

Rethinking Kink: Sadoomasochism as Serious Leisure

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Abstract Based on extensive ethnographic research in a public SM (sadoomasochism) community, this paper frames SM as recreation. Drawing on Robert Stebbins' work on "serious leisure" (1982), I posit that in order to more adequately understand SM as it occurs in this community, we need to shift from mainstream assumptions of SM as (simply) "kinky sex" to a more nuanced perspective. I explore the unique skills required in order to engage in SM, as well as the benefits and rewards that participants derive from it, in order to illustrate that SM can be more usefully understood as serious leisure.

Keywords BDSM · Sadoomasochism · Leisure · Serious leisure · Edgework · Sexuality

I made my way past the soda-fountain style counter and the old-fashioned, red vinyl-covered stools. Behind the counter, signs advertised milkshakes, Belgian waffles and nachos. I paused to consider whether I wanted a bottle of water, and someone came up behind me and hugged me enthusiastically, lifting me off of my feet. I laughed.

Jacob set me down and I turned around to say hello. "Hey, guess what I just got?" he said, grinning excitedly.

He gestured for me to follow him back to the diner-style booths, upholstered in the same sparkly red vinyl, opposite the counter. At the booth closest to us, he reached over the piles of coats and bags into the corner, and fished out his back canvas toy bag. He unzipped a side pocket, retrieved a pair of black leather gloves, and handed them to me. They were supple and incredibly soft, and strangely solid-feeling.

"Wow—lead-lined?" I asked. He nodded excitedly. I put the right one on. It was warm on my hand, and heavy. I punched my left palm with it a couple of times.

"Oooh. That's really nice!" I complimented him. High-quality lead-lined gloves were expensive, and not a lot of people in the scene had them.

"Wanna try them out?"

"Sure!" I handed them back to him and we looked around for an open play space.

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Jacob spied one first and began to walk towards the other room. Russ and Faye were standing at the threshold between the rooms, talking quietly and watching a flogging scene. We hugged our hellos.

“You guys going to play?” Russ asked. I nodded.

“Lead-lined gloves!” Jacob and I said in unison.

“Cool!” said Russ. To me, he added, “Let me know how you like them.”

The back corner, across from the wall with the built-in steel cage, was free. On the table beside the corner, Liam was rolling a Wartenberg wheel¹ across Rebecca’s bare back. Opposite them, Adam stood watching a single-tail² scene with two men I did not know. The top cracked the whip loudly through the air, and the bottom cried out as it sliced across his shoulders. I walked toward the empty corner and Jacob followed.

“Back and chest okay?” he asked as he set his bag down near Adam, who turned around to watch us as we set up to play. Leah, who had been watching Liam and Rebecca, walked over and began talking to Adam. A moment later, Jordan and Marcus joined them.

“Yep,” I replied. I removed my shirt as Jacob put the right glove on.

“New gloves?” Marcus asked.

“Yep,” said Jacob. “Got them today. They’re leaded.”

“Whoa...nice! Can I see the other one?”

Jacob handed the left glove to Marcus. I stepped backwards to stand against the wall, but the concrete was cold and I moved away from it. The first few notes of Orff’s “O Fortuna” floated over the club’s sound system.

“Oh, perfect!” Jacob shouted. “Give me the glove!”

Marcus handed him the glove and Jacob put it on quickly. He placed his left hand behind my upper back for support. With his right fist, he landed a slow punch on the left side of my chest. The glove was heavy and the impact seemed to reverberate through me after his hand was gone.

As the tempo picked up, he hit my chest harder and faster. The blows on my chest made me feel off-balance. I stepped back and stood against the wall. With both hands free, he hit both sides rapidly, alternating fists with the rhythm of the song and punching especially hard at the crescendos. My back scraped against the wall behind me, and my teeth rattled, threatening to bite my tongue each time his fist landed.

Consensual sadomasochism (SM) is a complex and poorly-understood social phenomenon. In popular culture, it is commonly represented and understood as either harmless bedroom “kink” or a side sexual interest of serial killers in crime thrillers. Although many SM participants do frame their “play” as having an erotic aspect, the conceptualization of SM as “kinky sex” has obscured a more nuanced understanding of this community and their activities. Unlike most sexual activity, participation in public SM relies on particular public spaces and involves an appreciable learning curve, financial expenditures and a social network. It can be more fully understood as a serious leisure (Stebbins 1982) pursuit, alongside other serious leisure hobbies such as kayaking and mountain climbing.

¹ A Wartenberg wheel is a handheld stainless steel instrument. The handle is approximately six inches long, at the end of which sits a sharply spiked wheel (akin to a pizza cutter with longer spikes). Originally designed to test neurological responses on skin, the effect ranges from very ticklish to very painful.

² A single-tail is a long whip with one lash.

Method

The narrative that prefaces this paper is a description of an SM interaction (“play”) in an urban SM community. In 2002, I began fieldwork in an urban SM community (“Caeden”) in the Northeast of the United States. At the time, there were at least five different SM-related formal organizations in Caeden, three public play spaces, several private “dungeons” in which play parties were held, several informal SM-related social organizations, and a vast number of Internet discussion lists.

For most people in the Caeden community, SM play is not feasible at home. Clubs provide not only a place to socialize, but also adequate space, equipment, soundproofing and privacy for SM play. Two of the three clubs in Caeden closed shortly after I began my fieldwork, leaving the other as the main play space for the Caeden community.

I attended these events (which occurred between four and five times a week, on average), and paid admission fees and/or yearly membership dues to SM organizations and clubs. I disclosed my identity as a researcher upon introductions. I participated fully in all SM events, including play parties, informational lectures, demonstrations and workshops, social lunches and dinners, organizational planning meetings, and fundraising benefits.

I participated in these facets of community life for 4 years (2002–2006). The first year of fieldwork was especially immersive; events ran very late on weeknights and into the following days on weekends, and I maintained almost-constant communication with community members through email, telephone, web blogging, and instant messaging. During this time, nearly all of my waking hours were spent in the field in one capacity or another, often amounting to over one hundred hours per week.

After I was well-established in the field, I began conducting interviews that focused equally on life histories and thematic questions regarding SM interest, practice, and activities. Because of the scope of the interviews and a strong rapport with most respondents, the average duration was 6 ½ hours long. (The shortest interview was 4 hours and the longest was 11.) Interview conversation flowed reciprocally, and as has been noted elsewhere (Berger 2001) I found that my own disclosure and self-reflection often enhanced the interview relationship. I transcribed the interviews and coded the transcripts and my field notes using qualitative software (Atlas.ti).

My analysis is based on ethnographic and interview data collected over the course of the four years. I had initially hoped that my sample would be inclusive across sexual identity, SM identity and race, but this was not possible. Despite the fact that Caeden is located in a racially and ethnically diverse city, it is disproportionately white and largely Jewish. Additionally, people of color are so rare in the community that if my interview sample were racially diverse, this disclosure would compromise confidentiality.

It should be noted also that this SM community is rather distinct from the swinger community in Caeden. My sense is that this varies by city, and in Caeden, while there are many members of both communities, swingers and SM participants often maintain careful distinctions of identities, space, language, etiquette and objectives. Public swing parties, for example, may involve “light SM,” but are not likely to involve heavier play, and public SM parties do not involve anal, vaginal or oral intercourse. (Practices at private parties in both groups are dictated by the hosts.)

Like most alternative or subcultural communities, the SM “scene” in Caeden shares a perhaps-esoteric vocabulary. Throughout this paper, “SM” refers to activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use, among two or more people, of pain, power, perceptions about power, or any combination thereof, for sensory or erotic pleasure, in the context of a public community. “Play” is used as both a noun and a verb to describe SM

interactions, and “scene” refers to an instance of play as well as to the broader SM community.

While space constraints preclude a thorough discussion of SM identities and identifications (top, bottom, submissive, dominant, switch, sadist, masochist, to name a few), a note on my usage of these terms is in order. Because this paper is concerned with SM as serious leisure, individual identifications within this framework are of less immediate concern, as would be the difference between a belayer and a climber is a discussion of rock-climbing as serious leisure. This paper views SM play as a social situation, and as such, in any given moment, one person is topping and one person is bottoming. I use “top” and “bottom” to describe people who engage in topping and bottoming, respectively, rather than as social identity markers. When used as nouns, these words should not be understood as fixed social identities, but as shorthand for “people who top” or “people who bottom” (most of whom, in Caeden, over time, are the same people).

Finally, because there exists so little work on SM and its participants, it is crucial to note that my discussion of “the scene” or “the community” is not synonymous with “people who enjoy kinky bedroom games.” The SM community is a social network of people organized around SM, who practice and observe SM in particular public spaces and attend informational and educational meetings. My observations and analysis of this community cannot be assumed to be relevant for people who may practice SM privately.

SM as sexual kink

Our contemporary understanding of SM is indebted to various works by de Sade (1965), Sacher von Masoch (1870) and early psychologists and sexologists (Ellis 1927, 1938; Freud 1905; Kraft-Ebbing 1886, Freud 1938). Early depictions of what we continue to consider SM frequently involved the eroticization of non-consensual relations. Later, SM entered both mainstream consciousness and academic literature through the gay and lesbian communities (at a time when homosexuality was also assumed to be unequivocally about sex), further ensconcing SM in discourses of sexuality. This view of SM persisted despite evidence to the contrary: in their pioneering definition of SM, Weinberg, Williams and Moser (1984) considered a sexual perspective of SM to be a criterion for inclusion in their sample: “Some people engaged in SM-type activities but did not give them sexual meaning and thus were not considered to be ‘into SM.’”

The perspective that SM is “about sex” persists despite widespread acknowledgement that at least some SM community members reject this framing. Research reveals that many SM participants do not understand their activities as an alternative or a prelude to, sexual interaction (Dancer, Kleinplatz and Moser 2006; Weiss 2006b). In a special-issue volume of the *Journal of Sexuality*, Moser and Kleinplatz maintain that defining SM is a difficult undertaking (Moser and Kleinplatz 2006) and Thomas Weinberg’s comprehensive literature review considers SM is a “complex social phenomenon” (2006, p. 37).

Yet in the same volume, in order to determine whether virtual (online) sadomasochists were comparable to real-life sadomasochists, Cross and Matheson’s study “sought to establish that the sexual tastes of real life and virtual sadomasochists are in fact similar....” (Cross and Matheson 2006, p. 139), as if “sexual taste” is a defining characteristic of sadomasochists. Rebecca Plante’s research on “sexual spankers” (2006) finds that sexual spankers differentiate themselves from the broader SM community. (In the community I studied, spankers are demographically different from SM participants.) Proceeding from the assumption that spanking and SM share a sexualized context, the study neglects the

theoretically important possibility that spanking is better understood as a sexual activity than is SM.

Another recent study follows Weinberg, Williams and Moser (1984) in restricting eligibility for selection to people for whom SM is experienced as sexual. Taylor and Ussher's respondents "were required to define their sexualities or sexual practices as SM... it was to be their preferred means of sexual arousal..." (Taylor and Ussher 2001, p. 296). Not surprisingly, given the exclusion of all SM-identified people who define their enjoyment differently, all of their respondents maintained that the enjoyment of their activities is dependent upon a sexual context.

This conceptual framework for SM has recently shifted to an assumption of primacy. Darren Langdridge observes that, despite "some recent moves within SM communities to minimize the sexual and instead focus on identities and practices that are more relational... at its core, SM, at least, appears to be about sex and this cannot and, I would argue, should not be denied" (Langdridge 2005, 2006 p. 380).

However, few people have actually studied SM communities—SM as it happens and where it happens, or as Robert Zussman phrases it, "people in places" (2004). Empirical work on SM has focused on self-report psychological profiles (Donnelly and Fraser 1998; Sandbappa et al. 1999; Nordling et al. 2006; Nordling and Sandbappa 2006), which approach SM from a very different paradigm than one that would explore people in places. Much of the current qualitative work on SM draws respondents from websites and chat rooms (Cross and Matheson 2006; Langdridge and Butt 2004; Taylor 1997), where SM is arguably more likely to be framed as sex and "participants" are less likely to have engaged in SM at all. Studies of SM respondents on the Internet are fraught with the highly problematic assumption that people on the internet who *say* that they engage in SM *actually* engage in SM as face-to-face interaction. SM "wannabes"—people who sexualize the discourse of SM on pornographic websites or in chatrooms, but who do not participate in SM—are notorious in public SM communities. People who present as if they are members of the SM community but have never engaged in actual SM activities ("play") may serve as informants for Internet researchers, and may well (despite Cross and Matheson's findings regarding similar sexual proclivities) be a vastly and importantly different group.

There have been a few participant observation studies of actual SM communities, but most are not recent (Kamel 1980; Moser 1998; Scott 1983; Weinberg 1978, 1983; Weinberg and Falk 1980). The notion of SM as leisure appears in one notable exception to this (Williams 2006, 2009), and another (Weiss 2006b) provides a more complex portrait of a rich and vibrant SM community. Still, however, we have little information about the experiences of people who participate in SM contemporary communities, and SM has not been theorized outside of the paradigm of sexuality.

The legacy of early thinking about SM, along with mainstream representations (including those that occur in chat rooms), is a narrow and limiting perspective on contemporary SM. In the post-Internet world, SM is something quite different than what it was when it was studied by sex-research pioneers. A quick search on the web results in links to dozens of established, above-ground, tax-paying SM organizations, which host play parties, educational events and "vanilla" (unrelated to SM or SM participants) social functions.

In the public SM community I studied, SM was neither a precursor to conventional sexual activity, nor a replacement for it, but an end unto itself. Activities ranged from light spanking to back whipping, cutting and breath play. Among community members who view SM as erotic or as sexual, many have difficulty articulating their erotic experience. In

this community, at least one person in any given SM interaction (also called a “scene”) was usually dressed. Kissing during play was rare, and genital play was much less common than other kinds of play (such as back-flogging). Participants often played with people they did not find sexually attractive and with whom they were not interested in being sexual. After play, participants normally went out to eat or home to sleep.

Yet the appropriation of SM iconography in popular fashion styles and mainstream media (see Weiss 2006a), the discourses of power and powerlessness in chat rooms, couples who experiment with light bondage in the bedroom, and real-life educational workshops on how to safely punch a play partner in the face are all glossed into the same literature. Having been socially constructed within and for a discourse of sex, in a pre-information-age historical context, the ongoing characterization of SM ought to be engaged both critically and theoretically.

The serious leisure framework

Within the SM community, the euphemism for SM interactions, “what it is that we do,” suggests that an adequate description of SM is elusive and complex. This paper seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of SM by exploring it as serious leisure—a devotion to the pursuit of an activity that requires specialized skills and resources, and provides particular benefits.

The understanding of a recreational activity as serious leisure exists in opposition to “casual leisure,” which Stebbins defines as “an immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable core activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (Stebbins 1992, 2006, 2008, p. 38). (From a leisure perspective, most recreational sex might be understood as casual leisure.) Understanding SM as a serious leisure pursuit expands the analytical framework beyond its “bedroom” milieu, and, as others have argued (Weiss 2006b; Williams 2006), recognizes the complexity and social richness of SM interaction.

Serious leisure has six qualities that distinguish it from casual leisure, all of which are salient aspects of SM participation in Caeden. To briefly summarize and paraphrase Stebbins, they are:

1. the need for perseverance—in the face of resistance, participants return to their leisure pursuit
2. the leisure pursuit as a career
3. effort involving the acquisition of knowledge, training, experience and/or specialized skills
4. durable benefits—personal and social-psychological benefits of engaging in the leisure activity
5. unique ethos—the spirit of community
6. personal identification with the leisure activity

Because of space constraints, this analysis focuses primarily on the second, third and fourth of Stebbins’ distinguishing characteristics of serious leisure (effort, leisure career and durable benefits) as they relate to this community. I hope that these primary discussions will illustrate also the remaining three characteristics (perseverance, unique ethos and personal identification with SM). Other work has offered representations of SM communities in which these characteristics are more fully illustrated (Newmahr 2008, 2011 forthcoming; Weiss 2006b), but a brief exposition may be useful here.

Overview: Perseverance, unique ethos and personal identification

The SM community in Caeden functions as a close-knit, intimate safe space for community members. Many participants structure their lives around community (“the scene”) activities, relying on their web blogs, cell phones and discussion lists to maintain consistent contact. It is not unusual for community members to have little everyday contact with outsiders. Some participants also organize their work lives around their involvement in the scene, even declining opportunities for income that would interfere with their participation in the scene. Even among people with conventional work lives and contact with their families, many report that their “vanilla” friendships have dwindled or disappeared since joining the community.³

This level of immersion can lead to a “burnout” cycle, during which participants become overwhelmed by the scene, often questioning their identity and their psychological well-being, and temporarily leave the scene. Generally, they return a few weeks or months later, and immerse themselves once again. This commitment to remain involved in the community despite periods of diminishing returns is one example of what Stebbins calls “perseverance,” and illustrates the centrality of SM identity for the members of this community.

Personal identification with SM, community spirit and perseverance are significant aspects of community life, often to the exclusion of work, family and “vanilla” relationships. Many people find a sense of belonging in this community that they have not found elsewhere; participants frequently describe their discovery of the Caeden SM community as finding “home.”

Effort: Learning to play

Like other serious leisure endeavors, participation in SM involves significant effort and a fairly steep learning curve. Learning to play is an integral part of “becoming” a member of this community, and this social process shapes and reshapes motivations and contributes to identity formation. Even apart from participants’ general desires to avoid sustenance and infliction of unintended injury themselves, the community as a whole shares responsibility for recruitment, education and supervision of SM play.

Learning to play centers not only around safety techniques, but around a complex discourse of safety. The question of safety (which includes emotional, physical and psychological safety) is taken very seriously in Caeden. The community is organized around this discourse, which distinguishes SM participants from criminals and the mentally ill, and SM from assault. Most of the processes involved in learning to play link back to this discourse.

Learning to top

Learning to “top” (that is, to participate in an SM scene as the person directing, and usually performing, action upon a person who is “bottoming”) involves five distinct processes:

1. acquiring technical skills (learning to wield SM toys safely and in ways that bottoms find satisfactory)

³ A thorough discussion of the ways in which this occurs, the role of the community in the lives of its members, and the relationships between community and identity is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper, but insights into some of these issues appears elsewhere (Newmahr 2008).

2. understanding communication in play (learning to read body language and becoming familiar with common strategies of communication in play)
3. learning basic safety information (recognizing dilated pupils, breathing changes, areas of the body that can and cannot be hit safely, how to handle emergencies)
4. coming to terms with performing (and feeling) sadism and/or dominance, and
5. learning how to handle potential emotional and psychological reactions of the bottom.

All of these processes, however, can be understood as reflecting a community emphasis on safety. As in many serious leisure pursuits, it is easy to get hurt, or to hurt someone, if a person does not possess the necessary knowledge and skills to engage in it safely. Although all participants are charged with playing safely, the responsibility for safe play falls primarily to the person topping during the scene.

Acquisition of technical skills

Most people begin learning to top by acquiring technical skills. Community members learn to use SM “toys” from other players. Through formal and informal mechanisms, more experienced players demonstrate, for example, how to hold one’s arm when throwing a whip laterally and how to tie a “predicament” knot that tightens when pulled. Other participants also serve as tools for practicing these skills, providing information about the effects of the top’s technique itself, as well as a sense of her strength, speed and range.

Safety in SM extends beyond the technical use of toys, and this learning frequently occurs in formal settings. A demonstration on the use of a flogger⁴ includes a discussion of where one can and cannot strike a person with a flogger without causing injury. Meetings designed for newer participants include basic first aid information as well as more specialized knowledge such as sensitivity to changes in breathing patterns, the dilation of a bottom’s pupils, and how to handle emergencies.

I once attended a workshop on fire play conducted by Enjo, a well-established veteran member of the scene. Her description of the materials needed for fire play included a lengthy explanation of the differences between isopropyl and ethanol alcohols; apparently, the temperatures at which alcohols burn vary, and ones that burn hotter and faster are safer. She suggested keeping a spray bottle with water nearby, and said that she likes to keep one hand free in case she needs to extinguish a flame quickly.

Enjo’s “demo bottom” was a boi⁵ named CJ who stood, naked and hairless, with his hands clasped behind his back. Enjo informed us that she would not take questions during the demonstration because she needed to devote her full attention to the scene. She lit a birthday candle and placed it into a metal cup. Holding that cup in her right hand, she picked up a second cup, which contained a blend of different alcohols. With her left hand, she dipped a chunk of cotton into the alcohol and wiped it in the shape of a large V from CJ’s navel to his shoulders. Quickly, she dipped her fingers into the alcohol up, swept them over the candle to ignite them, and then touched her fingers to CJ’s navel. The flame blazed up his torso in an orange-blue V. It lasted approximately two seconds.

Afterwards, Enjo patted down CJ’s skin, asked if we had questions, and began the workshop. The workshop attendees paired off and practiced the preparatory steps with each other (without the use of actual fire). Enjo then offered to demonstrate fire play on

⁴ A flogger is a whip, usually but not always made of leather, consisting of one handle to which multiple flat strands (“falls”) are attached.

⁵ “Boi” here refers to an FTM transgendered person with an identity and presentation as an adolescent boy.

interested audience members. Nearly everyone in the room accepted her offer, and she moved from arm to arm, setting each ablaze for a second or two.

These workshops are a typical and central component of the SM community in Caeden. They serve not only to pass along technical information, but to provide a network; an interested attendee who did not previously know a veteran skilled in fire play would later be able to contact Enjo herself or the organizers of the workshop, for further mentorship.

Understanding communication in-scene

While physical safety is the most obvious, and often most serious, concern in SM, safe play also requires that the top understand sometimes-unconventional modes of communication during SM play, which are not necessarily clear or consistent from one scene to the next. Because direct communication is undesirable to many SM players, tops must learn to decode communication strategies in play and to recognize signals that the bottom may or may not intend to send. A general tendency among bottoms to safeword only as a last resort makes this an even more important skill. Tops must often decipher ambiguous, conflicting or barely-visible signals in order to avoid causing real damage to play partners, and to remain desirable as play partners. This is most effectively learned through playing and discussing the scenes with play partners afterwards, though participants offer insight and advice about these matters while watching other scenes or publicly reflecting on their own.

Understanding and handling emotional and psychological responses

Emotional and psychological safety are also salient concerns in the Caeden SM community. SM play involves actions that are processed differently in other contexts, and tops in particular must be prepared for unanticipated emotional and psychological responses. Part of education about topping involves learning about the effects SM play *could* have on *any given* player while bottoming.

In addition to handling sometimes-unexpected responses from the bottom, tops must learn to navigate their own emotional responses to topping. At some point, most people who top find themselves wrestling with their performances (and feelings) of sadism and/or dominance, often grappling with feelings of guilt, shame and fear. This coming-to-terms is usually an informal process; demonstrations on the topic occur only occasionally. More commonly, tops process these feelings with their friends in the scene, and turn to other people who top for reassurance and support. Generally, however, most tops are regarded as safer when they are believed to be articulate and introspective about these issues.

These five learning processes—acquiring technical skills, learning about basic safety, understanding modes of scene communication, and understanding and handling emotional and psychological impacts on others and on self—are necessary in order for tops to acquire, engage in, and secure future play. For those who wish to top, the engagement in SM in a public community is extremely difficult, if not impossible, without these skills. Because the SM community is insular and protective, even at the national level, unskilled or unsafe tops who do manage to play in public rarely get a second opportunity to do so, without further SM education.

Learning to bottom

All SM participants must acquire specialized information and learn challenging skills, but the processes of learning to bottom are less obvious. Because tops are charged more fully

with maintaining safety in scene, classes and demonstrations focus more frequently on learning how to top. Instructive classes for bottoms tend to focus on submission⁶ and service—examples include how to handle the tensions between submission and agency, how to reconcile (female) submission with feminism, and the challenges of submission as a characteristic of a relationship (outside of play). There are few classes specifically for bottoms, though safety information directed at bottoms is a standard component of novice- and safety-oriented meetings.

Most often, learning to bottom involves learning to negotiate the tension between accountability for one's own safety and satisfaction, on the one hand, and the maintenance and preservation of a power imbalance on the other. Thus sometimes bottoms (particularly those who identify as “submissives”) learn to give themselves “permission” to recognize and understand their likes, dislikes and limits, as well as how to communicate those things in scene and out of scene. Further, bottoms learn how to evaluate their limits—“hard” limits that should be left alone, or “soft” limits that should be “pushed” by the top.

Bottoms also learn criteria for playing safely, though these lessons center on choosing a play partner wisely and disclosing concerns, issues and health problems. Like tops, many bottoms also wrestle with reconciling their submission/masochism with identities and senses of self. Finally, bottoms “learn” how to process, navigate and negotiate pain or unpleasant sensation. Unlike the formalized, technical learning process in becoming a top, this is a meaning-making process.

Durable benefits of SM

Stebbins' fourth criterion for the consideration of an activity as serious leisure is that participants reap particular kinds of benefits from their activities. These “durable benefits” of leisure activities include the following eight:

- development of skills, abilities and knowledge (self-actualization)
- the expression of same (self-expression)
- feelings of accomplishment
- regeneration or renewal of self
- recognition of serious leisure participation by others (self-image)
- social interaction and social attraction
- a sense of belonging
- lasting physical products

Self-actualization and self-expression

The development of specialized skills allows for both self-actualization and self-expression through SM play. Not easily acquired, these skills require practice, dexterity and dedication to their improvement. This effort thus provides a backdrop for feelings of technical,

⁶ The hermeneutics here are hotly contested, but I contend that submission is best understood as a particular kind of bottoming, in which the objectives of play are intertwined with experiences of power and powerlessness.

psychological, and emotional competence through play. These are common experiences for all SM players. Seth captures it well from both “sides” of the SM interaction:

Topping feeds very much on my need for competency. We’ve talked about this before. When a scene is going very well, then there’s a great deal of—I would say pride, in that fact, in skill well-executed. (*Interview excerpt, Seth*)

Because SM play is about doing and being asked to do, it provides opportunities to feel competent on all “sides” of the interaction. Most bottoms describe feelings of competence and success through bottoming, particularly through service.

There’s a mode I get into which is very cooperative and service-oriented when I’m subbing. Cooperative and it’s extraordinarily competent and strong. Like, just give me anything that you want me to do—and it will fucking get done. (*Interview excerpt, Seth*)

Additionally, both topping and bottoming provide players with opportunities to revel in their physical strength. Feelings of physical strength come from delivering or withstanding pain or intense sensation. This can be especially salient for people who bottom. Faye, a retired military officer, said that she prefers to stand free during intense scenes, that she “likes having to control [her]self while giving up control.” (*Field notes, January 2003*)

Feelings of accomplishment: Empowerment and efficacy

In Stebbins’ work on serious leisure devotees, self-actualization refers to the acquisition of particular skills, and self-expression refers to the opportunities to utilize those skills. In Caeden, these two benefits are closely linked to feelings of accomplishment, and together these are important and powerful rewards of SM participation for community members.

SM participants often identify a rather particular satisfaction that emerges from the intersection of intentional action with effectualness. These particular feelings of accomplishment (which I call efficacy) comprise experiences of both topping and bottoming for many SM participants. Feelings of efficacy during topping come from eliciting change in a person. These changes can be manifested physically, in skin color or texture, or in tears or screams. On a very tactile level, topping can be about impacting the body—watching skin yield to one’s hand, drawing blood or seeing the beginnings of a bruise. Change can also manifest emotionally or psychologically, such as when a bottom does something the top believes she would not have otherwise done.

Feelings of efficacy are not merely rewarding, but often an objective of play, especially given the effort topping demands. Longtime community member Eric categorized one scene as his worst because the effort he expended generated no observable change in the bottom:

And I started to flog this person. This person, as it turns out, that I didn’t know, is known as basically “the wall.” In order to make her feel like you hit her, you had to—I had to slam her so hard that the next day I could not feel my wrists. That’s how numb I was. And I realized that I was set up, it was basically like these people wanted to see me fail, basically. They were setting me up for a joke. She was perfectly happy to go along with it. But it was the worst scene, because basically I had no reason to play with this person. And then it became a matter of pride, you know, I gotta hit them. And I killed myself doing it—I really didn’t have to, I could’ve said, “Lady, I can’t do this.” Let’s put it this way, when I finally slammed her full force, she was like “Are you doing anything?” She was not being very heavily affected.

Eric's understanding of his "failure" here stems from the idea that success in topping is measured by the observable effects on the bottom.

Among people who bottom, submission in particular is frequently experienced as a source of efficacy. Submissive-identified participants, or bottoms who suddenly "feel submissive" in scene sometimes cast their physical experience as being necessary for the top. In this way they view themselves as effecting a change in the mental or emotional state of the top. At a panel discussion entitled "The Mind of a Submissive: Why We Do What We Do," I was struck by this common theme. The panel members, five in all, couched the appeal of submission in feelings of helpfulness, usefulness and effectiveness. Georgia said she liked "feeling like you've done something right," and Tony said that he submitted for the same reason he had become a paramedic: "to help people."

Casting a top's demands as a need, a submissive can view her actions as the only or the best way for the top to meet that need. The bottom in this case eliminates this perceived deficit in the top, thereby drawing feelings of efficacy and empowerment from her acquiescence. When bottoming does not involve submission specifically, players tend to emphasize endurance and stamina, rather than efficacy, as feelings of accomplishment.

Regeneration or renewal of self

SM play generates a sense of self renewal on multiple levels. The burnout-rebirth process described earlier, in which members withdraw from the scene and return weeks or months later, functions as one source of self-renewal. Though the rejuvenation period occurs outside of daily community life, the catalyst for the regeneration is SM involvement.

SM play can also be cathartic, as others have noted (Weiss 2006b), and this catharsis is often experienced as self-renewal. Participants are aware of the potential for SM as a space for emotional liberation (though some argue that "anger" is not included in the array of permissible emotions with which to play).

Russ stood behind Janelle and swung the flogger as hard as I'd ever seen anyone swing anything, and it landed on her back with a tremendous *thwack*. I thought she was going to break in half. She screamed, loudly, and he hit her again. Over and over he hit her that hard, breaking a serious sweat by the fifth swing. And over and over again she screamed, until one—the last one—brought her to her knees. He turned her around, played with her breasts and she dissolved into tears. Russ later told me that this was a formula for them; Janelle's goal was to cry. (*Field notes, July 2002*)

Regardless of whether catharsis is the objective of a given scene, the physical, emotional and psychological intensity of SM combine with its marginalized status to generate intense emotional responses that players often find it cathartic.

Even without catharsis, SM can be experienced as regenerating. The experience of play often involves intense concentration, intense sensation, and intense psychological and emotional stimulation. This results in an immersive and re-energizing experience that will be explored more fully in the next section.

Finally, SM participants sometimes use play to overcome traumatic experience. For Faye, the witnessing of a fatal flogging in an Asian country while on military duty had left her deeply disturbed by the idea (and the imagery) of flogging. Through SM play, Faye was consciously working toward becoming comfortable with a flogging scene, and thus overcoming fear that she viewed as an obstacle to personal growth. Other common examples of overcoming fear and trauma include playing with bondage to work through fears of restraint and blindfolds and hoods to become more comfortable with darkness.

Self-image, social interaction and social attraction

The social benefits of participation in this serious leisure pursuit are perhaps clearest through the extent of the immersive and insular qualities of the community, to the exclusion of a social world in which many community members have never felt entirely comfortable. This sense of belonging is intertwined with the benefits of community identity—what Stebbins calls self-image—as well as social interaction and social attraction.

Lasting physical products

Participants in SM purchase, trade, create and sell physical products for the purpose of engaging in SM play. These include SM toys, such as whips, floggers and canes, as well as articles of leather clothing that symbolize community involvement, such as vests, wristbands and corsets. In addition, Stebbins' conceptualization of lasting physical products might be extended to include “marks,” evidence of SM play left the body. Although some players do seek to avoid marks for a variety of reasons, many bottoms look to achieve marks. Welts, bruises, scratches and scars are enthusiastically displayed and verbally appreciated, and many people photograph their marks in order to maintain an even more lasting record of their SM play.

SM as leisure career

Another distinguishing characteristic of serious leisure is the leisure career, drawing from Goffman's concept of a moral career as the sequential set of changes that one undergoes during a particular “social strand of any person's course through life” (1959, p. 125). For Stebbins, the basis of careers is not only temporal continuity, but the relationship of this continuity to a trajectory of rewards and prestige: “Moreover, we are accustomed to thinking of this continuity as progress along these lines from some starting point, even though continuity may also include career retrogression” (Stebbins 2009, p. 68). The SM career involves the acquisition of new skills and vocabulary, a competency in the community discourse, and an experiential progression from “lighter” activities to “heavier” ones.

The learning process of becoming a player discussed earlier illustrates the temporal aspect of SM involvement in this community, and some of the rewards of SM have been explored as well. The accumulation of prestige in the community is of course intertwined with these skills and their expression, and is an important component of community life.

Social status within the Caeden SM community operates on multiple levels. Paths to high status are varied and related to identification labels, and means of status achievement in Caeden are clear to most participants. For example, as I alluded to in the story of Enjo's fire demonstration earlier, the emphasis on safety is a source of pride and of status. Safety is part of SM identity in Caeden, and to contribute to the discourse of safety is to make a statement that one belongs there. The commitment to safety is a part of public SM life in Caeden. Newer players, fresh from SM books or novice groups, often seem eager to demonstrate their knowledge of SM safety to bystanders (“That flogger's a little too close to her spine”), and veteran players generally avail themselves for impromptu lessons, demonstrations, and safety information.

Many players—generally those who top—carry alcohol wipes for toys, and several also carry rubber gloves and CPR masks. At the only SM club in Caeden, safety is generally the

domain of the owner, who prohibits blood play and advanced breath play, common prohibitions in public SM clubs. He also regularly makes rounds throughout the club or sends a trusted employee or associate to do safety checks; I once overheard him tell a staff member to “Go make sure that scream was a good one.”

At private parties and large public events, hosts post “house safewords,” particular words that, if uttered by the bottom, will end the scene at the hand of the hosts or “dungeon monitors,” regardless of the top’s response. Dungeon monitors generally take these assignments seriously, and have been known to interrupt scenes out of their own concern for safety, even in the absence of the utterance of a safeword.

Before the start of a meeting one night, I overheard Trey talking to someone about the sensation of a perforated eardrum, which he had apparently acquired in a recent fight scene. In a strange coincidence, since this is not a common injury, I was experiencing similar symptoms, due to a slap that had landed across my ear the previous night. Suddenly concerned that my eardrum was perforated, I asked him to describe his symptoms. He did so, and recommended his physician.

After the meeting, Russ approached me, having overheard the conversation. He was very concerned—and slightly irritated—that I might have an injury, and he wanted to know with whom I had played. Shortly thereafter, Shane approached me with similar concerns. By the end of the evening, word had traveled and more than five people spoke with me privately, wanting to ensure that I was only playing safely, publicly, and with people who “knew what they were doing.”

The response of the community members to the idea that I might have been injured during play emerges directly from the emphasis on safety in the community. I learned later that Trey’s story had elicited responses as well, though because he was both a veteran player and a top-identified man, the responses were couched in disapproval rather than in protectiveness. Adam, with whom I had played the previous night, deeply regretted the accident, and was worried about me. Aware that this reflected poorly on him, he was also embarrassed, and at least a bit offended, by the suspicion it had aroused in his abilities.

In the SM community, safety, social status and community identity are closely interrelated, in ways that occur in other serious leisure communities, and particularly among other edgeworkers⁷ (Laurendeau and Van Brunschot 2005; Lois 2006), where the consequences of ignorance or carelessness can be serious.

More specifically, the achievement and maintenance of a good reputation is specific to bottoming and topping. People who bottom earn reputations as good bottoms in three distinct ways: by responsive performances during SM scenes, by having a high pain tolerance or interest, and by being willing to experiment with riskier play.

Because much of the appeal of topping is the sense of efficacy, the observable and immediate response of a bottom contributes significantly to the enjoyment of play by tops. Many people who top consider themselves “reaction junkies.” A bottom who moans, yelps, screams, laughs, wriggles and writhes thus generally has a higher status than one who is stoic during play, all else being equal.

Bottoms with a high pain tolerance allow for more creativity and less tentativeness on the part of the top. This is often appreciated, even though not all tops play with pain, and fewer tops play with heavy pain. Bottoms with a high pain tolerance are accorded a high

⁷ Adapting the term “edgework” from journalist Hunter S. Thompson, Stephen Lyng describes the connection between edgework experience as those that “involve a clearly observable threat to one’s physical or mental well-being or one’s sense of an ordered existence” (1990, p. 857).

status even by such players; the difference may be understood as an incompatibility, but the bottom has a very definite elevated status nonetheless.

For the same reason, bottoms who have fewer limits provide their partners with more possibilities, and often the opportunity to engage in play in which most others are uninterested.

Because to top is fundamentally “to do” in SM play, tops attain status by doing what they do well and safely, by community standards. Mastery (relative to other tops) of a particular skill, such as throwing a single-tail or playing with fire, can confer status, as can general proficiency in a wide range of skills.

People in Caeden are sensitive to, and generous regarding, issues of status and prestige. The reinforcement of good reputations is considered good etiquette rather than poor taste. Participants speak very highly of good players with such frequency that it seems obligatory to do so. For example, although I did not ask questions about other members of the scene during interviews, most respondents told volunteered lengthy stories about other people’s scenes and complimented other players, with little provocation and little apparent relevance to their own answers. Further, negative comments about the skills of others are rare; players are very careful about reputation management and generally reserve unflattering remarks for situations in which a concern for safety exists.

Discussion: “People who *love* SM, and people who *do* SM”

In 1991, psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi’s bestselling treatise on “the psychology of optimal experience” identified optimal experience as autotelic, that which is an end in and of itself, for its own sake. Csikszentmihályi argued that this state of consciousness, which he called “flow,” is the result of attention so intense and all-encompassing that one achieves a sense of order in consciousness, against the default state of psychic entropy. Flow involves challenge and the utilization of skills, intense concentration, an altered sense of time, the loss of self-consciousness, goals, feedback and the conflation of action with awareness. Elsewhere Csikszentmihályi described the flow experience as one in which “The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one...”⁸

This optimal experience, Csikszentmihályi argues, can be generated in activities as varied as playing a musical instrument, running, and performing manual labor. For Stebbins, the flow experience can be a motivation for the undertaking of various kinds of serious leisure, including mountain climbing, kayaking and snowboarding (2005). Understanding the carnal experience of SM as flow helps to locate it as serious leisure, and further complicates the view of SM as, necessarily, “sex.”

In SM play, flow is generated physically and/or psychologically, through topping or bottoming. Bottoming is more likely to result in observable altered consciousness than topping, but the community is also more highly motivated to recognize altered states in bottoms than in tops. The flow experience for bottoms is most frequently called “subspace” or “bottom space,” and has many other descriptors, including “loopy,” “flying,” and “fried.” When the flow experience in topping is recognized discursively, these phrases include “in the zone,” “grooving” or “in top space.”

⁸ Excerpt from interview with John Geirland, (1996), “Go With The Flow.” *Wired* magazine, September, Issue 4.09.

Tops achieve flow through mental focus, particularly when engaged in activities that require intense concentration, such as knife play, needle play, and advanced bondage. Tops can also experience flow through the physical act of topping; the physical and auditory rhythm of flogging, juxtaposed with the concentration required to do so safely, can be meditative. Eric describes his experience as being “in the zone:”

I feel very large. There’s an intense sense of space, of infinity, of pure control, of being one with everything...I’m not here right now. I’ve hit that zone. In 30 minutes I’ll come out of it and go wow, did I do all that? You know, I remember it but you’re totally in the moment in that respect. (*Interview excerpt, Eric*)

When bottoming, players experience flow as a result of intense rhythmic sensation, sensation or pain itself, unrelenting focus on a particular task or concentrated effort to endure a sensation or circumstance. Lawrence said of the first time he experienced the “endorphin rush” of SM play:

It was a very intense buzz. My body was very light, I didn’t feel the weight of my body. I didn’t lose awareness of where I was, but my head cleared up completely which was really wonderful because I’m always thinking. I have a very busy mind and sometimes that gets the better of me. And it was wonderful just to be able to relax and not have to force myself to relax...I’d describe it as more as a high than a buzz. The closest thing I can say is that it’s like being drunk...so it was really amazing at that moment to be—all that I was, was the sum of my five senses. That was the thing that I most relished, being able to use my body to the utmost. (*Interview excerpt, Lawrence*)

These “sharply exciting events and occasions” that are most memorable to serious leisure participants are “thrills” for Stebbins, who considers them “exceptional instances of the flow experience” (2007, p. 15). Stebbins found accounts of the importance of flow among kayakers, mountain climbers and snowboarders. For members of the Caeden community, the flow experience (though not articulated using Csíkszentmihályi’s term) is an important component of SM play. This thrill-and-flow cycle combines levels of enjoyment that seem alternatively superficial and deep, resulting in a holistic and multi-layered sense of pleasure, rebirth and serenity. The view of SM as (simply) sex conflates the ecstatic with the erotic, two conceptualizations that are often intertwined, but that warrant more precise and critical treatment than the literature on SM has acknowledged.

SM participants speak of their play in terms of ecstatic experience, or what can be understood as flow. They speak of weightlessness: of grooving and flying, of the cessation of cognitive process and of the disappearance of the world around them. Their discourse is not necessarily one of sexual arousal, erogenous zones or orgasms. While sex and flow are not dichotomous constructs or experiences, the failure to distinguish between SM as a social phenomenon, on the one hand, and private sadomasochistic sex on the other, obscures the complexity of SM. Further, the oversimplification of SM as being “about sex” reinforces the pathologized assumptions about the nature of desire, arousal and eroticism.

While SM communities certainly include people who engage in sadomasochistic sex, they are also sites of engagement in sadomasochistic activities that are not clearly or necessarily experienced as “sexual.” Some SM participants insist that their play has nothing to do with sex at all, and there are community members who decry the presence of any sexual activity in SM clubs, lest SM be conflated with “kinky sex.” Others view SM as potentially sexual, but not a core aspect of SM experience. Sophie explained, “I haven’t

actually had the experience of it having very much to do with my sexuality—I can get aroused, but it’s not a default position” (*Interview excerpt, Sophie*).

Further, even if SM is sexual, the assumption that it is “about sex” implies that sexuality lies at the core of SM, and this is not so clear. Sam, a member of the community, shared his perspective that “there is a difference between people who *love* SM, and people who *do* SM,” in order to highlight precisely the distinction. From Sam’s perspective, people who *do* SM engage in it as a means to a (sexual) end. People who “love SM,” by comparison, view SM as an end in and of itself. It may or may not be sexual, and it may be erotic sometimes and not others, but it is always SM. This distinguishes not only between SM participants and people who are instead interested in sadomasochistic *sex*, but also between serious leisure devotees and others; Sam’s distinction (which quickly took root in the general discourse of the community) parallels the difference between SM as sex and SM as serious leisure.

This is not to disavow an erotic component in SM, for some or most or even all of its participants. To the extent, for example, that eroticism is understood in relation to adrenaline response (such as increased heart rate, heavy breathing, dilated pupils, hypersensitivity to touch), SM is usually erotic for participants, along with a host of other activities that generate flow (cello-playing, rock-climbing, dancing, for instances) which we often do not recognize as erotic. All carnal experience contains within it elements typically recognized as erotic. Flow closely parallels that which we recognize as erotic experience. If all instances of flow are necessarily “about sex,” then sex as a hermeneutic device warrants further exploration.

There are important reasons for SM participants to disengage sexuality from SM, emerging from the sex/violence binary that has underlain the debates about SM since the late seventies. To discount their voices is ultimately a dismissal of SM—of what it does and does not involve, of how people experience it, and of all that it is *other* than sex. In an ironic and unfortunate twist, this often-queer-friendly approach forces SM into a heteronormative model of sexuality, the very same battlegrounds of the gay and lesbian civil rights movement: a call for equal rights for kinky people. While kinky people, as all people, should have “equal rights,” the distinction between SM and bedroom kink is analytically important. If the argument is that what we understand as “sex” needs to expand to include all activities that comprise an element of erotic experience (perhaps, as examples, marathon running, ballroom dancing, motorcycle riding and homicide), then SM is sex, and I would support such a conceptual shift. As we currently understand sex, however, SM in real life is often very different, and sex-positive efforts are not helped by the insistence that it is not.

Subsuming all SM under the heading “kinky sex,” even over the protests of community members, is a political issue in another sense as well. To understand SM as something other than sex is to come dangerously close to (re)casting SM as assault, potentially blurring the important line between SM and domestic violence. For sex researchers, it may be that it is not only explicit consent, but also the intellectual accessibility of erotic pleasure that renders SM acceptable to discuss, to study, and ultimately, to defend.

In the public “SM community”⁹ that I studied, SM can best be understood as a serious leisure endeavor. This community is a rich and complex social organization constructed around an immersive recreational pursuit. It provides for members a safe space and strong sense of belonging and identity, a place to learn and express highly specialized skills and

⁹ There are variations across the nation and within communities—such as the BDSM community, the leather community and the kink community. The distinctions between these terms are contested, but the significance to my argument is in the use of the word “community” rather than in these distinctions.

competence, and generates a deep and meaningful identification. SM participants also reap the “durable benefits” Stebbins finds in serious leisure pursuits.

SM challenges us to reexamine what we mean when we call a thing sexual and when we describe experience as erotic, and further to explore the implications of these conceptualizations. Understanding SM as serious leisure allows for a fuller understanding of a growing social phenomenon, and illustrates the constraints of theorizing sexuality more broadly.

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