

BDSM, Interaction Rituals and Open Bodies

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Abstract In this article, based on ethnographic fieldwork in Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) communities in Sweden, I explore the ritual aspects of BDSM. Drawing on Douglas and Collins' theories of interaction rituals, I analyse the creation of emotional energy during humiliation practice through connection and intimacy between the participants. The article examines how the ritual aspect of BDSM sessions can be understood as an enabler of expressions and emotional energy. BDSM becomes a free zone in which bodies are allowed to be open in a Bakhtinian sense, that is, transgressive and beyond control.

Keywords BDSM · Interaction rituals · Emotional energy · Body · Taboo · Ethnography

Introduction

In this article, based on ethnographic fieldwork in BDSM communities in Sweden, I explore the bodily and ritual aspects of Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism (BDSM). The abbreviation BDSM seeks to describe a variety of (sexual) behaviours including an implicit or explicit erotic power exchange. According to many practitioners, a central part in BDSM is the creation of common rituals, where the group dynamics are particularly significant (Carlström 2015; Beckmann 2009). Turner (1973) defines a ritual as a 'stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a

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sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities of forces on behalf of the actor's goals and interest' (p. 1100). Based on field notes from BDSM sessions involving humiliation, the article aims to explore ritual aspects of this form of practices. Humiliation means that a person is exposed to, or forced to perform acts that are not necessarily physically dangerous, but taboo or uncomfortable. Drawing on Douglas (1966/2005) and Collins' (2005) theories of interaction rituals, I explore different meanings and motives to the sessions, and how voluntary humiliation can be orchestrated. Douglas and Collins both show that the ritual concept can be extended, and be applicable to various forms of behaviour also in secular communities. To understand the practitioner's attitudes to body fluids and taboos in the practices, I turn to Bakhtin's theory of the *grotesque body* (1965/1984).

There are few studies to date highlighting the ritual aspects of BDSM. Myers (1983) notes that the individual and group dynamics of *rites de passage*—rituals and initiatory practices in traditional non-Western cultures—are strikingly similar to those of the BDSM community. Mains (1984/2002) explores the spiritual, sexual, emotional and cultural aspects of the gay male leather community. He also links the leather and sadomasochistic experiences to the tribal rites of indigenous societies around the world and highlights the intimacy, intensity and altered states of consciousness in the plays. Role-playing, Mains argues, often plays on the themes of buried or frustrated emotions and can function as an enabler to heal emotional wounds. Beckmann (2009, p. 183) reflects on the link between spirituality and BDSM and points out:

The lack of areas of spirituality that were formerly satisfied by religious rituals left a void in Western consumer societies. The filling of this void might be one of the broader social meanings that the increased motivation to engage in the 'bodily practice' of consensual 'SM' in contemporary consumer culture signals.

In line with Beckmann, Carlström (2016) analyses the relations between BDSM fantasies, spirituality and rituals, concluding that participating in BDSM could serve the same purpose as a religious ritual, and enable meaning and a sense of security and belonging for the practitioners. Another researcher who describes the spiritual dimension of BDSM is Norman (1991). In particular, he explores the ability of BDSM to affect certain states of consciousness and likens the practice to sexual rituals of the Eastern tantric religious tradition. Comfort (1978) argues that sadomasochistic activities have similarities with magical rites in their ability to expand participants' self-awareness. According to Rubin (2004), SM practices involve the kinds of transformational experiences more often associated with spiritual disciplines. Sagarin et al. (2015) liken BDSM with another type of intense physical activity: extreme rituals (e.g., body piercing, firewalking). They suggest that as with BDSM, extreme rituals facilitate escape from the self, given the trances that some rituals are reported to produce. Sagarin, Lee and Klemen conclude that 'people appear to pursue BDSM and extreme rituals, in part, for similar reasons, and they appear to anticipate similar benefits from both' (p. 51). Westerfelhaus (2007) describes that BDSM rituals can be viewed as forms to release individual fantasies

and transform them into collective emotional energy and myths. According to Westerfelhaus, the rituals can also function as ways to create collective feelings and experiences of ecstasy and euphoria.

Understandings of humiliation in BDSM are still a void in the prior scholarship. In this study, BDSM humiliation is explored as an interaction ritual, which includes interconnecting group-dynamic feelings, healing effects, affection and community.

Methods

In 2012 and 2013, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted within several BDSM communities in Sweden. I participated in different forms of meetings, such as workshops, pub evenings and clubs. I became a member of Darkside, the largest Swedish BDSM network on the Internet with approximately 170,000 members (Carlström 2016), where I advertised my research project. I also advertised in a sex shop and contacted non-profit organisations working with sexual issues and for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and informed them about the research project. During the observation, I made ‘mental notes’ (cf. O’Connell Davidson and Layder 1994) of environments, events and characters. When it was possible, I recorded short phrases or keywords. Immediately after the observation I wrote a detailed field note of what had happened during the observation, including descriptions of events and persons as well as conversations with and between people. Most of the field notes were written from memory immediately after the observation. The thematic analysis, as described by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), is closest to my analysis work. Different categories and components were identified in the material and were analysed in relation to theoretical perspectives and previous research. Throughout the entire project, ethical considerations played a central role. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The project follows the Swedish Research Council’s ethical guidelines (Codex 2012) and was reviewed by the Regional Ethical Review Board.¹

Theoretical Framework

Interaction Rituals

Ritual is more to society than words are to thought (Douglas 1966/2005, p. 77).

Important transitions in individuals’ lives have always been associated with rituals, and in traditional cultures, these were predetermined and defined in relation to age and gender, so-called *rites de passage*; that is, passages which are often

¹ Dnr. 2012/180 and 2013/232.

characterised by collective ritual ceremonies (Douglas 1966/2005). Under conditions of modernity, such collective ceremonies are less apparent and it has become the individuals' own responsibility to manage life changes (Giddens 1991). Both Douglas and Collins are influenced by Durkheim's (1912/2001) sociology of religion, and his approach to the concepts of sacred and secular. Douglas believes that there are no differences in rituals between what she refers to as 'modern people' and 'primitive cultures', or between religious and prophetic rituals, since they fulfil the same important functions by offering a framework for daily symbolic action. She points out: 'If ritual is suppressed in one form it crops up in others, more strongly the more intense the social interaction' (Douglas 1966/2005, p. 77). Ritualistic behaviour expresses and recognises people's shared values while generating the necessary emotions to keep people in their assigned roles. According to Collins (2005), rituals can be seen as specific behaviour in relation to the sacred. By using the concept of 'interaction rituals', Collins (2005, pp. 48–49) widens the concept of ritual to reach outside a religious context. He defines an interaction ritual as:

- Two or more people are physically assembled in the same place, so that they affect each other by their bodily presence, whether it is in the foreground of their conscious attention or not.
 - These are boundaries to outsiders so that participants have a sense of who is taking part and who are excluded.
 - People focus their attention upon a common object or activity, and by communicating this focus to each other become mutually aware of each other's focus of attention.
 - They share a common mood or emotional experience.
- The interaction ritual has four main outcomes. The participants have the experience of:
- Group solidarity.
 - Emotional energy in the individual: a feeling of confidence, strength and enthusiasm.
 - Symbols that represent the group: 'the sacred objects'.
 - Feelings of morality: the sense of rightness in adhering to the group, respecting its symbols and defending both against transgressors.

The rituals function to handle the symbols, which, according to anthropologist Turner (1969), constitute the smallest units in a ritual activity. The symbols can be objects, activities, words, relationships, events, gestures or spatial units. They have multiple meanings and are bearers of meaning with a united function to maintain morals as well as satisfy the emotional needs of the individual (Turner 1969). Collins (2005) describes symbols as sacred objects to which rituals direct collective attention. Symbols can be both individuals and things, and they have a common agreed importance and meaning for the participants. The community within BDSM can be understood through Collins' (2005) description of the emotional energy that arises in connection with interaction rituals. Through the strong energy generated through the common focus directed towards an object, activity or person,

participants become aware of the established lines, as well as seeing who is occupying a position within the boundaries and who is outside. Collins talks about emotional energy as a connecting group dynamic feeling. High emotional energy is characterised by pride and commitment to the group. The emotional energy also has a moral sentiment and functions to control the members. It includes feelings of what is right and wrong, moral and immoral.

Open Bodies and Taboo Plays

The most barbarous or bizarre rituals and the strangest myths translate some human need, some aspect of life, whether individual or social (Durkheim 1912/2001, p. 4).

Some BDSM practices require access to each other's bodies, where what is usually considered taboo and disgusting becomes part of the role-play. Examples are wet- and scat plays (games containing urine and faeces) and various forms of humiliation games. Most people experience for example nudity, dirt, bodily secretions and forced feeding as degrading. Unlike contexts outside of BDSM where, for example blood and urine should be avoided, body fluids are less taboo within BDSM. BDSM can thus go against the ordinary understanding of body fluids, which also Beckmann (2009) discusses in her study. She points out that in Western society, the functional body ought to be clean and hygienic, where contact with body fluids is an area surrounded by taboos.

Bakhtin (1965/1984) distinguishes between open and closed bodies as two ways to see and understand the body. The body should be understood in both a physical sense and on a symbolic level. The closed (classical) body is perceived as restrained, beautiful and flattened. It appears to be complete and without flaws, visible wounds or defects. It does not extend beyond itself, but becomes self-sufficient. Other bodies are not necessary—the closed body harbours all that is necessary in itself. By contrast, the open body should be perceived as becoming, imperfect, incomplete and transgressive. It is an expression of the unfinished, transgressive to the community and the world. One extreme of the open body is the *grotesque body* (Bakhtin 1965/1984). This body's arena is the carnival, which celebrates fattening food, intoxicating drink and sexual promiscuity in a world where the correct and bourgeois culture is turned upside down. According to Bakhtin (1965/1984, p. 317), the grotesque body is:

(...) a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world (...) This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body.

Exaggeration and excess are, according to Bakhtin, distinctive features of the grotesque style. It is characterised in terms of impurity, disproportion, immediacy, and openings. The grotesque is interested in that which stands out and protrudes from the body when the prolonging parts of the body also connect with other bodies:

‘Mountains and abysses, such is the relief of the grotesque body; or speaking in architectural terms, towers and subterranean passages’ (1965/1984, p. 318). The most important facial feature of the grotesque is the mouth: ‘The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss’ (p. 317) The main elements of the grotesque body are, according to Bakhtin, the parts where the body transcends itself and goes beyond its borders, such as the stomach, breasts, genitals, mouth and buttocks:

Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body - all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. (Bakhtin, p. 317)

The characteristic of all these bulges and gaps is that the limits between the body and the world are loosening.

Results

Humiliation Rituals

This part takes its starting point in empirical examples by describing two workshops that I attended during my field studies. I analyse them by drawing on Bakhtin’s (1965/1984) theory of open and closed bodies, and Douglas’ (1966/2005) and Collins’ (2005) theory of interaction rituals. As mentioned, I am interested in different meanings and motives to voluntary humiliation, and by drawing on the two examples I explore how humiliation sessions can be staged. The examples are based on my field notes and consist of a staging where an audience is present. In the first example, I connect Bakhtin’s theory to one of the BDSM practices that I think people outside the BDSM community have the most difficulty to understand, namely humiliation, where bulges and gaps figure.

The event takes place in a relatively small place and we are about fifty people in the audience, it’s crowded and hot. We are in a BDSM setting to participate in a workshop on humiliation.

A woman is asked to come up to act bottom in a humiliation session. The woman is 25 years old and wearing a T-shirt, skirt and tights. First, the woman is told to keep her hands above her head and to make eye contact with everyone in the audience. The leader stands behind her. After a minute the leader pulls up the shirt so it exposes part of the woman’s breast. The leader involves the audience by saying; ‘Do you notice that she is affected? What physical expression can you see?’ Some in the audience point out that she giggles, becoming red in the face, ashamed and increased heart rate. The woman says she has looked at everyone in the audience, and the leader’s voice becomes hard: ‘Have I told you to stop? Continue!’ The woman continues to

meet the audience's eyes and the leader takes plenty of time, whispers something in the ear of the woman, holding her in a firm grip by her hair. After a while the leader takes hold of her T-shirt and makes a hole next to the breast that allows the breast to hang out of the hole in the shirt. Then she asks for assistance to get two plates from the bar, one full of cream, one with chocolate pudding. The woman must stand on a towel. The leader then takes her hands full and smears her, the hair, the face, the bared breast. The leader presses the chocolate and cream in her mouth until she is unable to swallow, but spits it out. Finally, she presses the chocolate and cream inside the panties between the buttocks. Afterward, the leader demands her to take a few steps back, still standing on the towel. She is then left there for the rest of the evening, without having washed off or taken on other clothing. (Field note 2013-05-15)

There are many taboos being transgressed in the session. The woman is vulnerable and exposed in front of the audience. Her sweater is pulled down to expose her breast and parts of her body are daubed. The leader is opening up her body to the audience by forcing her to keep eye contact with everyone in the audience. The gaze connects her body with other bodies and the boundaries between her body and the audience becomes diffuse and loosened. In the session, as in Bakhtin's grotesque body, the mouth, breast, sex and buttocks are in focus. When a hole is made in the t-shirt and one breast is lifted out, special attention is given to the 'shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside' (Bakhtin 1965/1984, p. 317). When the chocolate is pressed into her mouth, the connections to the gaping mouth become clear. Another part is the exaggeration in the session. Bakhtin speaks of sharp prominent exaggerations as hyperboles. These are particularly striking in the images of the body in relation to food. Filling food into body openings and making the private into something public (exposure of body parts) can with Bakhtin's words be said to signify a 'downgrading'. In what Bakhtin calls the modern image of the individual body:

Sexual life, eating, drinking, and defecation have radically changed their meaning: they have been transferred to the private and psychological level where their connotation becomes narrow and specific, torn away from the direct relation to the life of society and to the cosmic whole. In this new connotation they can no longer carry on their former philosophical functions (p. 321).

In modern society, there is an increased control of emotions, bodily functions and expressiveness, and a corresponding contempt for bodily revelations, smells, fluids and sound. The sociologist Pasi Falk (1994) draws on Bakhtin's theory when describing a historical shift, where the open body changed to become more closed. The closed body is characterised by a strong control of bodily and emotional expression. According to Bakhtin, the modern closed body:

... presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new

one begins) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. Since the closed body shall not reconcile with other bodies, the surface of the body will have an important meaning as boundary (p. 320).

There are few arenas in modern society where strong emotions are allowed. For the modern individual, this means a dynamic between both maintenance and discipline (cf. Foucault 1977), and loss of self-control. To be able to control the limit of one's body, a control of the fluids in and out of the body is required. Despite this distance from the 'grotesque other', there is nevertheless a complex fascination and enchantment. This is why, according to Featherstone (2007), there is a longing after arenas where the boundaries can be exceeded, and the restraint can be released. Featherstone provides examples of places such as theatres, carnivals, circuses and exotic environments. As stated above, it becomes clear that BDSM environments can constitute such an arena for transgressive and emotional expression. It should also be emphasized that the activities become erotically charged to their participants just because they are taboo. Cohen and Taylor (1976/2002) state:

Sex-making when legitimized within communes by reference to a free-love ethic, may lose its excitement along with its oppositional and covert status. For in a way all involvement in free areas necessitates putting ourselves at risk, it means putting a fantasy on the line, taking a chance that lifebuoys from paramount reality will not be available when required (p. 168).

The described session was associated with strong emotions, both from the participants and from the audience. When I visited Darkside (BDSM community on the internet) the following day, the evening was described in strong words, where many have been overwhelmed by the strong experience in a positive way and gave five of five possible stars. So did the woman who had participated in the session herself.

In the next field note, the collective intimacy and vulnerability are central. The participant explains that hir has long been working on hir gender identity and recently became more open as transsexual. The field note is from a workshop on humiliation with about fifty persons in the audience:

The session begins with the workshop leader sitting on a couch with the participant. She asks what relationship the participant has to degradation games and asks hir to tell. Meanwhile, she caresses gently the participant's neck and hir hands. Then she takes off the participant's shawl and uses the long-sleeved shirt to tie hir arms; she binds one arm on hir back and the other over hir chest. She binds the shawl tight around the body, making the body fixed in one position. The leader puts down the participant on the back of the floor. She sits across hir body, takes out some blackboard pens and looks into hir eyes and says 'She?' At the same time she writes the word on hir breasts. The participant shakes hir head and says 'No'. The leader says 'He?' And writes the word at the same time. Hir answers 'No' and still shakes hir head. This continues, the words are written on the upper body over and over. Finally, it is not possible to read the words because it has been overwritten so many times. The crowd is cramped and I feel the atmosphere as very emotional. The

leader brings up the pen again and says ‘It?’ And the participant nods and answers with great relief, yes. The ritual is repeated over and over again. Finally, there is a single large IT on the upper body of the participant and the session is over. Hir is laid on the side, hir mouth acts as a pencil holder and hir body as a footstool to the leader, who turns to the audience and summarises the workshop. (Field note 2013-05-15)

Also in this staging, the body is in focus. In order to understand the ritualisation that takes place, I return to Collins’ (2005) theory of interaction rituals. Both the described BDSM sessions meet the criteria for an interaction ritual. The collective emotional charge and the common focus are central in the two described sessions. It becomes clear that they have an important significance for the community. There are established lines between the inside and outside of the interaction rituals. The people who participate, and the people in the audience, know that it is a show where people have volunteered and agreed to what is happening. If a person came from outside, not knowing that BDSM was practiced, the interpretation of the situation would probably be completely different than the meaning which is given by the ‘initiated’. There is a physical closeness created between the participants and a unified focus on the leader and the participant. The audience direct undivided attention to the participant’s emotional and physical reactions. There is thus a common attention focus.

Both examples show a strong emotional experience in connection with the sessions. This experience can be deduced from what Collins (2005) calls emotional energy, a connecting group dynamic feeling. He likens emotional energy to the psychological concept ‘driving force’; it is distinguished from the former by a social orientation, where emotional energy is characterised by pride and commitment to the group. Collins distinguishes between long-term and short-term emotions. The former can be described as an emotion of mind where concern for the individual’s sense of self, caring for others, interacting and community are important. In an interaction ritual, participants enter the rite with a set of emotions. According to Collins, these are short-term and temporary. The outcome or the effect of a ritual is long-term emotions, such as belonging, group dynamics and community. He gives funerals as an example, where the short-lived emotions consist of sadness and lack, but the outcomes of the funeral are feelings of group community with other funeral participants.

The emotional energy of a BDSM session can be described as follows: The initial feelings described by the participants are desire, anticipation and excitement. For example, in the first workshop described, the audience point out that the participant giggles, becomes red in the face, ashamed and has an increased heart rate. These are the feelings that Collins sees as short-lived. During the ritual, participants have a group community and a common focus, which was evident in the examples. The initial individual feelings change to shared group-dynamic feelings. After the session, feelings of joining, love, affection, fellowship and vulnerability are described. Such emotions, according to Collins, are long lasting. Collins (2005, p. 149) raises the question: ‘What determines which interactional rituals an individual will join rather than some other rituals, and why some individuals

develop more of a taste for ritual solidarity than other persons?’ He argues that individuals who have taken part in successful interaction rituals develop a taste for more ritual solidarity and are motivated to repeat the practice. When conducting field research on professional dominatrices, Lindemann (2011) describes an unexpected discourse that emerged: ‘respondents repeatedly characterized themselves as “therapists”, speaking about their work as a form of psychological treatment for their clients’ (p. 151). She analyses BDSM as a device for confronting past trauma, and a psychological reprieve from the pressures of postmodern life. She points out that in BDSM, the practitioners are able to express these desires that have historically been conceptualised as problematic and pathological, in a context that is free from social judgment or reverberations (see also Barker et al. 2007).

Conclusions

I have analysed BDSM as an arena where bodies are allowed (or required) to be what Bakhtin calls open, in a society where the closed body is elevated to an ideal. A conclusion drawn from the fieldwork is that practicing BDSM is largely about dedication, transgression and emotional expressiveness. The practice can enable an exploration of areas that usually are perceived as taboo. The BDSM sessions meet the criteria for what Collins calls ‘interaction rituals’ and creates strong interconnecting group-dynamic feelings and emotional energy in forms of healing, love, affection, vulnerability and membership symbols, which can imply both meaning and motive for a BDSM practice. Drawing on Douglas and Collins, the article shows that BDSM rituals resemble religious rituals and serve the same purposes for the participants. Since the ritual aspect of BDSM sessions can be understood as an enabler of expressions and emotional energy this conclusion can provide a basis to understand why people seek out this kind of communities. BDSM becomes a free zone in which bodies are allowed to be open in a Bakhtinian sense, that is, transgressive and beyond control.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest Charlotta Carlström declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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