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## **Gender equal BDSM Practice – a Swedish Paradox?**

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## **Abstract**

In this article I examine power and BDSM, i.e. Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism within Swedish society. The main research question is: How do practitioners relate to power, gender and consent in Swedish society, which has been characterised by a long tradition of gender equality? The study is based on 29 in-depth interviews with self-defined BDSM practitioners and ethnographic fieldwork in Swedish BDSM communities. The article shows that there is a strong preoccupation of gender and equality among Swedish practitioners. They express gender awareness, and problematise the practice in relation to societal power structures. For BDSM to fit into a society with a strong egalitarian discourse like Sweden, the practitioners need to reconcile BDSM and gender equality. To defend an interest in BDSM, the practitioners emphasise the voluntariness, the central role of consent, and the defined staging in the practices. By highlighting the consent, the informants thus position themselves against the discourse of BDSM as violent, oppressive and patriarchal.

## **Key words:**

BDSM, Sweden, ethnography, gender equality, power

## **Gender equal BDSM Practice – a Swedish Paradox?**

BDSM, i.e. Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism is an acronym used to describe a variety of (sexual) behaviours including an implicit or explicit erotic power exchange. In this article I examine how BDSM operates in Sweden, a society that has a long tradition of gender equality (Kulick, 2005; Berggren and Trädgård, 2012). During my field studies in different BDSM communities, I was struck by the strong preoccupation with gender equality shown by the informants. Often, this preoccupation was connected with feelings of shame and guilt for practicing BDSM. For example, as a woman, to take a submissive role in a BDSM context was often expressed as rationally ‘wrong’ but emotionally ‘right’. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with 29 practitioners, the article aims to explore BDSM in the Swedish context and the research question is: How do practitioners relate to power, gender and consent in Swedish society, which has been characterised by a long tradition of gender equality?

### ***Introducing BDSM***

Over the past hundred years, many scholars have made efforts to explain why some people are interested in BDSM. Psychiatrists, psychologists and sexologists have tried to understand why some people enjoy domination play and why they enjoy to inflict and receive pain (Taylor and Ussher, 2001). From being dominated by clinical and therapeutic perspectives (Freud, 1938; Krafft-Ebing, 1886/1965), research has

increasingly been conducted with a sociological and psychological orientation. Already in the 60s, anthropologist Paul Gebhard (1969) raised BDSM as a sexual behaviour, culturally produced and dependent on a social context. Since then, several researchers have developed this approach (for example, Langdridge and Barker, 2007; Levitt et al, 1994; Plante, 2006; Sandnabba et al, 1999; Taylor and Ussher, 2001; Weinberg, 2006). In several studies where the psychosocial health of BDSM practitioners was investigated, practitioners showed higher levels of subjective well-being compared to those who did not practice BDSM (see Wismeijer and van Assen, 2013; Richters et al, 2008; Moser, 1999; Moser and Levitt, 1995; Gosselin and Wilson 1980).

BDSM is built on fantasies, daydreams, thoughts and feelings, and the different practices stress taboos, boundaries, prohibitions, and social norms (Carlström, 2015; Newmahr, 2010a). Common for the practices is that they include (sexual) expressions where people find shared pleasure through various forms of power exchange. The power concept is central for the understanding of BDSM. My definition of power derives from Michel Foucault (1976/2002), who sees power as: 1) productive, i.e., it produces subjects and identities; 2) relational, i.e., it exists as relational for people's interaction; and 3) operational, i.e., it exists in all relationships and at all social levels. Closely linked to power is consent. Consent in relation to BDSM means voluntarily participation, agreements, negotiation and conversation about sexual likes and dislikes. Consent and BDSM has been explored in previous research; for example in the ways which consent operates (Barker, 2013a), consent considerations in relation to age,

race, class, disability, and body shape (Bauer, 2014; Sheff and Hammers, 2011), and BDSM in relation to the BDSM mantra, Safe, Sane and Consensual, SSC (Weiss, 2011).

It is important to note that the acronym BDSM should be seen as an umbrella term. It is uncommon that practitioners are interested in every single practice that the concept accommodates. Rather, they talk about different (sexual) preferences, so-called 'kinks'. BDSM embraces a wide range of activities, practices, positions, and relational types but also various meanings and purposes. Weiss (2006, p. 234) describe BDSM as 'a polymodal combination of identity, orientation, lifestyle, hobby and practice, based around a community'. Several researchers highlight BDSM's therapeutic and healing potential (see for example, Easton 2007; Langdrige and Barker, 2007). Ambler et al (2016) examines the flow experiences in BDSM activities and state that practicing BDSM 'appear to facilitate subjectively enjoyable altered states of consciousness, reductions in psychological stress and negative affect, and increases in sexual arousal' (p. 1). Also Newmahr (2010a) explores SM as recreation where 'SM participants speak of their play in terms of ecstatic experience, or what can be understood as flow' (p. 328).

Practitioners adopt dominant, sadist, submissive or masochistic roles. If a person is interested to be both dominant and submissive, hir<sup>1</sup> is called a switch. For some practitioners, the roles are limited to sexual role-play, while for others the roles are

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<sup>1</sup> Hir is a gender-neutral third-person singular object pronoun.

adopted at all times, also called a 24/7 relationships. There are several studies on BDSM in relation to gender and power (Bauer, 2008; Barker, 2013a; Barker, 2013b; Beckmann, 2009; Deckha, 2011; Sheff and Hammers, 2011; Weiss, 2011; Yost, 2007; Zambelli, 2015) and on BDSM in relation to feminism (Ritchie and Barker, 2005; McClintock, 1993; Taylor and Ussher, 2001). Like Taylor and Ussher's (2001) participants, the women in Ritchie and Barker (2005) study challenged the perception that SM reproduces conventional gendered hierarchies by drawing on their experiences of subverting these roles. The authors conclude that both dominant and submissive SM roles were presented by the informants as compatible with a pro-sex feminist agenda and as a potential way to reveal and subvert gendered power dynamics.

BDSM in relation to gender comparison has to a certain extent been investigated. Alison et al (2001) distinguished clear patterns, which they called sexual scripts among BDSM practitioners. These scripts were divided into four overall groups: hypermasculinity, administration and receiving of pain, physical restriction, and psychological humiliation. The women and the heterosexual men preferred activities and behaviors that included humiliation. The heterosexual men choose a masochistic role to a greater extent than the gay men. In Levitt, Moser, and Jamison study (1994), a sample of 45 women was obtained. The women became aware of their orientation as young adults and most were satisfied with their orientation. They tend more often to prefer the submissive role but preference for the dominant role or no preference was found with considerable frequency. Hawley and Hensley (2009) explored forceful

submission fantasies in men and women. Fantasy vignettes were provided to nearly 900 female and male collage students, and they were asked to rate their preference for them. More than half of the students were entertained of fantasies of forceful submission and interestingly, men reported a higher preference than women.

### ***Sexuality and the Swedish Gender Equality Ideology***

To explore how BDSM practitioners in Sweden relate to power, gender and consent, we need to understand certain specific characteristics of Swedish society. According to The Global Gender Gap Report 2016 (World Economic Forum, 2016), Sweden is ranked as the fourth most gender-equal country in the world, after Iceland, Finland, and Norway. Although Sweden has slipped from first to fourth place over a decade (year 2006-2016), the nation is still seen as one of the world's top countries in terms of gender equality. According to Marie Nordberg (2005), the discourse on gender equality in Sweden exists 'as a "third presence" that individuals measure themselves in relation to and present themselves through and are careful to articulate in their politically correct self-presentations' (p. 80). Also Kulick (2005) points out that the Swedish gender equality ideology dominates the political discourse in Sweden and that, what he refers to as 'state feminism', has its roots in radical feminism. He states:

As an ideology, *jämställdhet* (gender equality) requires the clear delineation of men and women so that they can be made equal. So paradoxically, to eliminate gender imbalances in society, *jämställdhet* must invoke and continually reinforce the idea that women and men differ from one another. And indeed, the ideology

resonates strongly with 1970s radical feminism, which insisted that men and women have fundamentally different characteristics (p. 212).

Historically, different approaches to sadomasochism, prostitution and pornography created ambivalence both for individual perceptions and in the feminist movement in general. Radical feminists explained sadomasochism, prostitution and pornography as an extreme manifestation of patriarchal oppression (Hopkins, 1994). This perspective has gained a central position in Sweden and in line with the radical feminist perspective, the Law that Prohibits the Purchase of Sexual Services came into force in 1999 in Sweden. Gunilla Ekberg (2004), employed at the Ministry of Industry as the Swedish Government's expert on prostitution and trafficking in human beings, stated: 'In Sweden, prostitution is officially acknowledged as a form of male sexual violence against women and children' (p. 1-2). In combination with public education, awareness-raising campaigns, and victim support, the purpose of the law was to establish a zero tolerance policy for prostitution and trafficking in human beings.

This zero tolerance policy is evident also in the ongoing pornography debate in Sweden (Kulick and Rydström, 2015). Pornography was decriminalized in 1971 but is still subject to regulations about how it can be displayed in public. Besides, in Sweden the production of pornography considered 'violent' have been illegal since 1991. Violence is defined broadly and includes all representations of sadomasochistic sex (Kulick, 2005). In the 1970s so called sex wars, sadomasochism played a prominent role as a deterrent example of harmful pornography for the anti-pornography

movement. Hopkins (1994, p. 117) describes: ‘An unusual kind of altercation ensued a battle among feminists about what feminism meant and what sadomasochism meant, with tremendous anger and hostility and incredulity on both sides’. A woman, who agreed to practice BDSM, was considered to be socialised into a society where women were expected to be submissive (Deckha, 2011). According to the radical feminist Catharine MacKinnon (1997) it was more about self-respect in enduring a situation that was impossible to change than a choice, if a woman agreed to submission. She states: ‘All women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water. With no alternatives, the strategy to acquire self-respect and pride is: I chose it’ (p. 171). Another radical feminist theorist, Sheila Jeffreys (1996) considered that BDSM practitioners ‘eroticises the crude power difference of gender which fuels heterosexual desire, reinforcing rather than ending it’ (p. 86). These radical feminist stances have had great impact to the Swedish feminism. For example, MacKinnon was invited speaker to the Malmö based conference Nordic Forum - New Action on Women's Rights with almost 20,000 visitors as recently as 2014. The radical feminist perspective has been questioned and challenged, not least by the practitioners themselves and there are ongoing debates and discussions in BDSM communities concerning BDSM, gender and feminism where also sex liberal views are highlighted. In the last decades, queer theorists and activists started to argue that it is the (sexual) norm that needs to be challenged, not the deviation (Ambjörnsson 2016). Though, in Sweden, queer theory and activism came to have strong links with feminism, and some researchers argue that this connection is a specifically Swedish invention. It is no coincidence that the merger of the concepts ‘queer’ and ‘feminism’ happened in Sweden (Rydström &

Tjeder 2009). Queer feminism, with gender researcher Tina Rosenberg (2002) as a foreground figure, has been given a prominent role in both research and activism in Sweden and opened up to more affirmative interpretations.

Deckha (2011), offers another contribution to the ongoing feminist discussions about women's agency when she draws a postcolonial feminist approach to S/M and women's agency. An application of postcolonial feminist analytical tools, she means, 'can uncover the cultural hegemony that results when those who prefer to engage in normalized sexual relations criticize the sexual Other' (Deckha, 2011, p. 142). According to Deckha, the postcolonial feminist approaches have the potential to depolarise the S/M debates in the feminist arena. She states: We must refrain from impugning it as an anti-feminist practice before we take certain steps, central among them to listen to and elevate the knowledge of those who do see it as a hallmark of a feminist lifestyle (p. 143).

## **Methods**

In 2012 and 2013, extensive ethnographic fieldwork was conducted within several BDSM communities in Sweden. I participated in various forms of meetings, such as workshops, pub evenings, parties and clubs. I visited people living in 24/7 relationships in their homes to learn more about their everyday lives. My contacts with informants varied. Some I only met once to conduct an interview and some I met several times in different contexts and conducted repeated interviews. A few

informants helped me gain access to different gatherings and conveyed contact information to other people. Sometimes, the conversations and meetings were formal with a recorder while other meetings were more informal, such as conversation in clubs or over a snack or a lunch.

The criterion for participating in the study was an experience of practicing BDSM. Participants were found in different ways. I advertised in a sex shop and through the sex shop owner, I was invited to meetings once a week, where practitioners exchanged experiences and ideas about exercising BDSM. During the autumn of 2012 I regularly attended these meetings, and was also able to recruit people to the study. The chairman of the meetings put me in contact with two dominas<sup>2</sup> who run a club. Through them I participated in parties and workshops, and had the opportunity to recruit additional informants to the study. I also 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. I became a member of Darkside (the largest Swedish BDSM network on the Internet with approximately 170,000 members), where I advertised my research project.

Twenty-nine self-defined BDSM practitioners were interviewed. Nine identified as dominants and/or sadists, thirteen as submissive and/or masochist, and seven as switches. The majority of the informants were heterosexual or bisexual. The informant's age was between twenty and sixty. 14 identified as women, 14 identified

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<sup>2</sup> Domina (or Mistress) means a dominant female in BDSM practices.

as men, and one as transgender. They lived in large cities, medium-sized cities, in smaller towns and in rural areas in different parts of Sweden. Three of the persons were unemployed at the time of the interview, one received sickness benefit, and the others worked or studied. The majority (20) of the informants had a university education. Twenty-one were in a relation of which eight describe the relationship form as 24/7. About one third defined themselves as non-monogamous and lived in poly-amorous relationships, cuckold relations or describes themselves as relational anarchists.

Interviews were conducted in the cellar of the earlier mentioned sex shop, at cafes, at universities, in the interviewees home or at their workplace. Most interviews lasted from one and a half to two hours, some lasted up to four hours. On some occasions we did not have time to finish, but booked a follow-up interview. In the interview situations, I let the informant 'speak freely' as much as possible. The interviews were transcribed in full. The thematic analysis, as described by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), is closest to my analysis work. The thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic method for identifying, analyzing themes within empirical data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). By focusing on different categories and components that were prominent in the material, I analyzed the material in relation to theoretical perspectives and previous research in the field. 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.<sup>3</sup> Personal information was changed if it was able to identify the person. Since the BDSM community is relatively small in Sweden, there is a risk that people can identify each other. I often talked to the informants about this dilemma and in doubtful cases I let the informant read and approve texts. The fact that I interviewed persons at different locations and in different cities limited the recognition factor.

## **Results**

### *The individual practice in relation to societal equality structures*

Previous research shows that gender is not the most important factor organising BDSM sexuality (see for example Beckmann 2009; Simula, 2014; Yost 2007). Simula (2014) refers to her informants and states: ‘Their BDSM orientation (e.g., dominant, submissive) was more important to them than their gendered sexual orientation’ (p. 170). Also Califia (1995), a co-founder to the San Francisco based lesbian-feminist BDSM organisation SAMOIS, stresses: ‘S&M roles are not related to gender or sexual orientation or race or class. My own needs dictate which role I will adopt’ (p. 147). My experiences from fieldwork in Swedish BDSM communities are not consistent with these stances, however. Rather, gender appears as immensely important and discussions about gender equality and power structure in relation to BDSM are recurrent. The Swedish practitioners express gender awareness and a sense of responsibility in relation to the practices. The informants express a strong need to

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<sup>3</sup> Dnr. 2012/180 and 2013/232

reconcile feminist stances with BDSM practice. As already mentioned, researchers have investigated BDSM in relation to power structures in society. Though, my position is that BDSM practitioners' *preoccupation* with the individual practice in relation to societal equality structures has not been prominent in these studies. In view of such considerations, it appears likely, on the one hand, that Swedish BDSM practice differs from other countries and, on the other, that these differences are related to a strong tradition of gender equality in Sweden.

When attending BDSM workshops and meetings, feminism in relation to BDSM is often the topic of discussion. Examples of reflections that I have encountered in discussions with practitioners are: Can I call myself a feminist and at the same time enjoy dominating and inflicting pain on women? Is it possible to enjoy pain in a BDSM context, when there are other women who are abused? Can one still advocate an equal society if one has given away power? The questions expressed by the informants are already complex in themselves. A further layer of complexity is that in order to analyse BDSM activities in relation to power, we need to examine how power is organised between the individual and the overall structures. To understand these issues, which may, at first, seem like paradoxes, it is necessary to take into account intersections between the private and the political in general, as well as between concerns of individual pleasure, and societal structures, more specifically. According to Foucault (1979; 1977) power is seen as interactions of flows and intensities, surrounded by a myriad of forces and struggles. It is obvious that historical (feminist) power struggles and hegemonic discourses affect the current views of BDSM and the

practitioners' ways of looking at themselves and their practices. A submissive woman living in a 24/7 relationship, reflects upon this and says:

BDSM is a reproduction of power, of the skewed power structures. A lot of practicing is about that, whether it is between a man and woman, large and small persons, adult and child, man and animal. What happens in a world where people don't practice power in this way, and don't oppress each other? Does BDSM exist then? How do we play then? Does it mean that BDSM practice has fetishised the power structures? This is pretty much radical feminism. And some radical feminists totally distance themselves from BDSM, thinking it is an indoctrination. But I think that the radical feminists put certain things in focus, which I feel sex-positive feminists and liberal BDSM practitioners don't. It sounds so very simple that everything you do is with consent, and that then you can do whatever you want to. I don't think it is that simple.

The informant problematises the practice in relation to societal power structures. As previously related, BDSM often consists of pre-agreed and pronounced power relations between, for example, a slave and a domina, or a submissive and a dominant. At the same time, BDSM relations (as with other relations) exists in an arena where other - structural, but not always pronounced - power relations are present, for example, between men and women, young and old, and different ethnicities. In these power relations, BDSM does not play a passive role, but the power relations coexist, interact, engaging and influencing each other. Another submissive woman expresses:

In the middle of a play, a voice in my head begins to criticise me. I simply feel like a bad feminist. How do I remove this voice whispering that I am a bad feminist? Theoretically, I know that one can be a BDSM practitioner and a feminist, but how do I make the shame disappear?

The interviewed woman describes the feeling when the expected picture of what it means to be a 'good feminist' does not correspond to her own sexual desire. The feeling of shame is recurring with the informants. A dominant man reflects on his wife's thoughts of living as a submissive and says: 'Based on the fact that she sees herself as a modern woman, it becomes like guilty feelings for her and she ask herself: "Why do I think this it's okay"? "Shouldn't I think it's wrong?"' These stances from the informants differ from for example Bauer's study (2008) of dyke+ BDSM communities, where the BDSM communities are seen as a space 'that is perceived as devoid of predefined power relations in regard to gender and sexuality' and where most people 'share the view that "SM provides a safe space for people to fuck with their gender and also for their gender identity to be respected"' (Bauer, 2008, p. 234). Among my informants it was a constant recurring problematising of issues concerning gender and feminism. Asked how it works to combine the feminist view with acting submissive in a BDSM practice, one woman, who defines herself as submissive and feminist, responds:

I can imagine that my submission has to do with that kind of structures in society. That I, in my practice, somehow manifest these structures. I want to be a

good girl, to please and customise. Sometimes I think it's difficult to separate this from a structural inequality. So I have some issues around that, too. Is it really good that I do this, and what happens when I do it, and will it be worse for myself and for others in an equality perspective? I have not finished thinking about it and I probably never will.

The interviewer: But can you feel that you have a responsibility in your practice?

Yes, a little. I think that what I feel is my real responsibility is to be aware and reflective as much as possible, about what I do, what happens when I do it, what my motives are and how open I am with that.

The interviewer: What are your motives?

Well, I think it's difficult. If I should give up living out my submission because I am a woman and it somehow is similar to, or reflects a more structural submission of women in society and in relationships, it would not be good, since this is what I *really* like, and I feel so much pleasure and desire. So, to abstain from it would feel less feminist.

According to the woman, the power structures in society are manifested in the individual practice, where societal inequality has been internalised into her position as a submissive woman in a BDSM context. But at the end of the quote she reaches the conclusion that acting out a sexual desire can be understood as a feminist act, even if it means, as a woman, to be submissive to her husband. The interview extract touches on

a larger discussion of gender and patriarchal structures. Similarly, switch woman describes her partner's process of being a dominant man.

He has had some trouble with his orientation. He is a convinced feminist and it has not been compatible with him wanting to whip women and pulling them in the hair over the floor (laughing). And it didn't work for him, he thought he was a violent man and made a picture of himself as a monster until he realized that there are women who appreciate this. After talking a lot, he understood that he didn't want to rape a woman but wanted a woman who liked rape plays. And then he understood he's not a bad feminist, he does not want to do these things because I'm a woman, but because I'm a voluntarily submissive woman. He does not want to do this to any women, and he certainly does not want everyone to live this way. It's not a question of gender equality, but rather about sexual orientation.

The informant describes her partner as a convinced feminist and how he, from seeing himself as a monster and a violent man, found a way to reconcile his BDSM interest with the view of himself as a feminist. When emphasizing voluntariness and consent in the practices, it is obvious that the informant's partner is careful to articulate his self-presentation in a politically correct way, which is in line with, earlier mentioned, Nordberg's (2005) description of gender equality in Sweden as a "third presence".

***To make the Practices defensible –different Strategies***

As we have seen, several practitioners point at their responsibility, the importance of practicing BDSM with an awareness of societal unequal power structures and reflect on how to make their practice as feminist as possible. One way to do that is to make the settings secure. A switch woman says: 'For me, it has been important to only play with people whose feminist values I feel safe with, which means I don't need to think about their motivations'. Like this woman, several other practitioners also emphasise the importance of only practicing BDSM with people with similar values as themselves. In larger cities in Sweden there are a few clubs open only for women and transgender, and clubs with a queer and/or feminist approach. One of the most important ways to defend a desire to BDSM which appeared in the interview material, was to highlight the significance of consent. The informants thereby position themselves against the discourse of BDSM as oppressive and patriarchal. Many informants point out that a practice always should be based on SSC: Safe, sane and consensual.

Several informants highlight that in 24/7 relationships, consent is the only way to differ from traditionally patriarchal relationships. Unlike practice taking place at occasional times, during sessions or other similar contexts, 24/7 relationships assume that at least some part of the practice is constant (usually a shift of power). A submissive woman says that for her 24/7 means: 'I'm always subordinate to my partner. I obey him in whatever he decides. When he wants something, that's how it will be'. For a woman, to live in a 24/7 relationship and act as a slave, and/or submissive to her husband constitutes a life-style completely against Swedish gender

equality. But when power exchange in a relationship has been negotiated and agreed upon, the power aspects are made visible and open for reflection and discussion. Most important, the power exchange is eligible for everyone involved. Foucault (1979) understands power as created by and through each individual in a complex and simultaneous process through collectively constructed discourses. Power relations are not separated from other types of relationships, but inherent in them. They involve the individuals as actors with their own interests and as having a considerable measure of space for action. When discussing this with a switch woman, I suggested that ‘Some people I talked to believe that BDSM is only possible in a more equal society, that you can’t play a role that you already are’ and she answered ‘Exactly! Really, you can always choose. You enter this deliberately and with consent and knowing that you always have a choice’. Unlike traditional and sometimes unequal relationships, BDSM relationships require active decisions and actions that are communicated.

Sometimes, though, the consent becomes unclear. A submissive woman, living in a 24/7 relationship, explains that her master has written a contract in which he has formulated their affiliation as a patriarchal ownership relation. The relationship is built on a father-daughter power exchange, where she is expected to obey him. I ask her what would happen if she would like to end the contract, and she answers:

Well, we have said that it can only be broken if both want to. I've been thinking about what would happen if I wouldn't like to continue the contract. I don't know how he would react, if he would oppose, just because, and make my life terrible.

Here the consent becomes blurred and it is obvious that BDSM in a 24/7 relationship constitutes more than a staged role-play. Barker (2013a,) discuss that consent is something that requires establishing rather than being taken-for-granted and states: ‘Consent is possible, but liberal understandings of consent are called into question (...), and there is a focus upon what actions are feasible given the ways in which people are shaped by their contact with others and with the wider world’ (p. 909). Several informants emphasise that an important part of the practice is to extend one’s own limits. Consequently, there is a tension between the elements of surprise and the pre-agreed upon elements to be included in the exercise. Though consent is described as central in the practice, several informants stress that not knowing what will happen during a session involves tangible feelings of excitement. To consent to the acts that will take place, and at the same time desire to move one’s own boundaries, is something of a paradox.

Another strategy to reconcile the practice with gender equality is to emphasise the difference between real and staged. The distinction between fantasy and reality was evident also in Ritchie’s and Barker’s study (2005), and ‘particularly strongly emphasised when participants discussed practices that might be viewed as anti-feminist (specifically rape scenes, domestic abuse scenes, and 24/7 female submission) or as otherwise potentially exploitative (age-play, racial slavery play, and wearing SS uniforms)’ (p. 13-14). The relationship between reality and construction is thus paramount to reach understandings of BDSM. For Foucault (1979), sadomasochism

and sexual role-playing was something that allows an exemption from an essentialist perspective of power, both individual and relational (Plant 2007). Foucault (in Halperin 1995) declares: 'The 'S/M' game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid (...) roles can be reversed (...) Or, even when the roles are stabilised, you know very well that it is always a game' (p. 86). As BDSM allows for an exploration of boundaries, taboos, and strong emotions, it can function as what Cohen and Taylor (2002/1976) call a 'free zone'. Freeman (2008) analyses Julien's short film *The Attendant* and argues that:

S/M is not merely drag: it reorganizes the senses and, when it uses icons and equipment from traumatic pasts, reorganizes the relationships among emotion, sensation, and historical understanding. Its clash of temporalities ignites historical possibilities other than the ones frozen into the 'fate' of official histories. (p. 63)

Fantasies and role-plays are often based on real situations including, for example, violence and humiliation. In this way the practice can function as an alibi, allowing practitioners to play with power and taboos in ways that would be impossible outside the scene. Acts, which could be seen as incorrect and immoral, are made morally defensible within the BDSM context. A rape play for example, can be identical to a real rape, or a BDSM session based on pain can be indistinguishable from a situation of abuse. The actions can look the same, but assumes very different meanings or as Weiss (2006) puts it: 'it is both an intervention into and an interpretation of the "real" or social worlds' (p. 230). Since meaning is always constructed and formed in a context, it is interesting to ask what

actually is real and what is staged. Hopkins (1994) discusses the view of SM as a replication of patriarchal roles and activities. She states: ‘in SM there is attraction, negotiation, the power to halt the activity, the power to switch roles, and attention to safety. Like a Shakespearean duel on stage, with blunted blades and actors’ training, violence is simulated, but is not replicated’ (p. 124). The following quote is from a man describing his first visit to a BDSM club:

In the basement there was a room for BDSM play, and the first thing I see is a play where a man is whipping a woman and the woman is crying a lot. And it was really uncomfortable for me to see. The first time, this is what hits my retina and yes, it felt hard to see (...). A man inflicting pain on a woman who is crying; it has been as a symbol of what is wrong in the world. But then, afterwards, they hugged for a long time, and I went up to her and she was so nice; and she told me about how she experienced it: ‘This is what makes me feel good, and this is how I feel about it and the process that I go through’. And we talked for a long time and then her partner came, and he was very sympathetic and nice. He introduced himself and told me more about their relationship.

Several informants similarly emphasise that what distinguishes BDSM from violence-related situations is that BDSM is staged and that participants in BDSM have consented to the activity. One practitioner describes BDSM as ‘pain that is not distributed in a violent manner’. Newmahr (2010b) explores how member of an SM community frame, cast, and understand the role of pain in their SM activities. She

points out:

Members of the community collectively employ discursive strategies to construct and maintain the belief that power relations are imbalanced in SM. Additionally, participants in-scene collaborate toward authentic experiences of power imbalance. The work toward the ultimate goal of authentic experiences of power imbalance occurs partly through discourses of pain (p. 396).

On one hand, the role-play is a non-reality; a theatrical staging within established boundaries. On the other hand, by agreed boundaries and the confidence that these are respected, space can be created to bring life to the staged situation.

In line with the strategy to point out the difference between real and staged strategy in order to reconcile the practice with gender equality is the strategy to emphasise the sexual arousal in BDSM. Several researchers point out that practicing BDSM fulfil more/other desires than sexual and that BDSM is more than a sexual practice. Newmahr (2010a) states: ‘we need to shift from mainstream assumptions of SM as (simply) “kinky sex” to a more nuanced perspective’ (p. 313) and she argues that SM can be more usefully understood as serious leisure. Although some informants in my study highlight more and other meanings of BDSM than sexual, several point out that they see BDSM as ‘only’ a sexual practice. This can be interpreted as another strategy to reconcile BDSM with gender equality. A dominant man says for example: ‘BDSM is limited to the sexual for me. In everyday life, I want an equal relationship. There is

no power shift there. The power shift is only in the bedroom.’ By emphasising the power exchange as a sexual desire, the man can keep a self-image as gender equal.

## **Conclusions**

The main question that I wanted to discuss in this article is: How do BDSM practitioners relate to power, gender and consent in Swedish society, which has been characterised by a long tradition of gender equality? The study shows that there is a strong awareness of and preoccupation with equality among the informants. How BDSM relates to issues of gender, consent and feminism are recurrently discussed. For BDSM to be able to fit into Swedish society - a society with a strong egalitarian discourse - the practitioners need strategies to reconcile BDSM and gender equality. This is primarily done by emphasising the voluntariness, and the central role of consent in the practices. By highlighting the significant role of consent and the defined staging in the practices, the informants position themselves against the discourse of BDSM as violent, oppressive and patriarchal.

Discourses of gender, power and sexual activity construct different views of BDSM practice. On the one hand, BDSM is seen as an arena for creating alternative ways for pleasure and sexuality, where those involved are considered independent and capable of giving valid consent. Here the power to embrace ones sexuality on ones own terms is seen as a feminist victory in itself, regardless of one's sexual preferences are in line with a repression structure or not. On the other hand, BDSM is seen as destructive acts

of violence and regarded as expressions of patriarchal norms. As I have discussed, this ambivalence is evident in Swedish society, and there are on-going debates and discussions both within and outside BDSM communities concerning how gender equality and feminism shall be understood in relation to BDSM. The statements of the informants span along a continuum where radical feminist stances constitute one pole and sex-liberal attitudes its opposite pole. Though, the polarisation of the two perspectives; radical feminism and sex-liberal feminism, has been criticised. Downing (2012) and Barker (2013) highlight a *sex-critical* perspective as an alternative to the existing dichotomies sex-positive or sex-negative. In this sex-critical perspective, structural power is noted through a critical review in which a sex-positive attitude is central, but with a focus on awareness-raising and criticizing existing power structures. BDSM is not practised in a vacuum beyond structural inequalities; rather, individual practice can only exist and operate within these frameworks. Since BDSM implies a complex chain of symbolism that affects overall perspectives on gender, pleasure and power, I find the sex-critical perspective very useful. Here all forms of sexuality and sexual representations should be the basis for critical exploration and not just the alternative forms. For example, heterosexual relationships, intercourse and reproduction should also be subjected to critical review - if not more - given the historical lack of critical attention and questioning of what has been perceived as norm.

## **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.

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