran, Peter and others, pay attention to what brings a person to the BDSM communities and groups they attend. The reason is that they try to avoid unsuitable people attending such groups. What constitutes a reason to be unsuitable is clearly determined by a common discourse that emphasises equilibrium and measure above all. Equilibrium is not present when people desire to be beaten up and humiliated beyond a certain point. The word used to describe them would be masochist, or sadist. Kyran, Peter and others try to avoid situations where people, just to be part of a group, will accept to be beaten and humiliated. The reasons for engaging in BDSM could vary among people. If their objective, though, is to be part of a group, the common discourse would reject them as members. If their aim is to reach sexual pleasure or the enjoyment of a sense of general wellbeing, it is acceptable and the aspiring members are considered appropriate to play with.

This discourse on the 'sanity' of the reasons to engage in BDSM play, when explicit, is part of a sense of authority, control and even reliability that some older members of the community feel they are called on to represent. Some younger BDSM practitioners do probably act following the same principle of avoiding people entering self-destructive interactions, but they do not have either the social power or the social role to do it explicitly.

7.3 Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Contemporary Intimacies

In this section, I will discuss the pertinence of the concept of intimacy with regard to BDSM interactions and practices. Despite all the differences among practitioners, in terms of practices preferred, roles, gender stereotypes and sexual orientation, one of the concepts that brings all the practitioners together at once is intimacy. They in fact, usually want to establish a relationship – even if it only lasts an evening – before playing. For example, several submissive men complain about the cold and detached attitude of mistresses, while they were longing for a bit of emotional involvement, for a hint of a mental bond with them. They were actually looking for intimacy.

Throughout sessions, what is looked for is a precise kind of relationship: the acknowledgment of the dominant person from the submissive partner and a relationship that implies control of the situation by the dominant side. Variously called – belonging or mental connection – this kind of relationship – I repeat, not necessarily a long term one – could be defined as intimate.

But what is intimacy? Both the English and the Italian etymology for 'intimate' is twofold: the first meaning is 'inmost', the superlative of interior, and the second is 'to make known to, to put into, to bring into, to announce, to publish'. The root itself is constituted by two Latin words: either *intimus*, which is itself the superlative of *interior*, or *intimatus*, the past participle of *intimare*, that is 'to notify, to command, to summon' (Cortellazzo and Zolli, 1983; Devoto, 1968; Klein, 1971; Nocentini, 2010; Partridge, 1958). Intimacy has the double value of secret and order[89].

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[89] I find the definition of intimacy given by Giddens in his famous book quite limited: "intimacy is above all a matter of emotional communication, with others and with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality" (Giddens, 1992: 130); it seems to me that what is highlighted is the tender, romantic, pleasant and above all politically correct aspect of intimacy, and this is just part of the whole concept.

Hence, intimate is something that belongs to the human being's inner self, something private that is not shown to outsiders, and at the same time represents the action of giving an order with authority. While I will drop the latter meaning – until the stories of Daphne and Ginger – the former is what at best describes BDSM practices as enacted by practitioners.

Intimacy in the end is about access to what is most secret, dear and hidden from others.

As Newmahr (2011) suggests, intimacy is about access; access to the "emotional and physical experiences of others" (Newmahr, 2011: 171). It is not necessarily something beautiful, tender, or pleasurable. She draws on Simmel's work (1908) to develop the concept of intimacy as access. Some of the BDSM practitioners interviewed confirmed this, by saying that intimacy or consent is about touching a part of the other person that he or she does not want to be touched (Interviewee Victor, 2014).

Intimacy is something that differentiates a particular relationship from other ones (Newmahr, 2011). This meaning is particularly useful when discussing intimacy within polyamorous contexts, where the modern definition of intimacy, as something coupled with romantic love and tenderness, simply does not work[90]. Within polyamorous relationships, as the example of Ursula will show, intimacy is constituted by sexual or BDSM practices reserved just for two people – in this sense, the traditional monogamous and 'vanilla', couple resists the deconstruction operated by polyamory.

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[90] In this case, the analysis of Giddens seems to fit when he highlights this disconnection: "the connections between romantic love and intimacy were suppressed, and falling in love remained closely bound up with access", although his notion of access is quite restricted since "access to women whose virtue or reputation was protected until, at least, a union was sanctified by marriage" (Giddens, 1992: 60).

7.3.1 New Forms of Intimacy

The current sociological literature on intimacy stresses the transformations that occurred within contemporary societies. Modern intimacy was a distinctive trait of loving heterosexual and monogamous couples, and thus of marriage, sex, disclosure, romantic love (Hendrick and Hendrick, 1992; Toffanin, 2014)[91]. Since the 18th century and until recently, intimacy has been a sphere in which people produced the meaning of their own private uniqueness; such sphere was confined into the domestic space of the house (Berlant, 1997a).

Some authors call attention to the qualitative difference among relationships. For Newmahr (2011), an intimate relationship is a relationship that is qualitatively different from the others. The postmodern notion of intimacy keeps this notion of difference, although it no longer involves sex and marriage.

> "What is experienced as intimacy is what is understood as somehow *distinguishing the relationship from others.*[...] It lies not necessarily in marriage, disclosure, or sex, but anywhere that people experience each other *differently enough* than other people experience them." (Newmahr, 2011: 172)

In general, intimacy is a sexual script that recently gained cultural centrality (Bertone and Ferrero Camoletto, 2009); this script is oriented towards emotional authenticity (Illouz, 2001) – which involves in turn the awareness of one and other's

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[91] Although even if romantic love is an almost universal category, no conclusive definition has been given of it (Hendrick and Hendrick, 1992; Toffanin, 2014).

emotions – and towards progressive reciprocal disclosure within a relationship (Camoletto, 2014).

Giddens (1992) proposes the pure relationship as part of a generic restructuring of intimacy. A pure relationship is a relationship into which a person enters for the relationship's sake and remains there as long as both parties manage to find satisfaction – in various forms – deriving from it. The description of this pure relationship is particularly apt to capture some features of the BDSM relationships between or among practitioners; the only difference is that Giddens (1992) refers to couples and not groups of two or more individuals.

New forms of intimacy have been developing since the 1970s, and are variously called "post-traditional forms of intimacy" (Leccardi, 2014: 826), "non normative cultures of intimacy" (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004: 153), or the "restructuring of intimacy" (Giddens, 1992). They all convey a sense of distance from the traditional or modern concept of intimacy. These forms of intimacy, recognised and conceptualised for the first time, are, according to numerous scholars, the result of the attempt to reduce private life to the logic of the market (Hochschild, 2003, 2013; Koch and Buchanan, 2013; Leccardi, 2014; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004).

While the legacy of the radical and alternative movements of the 1970s is progressively dissolving, new groups, individuals and social actors are appropriating these new cultures of intimacy[92]:

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[92] Parallels between particular forms of government and the erotic frame are not new; consider for example the work of Lupo (2006), based on the idea of sadomasochism as a political and philosophical concept that is inherently anti-democratic and anti-feminist, and which encourages a sort of Darwin's evolutionary theory applied to society, à la Nietzsche or à la Mussolini. Also Musser (2014) draws a comparison between western colonialism and masochism through the analysis of Fanon's 'Negro' (1952).

"Non-normative cultures of intimacy and care are brought into being, as lifestyles which were once a politicized strategy pursued by those within alternative and feminist communities in the 1970s and 1980s are extending to those who do not think of themselves as activists or radicals."
(Roseneil and Budgeon 2004: 153)

Intimacy seems to have gained a place within the sociology of emotions, since it is described as a "synonymous with the emotional sphere" (Leccardi, 2014: 825).

Intimacy, though, also deals with the materiality and boundaries of the body (Butler, 1990; Newmahr, 2011); even in the more traditional sense, intimacy encompasses, for example through genital penetration, an 'encroachment' into the other's body. Bodily boundaries could be thought also as marking the distinction between pure and impure (Douglas, 1969), sacred and profane (Durkheim, 1912), they are "the limits of the social *per se*" (Butler, 1990: 167)[93]: intimacy means thus to touch what is most sacred and pure.

Intimacy, though, being about access to what is more private and deep, is also about violence and the forced trespass of the same boundaries. Toffanin (2014) researched the links between love and violence within intimate relationships; Newmahr (2011) describes murder as the most intimate act possible. I would say that Downing, in her analysis of the limits of sexual ethics, by dealing with lust murder (2004) combines the two, pushing forward the category of intimacy until its theoretical extreme.

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[93] Butler reads Mary Douglas' boundaries of the body as the limits of what constitute social hegemony: "Her analysis suggests that what constitutes the limit of the body is never merely material, but that the surface, the skin, is systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions; indeed, the boundaries of the body become, within her analysis, the limits of the social *per se*. A poststructuralist appropriation of her view might well understand the boundaries of the body as the limits of the socially *hegemonic*." (Butler, 1990: 167).

"To violate, and to be violated, are intimate experiences. If we cease to reserve the word 'intimate' for situations that are desirable or healthy, we can see, for example, the intimacy of violent crime. [...] The social situation of murder, from this perspective, becomes the most intimate act imaginable." (Newmahr, 2011: 176)

7.3.2 Postmodern Intimacies

Postmodern intimacies show some specific traits that could differentiate them from earlier connotations. In general, what constitutes a conceptualisation of intimacy in terms of the heterosexual, loving, tender and happy couple is rejected. New concepts emerge, and are used alongside the previous conceptions. The definition of intimacy widens as to include more disturbing, broader and also 'negative' conceptualisations.

I argue that the new traits of postmodern and contemporary intimacies are access (Newmahr, 2011), unsafety (Nussbaum, 2010), impersonality (Dean, 2009) and commonality (Bersani, 2008). The conceptualisation of intimacy as access has being already deepened. The other three categorisations constitute an enlargement of the concept.

In her analysis of sexual orientation through the frame of the law, Nussbaum (2010) gives an example of how one of the most intimate zones of the house is the most common place in which to feel unsafe. She refers to the HIV contagion in Africa that happens mostly within the household, usually passing from the husband to the wife due to the high percentage of men visiting prostitutes and contracting the HIV virus. Postmodern intimacy is unsafe. Even in the house, in what should be among the safest places, there is no safety.

Secondly, postmodern intimacy is impersonal (Dean, 2009). In his analysis of unprotected anal sex among gay men, Dean (2009) describes an intimacy that is impersonal because the object that qualifies for intimacy, namely sperm, comes from unidentified donors. The practice of inserting sperm coming from anonymous donors into the anus of a man with a funnel is the quintessence of impersonality (Bersani, 2008; Dean, 2009). It is impersonal because the receiver does not know who the men who gave their sperm are. The intimacy of one's own skin on another's skin that characterise these intercourses as well as the desire for certain emotions, for example the thrill coming from the possibility of contagion, are further characteristics of intimacy that emerge from the work of Dean (2009).

The last characteristic of postmodern intimacy that I would include in the postmodern conception is taken from Bersani's work (2008). Commenting on Dustan's work (1996), Bersani underlines how such intimacy is profoundly communal and impersonal. Dustan (1996) wrote about his personal engagement in the practice of barebacking. It is impersonal because the dark rooms favour contact among people who do not know each other. It is communal because, with regards to the possibility of contracting the HIV virus (among others), what is contracted is actually a virus that can be traced back to the first outbreaks. A person engaging in barebacking is in a sense having sex with all the gay men who died of AIDS along a chain that goes back to the middle 20th century (Bersani, 2008).

The aim of Bersani was to deconstruct the notion of intimacy that necessarily implied a psychological knowledge of the other person (Bersani, 2015). Intimacy was for him impersonal, and this notion is found in Dustan (1996) and later in Dean (2009).

7.3.3 Power and Intimacy

What then is the relationship between power and intimacy? It is so common to frame BDSM in terms of power that it is often forgotten that each person and each human interaction contains an element of power. Almost every scholar dealing with BDSM analyses it in such terms. I agree with Foucault when he says that power as something fluid, that constantly changes its nature, which shifts, that contains in itself the prodromes of resistance – it is everywhere[94]. To underline that BDSM relationships do involve power constitutes a repetition of the obvious. Perhaps it is useful to remind it, since if power is everywhere, it does not exist. Foucault calls this the paradox of power:

> "The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others. Which is to say, of course, that something called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist." (Foucault, 1982: 788)

Feminists and queer scholars and activists have been saying for decades that BDSM is about power, whether they are against BDSM or in favour of it (see chapter 5.2). In fact, BDSM is called also Total Power Exchange.

It seems to me that in BDSM interactions, power is being reformulated as intimacy. The form that power takes within these relationships is one of intimacy, where intimacy means access to shielded and secret parts of oneself. Power does not disappear,

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[94] Although I would say that resistance is itself power just with a different name and that what could be – linguistically at least – opposed to power is impotence, not resistance.

instead it becomes the object of the negotiation among actors engaging in BDSM, polyamory, and the like.

Intimacy occupies specific times and places. It is both a spatial and a relational concept. It implies a contact with the Other and at the same time this contact happens within a circumscribed space; once signified, this space becomes a place. From the participant observations and the interviews with BDSM practitioners, these two main aspects of intimacy emerge clearly: the former relates to how intimacy influences and at the same time is the result of the social interactions with different people with whom one is playing and who witness the session itself. The latter stresses the importance of the spatial side of intimacy: in which places is intimacy enhanced? Which places or spaces make establishing intimacy more difficult? Which favour it? Consider for example the different moods that could influence the success of a public party attended by forty people or a private meeting among half a dozen participants.

This division between relational and spatial aspects of intimacy is made to emphasise some aspects of intimacy, which are tightly bound together in the experiences and narratives of the BDSM practitioners. This distinction is clearly pedagogical and is constituted by two ideal types. I will now present and analyse some examples stressing either the relational or the spatial notion of intimacy and briefly discuss them.

7.3.4 Proximity and Public Spaces: the Importance of Spatiality in BDSM

Intimacy pertains to what is internal, close and near. This is made clear by Oliver. That intimacy concerns the characterisation of spaces is apparent in analysing his

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interview, since he stresses terms related to spatiality or positions in space; consider the terms 'inside', 'around', 'enter', 'bubble', 'look into', 'share' and 'square metres' (in bold in the interview excerpt). Internal and external spaces are fused together, and communicate with each other through eye contact and smiles.

Intimacy, for him, is closely linked to sex, and is both the product of and the precondition necessary to engage in BDSM practices. To share intimacy with others is a means through which he establishes and reinforces close relationships with others; "like a brother or a sister" (Interviewee Oliver, 2013) is how he considers people who he has played with. For Oliver, the most intimate form of BDSM is the one which is related to sex, or in general the erotic sphere:

Laura: "Is BDSM about sex, or not?"

Oliver: "Sex is not necessarily [pause] involved in BDSM [pause] well, I mean, also [pause] not only at home, but also [pause] in the other settings we attend [...]. And, and and and and – and it doesn't always necessarily become sex. Well, it becomes sex when **inside** of us some vibrations [pause] are created, when I feel at ease [pause] with who's **around** me. And then I **enter** my soap **bubble** where no-one **around** bothers me, or makes me uncomfortable. And um [pause] **around** there is a sort of hush, I don't know how to say it. Um and at the same time, on the other side, this can originate in an amusing way, just because you are in good company, right? That is the form of **intimacy** that could originate between two couples that, well in the end it doesn't have to be about swinging right? Each of us [males] with his female partner, but also just to **look into** each other's eyes and smile as if to say 'I'm happy to be here',

right? 'happy to **share** these two **square metres** with you'." (Interviewee Oliver, 2013)

Since for Oliver BDSM is closely linked to sex and he identifies as heterosexual, he prefers not to play with other men. I asked him if he engaged in BDSM play with men also and what differences he saw between playing with men and women. His answer was clearly embarrassed and expressing discomfort.

"I played with men without physical contact with them, that is, if I'd given him a kiss on the cheek it's [enough] [...] um, not with men, but because [pause] if there's to be a man, it must be very [pause] intimate for me, very intimate. I must have a strong relationship with him, and then yes. If not, it disturbs me. I don't know how to say it [...] I have difficulties, maybe yes, I am affectionate in the sense that perhaps to put them [male transvestites] at ease [and] to put myself at ease [...] with them [...] and then maybe I don't act as detached or fearful, because, fuck! You are not sick! It's clear that respect is valid for both of us, just respect, if there's respect it's enough. That's great. Um [long pause] no, I prefer the female contact." (Interviewee Oliver, 2013)

Space for Oliver is very important: it has to be shared with people, preferably female, with whom he is in confidence, wh he trusts, who he considers as brothers and sisters. His sexual orientation – heterosexual – parallels his play preferences: he prefers contact with women. Moreover, he confuses "male transvestites" – that is, biological

males dressed as females – with homosexual males. His intimate sphere is clearly reserved for cisgender heterosexual women, either BDSM players or not.

Sometimes spaces could influence the very possibility of playing. Victor needs particular spaces in order to engage in a BDSM session. In this case, this necessity is entirely psychological, since Victor needs his play partner to be in a certain space in order to play with her.

He explicitly made references to the enclosed space of the bathroom, when referring to intimacy. I was asking him about his first experiences with BDSM and he acknowledged that in order to put his partner "in an intimate situation" he decided to set their session into a private space, the most intimate place of the house, the bathroom. This room is for him the most intimate in the house because one can enter and shut the door, is usually alone, in complete peace and quiet. "Maybe you share the apartment, so the only intimate place you have is the bathroom, maybe you don't think about it or don't know it, but is a place where you can close the door and feel comfortable and create a context in which you are okay" (Interviewee Victor, 2013). The context of Victor's and his partner's session together and the activities they were involved in that occasion were so private, personal and "intimate" for Victor that he explicitly asked me not to write about them in detail.

What comes from the inside of a person could be intimate just as a place is; it could be intimate just for the fact that it comes from the inside. This is the case of Algernon, a shy young man in his thirties, who is fond of pissing. Despite only having a few experiences with BDSM, Algernon is clearly fond of 'pissing'. Pissing describes all the activities that involve the other's or one's own urine, from being wet by it to drinking it,

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or simply observing the other urinating. For him, what is fascinating about pissing is that involves a relation with something that comes from inside of the person he loves. He discovered his love of pissing by chance, with a partner he had, and since that moment he has been seeking for other experiences with new partners. He connects the intimacy of this practice to the fact that urine comes from the inside of a person; it is something private shared as a "special love gift" (Interviewee Algernon, 2013).

Intimacy is a quality of the act of being wet by or drinking urine. Since this act is intimate, it cannot be bought or sold. This is why he prefers to have love and play partners rather than asking a prostitute or a prodomme – respectively – to fulfil his desires. This refusal recalls the interpretations of intimacy as something that escapes the logic of the market (Hochschild, 2003, 2013; Koch and Buchanan, 2013; Leccardi, 2014; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004).

The material quality of the substance involved in the practice itself – urine – is also intimate. Pissing is an intimate practice since the substance involved in it is intimate: coming from the inside of a person, it acts as a guarantee of love and authenticity, and of a strong relationship for him. In fact, Algernon does not want to find casual partners to engage in pissing – or sex – with: he wants to have a lover, a woman with whom he is in love with. He will accept only her urine and only once they have established a close enough bond. For him to call on a prodomme would resemble the difference between having sex with a prostitute and with the woman he loves.

Algernon: "About other wo[men], well, there's the mistress, the one that yes, maybe, well that you can also meet and do it, for a fee, she asks you for money, you know? So it's not...well, it doesn't inspire me to do this

in that way, it should be an intimate thing, rec[iprocal], that is, like...
making love, yes, or kissing. That is, for me, it's an intimate thing, ok?"

Laura: "Yes, so you don't want to pay someone to play"

Algernon: "This goes beyond sex, yes, it's a thing more, well, I don't
know how to explain myself..." (Interviewee Algernon, 2013)

While for Algernon intimate contacts are best when they involve a love partner,
for Helen this is not the case. Young and lively, she describes intimacy as linked with
BDSM: despite having a boyfriend with whom she also engages in these practices, she
plays with others in the scene. In particular, she describes the needle play she engages in
with another practitioner as a form of "alternative penetration" (Interviewee Helen,
2013). In this case alternative refers to something different from the genital penetration
of a female by a male.

The penetration, a disruption of the space occupied by the skin, is a profoundly
intimate act. She describes her experience with this older man as something intense,
intriguing and fascinating, that has nothing to do with sex. The intimate moments in
which she engages in BDSM are the ones in which her bodily boundaries – the skin
tissue – are literally trespassed by the needle tip. The act of threading a needle indicates
the access to something intimate that she grants to her partner.

7.3.5 Relational and Spatial Aspects of Intimacy

The distinction between relational and spatial aspects of intimacy is mostly
theoretical, as stated in the previous chapters. In the cases we shall see in this section,
this is clearly evident, since I will deal with practitioners who mean and embody

intimacy in both senses. For them, intimacy as the product of and requiring particular spaces as well as intimacy made possible only with some particular relationships are co-present aspects of their narratives and experiences with BDSM.

Invisibility and proximity are what Hector looks for. He enjoys the invisibility he reaches when his sessions are a success, when they turn out well. Intimacy is at the same time for him proximity to the woman he is playing with and invisibility, that is, the sensation that his partner is gently and quietly performing everyday gestures and actions, like washing the dishes, putting on her make up in front of a mirror, preparing coffee, brushing her teeth, just carrying on with her daily life. In the example of Hector, the spatial dimension of intimacy is a useful concept both to describe his practice and the ways in which it turns out as a satisfying session.

Hector is heterosexual and prefers to play with women. Since it is an intimate space the one he shares with play partners, he avoids playing with men. Playing with a man for him is the same of admitting that he is homosexual – which he is not.

He establishes such close a connection with the person with whom he plays, that he can distinguish and remember each and every one of the women he has played with among the several dozens of them. For him, intimacy is achieved when proximity and invisibility are established at the highest possible level with his play partner.

Tania indicates that her more intimate friends or lovers are those who are nearer to her. To be near Tania means to occupy a space in her close sphere that is central and which grants you her love, cares and attention. She thinks that both BDSM and sex – not intended only as penetrative and between a man and a woman – are two alternative and different ways to communicate intimacy with people. BDSM is a way to communicate intimacy neither better nor more specific than others, simply different. For her it is like

having sex, or spending time together in other ways. She applies the same, and yet differentiated, concept of intimacy to several categories of people: friends, relatives, lovers, play partners, and so on. In her close sphere she includes only people for whom she is able to care, to whom she is able to dedicate quality time and perhaps money. Thus, the closer the proximity, the higher the intimacy with that person. Tania's limited amount of time, care, love etc are granted to the few she really cares for.

She lucidly visualises her intimate relationships as spatially categorised with respect to herself:

"Having never made any hierarchical distinctions among friendship, romantic or sexual relationships, and having just a very **small** group of people with whom I interact, for me it's like I'm **in the middle of a circle** of people with whom I interact, but there's not one who's more important than the other. Um, and at this time [...] in my personal sphere some people are **very close** to me, they're like my family, with whom I have platonic relationships but emotionally very intense, and people with whom I have more sentimental relationships, like [male name] there, like [female name] [pause] um, with whom this relationship evolves in a very different way, but at the level of emotional importance to me they are equivalent, in the sense, that they're **there**: there's no primary partner, secondary partner, satellite partners, all that crap. Ahem [pause] and for me this makes a lot of sense as a way to handle myself, since I don't want to start a family, I'm not interested in getting married, or anything like that, for me it's far more natural to have such relationships..." (Interviewee Tania, 2014)

Some words, in bold in the excerpt, explicitly highlight the spatial dimension of intimacy present within her narrative. She conceptualises different kinds of relationships – the one with a lover, the one with a friend, and so on – as having the same spatial distance from her, like she was the point of the compass hammered into the sheet, and those people who are inside the traced line receive her attentions.

For Red the emotional sphere is constituted by his house. Those sharing it with him are part of his family. He conceives intimacy as both a spatial and bodily feature: sharing the space where he lives means to share his own life and intimacy. Although he keeps himself rather reserved and in general prefers to speak about the changes in the community he has witnessed, rather than about his personal pathway toward BDSM, he describes intimacy in physical and bodily terms with some details of his own everyday life. In the following excerpt, taken from Red's interview, it is evident how he employs litotes to speak about the differences between playing BDSM in public and in private houses. Note that even in the choice of this expressive instrument he partially conceals his thoughts behind a rhetorical figure of speech. In fact, he explains what could be an intimate situation for him by describing one that is not intimate.

The use of words such as 'physical', 'dialogue', 'rhythm', 'staring', 'jostling', and 'place' denotes an attention towards the physical and spatial dimension of BDSM and intimacy:

"Clearly in private [BDSM] is something that takes **place** in a somewhat different way, as you saw. You saw that there there's a lot more intimacy but not only **physical**, quite mental, well, a more relaxed **dialogue** and **rhythm**, you know that you'll not have anyone **staring** at

you, or [laughs] **jostling** you to take your **place**…" (Interviewee Red, 2014)

It follows that a non intimate session or situation would be characterised by physical intimacy and closeness, calm and quiet dialogues slowly engaged in, others' eyes looking in other directions and finally a lot of space available for everyone.

The polyamorous relationships Red has are marked by the physical and spatial sharing of the housing space: a room for every one of the three members of the family, a bed big enough to let them sleep together. Red takes a pride in affirming this, as the fact that they share the most intimate space – the bed – is a sign of the existence and functionality of their polyamorous relationship. He compares his experience with that of the others who engage in polyamorous relationships: none of them had either the possibility or the initiative to place a polyamorous relationship on such an intimate level, to the point of sharing their own house and living together.

To share one's own house is not for everyone. Sybil, in fact, prefers to live alone. Her private space is very important for her. She is a dominant woman in her fifties, so versatile, skilled and experienced that for her BDSM is like eating and breathing: even the private space of her house includes objects from her BDSM life, as the next example will show.

During our interview that took place in her kitchen, she told me an anecdote about her neighbour who, while searching for some vegetables in the fridge – Sybil was in the other room – discovered the dildo she kept in the fridge. Sybil usually kept it there to prevent it from spoiling. The laughs of Sybil resonated in the entire kitchen while telling this story, and mine did too.

Her private space is filled with objects that relate to BDSM, her passion. At some point during the interview, I touched a solid object with my foot, under the table; to know what it was and to check for any damage, I lifted the kitchen cloth and discovered a metal cage. I then asked Sybil who was laughing, whether it was meant for her dog, and she nodded: she uses it for her slaves, to keep them quiet.

"In fact, the other day my sister came [...] Well, she knows everything [about her doing BDSM], and at some point I was trying to – because my nephew was also going to come, so I tried to hide all [the objects linked to BDSM], no? Oh well, the cage is impossible [to hide] [...] My nephew went inside of it, he wanted to stay inside [laughs] at some point my sister opened the fridge [laughs] and said 'and this?' I forgot the dildo in the fridge! [laughs] I told her 'it stays fresh'..." (Interviewee Sybil, 2014)

Her sister, who knows about her engaging in BDSM, is nevertheless startled both by the dildo in the fridge, like the woman living next door is, and the cage under the table. Sybil experiences intimacy with her play partners both as a spatial and a relational category: both aspects are central in understanding her narrative and experiences about BDSM. Different places – her home *versus* the public space of the club – mean different practices. In private she can dare more, she can play harder and more intimate sessions, like the ones that involve a strap-on, and engage in practices that require specialized equipment as well, like a cloth or a shower for 'pissing'. In private she can be "more intimate" (Interviewee Sybil, 2014).

As regards the relational aspects, she tells me that her body, herself, is intimate for her, and thus she does not allow anyone to touch her or see her naked in certain contexts. For example, her urine is private, is something she owns, and is reserved for those people who deserve it. It is a thing so private, that even though she will engage in pissing with almost any of her partners who ask for it, the majority of them are kept blindfolded, and so cannot see her genitals. Just a few of them can both experience contact with her urine and see her naked body:

Sybil: "For me pissing is an intimate thing, in fact when they ask me 'do you do pissing?' I say 'if I blindfold you, yes', but you're blindfolded, and have to stay away from my pussy, that if you approach you get a punch, because for me [pause] my, my person is intimate, so it is for someone, not for..."

Laura: "Yes, it's not public"

Sybil: "It's not public, you understand? Well, my play goes on, and can also be for everyone; my person, that is, what's mine, so even the simple pee, is mine and so is for [pause] is for, is for those who deserve it."
(Interviewee Sybil, 2014)

For Daphne BDSM occupies a special place: it is almost central in her everyday life. She, too, conceives intimacy as both a spatial and a relational category. She loves rope bondage. She describes as intimate being wrapped up by ropes, suspended and lifted up, kept in a cocoon like a silkworm. She could be tied anywhere, but not by anyone, and she feels detached from the people and the environment surrounding her.

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The place in which she is, loses its importance, as well as the eventual observers occupying that space.

As for the relational part of intimacy, it is represented for her by mental control: the mental control exercised on her is something intimate, an exclusive and romantic relationship. A public that observes her is not necessary in this case. Mental control or being tied up is enough.

> "Personally I don't need the audience, I don't care about it. Doing it with a friend 'let's play! tie me up!', well, that makes no sense for me. While there are people who still love the situation and, and still enjoy the whip and enjoy being exposed or maybe being publicly exposed [...] for me it's not so, for me it's mind control, is almost inevitably something intimate and personal. Because your mind, well, it's you who have complete control over me, the public is not needed, is doesn't help, it makes no sense."
> (Interviewee Daphne, 2013)

She looks explicitly for a kind of relationship in which she can let go of control and enjoy abandonment, by relaxing and letting all her thoughts go. She likes receiving attention and all the gestures which indicates that she is completely occupying completely the attention of the rigger while they are playing.

During a bondage session, Daphne is so happy to be tied up by a person she trusts that she gives too little resistance to the ropes; she does not abandon herself completely, but instead complies with the gestures of the rigger:

Laura: "How did you feel being suspended [by ropes]? Before, during and after, I mean"

Daphne: "Before, nervous [...] Nervous, yes, who knows how it will go, who knows... and anyway if he's the master and I like him and he is doing – is going to suspend me there's a kind of reverence, so 'will he do the right things?' I have a bit of... and in fact at the beginning he said 'you're too cooperative!' because he was like pulling the rope and I was moving 'don't move! Just be passive!' etc [laughs] 'but I want to help you!' [laughs] so I was a bit 'oh, my God, now...', and then during [the session I was] in heaven because he was dealing with me, he was around me, he made me things and after the first rope bondage session in [name of place] I had to take a ten minute break and a glass of water, but I was lying suspended for a good quarter of an hour. Not this time, I was fine, just that it was too short! [laughs] more [name of the rigger]! Give me more [name of the rigger]! (Interviewee Daphne, 2013)

For Daphne, the enjoyment and pleasurableness of BDSM are clearly linked with the particular person who ties her up. Even if the session was physically demanding, she enjoyed it more than the other she names, just because of the presence of this particular rigger. Thus, the relational component of BDSM is important as well as the spatial one.

Before dealing with relational aspects of intimacy, I would like to point out a particularity: Daphne, in fact, seems to embody the etymology of intimacy linked to giving orders – as explained before: for her, in fact, the pleasure of intimacy is caused by her taking orders, being told to do something, not just by accessing or sharing something internal and private.

Now I will present the BDSM practitioners who enact and conceptualise their intimacy in relational terms, rather than spatial; I will give account of their experiences and attitudes and briefly discuss them.

7.3.6 Relational Aspects of Intimacy: the Importance of Communication and Bonding

Quincy is keen on ropes. He is a rigger. He was encouraged and invited by his girlfriend to attend their first rope bondage workshop together; even if he thought that there was "something sexual" (Interviewee Quincy, 2013) in using ropes, and that this aspect was unnatural, he nevertheless started attending workshops and became quite literally in love with ropes. What fascinates Quincy is that ropes create a particular and tight bond with the person who he ties up. It is a way to better get to know the person.

Since rope bondage is so intimate, how could one perform it in public?, he asks me rhetorically. Playing in public is like "checking who has the longest [penis]" with a group of men (Interviewee Quincy, 2013). For such a public display of intimacy is unconceivable for him, like showing his genitals at a party.

He does not understand how can others enjoy being beaten up in public. He has never been curious about play parties, but since his interest in ropes started, he has attended a few and realized that BDSM parties are for him sources of embarrassment and boredom. He prefers workshops, which he has often attended, and which constituted the occasion for our meeting. At a workshop people go to learn new techniques, and not to show off.

I met him at one of the many bondage workshops that had started flourishing in Milan at that time. There was nothing sexual at all either in his attitude with play

partners or in his clothes, which have to be comfortable and practical to be able to move easily without the constraint of tight clothing. Half a dozen couples were playing at a respectful distance from one another. He moved with attention from one couple to another, checking their bindings and pressure points. Every now and then Quincy commented or corrected a step of the binding.

He offered me one of the two living examples of BDSM play between men. I was sitting in silence observing the couples that were practising new or old bindings together and was startled when I realised that two men were isolating themselves in order to tie one another up. I immediately realised that Quincy was just 'teaching' Victor how to tie limbs safely and reduce the risks of altering blood flow. Victor, while being tied up, was motionless and staring upwards, his gaze turning downwards only to observe in detail the bindings of his ankle. Quincy was professionally moving around and handling his ankle, touching his body just as much as was strictly necessary. Their bodies, both of them, were telling a story about their heterosexuality and their teacher-student relationship.

> *Then Victor's shoulders are tied by Quincy. It's the first time I see one man tying another. It's interesting how this happens in a 'school' and 'training' context: he's tying him because he's teaching him how to do it. The look of Victor is fixed to the ground, or at half-height. No emotion show on his face. Nothing erotic, no enthusiasm, no sensuality in this technical lesson. This strikes me, because any sexual or erotic element which could refer to an interest of the two in relation with what they're doing beyond the 'training', is absent. No doubt that they are not homosexual, or if they are – which I do not think – nothing emotional shines through.*

For Quincy, the relationship that is created through rope bondage is so intimate that he prefers, in accordance with his sexual orientation that he states clearly as heterosexual, to play only with women. More, with 'feminine' women. It is not entirely clear to me what he meant by 'feminine', but I suspect that he meant women with long hair, big breasts, with make-up and painted nails. Quincy is not interested in playing with 'masculine women'. In this case, the distinction between masculinity and femininity in a woman is not an assessment of female femininity but rather a way to express Quincy's desire for the involvement, either emotional, or slightly sexual, of the play partner. It is a way for him to stress the importance he places on playing with a person who could desire him – emotionally, sexually – and who, in turn, could be desired by him. This desire to play with 'feminine' women is, in the end, a desire of reciprocal intimacy mediated by emotional or sexual interest and/or involvement.

Despite his rigid posture and his austere and severe gestures – or perhaps because even of them – Ulrich explains in his even and controlled voice that for him intimacy is a form of communication and communion – as if it was a mystical union with some god or goddess – that is usually produced during the session, especially when he is in love or has a close connection with the person he is playing with.

He approaches BDSM at the same time as a great passion, a part of him that is fundamental and as something which necessitates a cold weighting of pros and cons in order to estimate the risks of the activity in which he is going to engage. The complexity of his approach reflects the high number of years he has been practicing BDSM. The coldness of the surface of his attitude is misleading, since once he has decided, nothing

can stop him in accepting all the consequences of his decision and any fallout from the sessions.

His progression towards complete self-realisation, resulting from a clear self-awareness acquired early in his life about his 'true nature' as a slave, is not necessarily directed toward harder and harder practices. In fact, it could be that his awareness is developing and deepening while in the meantime he is engaging in the same old practices. What an outsider's eye cannot see is that his intentions are changing internally. His "internal ascetism" and the meaning of what he does now are profoundly different from five years ago (Interviewee Ulrich, 2014). While his awareness is progressing, his gestures become more simple and purified.

Usually, he prefers to engage in 24/7 relationships, that is, to be coupled with a mistress who is also his partner in love and life. This has happened twice in his life so far. My inexperienced attempts to understand how he can reconcile a loving relationship – which is supposed to be rooted in equality in economic, decisional and other terms – with a 24/7 are swept away by his simple answer. There is a great emphasis, in fact, on how a couple should be based on equality in economic, decisional and other terms.

> "For both [he and his mistress-girlfriend] of us [BDSM] was not a game, it was a way of life, a lifestyle, so for 24 hours a day, 7 days out of 7, I was her boyfriend but also her slave. What is a relationship? A couple relationship [coughs] is generally a relationship of strong intimacy [pause] um, between two people [with emphasis] who share a lot of intimacy and have a projection of um, about the future, that can see into the future a continuation together, based on certain beliefs, certain ways of being, certain disagreements and so on." (Interviewee Ulrich, 2014)

What about a relationship slave-mistress which continues all day long? How can these two aspects, of equality and submission, be present? The description he gives of a couple could not be more straight-forward or more romantic. His intention was clearly to make me understand that a couple is a couple even if it engages in BDSM, since it is founded on the existence of future projects together, based on the sharing of some fundamental values. His way of being and seeing things was the same as any heterosexual loving couple not engaging in BDSM. Once I learned my lesson, I asked for further particulars in order to understand how a certain level of tension and distance resulting from a 24/7 relationship could be maintained in their everyday life and interactions.

"If I'm with her on the couch and we're seeing a movie, and there is a contrast in some way – and she allowed me to be her partner, I always have to remember that she is my mistress. I always have to remember that she has the potential to hit me, control me, humiliate me, I always have to remind myself that she has submitted me in the past, humiliated, um [pause] also beaten, if necessary, etc. Then, in that moment I've absorbed the past, I know what the future can be, and then, when I address her, I have a thought towards her, I know this thing and [...] I always have to have that level of attention beyond that of a traditional relationship which lacks this." (Interviewee Ulrich, 2014)

Ulrich's answer is clear: the key is awareness and self-awareness. Always remember who you are (see Fig. 3, in which Ulrich stands for the ideal type of the slave

as his identity) and who are you dealing with, as well as the nature of the existing relationship.

Ginger represents the last example of intimacy intended in relational terms within a BDSM frame. Rope bondage constitutes for her a particular intimate practice, since she and Lance have been doing bondage from the beginning of their story as a couple. Most of all, she likes the bodily sensation of being tied up: she enjoys the strange and odd positions into which she is forced while tied up, being constricted by ropes, "pulled, made small, elongated" (Interviewee Ginger, 2013).

At the same time, intimacy for her is a by-product of the play, something that arises after having played more than once with a person with whom she feels a certain feeling. That someone needs not to be necessarily her partner.

She embodies a certain relativity of intimacy, since she acknowledges that what is intimate for her could not be intimate for others. She engages in BDSM sessions and has sex both with her partner and other people, but she maintains different degrees of intimacy by discriminating between the practices done with each person. Some practices, this could be anal sex or a particular BDSM one, are done exclusively with Lance.

> "Because there are practices that I feel as more intimate, and talking to other people they tell me the same thing, about other practices that on the contrary I'd maybe do [pause] with anyone. That is, not with anyone, but with other people. That is, once a girl told me that she sees for example the needles as a very intimate thing, so in public [parties] she's not able to do them." (Interviewee Ginger, 2013)

Barriers are decided together with Lance, her play partner and boyfriend: they agree on with whom they can play either together or separately, for how many times at most in order to minimise the possibility of falling in love with them, and ultimately which practices and plays are reserved just for the two of them. For example, they both agreed not to engage in particular mental domination plays with other people, and that they have to communicate each other about sexual encounters and BDSM sessions with others.

Among their negotiations, the one concerning the opening of the couple seems to be the most recent one. They started their relationship as a monogamous couple practising BDSM, and now are taking their first steps into the polyamorous community, by attending events and talking with those attending them. Since their relationship has been opened, they both engage in sexual and in BDSM activities with other partners.

Intimacy is something conquered progressively, a reciprocal concession that could increasingly grow between play partners. Ginger gives an example about the different types of collars and the relationships implied accordingly as intimacy increases between dominant and submissive. This example also offers the opportunity to explore the second etymology of intimacy, which derives from *intimare*, to give orders, as was the case for Daphne.

> "At the beginning, the first collar is the chain with the carabiner, so anyone could open it [pause] so you're a little, you have your role but [pause] well, if a guy comes and dominates you, is a bit as if anyone could do it. Then there's the [pause] padlock with the key [pause] and so this is another level. Anyway [pause] you do a number of things, which probably make [pause] the person who's dominating you [pause] satisfied with

what you're doing, because [your dom] is going to make you grow, as I was saying [...] and after that there's [pause] I don't remember if there are other symbols in between, until in the end you get to the leather [collar], and that's why I'm saying that this kind of play is not to be done with everyone, because for me there are steps that must be overcome and you shouldn't do this with anyone, because it's still a kind of intimacy that you only have with a few people, could be one, or two [...]" (Interviewee Ginger, 2013)

The leather collar, the most luxurious item closed by a padlock with a key, stands for the uniqueness and closeness of the relationship between the submissive and his or her dominant. The history of the collar acquires almost the meaning of a parable, or a Latin *exemplum,* a short story that conveys a moral and at the same time teaches the submissive or submissive-to-be practitioner what is considered appropriate and proper for his or her role. In this case, the higher the status, the more difficult to open the collar and the fewer the number of people that could open it.

Maud dominates but does not like collars or other accessories to adorn her submissives. For Maud too, intimacy is a relational quality depending on the interaction with a particular person. What she loves is to establish, to create and to construct a relationship of intimacy – even if with a casual play partner – where there is none, both at public play parties and in other frames. She likes concentrating her energies on a single person at a time, on the very session they are engaged in. Typically, she is a dominant and enjoys light plays, such as foot massage or the mild domination of submissive males.

She came into contact with the BDSM scene, although she is quite external to it, since her contacts are limited in number, through the foot fetish scene. She has been acquainted with some of the former members of this scene, and later met the most popular and active people in that community. That was the time at which, in Maud's opinion, the foot fetish scene in Italy was quite developed, organised around a network of people and some periodical events. Through these acquaintances, she also came into contact with some members of the BDSM scene and started also attending that series of events.

Notwithstanding the fact that she enjoys light sessions, she has been lauded several times by the males she played with for her physical participation in some foot massage sessions. She was present, and pandered so well to the movements of the hands of the males massaging her foot, that the submissive males could not help noticing it and complimenting her for this reason. Maud explains to me what for her constitutes the difference between a public and a private BDSM session.

> Laura: "And so you play both at private [at friend's home] and public parties?"
>
> Maud: "Yes"
>
> Laura: "Are there differences?"
>
> Maud: "Yes. Yes, yes. […] first, in private you can perform some practices that at [public] parties you'd never do"
>
> Laura: "Like what?"
>
> Maud: "Um, well, like [pause] footjobs. I mean, I wouldn't do that to a party, but in private it happens, or anal practices which at parties usually – then, um, some people, no not footjobs, however usually anal practices

are accepted…because maybe they're not thought as real sexual practices. Or [pause] but yes, these things"

Laura: "And apart from this what changes?"

Maud: "The atmosphere"

Laura: "Like it's more intimate?"

Maud: "Yes, there's more intimacy, surely there's more intimacy, for sure there's more intimacy in a private than a public party. Listen, one of the things I like most is to create intimacy in a party where there are many people, that [pause] well, it all depends on [inaudible] it all depends on which places I play in. And of course, I must say, on the experience of the people who are playing in that moment, because of course now I'm likely to lead sessions in a different way than when I started, am I not?" (Interviewee Maud, 2013)

The different mood between private and public parties allows people to engage in more intimate practices, like anal sex or footjobs. She perceives the creation of intimacy as one of the central features of BDSM sessions.

In the next section, I will discuss how different levels of intimacy are intertwined with polyamorous practices. To be in a triangle or in a more populated polyamorous arrangement means to share one's own body, time and space with others. These others are often involved in such relationships to varying degrees. It follows that their different statuses are somewhat reflected in the different level of intimacy with the play or love partner. In this regard, it has to be noted that the term 'polyamory' is employed by BDSM practitioners to indicate the existence both of multiple BDSM play partners and/or multiple lovers.

7.3.7 Variations of Intimacy

For Ursula, a young woman in her twenties, intimacy is a matter of relationships. Like Ginger, with whom she is friends, intimacy is a threshold that varies accordingly to the person she is having a BDSM or sexual relationship with at the time. Ursula has an older boyfriend, in his forties, and since the beginning of their relationship they have been practising BDSM together, both at home and at parties. However, they both enjoy the company of other BDSM play partners or couples as well as sexual partners. They established limits to avoid falling in love with others. Despite this fact, she does not define their relationship as an open couple.

For her the idea of the open couple is linked to a deep emotional involvement that goes beyond merely having sex with or engaging in BDSM practices with others. Thus, establishing limits to avoid falling in love with them is a way to keep the couple 'closed'.

She described herself as jealous; both she and her partner can have separate sexual partners with whom, though, some practices must be avoided in order to safeguard the couple. For example she must avoid fellatio with other men and he must avoid vaginal sex with other women. The action of establishing different intimacy levels with different people is employed to give their relationship a primacy status compared to the others, which appear as peripheral. The distinction between primary and non primary relationships is quite a common feature in the polyamorous community[95].

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[95] This hierarchical distinction among polyamorous relationships is reported in what is considered one of the most fundamental texts of the movement, *The Ethical Slut* (Easton and Hardy, 1997), a famous self-help manual on the topic. The reason for this distinction might be linked to the fact that a huge part of the polyamorous discourse is an answer to the crisis that the monogamous couple has been facing since the second half of the 20th century, after the sexual revolution. One of the proposed answers has been to open up a closed couple to let in some fresh air. It follows that, although opened, the 'old' couple remains in the discourse, characterised by being named 'primary'. The subsequent relationships resulted from this opening of the primary one have been termed 'secondary', 'satellite', etc.

Laura: "Would you describe your situation as that of an open couple or not?"

Ursula: "No, it's not open. I am so jealous! [laughs]"

Laura: "But he also plays with other people, doesn't he?"

Ursula: "[...] Yes, we play often with other couples, so yes, we play with other people."

Laura: "But is not an open relationship"

Ursula: "No, no"

Laura: "Then somehow there is a discrimination between…"

Ursula: "[interrupting] Yes, for example he is bothered if I kiss other people, or if a man comes in my mouth. Indeed, he [...] wouldn't tolerate a parallel [love] story, either with a man or a woman. But he says: 'I'm straight, but I know you're bisexual, then do what you want with the girls, of course. But with men…" [pause] [...] Well, to be honest, having a male partner I don't look other men, in the sense that [pause] I'm already ok, I don't look for them. While with the girls I feel more relaxed […]. And then it's completely a different thing, so it's not, if it's an adventure, a flirt, and not a true [love] story, then it's not polyamory, it's not a betrayal [...] and indeed he encourages me 'go! I know you like it! Well, go!' Well, he's nice, isn't he? That is, if he too was bisexual I would say to him 'look I'm not a man, I can't give you what a man can give you, so go in peace' [and have sex with him]"

Laura: "Nonetheless you established some limits, as you said […]"

Ursula: "[making a list of what is not allowed] kisses and that a man comes in my mouth; if I want to have sex with another person he says to

me: 'tell me [if you are going to do it], because in the end we're engaged, that is, let me know'. And yes, preferably not with other men, while with women I have freedom, at least [pause] 'tell me who you like at this time' [pause]

[...]

Laura: "You told me that your partner doesn't like to mix up sex and BDSM"

Ursula: "In the sense that he tells me 'for me a blowjob is also a form of domination, so I could consider it [as BDSM], but sex, I'm doing it just with you, because with another woman I don't, well, anal sex maybe, anal, but not vaginal sex'. In my presence at the most he has received oral sex, but I saw he was interested only in that. To me it's better, I mean, that's fine, I feel calmer because it's a guarantee of exclusivity in a certain sense, that is, he has vaginal sex only with me. It's a great satisfaction, anyway"

Laura: "[laughing] Now you're going to be beaten up!" (Interviewee Ursula, 2013)

One of the reasons that in the eyes of both Ursula and her partner justifies the opening of the couple at least on her behalf, is that she is bisexual. Since he 'could not give her what she wants' (what this could be is not made explicit), they agreed that she could look for that in other places. As a result, her partner as well can look around and engage in BDSM or sexual practices with other women.

Nevertheless, Ursula's interview reveals some difficulties in managing the jealousy that could arise from sharing her partner with other women. In particular, she

told me about a BDSM play party in which she felt quite ignored by her fiancé, who was busy playing with another girl. The moment in which she realized that his hand was "inside her pussy" (Interviewee Ursula, 2013) she went crazy and raged, took his hand with force and bit it.

Apart from this episode, she acknowledges the importance of communication and negotiation in order to manage in the safest way possible these kinds of events that could turn out to be quite unpleasant for their life as a couple. The primacy of the monogamous couple over the polyamorous encounters and the primacy of vaginal sex – the thing he must do only with her – over other forms of sexual encounters are reaffirmed clearly in this interview with Ursula. In this sense, to engage in polyamorous relationships has the effect of reaffirming the primacy of both the monogamous couple and the sacred nature of vaginal sex. Rubin's charmed circle of sexualities is still valid and useful (1984)[96].

The deepest level of intimacy is what she reserves for her play and sexual partner.

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[96] The charmed circle is a graphic representation of the hierarchies that in the opinion of Rubin were imposed on different sexualities during the 1980s. In particular, some sexual relationships were acceptable by the society, others not. For example, among the sexual relationships not accepted or stigmatised there were: homosexual, casual, cross-generational and SM sexual encounters. On the other hand, those accepted were heterosexual, within a marriage, procreative, engaged in at home, etc.

8. In Guise of a Conclusion

The study of the BDSM scene allows light to be shed on a social phenomenon largely ignored in this country. BDSM functions as a kind of litmus test highlighting the changes in sexual and social attitudes in society at large. This area of research is highly neglected, and no previous empirical works exist on this topic in Italian academia. Hence, the aim of this research is primarily to provide an image of the Italian scene. How the scene developed through time? What are its characteristics? What are the stories of the practitioners involved? These are only some of the questions I tried to answer to in this thesis.

My second aim concerns the macro level of analysis and relates to the framing of such descriptive analysis in the larger sexual and social context of western societies. How BDSM does relate to 1960s' sexual revolution? What are its links with feminism? One of the results of the research has been to frame these accounts of BDSM within the broader context of postmodern intimacies. BDSM is one among many ways of expressing and acting intimacy.

The sociological ethnographic account of the BDSM scene in Milan, through over one year of participant observations and interviews, provides the empirical data on which this thesis is based. Semi-structured interviews have been designed to allow the participants to express their own viewpoints. The identification of some core topics has provided the draft for the interviews (cf. chapter 1).

BDSM practices were codified in the contemporary form in the years following the sexual revolution in western countries, and BDSM practices have a close link with that event. Despite criticisms about the reach, the duration and impact of changes of the

sexual revolution, it is difficult to wipe out and erase its existence. It was this set of changes and claims, at least in the United States and some European countries, which gave BDSM practices formalisation and systematisation. Along with other movements, like the youth and women's movements, and claims based on sexual practices or identities, BDSM has been progressively institutionalised and formalised from the 1960s onward.

The bonds between the formalisation of BDSM and the sexual revolution are apparent when considering polyamory, for example. Some practices that were common during and after the sexual revolution could be considered as ancestors of contemporary polyamory. During those years, free love and political lesbianism also acquired a political meaning in the struggle against the patriarchal society based on the monogamous and married couple.

The conclusions of this thesis can be organised around two main arguments. First of all, some of the features of the BDSM scene and practitioners do constitute new ground within the sociology of sexuality. Considering the absence of contemporary works on such topics, a description of the BDSM scene constitutes a new element in the field (cf. chapters 4 and 5). Secondly, it is possible to frame BDSM practices within the concept of contemporary intimacies and to affirm the present-day importance of feminist and queer discourses in assessing core issues of BDSM (cf. chapters 6 and 7).

Further findings relate to the reframing of concepts related to BDSM, such as pain, pleasure and power, and I come back to these in the following sections. They have been explored using BDSM practitioners' accounts and the observations conducted as a jumping off point.

Furthermore, I addressed the role of BDSM practitioners and groups within certain ethical standards and behavioural codes. In fact, they do act in order to provide those external to the group with a positive image and at the same time 'regulate' themselves; this role is personified especially by the older members.

The analysis conducted has been multi-level: from the micro level of interactions among practitioners, to the meso level of the formation, function and dynamic of groups, to the more general and wider level of the framing of BDSM practices within the social and sexual attitudes of contemporary societies.

I will now summarise the main findings and the pre-existing views which have been challenged through the argumentation of the thesis.

BDSM practitioners of the scene observed come from the middle class. To be more specific, the majority of them are part of the educated fraction of that social class. As other research has demonstrated (cf. chapter 3 and appendix A), they seem to constitute a sort of elite in terms of educational level and wealth. In view of the nature of the public places chosen by groups to practice BDSM, it is apparent that a certain spending capacity is necessary to attend such events. Furthermore, even the appearance of some clubs mirrors this wealth. Social conventions linked to the necessity of choosing certain outfits and the geographical position of the clubs highlight the quasi-bourgeois nature of such gatherings. For example, it is by choice that the Kinky Pop, the event reserved for the under 35-years-old practitioners and friends, takes place in a pub where the price of beverages is high enough to discourage 'some' categories of people to attend it. The same is valid for the BDSM play parties and at least one other monthly meeting, the First Fridays. The middle-high-class background of the practitioners is

apparent; it is furthermore maintained and reinforced throughout these meetings and events. Through outfits, gestures and behaviours the middle class replicates itself.

8.1 Pain and Safety

The importance of pain within BDSM practices is discussed by practitioners and documented throughout the thesis. Personal narratives and discourses that circulate among groups and practitioners emphasise the role of pain in shaping and giving meaning to experiences within BDSM. Pain has both bodily and mental implications and effects. It is indeed one of the main elements of BDSM, however it is rarely looked for in itself. Very few practitioners embark on a BDSM journey seeking pain for pain's sake, like Paula does (cf. chapter 7). And usually, abstractly speaking, BDSM practitioners do not have in high regard those who do so. 'Masochists' are seen as enjoying pain, which is not something that is completely understandable. For the majority of practitioners pain is a cognitive and communicative tool through which other ends can be reached. These ends are highly subjective and shaped by interactions. They do, nevertheless, follow certain patterns. For some, pain is a means through which to be submitted completely to one's own master or mistress. Through pain, they are subdued and their resistance is overcome. For others, pain serves as a reminder of who is in charge; a *memento* that establishes the hierarchy within a 24/7 relationship, like for Ulrich (cf. chapter 7). Pain can be inflicted at any time by the hand of his mistress, just to remind him that she has the power. For others it could be also the key to reaching an intimate relationship with one's own dominant partner. Some intimate experiences are possible only with few people; a dominant within a BDSM relationship could be one of them (cf. Ginger chapter

7). The endurance of pain is often a matter of pride, or constitutes the achievement of the ordeal within the path of becoming 'the perfect' submissive.

Pain carries multiple meanings and is constituted by overlapping layers: it is a communicative and cognitive tool in the experiences and narratives of BDSM practitioners.

8.2 Safety Protocols

Within BDSM groups, several discourses circulate about their role in contemporary societies; they seem somewhat conscious of occupying a marginal position. BDSM groups perceive themselves as different and separated from the more common ways of conceptualising pleasure and sex. Within this separateness, several narratives serve the purpose of either making BDSM practitioners as similar as possible to non-practitioners in order to not be stigmatised, or of widening the separation between practitioners and non-practitioners in an attempt to claim a qualitative – and sometimes hierarchical – difference. BDSM practitioners and groups are caught within this continuous movement between a call for acceptance and a claim of diversity.

This oscillation between the call for acceptance and the claiming of an essential difference is apparent observing some practitioners' interactions and discourses. One such discourse, analysed in detail in chapter 6, relates to the safety protocols SSC (Safe, Sane and Consensual) and RACK (Risk Aware Consensual Kink). SSC and RACK stress the importance of individual awareness in engaging in BDSM practices as well as the risks connected. The common discourse about SSC and RACK is that the latter is more realistic, since it accounts for eventual risks that could occur during a session, irrespective of one's caution and preparation. On the contrary, the former describes

BDSM as if it were an activity without any risks, if only those engaging in it are careful enough. This supposed distinction between these two ways of addressing safety is a sort of mirror of the movement just described. In fact, on the one hand, the call for acceptance of BDSM practitioners could be reflected into the normalisation brought up by SSC; on the other hand, the claimed difference from the 'others', that is, those not engaging in BDSM, is acknowledged by RACK, a *memento* of the risks a practitioner could face.

The discourse about safety protocols is primarily intended for non BDSM practitioners: it is a way to normalise BDSM practices and make them comprehensible – or at least 'more rational' – for those not engaging in them. If BDSM is something that has rules and codes of conduct it appears less irrational and incomprehensible, and as a consequence, it is less frightening. At the same time, discourses on SSC and RACK serve the purpose of instructing new BDSM practitioners and giving them a frame in which to move and act. It is part of the subculture. It is part of their formation and education, although neither of them is formalised in courses or workshops in Italy. In some ways, these discourses on safety are sometimes void and empty within the BDSM groups, in the sense that they express a paradox. The more seasoned practitioners account for the paradoxical nature of such discourses. How can BDSM be safe, sane, and consensual at all? This question is raised by many (cf. Sybil and Garrett, chapter 6). The very desire and interest of many practitioners is namely to break established limits and to engage in risky activities. With these premises, how can BDSM ever be safe, sane, and consensual? Naming these safety protocols RACK instead of SSC partly accounts for such reflections. The more realistic RACK is for now held as the more genuine acknowledgment of risks by BDSM practitioners.

8.3 Negotiating Legitimacy

The importance of negotiation has been addressed by both practitioners and literature. Such literature stresses the importance of negotiating a session before it takes place. Negotiation is often indicated as one of the elements that marks a distinction between violence and BDSM.

Negotiation, *mutatis mutandis*, could undergo the same analysis as SSC and RACK. On the one hand, it constitutes an argument that fosters the comprehension of these practices by those who are not involved. At the same time, it also serves the purpose of instructing new members on the policies of BDSM groups and communities. Notwithstanding these discourses, some violations have taken place (cf. chapter 6). I highlight this aspect not to please the detractors of BDSM, but to underline that this allowed first of all, to deconstruct the very concepts of consent and negotiation and secondly to show the ways in which some groups self-regulate. The role of some central members of the BDSM groups in maintaining order reflects the desire to present an acceptable image to the exterior and to safeguard their own image as individuals and groups. Similarly to other groups that are highly stigmatised or based on sexual interests, BDSM practitioners often are careful in providing public images or discourses about themselves and the practices they are engaged in.

Apart from a few exceptions, it is nevertheless certain that negotiation takes place. In different forms, detailed or merely sketched, built on previous encounters or constituted by people who give feedback on other players, negotiation takes place. Sometimes the degree of mutual knowledge does not lower the likelihood of a detailed negotiation, as is the case of Paula and her partner (cf. chapter 6).

The case is quite the contrary for safewords. Another 'must' of the discourse regarding safety, they often are avoided to the point of constituting one of the limits inherent in the session itself. Like any other practice could constitute a limit, they are avoided during sessions. Usually, there is a tacit agreement between or among play partners who act in order to avoid them to be pronounced – or even agreed upon. A detailed negotiation, frequent check-ins and other means serve the purpose of avoiding to safeword, a practice that places both the submissive who pronounced it and the dominant who caused the 'safewording' in a bad light. Usually, both the dominant and the submissive practitioners implicitly agree to avoid a situation in which the safeword is necessary; the dominant because it could signify that he or she has overstepped the limits, and the submissive either because it would imply that he or she took the negotiation lightly or that he or she is not strong enough to endure that particular session. To consider safewords as limits does not mean that they are never agreed or pronounced, though. I want to call attention to the fact that, as a general rule, they are avoided.

The ground-breaking nature of BDSM as one means of challenging the norms and attitudes of the majority of the population, sometimes held by practitioners as one of their distinctive characteristics, shows itself fully also in the practice of polyamory. Despite the fact that BDSM and polyamory are not entirely overlapping in the Italian scene, the propensity of some BDSM practitioners to negotiate so many aspects of their scenes and sexualities reflects the increase of interest in the latter.

BDSM practitioners and those interested in polyamory came in contact more formally during the period of observation. The periodical meetings of the polyamorous community in Milan restarted after a period of suspension. A new monthly meeting of

the younger BDSM practitioners, the Kinky Pop, was arranged more or less in the same period, and it also gathered together members of the polyamorous community. Polyamorous and BDSM events thus overlapped and on the initiative of the organisers, they hosted debates in order to attract people from both sides. In fact, many people attended both.

The revival of discourses about polyamory coincided with some few events – the translation in Italian of a famous bestseller that is a cult book for the polyamorous community[97] and the recent launch of a new Italian website on polyamory[98] – which provided new sustenance to the discourses themselves. It is not that among older BDSM practitioners polyamory is not practiced. This revival of discourses is not meant to instruct the older members on polyamory. On the contrary, they have polyamorous relationships just as often as the younger practitioners. The fact is that this new interest is part of a wider discourse on the importance of negotiating many aspects of one's own relationship. It appears that the pure relationship (Giddens, 1992) is gaining ground. The pure relationship, the one in which negotiation is at the centre, is gaining new attention. Used to negotiate their scenes, preferred practices and BDSM roles, some practitioners are somewhat prone to also negotiate around their impatience with the monogamous and closed couple and to engage, either verbally or practically, in polyamory. The main aim put forward by BDSM practitioners of their interest in polyamory is to overcome the jealousy inherent in the couple. Such interest is, though, mainly theoretical and directed towards debates and meetings. Understandably, it is practiced with difficulty and some resistance. Furthermore, often BDSM practitioners do not only mean polyamory simply as engaging in multiple sexual and emotional

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[97] I refer to *The Ethical Slut* (Easton and Hardy, 1997) translated in Italian as *La zoccola etica* in 2014.

[98] The website is www.poliamore.org.

relationships. By polyamory they also mean having multiple BDSM play partners. This meaning of polyamory overlaps the one that relates to the co-presence of multiple sexual and emotional relationships, creating a tight intersection between BDSM and sexual relationships that characterises the scene examined.

8.4 BDSM Practices and Intimate Relationships

Throughout the thesis I propose to reframe BDSM practices within postmodern intimacies. I imagine postmodern intimacies as inheriting meanings from the modern conception and integrating them with new elements. The modern concept of intimacy is based on the primacy of the couple as the foundation of personal identity, on tenderness, heterosexuality, marriage and love. It is no longer the one and only categorisation of intimacy possible in western societies. Nevertheless, this modern idea of intimacy has not at all disappeared. What I state is that it has been flanked by other conceptualisations that take into account new subcultures, sexual practices or social changes. Postmodern intimacies, besides including the modern meaning of intimacy, contemplate categories less reassuring but more realistic and up to date, such as unsafety, impersonality, commonality and access.

Intimacy can be unsafe, if it brings the possibility of contagion into the household, where the degree of intimacy should instead guarantee total safety and protection (Nussbaum, 2010). Intimacy could be impersonal and communal, if one considers the practice, for example, of barebacking. In barebacking, the individual is linked to a community of people who share both the same virus, inherited from previous generations, and the same desire to engage in risky sexual activities (Bersani, 2008; 2015; Dean, 2009). Finally, intimacy could be intended as access to the innermost part of

a person, to the most secret and secretive, protected and personal part (Newmahr, 2011). Sometimes this access takes the form of violence, although this argumentation cannot be deduced from the present research.

Those four concepts are by no means exhaustive in describing contemporary intimacies, but so far they depict the changes which have occurred within the last fifty or sixty years, and enrich our comprehension of the multiple forms of emotional attachment possible among human beings.

I do not intend to frame BDSM practices within a negative context; on the contrary, I want to state that framing BDSM as intimacy, meaning access is a means to enrich the very notion of intimacy itself, as well as emotional attachment in contemporary societies.

On the one hand, intimacy constitutes the aim of practitioners engaging in BDSM; putting aside all the differences in BDSM and gender roles and practices preferred, what is looked for is intimacy. An intimate relationship, and the quality of it, between a dominant and a submissive is in the end what counts for the majority of BDSM practitioners. Some submissive men lament the absence of an emotional link with their mistresses; they accuse them of being heartless and interested merely in impact play. Many female dominants complain about distant and non-devotee male submissives. A number of male dominants long for female submissives who will follow, love, and have sex with them. Other female submissives want dominant men to devote all their attentions to them. What is at stake is intimacy. BDSM practices are a means through which to look for such intimacy, even if within a frame of a short or casual relationship.

And power? Power is always present, in every relationship. It is negotiated and enacted throughout BDSM interactions. It coexists alongside with intimacy and other features that inform BDSM practices.

Although the desire to become involved in these intimate relationships is common, the ways of approaching BDSM can widely differ among practitioners. Practitioners are different, their approach to BDSM is just as different. Some discovered their interest as child, like Frank did (cf. chapter 5); others at a more mature age. Many conceive BDSM as a sexual activity, though that activity could differ from the 'usual' genital penetration. For a few, BDSM is like an ascetic journey into self-discovery, as is the case for Ulrich (cf. chapter 5). In order to comprehend these different meanings attributed to BDSM and the paths leading to it, I employed two broad concepts: the sexual dimension and the identitarian dimension of BDSM. They are graphically represented in Fig. 2 (cf. chapter 5). Each dimension has two extreme ideal types connected along a *continuum*.

The sexual dimension of BDSM is constituted by the ideal type of the BDSM practitioner who comes from a traditional SM context, where different sexualities are rigidly separated and everything has its own place. No fluidity or mix among sexual identities exists in this extreme. On the other side, fluidity rules: sexuality is an ongoing practice and experience, not a system of classification; social innovators create new events and favour the entry of polyamory in the BDSM scene. They import new practices into the group and attract new members.

The other dimension is the identitarian one. It relates to the depth of involvement with which practitioners approach BDSM. How much does BDSM represent them as individuals? Modern and postmodern identities constitute the two extreme ideal types. Those looking for a true self through BDSM interactions look for an essence that

characterises them: they are within the modern frame. Identity is something that, with its fixity and essential nature, describes them fully and completely. On the other side, those who engage in BDSM with self-irony, with a playfulness directed both toward their role and the other's, who look for a sexual or emotional amusement rather than an ascetic discipline for life, are part of the postmodern frame of identity. There is a sort of incoherence, or to put it better, there is no search for coherence in their engagement with BDSM practices.

BDSM practitioners' positionality might be highlighted according to these two dimensions, the sexual and the identitarian (cf. chapter 5). The meanings practitioners give to BDSM practices lie somewhat within the space framed by these two dimensions.

8.5 Queering Intimacy or Normalising Marginal Sexuality?

Despite the conservative nature, as it might be called, of BDSM practitioners, which is also linked to the nature of Milan as one of the cultural and economic centres of northern Italy, some characteristics of the established gender and sexual order are somewhat challenged. It has been argued, at least since the sex wars and the sexual revolution, that BDSM has a potentially highly disruptive nature as regards gender stereotypes, gender roles and the sexual orientation of the practitioners (cf. chapter 6). The feminist and queer discourses have highlighted such potentials in answering the claims made by the feminist and other movements against BDSM. Such claims stressed the nature of BDSM as bound to patriarchy and the male sadist imagination. Women were thought not to desire 'such things', even less to engage in these practices.

These debates have been going on for several decades, and have involved both academic and activists in different countries. Especially in the United States, the United

Kingdom and Italy (in particular within the Italian lesbian movement), such debates produced several contributions that are useful in the analysis of the contemporary BDSM scene and practitioners' narratives. These feminist and queer discourses dealt in particular with the deconstruction of topics such as consent and gender identity as well as abuse and the fluidity of sexual orientation.

It is interesting to note that despite probably being unaware of the roots of such discourses, BDSM practitioners have re-appropriated them in a reframing process that has led to the eradication of the feminist and queer framework of such discourses. BDSM practitioners touched on the very same arguments as feminist and queer theorists and activists, sometimes raising the same topics and objections, without any awareness of their roots.

In a context such as the Italian one, where feminist thought and identifications – not to mention queer theory – are seen in a bad light, the appropriation of such discourses occurs without giving credit to the very movements that fostered such insights.

Despite the efforts already made, I am perfectly aware of the necessity to deepen and develop research on the topic. Partly because of the particular configuration of the BDSM scene and partly due to time constraints, the gay, lesbian and bisexual, or as I would say more appropriately, the non-heterosexual BDSM scene has not been explored. From the very beginning of the fieldwork, I realised that heterosexual and non-heterosexual BDSM practitioners and groups were socially and spatially segregated[99]. Different clubs and different events; separate channels were used to communicate and

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[99] Some exceptions are to be made, of course, for some particular practitioners. For example, especially among women, bisexuality as a sexual orientation, or as a practice, since it could have been performed as part of the session, has some space, at least at public parties.

organise meetings. I nevertheless had the impression that non-heterosexual practitioners were less organised or at least more secretive, and that their meetings were not as publicised as the 'heterosexual' ones. Thus, all the arguments and conclusions could be extended only with some difficulty to the non-heterosexual population, in particular those regarding sexual orientation. Among non-heterosexual practitioners, I could expect, though, a higher degree of social stigma both perceived by and attached to them. Their sexual orientation could constitute a further cause of discrimination, at least within the Italian context. The Italian social and political context, in fact, presents some opposition in the pursuit of equality irrespective of sexual orientation both in legal terms and in everyday interactions. As a result, I would expect a high degree of secrecy among non-heterosexual BDSM groups and communities.

Increased understanding of BDSM as a sociological phenomenon could be brought about by the inclusion in the analysis of non-heterosexual BDSM practitioners, alongside heterosexual ones.

Another area of further research could be constituted by BDSM parties and scenes taking place away from the spotlight. They are likely to reveal different practices, as well as a diverse degree of involvement on behalf of the practitioners. Although not for all practitioners, the presence, or the absence, of a public could alter the success of a scene for some.

Since I was not involved in BDSM practices, there was little possibility of attending parties at private houses in which the number of participants was limited. In these cases my presence as an observer would have been noticed.

As regards the public nature of BDSM plays attended, I would expect that the theatrical element that characterises them would in some ways modify the interactions

among BDSM practitioners, both of those observing and engaging in practices in that context. In particular, the spectacular nature of a play held in front of an audience and the absence of certain tools would favour some practices over others. For example, some practitioners found difficult to engage in clinical practices at public parties due to the presence of an audience and the absence of particular tools – maybe expensive or possibly dangerous. As a consequence, the exploration of the theatrical dimension of BDSM sessions of private parties could be explored.

Another possible area of research could relate to the normalisation of BDSM practices throughout the last few decades. Such normalisation has been accompanied by the commodification of BDSM itself in western societies. From the creation of tools and accessories to the organisation of big, spectacular parties that go on tour around Europe, BDSM has a side related to goods and services. That side, as the success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* shows, has increasing economic and cultural importance. Is marginality still a prerogative of BDSM practices or is the divide between 'vanilla' and BDSM practitioners is blurring? To further focus on normalisation and commodification would be to better comprehend the place of BDSM practices within western societies.

The last area of further research I want to suggest relates to the re-propositioning of the feminist and queer arguments regarding the potential disruptive nature of BDSM. It is true that BDSM practitioners in the scene, whose experiences have been explored in this thesis, did in some cases act in such a way as to disrupt social stereotypes about gender and sex. But were they aware of that?

It could be fruitful to explore whether or not the challenging nature of BDSM is theorised or acted upon in contemporary societies. Are there any lesbian and/or

feminist groups reading Foucault and consciously dismantling sexual roles through BDSM? Do feminists theorise and enjoy (BDSM) pornography as a way to challenge patriarchy?

For many reasons, my personal feeling is that the answer to both questions is yes, and that something is happening among those who could be called queer activists.

Thus, I would recommend a revitalisation of the debates of the sex wars, involving BDSM practices but also beyond this. I think that the study of BDSM practices could be a tool through which explore many broader fields, such as sexuality, individual agency and the relationship between the social actor and the general context in which he or she is embedded.

Appendices

Appendix A. Comparison among research on BDSM practitioners, from 1960s to 2014

Tab 1. Comparison among features of different research on BDSM practitioners

|	Time and place of data collection	Sampling technique(s)	Survey method(s)	Requisites to participation
This research (2014) Total obs. 44	Milan/Italy 2013-2014	Snowball and convenience sampling Through posts on BDSM-themed social network Word of mouth	Interviews Participant observations	Age: 18+ Practiced BDSM at least once
Richters *et al.* (2008) Total obs. 16779	Australia 2001-2002	Representative sample (random-digit dialling) oversampling of men and some geographical areas	Interviews by telephone	16–59 years Been involved in BDSM in the last 12 months
Breslow *et al.* (1985) Total obs. 163	United States 1982	Questionnaires published in magazines, mailed and placed in shops and clubs	Written questionnaire	Not available

Dancer *et al.* (2006) Total obs. 146	Online 3 months in 2001	Snowball sampling Word of mouth Questionnaire sent to organizations and groups	Online questionnaire on a commercial site	Age : 18+ Identify as "24/7 slave" Complete demographic data
Levitt *et al.* (1994) Total obs. 34	San Francisco and New York	Snowball and convenience sampling Questionnaire published in magazines	Written questionnaire	Women
Moser and Levitt (1987) Total obs. 228	San Francisco and New York 1978	Questionnaire published in magazines Snowball and convenience sampling	Written questionnaire	Define at least part of their sexuality as S/M
Sandnabba *et al.* (1999) Total obs. 164 Sandnabba *et al.* (2002) Total obs. 184	Finland	Questionnaire mailed to members of clubs	Semi-structured questionnaire	Men* Identify as "sadomasochists"
NCSF (1999) Total obs. 1017	United States April 1998 – February 1999	Questionnaire published on NCSF website Questionnaire's links emailed and posted on websites (online questionnaire)	Written and online questionnaire	Not available

		Snowball and convenience sampling (written questionnaire)		

Legend: *Women excluded from part of analysis (demographic data) due to low number of female respondents.

As Tab 1 shows, most of the research on BDSM has been conducted through snowball and convenience samples; since BDSM practitioners constitute a hidden population, subject to stigma and discrimination – as the academic literature shows throughout the thesis – a random sample is (virtually) impossible to obtain, since it would require a list of all the BDSM practitioners within a population. The unique exception is the work of Richters and colleagues (2008) who collected information about BDSM among other data, and thus could select a sample that was statistically significant, respondents being selected within a list of all households with a telephone.

Graph 2. Age of respondents
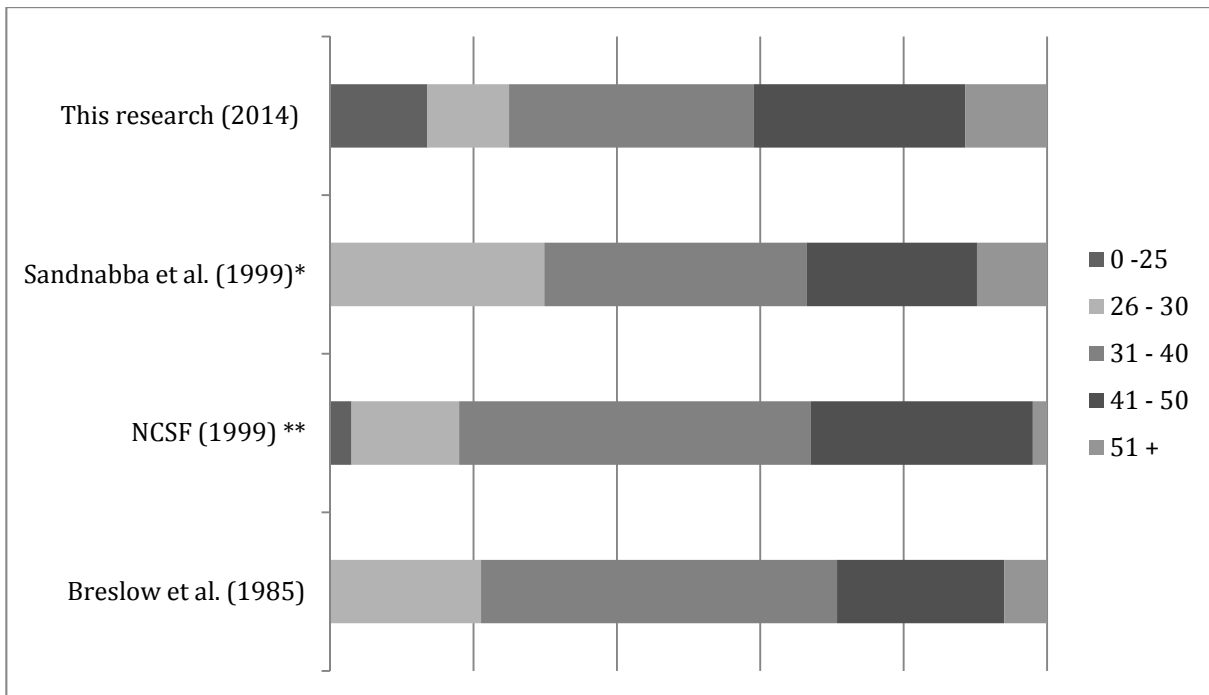
Legend: * = the first age group is from 21 to 30 years old; ** = age groups are different: 18-22, 23-29, 30-44, 45-64 and 65 and over. Electronic data processing by the Author.

Observing Graph 2 it appears that the age of BDSM practitioners varies widely but is mostly concentrated around the decade from the thirties to the forties. Respondents are in general middle-aged.

Graph 3. Educational level of respondents
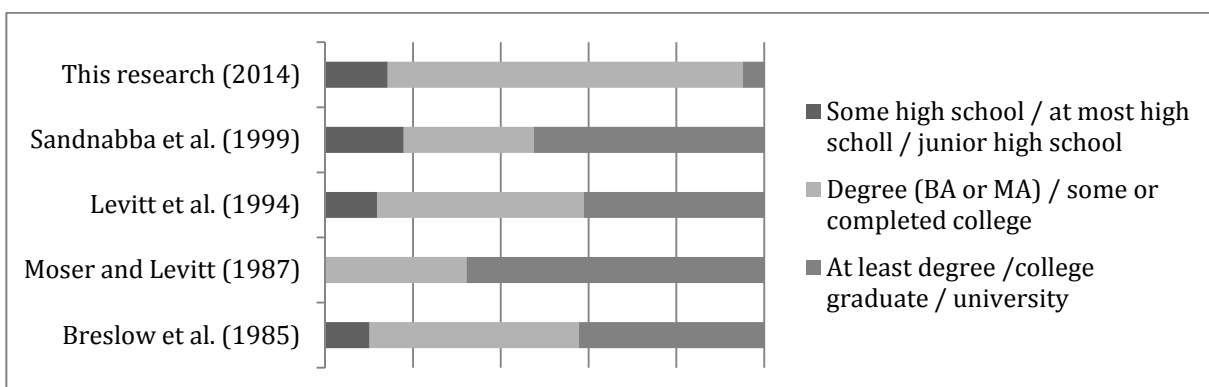
Electronic data processing by the Author.

In general, BDSM practitioners, as showed in Graph 3, appear to be quite well educated, since high proportions of them have a degree or attended and graduated from college. Those who obtained a PhD are excluded from the analysis since they were present only in the sample of this research.

Graph 4. Gender of respondents
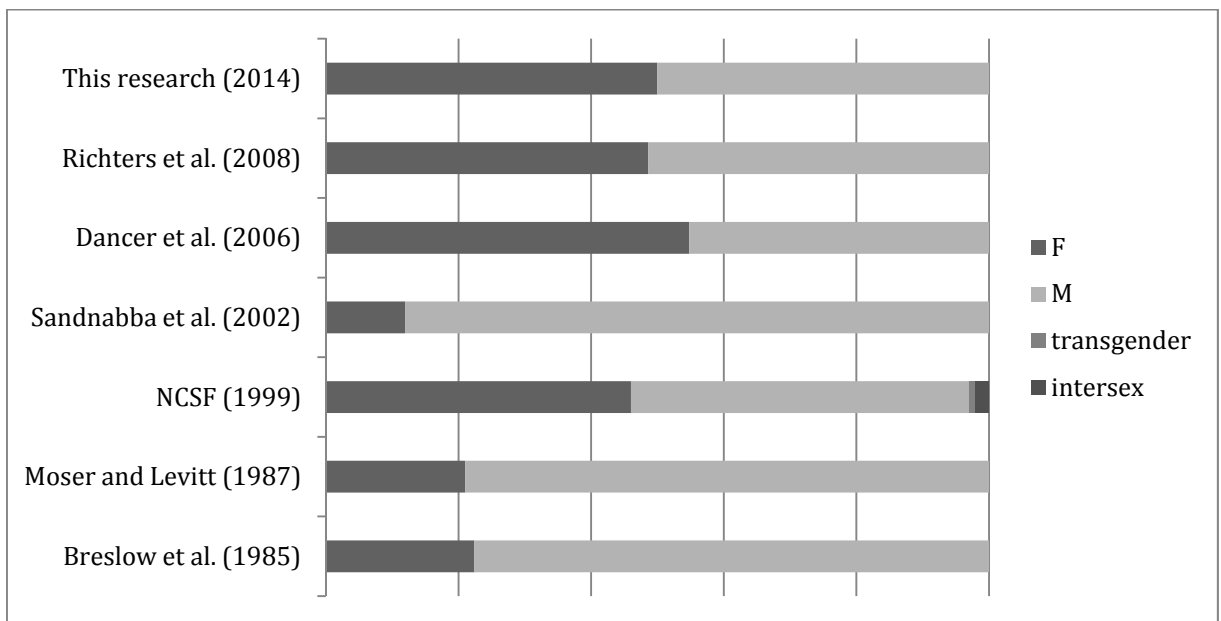
Electronic data processing by the Author.

The percentage of female or males, as showed in Graph 4, varies widely, with a predominance of male respondents. The research by NCSF (1999), in which some practitioners define as transgender or intersex, is notable. The data collected for this research was equally divided between men and women on purpose.

Graph 5. Profession of respondents
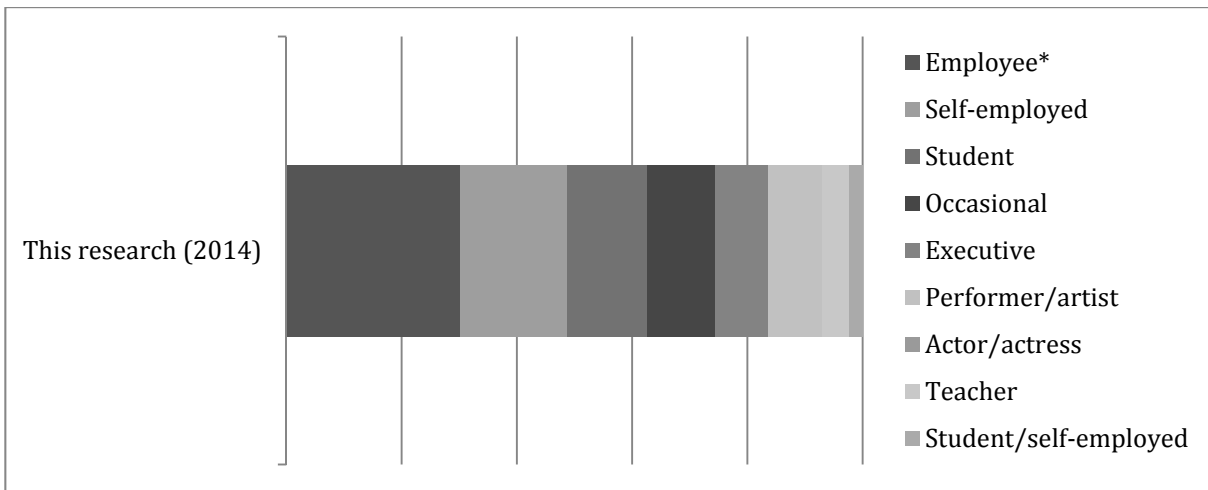
Legend: * includes public servants.
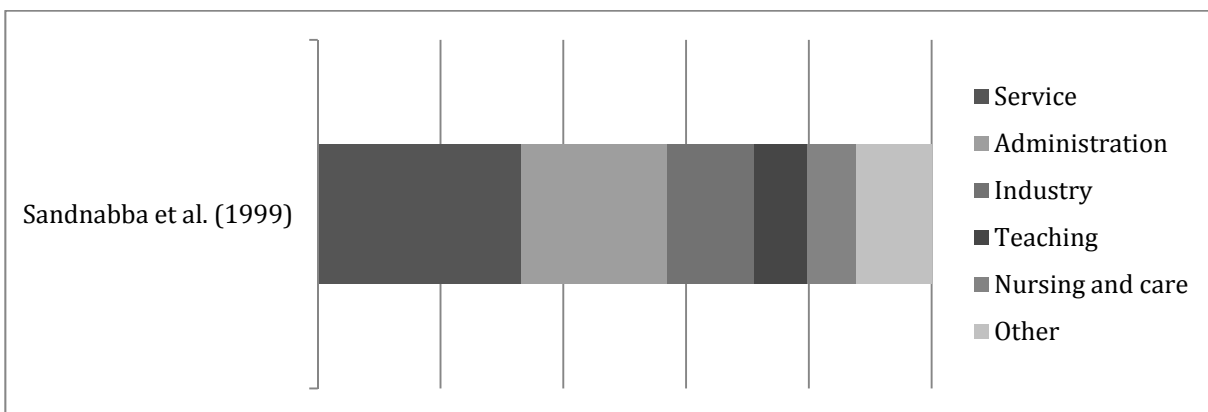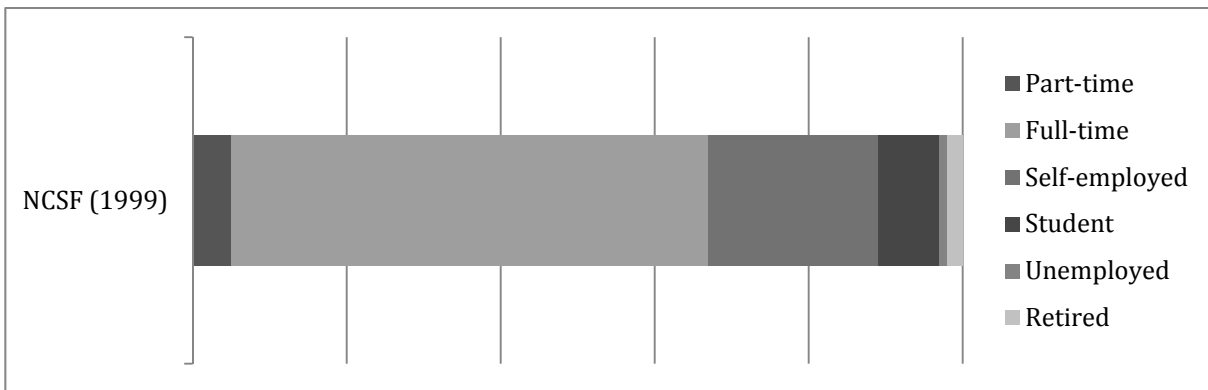
Electronic data processing by the Author.

The data on the profession of BDSM practitioners, showed in Graph 5, are even

with the caveats explained above, comparable with the highest degree of difficulty, since

the coding of the professions has been different between the different studies, NCSF (1999) concentrating on the amount of time dedicated to work, and the author and Sandnabba and colleagues (1999) on macro sectors of jobs.

Graph 6. Sexual orientation of respondents
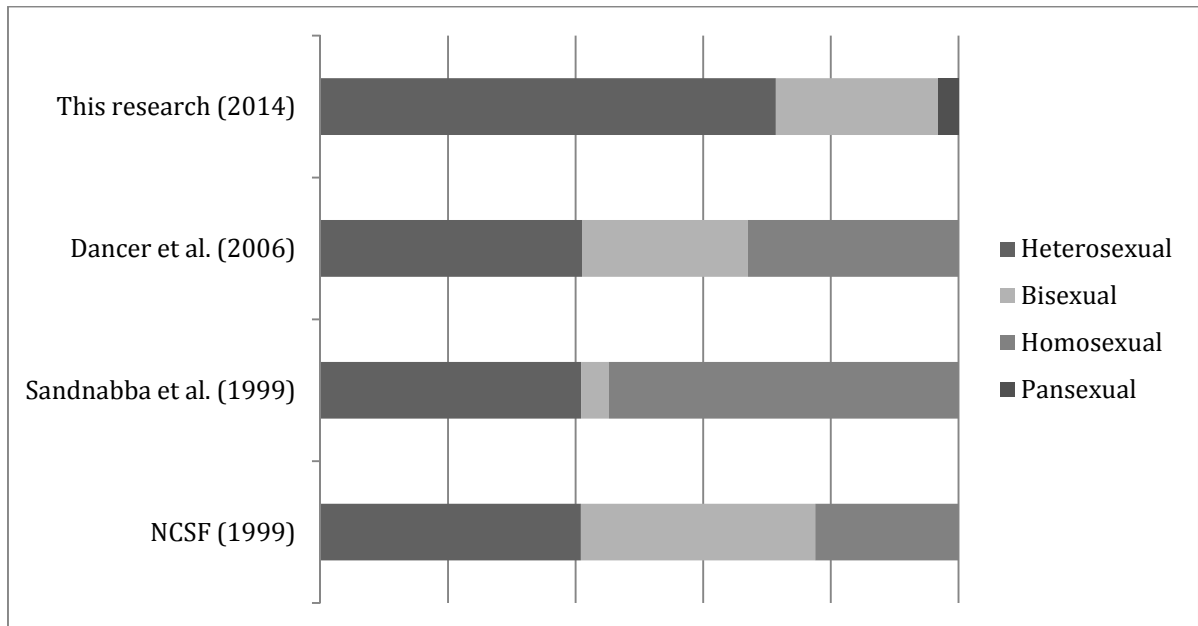
Electronic data processing by the Author.

The last graph, Graph 6, provides data on sexual orientation as declared by BDSM practitioners. In some cases homosexuals constitute the majority of the practitioners; in others they are not even present. This depends on the geographical and virtual places in which the research has been conducted and the scope of the study.

In general, it seems that the BDSM practitioners interviewed by the author possess quite similar characteristics to those involved in previous research on BDSM: the practitioners are either male or female, well educated, with at least a degree or still enrolled at university, aged around their thirties and forties.

The specificity of the Italian context chosen lies in the spatial and social segregation between homosexual and non-homosexual (hence bisexual, heterosexual, pansexual and so on) BDSM practitioners. The segregation has been noted and explained by some practitioners most sensitive to the topic – for example Nick – not as an overt discrimination against homosexual people, since they would well be accepted, but as a shared mood, a way of doing things that it is likely to have discouraged them to join in the events.

The only homosexual interactions at BDSM play parties I observed were among women, and this performative bisexuality – since all of them declared or appeared to be heterosexual – is likely to be staged either for a male public or for the sake of the BDSM play.

Appendix B

Interview Guide

As regards the interviews, I define the questionnaire as more of a guide than a document to be followed rigidly. I developed a draft for the interviews that was flexible enough and touched all the theoretical points in which I was interested. Interviews took place in a location chosen by practitioners, be it public or private, such as their home or workplace, or a park. Before starting the interview, I informed them about the fact that I was going to audio record our conversation and asked for their permission to do so. Audio recordings are available only to me. I informed them that the interview was going to last approximately two hours. The maximum duration of an interview was 7 hours. Finally, I informed practitioners that I would use fictitious names in order to stop others from identifying them; moreover, I would not reveal personal details that could lead others to identify them – even within the BDSM community.

Every question I asked was open and wide, thus the practitioners could talk freely and roam from one topic to another. I advised them to move from one topic to another, and to let them follow the flow of their thoughts and memories.

This is the interview guide I employed. In some cases, further questions were asked, but in general these are the ones which were employed throughout the research.

- For how long did you/have you been involved in BDSM practices?
- Tell me how you started…
- How about your play partners, how do you find them? How many are there?
- What emotions are involved when you engage in a BDSM session? Before, during and after…

- What is your typical BDSM session like? Do you prepare yourself and the area around you in some way…?

- Do you have a reference group for these practices?

- Have you ever had negative experiences related to BDSM (boredom, detachment, estrangement…)?

- With whom do you talk with about your engagement in BDSM?

Interviewees: Names, Gender, Age, Education, Profession, Sexual Orientation and BDSM Role

Fictitious name	Gen der	Age	Education	Profession	Sexual Orientation	BDSM Role
Abigail	F	40 - 45	bachelor's or master degree	occasional job and housewife	heterosexual	slave
Algernon	M	30 - 35	high school diploma	self-employee	heterosexual	submissive
Barney	M	35 - 40	bachelor's or master degree	employee	heterosexual	top
Brian	M	50 - 55		executive	heterosexual?	dominant?
Bridget	F	30 - 35	bachelor's or master degree	employee	heterosexual	submissive
Catherine	F	25 - 30	high school diploma or bachelor's or master degree	actress and performer	heterosexual (bisexual?)	submissive
Cecil	M	20 - 25	bachelor's degree?	university student	bisexual	dominant
Chloe	F	25 - 30	bachelor's or master degree	teacher?	heterosexual?	submissive ?
Daphne	F	40 - 45	PhD	administrativ e employee	bisexual	submissive
David	M	40 -	bachelor's or	employee	heterosexual	submissive

Name	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Orientation	Role
		45	master degree?			
Donna	F					submissive?
Elsa	F	25 - 30		university student	bisexual	submissive
Eric	M	45 - 50		executive	heterosexual	submissive
Fanny	F	25 - 30	bachelor's or master degree	actress and performer	bisexual	switch
Frank	M	50 - 55	PhD?	university professor	bisexual	submissive?
Garrett	M	40 - 45	bachelor's or master degree	self-employee and writer	heterosexual	switch
Ginger	F	20 - 25	bachelor's degree	university student	bisexual	submissive
Hector	M	30 - 35	high school diploma?	occasional jobs	heterosexual	switch
Helen	F	20 - 25	bachelor's degree?	university student	heterosexual?	role not defined yet
Isaac	M	40 - 45		commercial agent	heterosexual	submissive
Isabel	F	30 - 35	PhD	employee	heterosexual	submissive
Jade	F	20 - 25				submissive?
Janice	F	25 - 30				submissive?
Jasmine	F	25 - 30	high school diploma?	shop assistant	heterosexual	submissive

Jefferson	M	30 - 35	bachelor's or master degree	self-employed and photograph	heterosexual	fetishist
John	M	50 - 55				dominant?
Kathleen	F	30 - 35	high school diploma	shop assistant	heterosexual	switch masochist
Kyran	M	45 - 50	bachelor's or master degree	executive	heterosexual	master
Lance	M	20 - 25	bachelor's degree?	university student	heterosexual	master
Leah	F	50 - 55	bachelor's or master degree	occasional jobs and housewife	heteroflexible	switch
Malcolm	M	45 - 50	bachelor's or master degree	self-employed	heterosexual	submissive
Maud	F	30 - 35	bachelor's or master degree	public servant	heterosexual	mistress
Nick	M	30 - 35	PhD	employee	heterosexual	switch
Norah	F	35 - 40	bachelor's or master degree	public servant/artist	heterosexual	switch
Olive	F	30 - 35	bachelor's or master degree?	occasional jobs and artist	heterosexual	switch
Oliver	M	45 - 50	high school diploma?	self-employed	heterosexual	switch (mostly master)

Paul	M	25 - 30				
Paula	F	30 - 35	bachelor's or master degree	teacher	bisexual	masochist
Peter	M	50 - 55	bachelor's or master degree?	executive	heterosexual	switch (prefers "dominant")
Quianna	F	45 - 50	bachelor's or master degree	writer	bisexual	dominant sadist
Quincy	M	35 - 40	bachelor's or master degree?	public servant	heterosexual	rigger=bondage
Red	M	45 - 50	bachelor's degree?	self-employed and writer	heterosexual	master
Rosamund	F	25 - 30	bachelor's or master degree	secretary	bisexual	mistress
Scott	M	55 - 60			bisexual	switch?
Sibyl	F	55 - 60		occasional jobs	heterosexual?	mistress
Tania	F	30 - 35	bachelor's or master degree	teacher and artist	pansexual	dominant masochist
Thaddeus	M	40 - 45	bachelor's or master degree?	public servant	heterosexual	master
Tom	M	40 - 45			heterosexual?	dominant

Ulrich	M	45 - 50	bachelor's or master degree	executive	heterosexual	slave
Ursula	F	25 - 30	bachelor's degree?	university student	heterosexual?	submissive?
Vicky	F	45 - 50		actress/self-employed	heterosexual?	rigger? or mistress?
Victor	M	25 - 30	bachelor's or master degree?	student and self-employed	heterosexual	master
William	M	35 - 40	PhD	professor		submissive
Zach	M	25 - 30			heterosexual?	dominant?
Zoe	F	20 - 25		university student?	heterosexual?	submissive

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