

LEARNING SADOMASOCHISM

An Information Literacy Perspective

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Secondary master's thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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HARVIAINEN, J. TUOMAS: Learning sadomasochism: An information literacy perspective

Secondary master's thesis, 72 p.

In this thesis, I examine the way people with a liking for pleasure-giving actions involving elements such as pain and humiliation become practicing sadomasochists. Special focus is on sadomasochist communities as learning organizations and on Annemaree Lloyd's expanded concept of information literacy, because much of the enculturation and learning takes place not through formal sources or training, but rather the observation of others' actions and the interpretation of them as meaningful texts, which are in turn appropriated by the learners. The thesis is based on the author's ethnographic observations and interviews within the Finnish sadomasochist scene, conducted over a time period of 20 years, as well as a metatheoretical review of the relevant literature. The author's findings are compared with the medical and stigma history of sadomasochism, so as to show that practitioners have to navigate a particularly problematic information environment in order to get access to reliable learning material. As sadomasochists have strong personal preferences relating to both their activities and to individual learning styles, the community, as a learning organization, is chaotic, yet exemplifies many qualities of both individual and communal information literacy.

Keywords: Communities of practice; ethnography; information literacy; learning organizations; sadomasochism.

Foreword

I have embarked upon the journey of making my secondary master's thesis, which I have been writing concurrently with my doctoral dissertation, on this particular subject in order to fix a significant gap in my own research materials. While I have written several works on sadomasochism (e.g. Harviainen, 2011; in press; numerous magazine columns and short treatises), what I have been at all times lacking is a suitable basic description of how people learn practice and limit their sadomasochistic activities and tendencies. The result of this has been an inability to refute certain outrageous claims during peer reviews - without a sufficient data basis, many medical professionals have proven rather adamant at refusing to accept that their critique prejudices concerning certain sadomasochistic phenomena (especially the myth of potential escalation from play to violence) might be an issue of facts, not a political opinion. Over the years, several solid leads have been made, nevertheless, and I have chosen to summarize their results in one place, in a form I can utilize, and one that hopefully offers a contribution to others as well.

I furthermore hope - and believe - that members of the community I have described here recognize themselves, as individuals and as a community, in this thesis, in a positive manner. I have seen that while in many ways somewhat flawed and problematic, the Finnish sadomasochist communities, as collectives of individuals, do their best to provide their members and associates with both a sense of being protected and a social network that understands what its participants value. In my opinion, they provide a very valuable service to a group of people that has been needlessly marginalized, stigmatized and misunderstood.

In Vantaa, Finland, August 2012,

J. Tuomas Harviainen

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1. INTRODUCTION

The study of sadomasochism and activities relating to it has thus far been viewed mostly from two perspectives: The first approach has been a psychiatric, etiological view of the phenomena, leading to disease classifications, social stigma and lost custodial battles (see Weinberg, 1978; 1995; 2006, for examples). The second has been a sexological one, gathering data on specific behaviors and their frequencies with, at least, some attempts at providing actual field results, in opposition to the overt generalizations of the former (ibid). Theories discussing sadomasochism as sexual game-play, as well as serious leisure, also exist. In addition to these, there are some highly prominent texts on sadomasochism that are actually not based on observed facts, but are rather extensions of their authors' personal philosophies (see Deleuze, 1967, for an influential example).

In this thesis, I introduce a new approach, using information literacy. It is, in essence, an expansion from both the play and leisure angles, as well as what Paul Gebhard suggested in 1969. It is the idea that the human ability to gain pleasure from certain kinds of pain (sometimes called *algolagnia*) and/or humiliation is not the same as the semiotic, social phenomenon known as sadomasochism.¹ Rather, sadomasochism is a complex way of dealing with algolagnic and dominance-oriented inclinations and needs, one that only manifests in hierarchic, yet semi-equal, societies. In such environments, persons with algolagnic desires show the ability to handle those needs by way of symbolic interactions, and tend to form social networks where they can seek partners for the actualization of their desires. The enculturation of members to and in such networks is a form of information literacy very similar to the learning processes, both socially and risk-wise, of law enforcement officers and firemen - two groups that have been the subjects of earlier studies on information literacy in addition to more conventional work groups (see Lloyd, 2007a; Bruce, 1999).

¹ Early authors used Schrenk-Notzing's (1895) concept of *algolagnia* to basically denote sadomasochism in general, but the term has since been adopted to mean the psychophysical process of enjoying certain kinds of pain, believed (as per Gebhard, 1969) to be one ground facet of sadomasochism, but not exactly the same phenomenon (see Wetztein, et al., 1993, pp. 158-162, for an example of later applications of algolagnia as not equating sadomasochism)..

To explain this phenomenon, I draw upon one main source and two supplementing ones. I am primarily following the path set by Geoff Mains (see 2002) in his seminal 1983 ethnography of the Californian gay leather scene, which he based on his own experiences and observations within it. Having been involved in, or associated with, the Finnish BDSM scene since 1992, and having had a strong interest in the way the newcomers to it were welcomed, and how they adjusted to the scene, I feel confident in reporting my observations as existing phenomena. To support these, I originally drew upon documented discussions from several Finnish online magazines/forums, the now already defunct *Tuntematon Maa*² and *Leikkikehä*³ (both of which were active when I started this thesis, and no longer are), as well as the still existing *BDSM-baari*⁴ and *Nahkafoorumi*⁵. Relevant discussions also exist in areas of more general-purpose forums.⁶ Due to the shut-downs of the two most important sites, this thesis' focus was later moved more towards retrospective ethnography, combined and compared with data gathered by key sadomasochism ethnographers such as Newmahr (e.g. 2011) and Wetzstein et al. (1993) from other sadomasochist communities.⁷ Of particular interest is the work of a research group consisting of Pekka Santtila, N. Kenneth Sandnabba, Niklas Nordling and Laurence Alison. Their work, which was on Finnish sadomasochists, will be much referenced below, even though their primary (but not sole) target group of mostly gay men from the "leather" scene (centered around MCS Finland - Tom's Club⁸), differs somewhat from mine. Due to necessity and subject matter, some of the comparison literature is non-academic, consisting of practical guidebooks and well-researched, academia-utilizing journalistic accounts (e.g. Brandhurst, 2011). This is because when it comes to

² <http://www.tuntematonmaa.net>. *Tuntematon Maa* (TM) was an online magazine with an attached forum. It was established to function especially as a provider of factual information about sadomasochism and kink culture, as well as being a networking site. It was shut down in January 2012. Having been a columnist for TM for a long time, and discussed the subjects of this thesis there, I am using extra care when referencing material from that site. In addition, due to this bias I have completely avoided posting on the other analyzed forums, in order to preserve an objective view on those.

³ <http://www.leikkikeha.net>. *Leikkikehä* contained articles with practical information, but it was mostly perceived as a contact forum, particularly for finding partners interested in BDSM. It ceased to exist after a severe crash in December, 2010.

⁴ <http://www.bdsmbaari.net/>

⁵ <http://www.nahkafoorumi.com/>

⁶ For an example relating to the subject of this thesis, see <http://keskustelu.suomi24.fi/node/8522491>

⁷ Some Finnish sadomasochists also frequent sites from other countries, such as Fetlife (<http://www.fetlife.com>) or the Swedish Darkside (<http://www.darkside.se>), but given the use of several nicknames by many, those are beyond the scope of this thesis. Such sites may furthermore have policies forbidding the use of their contents for any sort of research, making them effectively inaccessible.

learning an activity, I trust community reports with many respondents as indicators at least as credible as I do academic works on it.

There is not much data yet concerning the practice of sadomasochism and related activities in Finland. In addition to the efforts of the aforementioned research group, data exists from 1999 and 2007. According to Osmo Kontula (2008, 2009), in 2007, 42% of Finnish men and 38% of Finnish women approved of sadomasochistic activities. Among young respondents the numbers were 68% and 58%, respectively, which was about 4-5 times as high as that of old respondents. Of people with a strong religious conviction, less than 10% approved of it. In a national sex survey done in 1999, 8% of men and 7% of women reported that they had tried bondage, and 3% and 1,5%, respectively, sadomasochism. In these categories, too, the numbers were significantly higher among younger respondents (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 2001). This lead O. Kontula (2008; 2009) to conclude that sadomasochism is a rising trend in sexuality, comparable to the way increasing sexual liberties correlate with a more widespread acceptance of masturbation as a normal part of human sexuality.

Language relating to sadomasochism is loaded with terminology, and often highly debated. Given its nature as an activity concerned with clear power dialectics, its concepts are usually expressed in opposing pairs (Brandhurst, 2011). By basic rule of thumb, the following dichotomies are the most popular (see also Newmahr, 2011): A "dominant" is a person who enjoys the use of power on a willing person, and a "submissive" a person who enjoys the use of such power over him/herself. Dominants tend to be called with capital-initial honorifics such as "Mistress", "Master", "My Lord", and so forth, whereas submissives are commonly referred to as "slaves", "pets", servants and so on. Many of the names also reflect gender and relationship status, for example a "Mistress" is likely to be accompanied by her "slaves". Given that most practitioners only use SM dichotomies in small, temporary scenes (usually called "sessions"), the honorifics tend to be temporary, or at least reserved for BDSM community use. Some, however, use them consistently (Dancer, et al., 2006; Newmahr, 2011). People who have both dominant and submissive tendencies are known as "switches". They form the significantly largest demographic among sadomasochists, as opposed to pure or nearly pure-form sadists or masochists, dominants or submissives (Moser & Levitt, 1987).

⁸ <http://www.msfin.fi/> It is notable that the Finnish male homosexual BDSM scene has neither a discussion forum nor a mailing list for trading practical information of the kind discussed in this thesis. When I interviewed its members, they all said almost all such information is among them transmitted only through spoken guidance.

When analyzing (or discussing in abstractions, see Newmahr, 2011) a session, the dominating partner is referred to as a "top", and the receiving partner as a "bottom", but within the illusion of play, the names may be something completely different (Brandhurst, 2011). This is because during the act, participants take on the roles they think best fit that fantasy scene (Harviainen, 2011).

As will be shown below, behavioral and preferential variance between people even in the same sub-categories is huge. Generalizations are therefore very hard to make, excluding a few central ones. Being, for instance, a submissive does not mean that the person is a masochist, or vice versa. Strong correlation exists, but it is not at all absolute. The same goes for dominants and sadists. The abbreviation "BDSM" tries to point this out, as it constitutes of Bondage & Discipline (B&D), Dominance & Submission (D/s) and Sado/Masochism (S/M, S&M or SM). The second key issue is that while most practitioners use the short-session temporary power exchange (PE) style, certain people opt for a constant D/s relationship, a total power exchange (TPE) usually referred to as "24/7", where the role-dialectic is maintained at all times (see Dancer, et al., 2006).

This complexity, especially its impact on learning and information source selection, is the key reason why I have chosen sadomasochism as the subject of my thesis. Its physicality and level of unpredictability, on par with that of professionals like firemen, furthermore emphasizes the way it fits the same sort of analytic approach as used in earlier research on physical-action-including information literacy. As sadomasochists are in their way just as committed to what they do as are professionals in other fields (Newmahr, 2010; 2011; Williams & Storm, 2012), the activity also very clearly constitutes a form of serious leisure (as per Stebbins, 2007; 2009)⁹, thus making its participants into a community of physicality-including practice.

⁹ For examples of serious leisure research within library and information science, and the way it connects to studying communities of practice, see Hartel 2003; 2005; 2007. I have, however, chosen not to go too deeply towards the serious leisure angle, because of the varied motivations and experiences of sadomasochism practitioners.

2. A PRIMER ON SADOMASOCHISM AND STUDIES CONCERNING IT

Sadomasochism is a surprisingly elusive concept, as beyond the obvious connections of pain-pleasure and humiliation-pleasure, what it precisely includes is highly variable from one practitioner (or analyst) to the next, and sometimes even from a practitioner's one day to the following. It is therefore best observed as a category of "family resemblances", i.e. a group of phenomena associated with each other because of shared traits, shared circumstances, or both (as per Wittgenstein, 1953). Its elements exist in clusters of probability (Alison, et al., 2001), in that certain activities are found in the company of some others, for example whipping and spanking tend to be practiced by the same people. Others are rare without some "prerequisite". For instance, people who practice anal fisting (the penetration of an anus with a hand or both the hand and the forearm) are likely to have also at least tried anal intercourse earlier, yet not everyone who tries anal sex moves on to anal fisting. In order to understand the way people learn sadomasochism, it is necessary to start by understanding not only the subject area itself, but also the images of it - popular, scientific and pseudo-scientific - as they have a strong impact on how the participants, too, view, understand and define what they do. As will be pointed out several times in this thesis, BDSM practitioners pick up many influences from popular culture - including negative ones.

2.1 Defining sadomasochism

In current-day terminology, sadomasochism is an umbrella concept, under which are placed various consensual types of sexual and other pain-enjoyment behavior. These phenomena are mostly connected to themes of power, pain and humiliation, but not necessarily limited to those. According to the most widely accepted definition, coined by Weinberg, Williams and Moser in 1984, there are five key components to it. Not all of them need to be present in order for an activity to constitute BDSM, but they are often found together. These are:

1. The appearance of dominance and submission; the appearance of rule by one partner over the other.
2. Role playing.
3. Consensuality, that is, voluntary agreement to enter into the interaction.
4. Mutual definition, i.e., a shared understanding that the activities constitute SM or

some similar term.

5. A sexual context, though the concept that SM is always sexual is not shared by all participants. (Weinberg, Williams & Moser, 1984, 380-381.)

Some associated activities which do not conform with this template are furthermore grouped together with BDSM under monikers such as "kink", "kinky" or "perv". These are, despite their derogatory origins, used as empowering terms by the BDSM community, in the manner of re-appropriated racial slurs by minorities (see Brandhurst, 2011, for examples).

Confusing the definition issue, however, are two elements worthy of special mention: First, some groups consider their activities similar, yet not identical, to BDSM. The most significant of these are members of the gay leather scene, many of whom tend to identify through the concept of "leather" rather than sadomasochism while practicing highly similar activities (Mains, 2002; Kamel, 1995a). Second, some groups that are centered around highly defined singular aspects of sadomasochism sometimes want to keep a separate - possibly even hostile - identity apart from sadomasochism. This is due to them regarding their own practices, such as spanking, as "natural", in opposition to an according to them "truly kinky" BDSM (see Plante, 2006, for an example). Regardless of their own group-internal views, I will treat these as facets of BDSM for the purposes of this thesis, as that's where the data seems to strongly point.

The lines are blurry, as the evidently pleasurable self-torture of a training athlete, for example, does not constitute sadomasochism. Neither do BDSM-resembling activities done in, say, a religious context - unless one gains sexual or autotelic (i.e. goal-in-itself, as opposed to something externally oriented, i.e. allotelic, like "religious purification") pleasure out of it. And some non-consensual things outwardly resembling sadomasochism are furthermore actually violence, symptoms of mental disorders, or both, not at all sadomasochism, even as they may sometimes very much look like it and even use the same paraphernalia and vocabulary (see Mokros, et al., 2010 and Nitschke et al., 2009). It is thus necessary to understand the discursive limitations of the actual phenomenon, as opposed to its popular and medical images. The information seeking habits of its practitioners are so strongly tied to public perceptions on sadomasochism that it is not possible to understand those habits without knowing at least the basics of the history of BDSM.

2.2 Algolagnia and sadomasochism

As noted in the introduction, sadomasochism is an emergent social phenomenon given birth by the combination of algolagnic and/or dominance-submissive urges, and a suitably hierarchic social environment. Especially favorable to it are highly regimented cultures where sexuality is nevertheless not totally repressed (see Gebhard, 1969). Japan, being strongly associated with things such as artistic rope bondage (known as *kinbaku* or *shibari*, discussed later in this thesis) and misogynistic fetish pornography, is an obvious example (see Diamond & Uchiyama, 1999). Algolagnia and sadomasochism share a common study history, until Gebhard's breakthrough in 1969. The two terms and their like, as well as their connotations, had before that nevertheless been extensively discussed by theorist-researchers such as Havelock Ellis (1903) and Sigmund Freud (e.g. 1905), so the analysis can from a modern perspective be considered biased, surely, but not unreflective.

The first reliable mentions of sadomasochistic sexual behavior are from the beginning of the 16th century. Near the end of the 15th century, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola wrote of a man who only enjoyed sex when he was beaten bloody with a whip dipped in vinegar. Similar cases were also reported by Coelius Rhodiginus in 1516 and Otto Brundel in 1534. All three were, however, described as medical curiosities and not even forms of sexual deviance (Ellis, 1903; see also Moser & Madeson, 1996). Some works on sadomasochism (e.g. Kaartinen & Kippola, 1990) go further back in history, linking religious flagellation to algolagnic pleasure. There is, however, no way to ascertain whether the practitioners were seeking transgressive pleasure, flesh mortification and pain-in-itself, or both (see Jenks, 2003, on such differences), so the historical issue remains open on that part.

In 1805, Richard von Krafft-Ebing published his *Psychopatia Sexualis*. It contained the first consistent definitions of the phenomena known as sadism and masochism (Weinberg & Kamel, 1995). Instead of proper field data, however, Krafft-Ebing drew his definitions, and their names, mostly from works of fiction, combining those with his knowledge of patients who were sent into mandatory treatment or sought it out in order to be “cured” (Stekel, 1965).¹⁰ The former phenomenon was named after Donatien Alphonse François de Sade,

¹⁰ This is comparable to the current-day situation, where most of the data, especially that which is used to justify the continued classification of sadomasochism as a mental illness, comes from forensic populations (see

(1740-1814) whose works contained numerous instances of dominance and sexual cruelty, as both mental and physical acts and as political philosophy. The latter was given a name after Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895), who had written on the subject of enjoying (his own) pain and humiliation. Sacher-Masoch, still living at the time and an esteemed author, was quite offended by his family name being turned into a type of sexual illness (Haeberle, 1993). As noted by Weinberg (2006), the misunderstanding was quite understandable (as was that of later followers through Freud), because Krafft-Ebing and his disciplinary scions dealt with literarily depicted extremes, and their own base of empirics was restricted to patients and criminals, leading to a very narrow interpretation.

While in his tone highly pathologizing, Krafft-Ebing noted that the roots of sadism are visible also in "normal" sexual congress, in the form of elements such as scratching, clawing and wrestling. He also mentions the significance of fantasies to a masochist's gain of pleasure from the pain. The main perspective is, nevertheless, quite negative and centered on the concept of an enacted sexual cruelty.

A significant turn took place in 1903, when Havelock Ellis demanded a step away from that "cruelty" as the signifying factor, towards a pain-centered view. He utilized the concept of *algolagnia* (first introduced by Albert von Schrenk-Notzing in 1895), i.e. the sexual enjoyment of pain, to denote the difference in viewpoints. According to Ellis, the key reason for algolagnia is in love: neither tops nor bottoms enjoy all sorts of pain, as pleasurable agony requires the right set of circumstances. He did, however, consider the submissive partner a passive participant - he actually called them "victims" - who just happens to be voluntary. He furthermore did not grasp that BDSM may extend to things well beyond painful situations, a perspective completely overturned by more recent data (see Nordling, 2009, for examples).

Two years later, Sigmund Freud claimed that sadism and masochism are actually two sides of the same impulse, and that they often co-exist in the same individuals (Freud, 1905).¹¹ He defined masochism as the self-directed sadistic impulse of a person. Sadism is therefore for

Krueger 2010a, 2010b). The key exception are Wetzstein et al., 1993, who while studying the border between consensual BDSM and sexual violence left out forensic populations and concentrated on a snowball sample of self-identified consensual sadomasochists.

¹¹ Note that editions of the book varied heavily in content. For this thesis, I have utilized a version of the 1949 translation.

him active algolagnia, and masochism the same in a passive or reflexive form. The concepts remained effectively separate in discourse, however, until he coined the umbrella term "sadomasochism" (Weinberg & Kamel, 1995; Freud, 1905). Freud had a problem with defining masochism, however, as some of his data clearly pointed towards some men and women only enjoying it by proxy, or through fantasy, while he himself considered the phenomenon to be at the core a female trait, an accentuation of the will to obey and to submit to the father or other male authority figure (Siegel, 1995). Such convolutions did not fit his theory on desires, urges and fixations, as these patients acted against Freud's highly gendered expectations.¹²

The most influential result of Freud's work, however, was a lock-down of the thought of sadomasochism as a disease as the sole research point of view for several decades (Weinberg & Kamel, 1995). The social, playful aspects were ignored. Since Freud, researchers have also been much keener on studying masochism than sadism, as the latter can be rather easily explained away as just an extension of mankind's natural cruelty towards others, or as the psychoanalytic view's presumed thanatic urge, driving humans to destroy things. The situation was not at all helped by the fact that until the 1970's, most of the data was gathered solely by interviewing psychiatric patients, many of whom were sent to seek counseling after being arrested for strange or illegal conduct (see Weinberg, 2006, on the paradigm shift). Much of early European sexology - BDSM and other - was furthermore destroyed by the Nazis, who considered it a "Jew Science" (Moser & Madson, 1996).

Before Kinsey's first report (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948), only some two dozen surveys on human sexual behavior were published. Most of them were highly gender-biased (Breslow, et al., 1985). Out of all those, just Hamilton's (1929) study on 100 men and 100 women, 55 of whom were couples, asked questions relating to sadomasochism. Of men who responded, 51% remembered gaining pleasure from inflicting pain on a human or an animal. Of women, 32%. Roughly two thirds in both groups reported that they still felt that way. An enjoyment of received pain at some point, in turn, was reported by 28% of men and 29% of

¹² While criticizing Freud, however, one should note that he did not consider the things he presents as always fixed, rather supporting a fluid concept of a mutable human sexuality (see Stålström, 1997).

women, with 20% and 27% stating that they still enjoyed the reception of inflicted pain.¹³ The numbers are not exactly reliable from a modern perspective, though, as Hamilton did not differentiate between abusive, pathological sadism and consensually experienced pain.

The second part of the famous Kinsey report (Kinsey, et al., 1953) included results stating that 24% of the interviewed men and 12% of the women reacted at least slightly erotically to stories containing sadomasochistic elements, and 50% of men and 54% of women stated that they gained some sort of erotic stimulation from being bitten.

An influential, non-scientific sidestep in perceptions on BDSM took place in 1967, when French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, in his foreword-essay to Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870), presented his own view on sadomasochism. According to Deleuze (probably in response to Sartre, 1943), masochism is supposedly a conflict-state between desire and pleasure.¹⁴ A submissive therefore would seek to maximize his desiring-of-pleasure via an executed contract, making the dominant partner his unfeeling tool for that purpose.¹⁵ The dominant, in turn, would get his pleasure from the power. Therefore, according to Deleuze, the two impulses actually have no shared origin. Despite this view having more to do with Deleuze's own philosophical system than any actual real-world data, it has gained a strong following. It is, for example, often cited by even medical professionals in favor of the paraphilia view on sadomasochism (see 2.3 below).

The 1970s saw several studies touch on issues of sadomasochistic type: Hariton (1972) questioned 141 women about their fantasies during marital intercourse. 19-49% of them had

¹³ Note that in contrast to this, many modern sadomasochists speak of “giving” pain rather than inflicting it, and consider that a defining trait of their activities (Reiersøl & Skeid, 2011). As stated by Williams & Storm (2012), however, several differing discourses regarding pain exist within sadomasochistic communities. In my observation, a clear division exists in many sadomasochist communities between people who hold differing view on the significance of pain in BDSM activities.

¹⁴ Note, however, that Deleuze clearly states that he sees the connection to de Sade as disrespectful towards Sacher-Masoch. Deleuze also claims that he is discussing only literary aspects of sadism and masochism, but quite blatantly nevertheless generalizes from those literary depictions later on, leading to misquotation due to a lack of source criticism (i.e. the lack of information literacy skills from supposed experts).

¹⁵ Deleuze drew this idea from Sacher-Masoch. Some BDSM practitioners (including Sacher-Masoch himself) use actual written contracts as a part of their practices, even as those do not carry any legal weight. Many of the guidebooks cited in this thesis include samples of such, and they are also popular in fiction (see James, 2011, for a good example). From a library and information science perspective, they can be seen as documents both delineating the parameters of acceptable sadomasochistic activities and guiding participant interpretation relating to said activities.

some submissive fantasies, with 2-14% experiencing those in a repeated fashion. Stein (1974) studied the male customers of prostitutes who neither were professional dominants nor advertised domination. Of those men, 13% nevertheless purchased precisely such services from the prostitutes. In Hunt's (1974) survey of 2026 people, about 5% of men and 2% of women said they had enjoyed inflicting pain upon someone else, and the same numbers - but in reverse - that they had enjoyed receiving pain. In a survey conducted for the Playboy magazine (1976), 18% of men and 12% of women, out of a random sample of 3700 in total, reported at least some interest in things counted within sadomasochistic behavior.

During this same period began a prolific publication of feminist texts which contained highly anti-sadomasochism viewpoints (Wright, 2006). Their core idea was that BDSM was solely a male fantasy which always utilized women (either against their will or as pseudo-volunteers brainwashed by patriarchal culture). They furthermore claimed that amongst lesbians there would be no sadomasochism, despite the existence of several women-only BDSM organizations (such as SAMOIS) by the end of the same decade. This view still lives on in critique of BDSM, and is sometimes allied with the psychopathological perspective on sadomasochism (see Siegel, 2000, on feminism and sadomasochism).

In 1977, Andreas Spengler received responses from 245 West-German male sadomasochists, who about equally represented primarily homo- and heterosexuals. Most of the respondents had not told their regular partners about their sadomasochist inclinations, yet about 40% of them had engaged in BDSM during the last year. Of the respondents, 16% would have preferred to engage only in sadomasochistic sex, 65% wanted at least as much of it as plain ("vanilla") sex, and 15% reported being able to experience orgasms only during BDSM sex.

The 1980's AIDS epidemic caused significant changes to sadomasochist communities' practices, especially amongst gay leathermen (see Mains, 2002; Kaartinen & Kippola, 1990). The decade also saw the first reliable data on female BDSM practitioners, when Breslow, Evans & Langley's (1985) 182 survey responses included 52 by women. Several gender differences emerged: For example, whereas 75% of males reported that their partner knew of their sadomasochist inclinations, that number among females was 97,4%. There was also a difference in how one's sadomasochist tendencies had first been discovered: Only about one fifth of respondents in both genders had first encountered it through pornography. Of men,

63,9% and of women, 20,6%, said they'd been interested in BDSM already as children. 8,36% of men and 61,8% of women said they'd been introduced to it by another person. Given the significance of these factors to the way sadomasochism may be learned, I will return to the subject in chapter 5. No reasons were given (nor found) for the differences, and the BDSM-preference splits were quite alike among both sexes, even as men were slightly more likely to be at the extreme ends of both dominance and submission.

Moser and Levitt (1987), in turn, received answers from 47 women and 178 men, forming out of them a statistical table with the categories of "tried" and "tried and enjoyed".¹⁶ For example, spanking was listed by 89.1% as "tried" and by 66.1% as "tried and enjoyed" (see Moser & Levitt, 1987). Interestingly, 5,8% of the respondents stated they'd prefer not being sadomasochists, 58,5% claimed sadomasochistic sex was more satisfying to them than "straight" (vanilla) sex, and 36,8% said they enjoyed both equally. These statistics, when added up, show that some sadomasochism practitioners may have actually enjoyed vanilla sex more, but the most likely explanation is that such persons may have been "good, giving and game", engaging in BDSM primarily for the pleasure of their partners. 30,2% of the respondents said they needed sadomasochism in order to be fully satisfied. Of the respondents, 85,6% presumed that no one in their mundane life would guess they were sadomasochists. Women were more likely than men to presume their inclinations might be detected by others, but among them, too, such ideas were in a minority. Such results tie in directly with the issue of the stigma of sadomasochism and the way it affects learning the practices and precautions of it.

The Moser and Levitt study also showed that only about 8% of sadomasochistically oriented males considered themselves purely dominant, and roughly the same number purely submissive. The rest were switches, of whom about half had a preference towards either direction. The female respondents' number was too small for reliable results, but what data did exist, pointed towards the same type of preference spread.

The most interesting result, however, related to fear: 29,9% said that there was a "reasonable danger that S/M play will escalate to a truly dangerous extent." This assumption has been

¹⁶ Moser and Levitt did not distinguish further within non-enjoyment, so those not included in the latter columns may have had either a neutral or a negative experience.

refuted by more recent research (see Nordling, 2009, for examples), as it appears that sadomasochism and antisocial sexual sadism are not parts of the same continuum, but rather different phenomena with similar manifestations (see Nitschke, et al., 2009). Dangerous transgression through escalation is not likely, despite some of the consensual practices being by nature risky, i.e. “edgeplay” (see Newmahr, 2011, and 5.3 below). When accidents or worse happen, they are almost always due to a lack of skill, intoxication (see Jardine, 2011, for a drastic example) or cases of criminals pretending to be consenting sadomasochists (see Jenks, 2003) so as to lure in potential victims.¹⁷ Many in the medical community still, however, support the hypothesis of potential escalation, which is a key reason why the medical classification of sadomasochism persists, and demands to remove it from the classifications are considered political statements even as field data would point to that conclusion (see section 2.3).

Around the mid-90’s started the influx of academic and semi-academic books on sadomasochism, many of them with an agenda of expanding earlier, often medicalizing, perspectives on BDSM towards a more positive, social interpretation, while also including tips and guidance to would-be practitioners and/or autoethnographic contributions. This same process has been since continued, leading to a number of both academic works, ideological treatises and practical guides. To understand their significance, as well as a paradigm shift currently taking place on how sadomasochism should be viewed, we next turn to the medicalizing perspective, its consequences and its more recent critique.

2.3 The medical classification issue

Adding significantly to the stigma is the fact that in countries outside the Nordic area, sadomasochism is still classified as a mental illness (see Reiersøl & Skeid, 2011, on the

¹⁷ Sadomasochist communities watch their members’ behaviors closely, for the sake of mutual safety, due to which antisocial sexual sadists do not tend to prey amongst them. Likewise, as shown by Newmahr (2011), play while heavily intoxicated tends to be strongly frowned upon in such communities. While, as shown by Sandnabba, Santtila & Nordling (1999, p. 275-276), a correlation between the use of alcohol and sexual satisfaction seems to exist among sadomasochists, in my observation community rules are strongly against sadomasochist play while obviously intoxicated. I would argue, based on my ethnographic observations and on the findings of Connolly (2006), that the correlation comes from many of the practitioners being sensitive to various pleasures. It seems only natural that those who report most pleasure are also people who have a somewhat wider hedonistic streak.

Nordic removals). Greece, for example, has gone so far as to list it as a disability, offending both sadomasochists and the disabled (see Paphitis, 2012).

The diagnostic criteria for sexual sadism in *DSM-IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, section 302.84) are:

A. Over a period of at least 6 months, recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving acts (real, not simulated) in which the psychological or physical suffering (including humiliation) of the victim is sexually exciting to the person.

B. The person has acted on these sexual urges with a nonconsenting person, or the sexual urges or fantasies cause marked distress or interpersonal difficulty.

The *ICD-10 International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, Tenth Revision* (World Health Organization, 1992) (p. 367) criteria currently are:

Disorders of sexual preference
Includes: paraphilias

F65.5 Sadomasochism

A preference for sexual activity which involves the infliction of pain or humiliation, or bondage. If the subject prefers to be the recipient of such stimulation this is called masochism; if the provider, sadism. Often an individual obtains sexual excitement from both sadistic and masochistic activities.

Masochism

Sadism

Furthermore, the ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavior Disorders diagnostic criteria for research (World Health Organization, 1993) are:

F65 Disorders of sexual preference (p. 135)

G1. The individual experiences recurrent intense sexual urges and fantasies involving unusual objects of activities.

G2. The individual either acts on the urges or is markedly distressed by them.

G3. The preference has been present for at least 6 months.

F65.5 Sadomasochism (p. 137)

A. The general criteria for disorders of sexual preference (F65) must be met.

B. There is preference for sexual activity, as recipient (masochism) or provider (sadism), or both, which involves at least one of the following:

(1) pain;

(2) humiliation;

(3) bondage.

C. The sadomasochistic activity is the most important source of stimulation or is necessary for sexual gratification.

These criteria attempt to target only harmful and non-consensual activity (Krueger 2010a, 2010b), but the diagnoses embrace the sexual preferences entirely. The problem is that there are actually two distinct forms of sexual sadism: one of them is consensual and the other non-consensual (Nitschke, et al., 2009). The DSM-IV-TR criteria do contain the word “nonconsenting”, but as shown by for example Klein & Moser (2006) and Wright (2010), they can nevertheless be used against consenting practitioners (see Fulkerson, 2010, on sadomasochism and the limits of consent). As long as the idea of potential escalation from consensual forms into non-consensual, antisocial sadism and masochism exists, consensual practitioners can be labeled as potential monsters.

I believe that the disease classifications are based on five factors: The first of them is the fact that the creators of the early classifications, such as Krafft-Ebing and Freud, draw their empiric data from solely forensic populations and people who had sought out treatment because they (or their relatives) were distressed by their urges (see Weinberg & Kamel, 1995 and Weinberg, 2006).¹⁸ The second factor is historical precedent - the fact that sadism, masochism and sadomasochism have been included in the classification systems is a key reason they keep being included in the newer editions. The third is the existence of antisocial sexual sadism as a real phenomenon (see Mokros, et al., 2010), combined with the fact that it has for a long time been considered to be the same thing as consensual sadomasochism. The fourth factor is the ideological misperception of sadomasochism as deviance, as a perversion, particularly by psychoanalysts who have been calling views opposing theirs “unscientific” (Weinberg & Kamel, 1995; Stoller, 1991; see also Caprio, 1995, Socarides, 1995 and Stekel, 1965, as examples of such ideological works). That view has tainted both medical and legal interpretations of sadomasochism (see White, 2006 and Klein & Moser, 2006, for examples). The fifth, and possibly most significant, is the fact that separate disease classifications for sadomasochism (in the ICD) or sexual sadism and masochism (in the DSM) are useful as diagnostic tools, the misattribution risks of which are believed to be removed by the inclusion of non-consensuality as one of the criteria.

¹⁸ As shown by Krueger (2010a, 2010b), that practice has continued to a great extent to this very day. The sole key exception seems to be the German data collected by the “Medienkultur und Lebensformen” research group, published in Wetzstein, et al. (1993).

I, however, have over the two decades observed a community that strongly seeks to separate itself from non-consensuality (see also Moser, 1999). What transgressions I have witnessed (or heard reported reliably) had to do with either

- 1) outsider assumptions of excessive force, despite the participants themselves being fine with the situation,¹⁹
- 2) accidents related to excessive intoxication during play,
- 3) misunderstanding the limits of a submissive participant's consent (for example, penetration during a non-safeworded session the submissive expected to be non-sexual but the dominant sexual),
- 3) the lack of proper use of a safe word, followed by claims that the dominant should have realized there was a line even without it; or, most commonly,
- 4) the relationship issues of practitioners (jealousy, imminent break-ups, and so forth) carrying into sessions, leading to complications, or a change of mind by the submissive partner *post de facto*.

All these incidents have been very rare. In my opinion, this is partially due to the community members emphasizing consensuality, knowing that a transgression (even an accidental one) is a serious ethical breach and, when necessary, a matter of criminal law. Most of all, however, it seems to be due to the fact that sadomasochists tend, according to studies, to a great extent be socially well-adjusted people whose BDSM-oriented activities are reserved solely for certain agreed-upon, consensual situations (Sandnabba, Santtila & Nordling, 1999; see also Cross & Matheson, 2006 and Connolly, 2006). So in most cases, the sadomasochist mantra of “safe, sane & consensual” appears to be very true.

Even Freud, while classifying sadism and masochism as deviance (e.g. in *Beyond the pleasure principle*, 1920), differentiated between various types of such behavior. His

¹⁹ In discussions of whether sadomasochists actually comply with the “sane” aspect of their credo, the so-called Spanner trials are easily brought up. This was a case of the British police acquiring videotapes of sadomasochist individuals engaged in very heavy play, leading to the participants being later found guilty of various forms of assault (see White, 2006). While in theory solely a matter of law, it was treated as also a matter of public health, and the sanity of the practitioners put to question. Several of my interviewees reported that similar things had happened in Finland as well, with for example the sanity of a submissive being questioned in court when her dominant partner was accused of assault, for consensual activities done during a session which they videotaped.

opinions varied over the years, but both sadism and masochism came to be associated with the death instinct.

The theory of sadism was formulated very early. Ever since the *Three Essays on Sexuality* the term covers three sets of phenomena. First, it designates a more or less perceptible component in any normal and integrated sexuality: second, it designates a perversion, sadism proper, i.e. a mode of being that has become independent of that sexual component: and last, it also stands for a pregenital organization, the sadistic stage, in which that component plays a dominant role.

The case of masochism is quite different, for up to the present - in the *Three Essays* and in "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" - masochism was nothing more than sadism "turned round" upon the ego, whereas Freud now regards the forms of masochism as derived phenomena, as a return or regression to a primary masochism. (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 295.)

What medical classification (excluding the Nordic countries, see Huuska, et al., 2010) has not done is properly differentiated between social sadomasochism and pathological states with symptoms that resemble it. What is central to the situation is that while sadomasochism proper is play with transgression, to actually transgress social norms of pain without proper consent from all involved is to commit a crime (Jenks, 2003). This is the same difference as that between rape and consenting sex. Just as most women who enjoy rape fantasies do not wish to be actually raped (Zurbriggen & Yost, 2004; Stear, 2009), consensual sadomasochists would not find actual non-consensuality arousing (Newmahr, 2011).

“Acceptable” transgression, in sadomasochism, is a consensual transgression of social norms, through a contra-moral (see Lappi, 2010) and the temporary consensually playful bracketing of some parts of the other partner’s emotions and humanity (see Harviainen, 2011), combined with occasional pushing of the participants’ own limits. At the same time, such transgression also strengthens the norms and boundaries, because those have become internalized by the transgressors (Jenks, 2003, p. 7). At the same time, the trespassing is seen as contaminating, by both the people committing it and (often especially) outsiders (Douglas, 1966, 33-37). Due to these factors, Freud (1918, p. 45-47) thought that because in it prohibitions become eroticized, sadomasochism functions through a revenge-utopia mechanic, of committed transgressions for which one is granted the right of desired punishment. While again true on some practitioners (who like to play with a system of intentional transgressions and “deserved” punishments - such as getting a whipping because of badly washed dishes, or for not losing weight), it does not describe the great majority of BDSM practitioners. Therefore, if one does not want to go into each individual’s own motives, it is best to think of the

transgression aspects through an umbrella concept such as Bataille's (1957) idea of an overall attraction of the "borderline towards the horrific". The transgressive facet is certainly significant as a factor, but it is not solely explanatory.

Likewise, along with researchers such as Gebhard (1969), Moser (1979), Nordling (2009) and Reiersøl & Skeid (2011), I too argue that sadomasochism does not have an etiology. It is a learned social extension of certain natural urges, one that takes highly ritualized forms. The learning, too, is more complex than it would appear at first glance. As Gebhard (1969) notes, we cannot extrapolate from just the cases the roots of which we do know (see also Wetzstein, et al., 1993):

[I]ndividualistic explanations do not suffice for the phenomenon as a whole. After all, the supply of English headmasters and Austrian girl friends is limited. (Gebhard, 1969, p. 79.)

To understand the way practitioners learn and construct their systems of sadomasochist activity, we have to look at the various channels as a combination of which it is learned, as well as certain factors which influence that process.

2.4 A note on commercial BDSM

Spengler (1977) presumed that the low number of female respondents to his survey meant that all women who participated in sadomasochistic activities were prostitutes, and that sadomasochism held no real appeal to women. Such a misconception may seem radical, but it follows the patterns established in early sexology. Forel (1905), for example, claims that women cannot be voluntary masochists "beyond their natural desire to be dominated". Later studies (see Wetzstein, et al., 1993, for an example) have overturned this view, however.

Professional BDSM services do exist, but they are a small fraction of the number of actual female sadomasochism participants, and are often disliked by BDSM community members, in a manner similar to the stigma of prostitutes (as per Goffman, 1963; see also Jones, et al., 1984).²⁰ In most cases, professional BDSM providers do not seem to frequent leisure

²⁰ During the trial of one of Finland's most prominent providers of commercial BDSM services, in 2010-2011, for potential indecency and assault charges, several community members openly said she should be convicted

sadomasochism events (Newmahr, 2011), but I have observed that some members of the Finnish leisure community do part-time commercial work as freelancers, particularly as dominatrices (see also Williams & Storm, 2012, on professional dominatrices and leisure, including their learning of the trade).

According to my interviewees, most women working within commercial sadomasochism performed a dominant role. At least one of the prostitutes A. Kontula (2008) interviewed, however, offered services as a submissive, as did some people described by Wetztein et al. (1993). The situation is not as clear-cut as it would seem, and neither is the customer demographic. Wetztein et al (1993, p. 81-89) provide an apt overview of commercial sadomasochism in Germany. According to my observations and an interview with a Finnish scene member who also worked part-time as a professional dominatrix, the picture given in it also fits Finland, as far as contact systems, negotiations and so forth are concerned.²¹ A key difference is nevertheless found in sex: Due to the Finnish laws regulating prostitution²², and both the social stigma and specially personal preferences involved, the great majority of Finnish BDSM professionals do not engage in commercial sex. In Finland, according to my freelancing interviewee, professional submissives are also extremely rare. In contrast, in Germany, according to Wetztein et al. (*ibid.*, see also Brandhurst, 2011), the same people who work as prostitutes may also work as commercial BDSM submissives, even in commercial studios. Based on the data of both A. Kontula and Wetztein et al., we can presume that some individuals who engage in prostitution in Finland also provide BDSM-related services, but both my observations and interview data strongly point towards them doing so almost solely outside the boundaries of the Finnish sadomasochist scene. Within the scene, to call a professional or semi-professional BDSM worker a sex worker is a severe insult.

It is furthermore notable that as many forms of sadomasochistic sex, particularly fantasy-enactments of many kind, require substantial investments. Some tools of the trade, so to

(regardless of the actual facts of the case), because they disliked the services her company provided, and associated it with prostitution.

²¹ This particular interviewee had extensive knowledge of commercial sadomasochist practices in Finland, and was interviewed as an expert informant, not as a part of the main sample.

²² Most significantly, while voluntary prostitution is legal in Finland, it is illegal to profit from acts of prostitution performed by others, even by proxy. Thus any such act in the context of a commercial BDSM studio would constitute a crime.

speak, are not at all cheap. This, combined with how many BDSM scenarios follow their own set narratives, easily transferable into commercial form, has led some researchers to conclude that sadomasochism is the most capitalist form of sex that exists (see Siegel, 1995²³). While probably an exaggeration, especially if one does not subscribe to commerce-based view on sexuality (see Baumeister & Tice, 2000, for an example of that framework), it does have one notable point: Sadomasochism often does require significant investments of both time and money, especially if one wants to attend community events defined by a strict dress code. This phenomenon correlates with the documented tendency of active sadomasochists to statistically be of above-average income (see Sandnabba, Santtila & Nordling, 1999, p. 274). Many of my interviewees attested that while many types of sadomasochistic activities, such as open-hand spanking, cost practically nothing, the transgressive, explorative, push-the-envelope charm of it all entices them to acquire new toys, tools, outfits and so forth. The enactment of many fantasies requires the right, often costly, paraphernalia (Wetzstein, et al., 1993). According to my interviewees, one of the key developments of information literacy regarding sadomasochism is the learning of the ability to balance perceived scene requirements with fiscal and organizational realities: A total replication of Roissy is much too hard and expensive to get, but a role-play based on it, if performed in a normal living room, is not sufficient for most, either. Sadomasochists therefore construct or develop for themselves systems of information optimization, which allow them to enjoy a not-perfect fantasy, if the related semiotic re-signification burdens are not too distracting (see Harviainen, in press). Such processes are greatly assisted by community discourses which provide useful frameworks for comprehending what is likely to be important in such a scene.

2.5 BDSM and mainstream culture

A lot of activities within popular culture flirt with sadomasochism or include elements normally associated with it (see Siegel, 2000, for examples). Such depictions were mentioned as a common influence on BDSM behavior by many people I have interviewed within the Finnish BDSM scene. As information sources, however, the mainstream culture interpretations are quite problematic. This is because their primary purpose is not to give accurate descriptions of sadomasochistic activities, but rather to entertain. As will be shown

²³ Siegel (ibid.) also claims that the inherent narratives of sadomasochist play contributes to this (see Harviainen, 2011, on sadomasochism and narratives).

below, one of the key areas in which sadomasochists apply their information literacy skills is the appropriation of ideas from these types of biased information sources.

While functioning as inspiration and sometimes also as initial pathways into sadomasochism, mainstream depictions also affect the stigma associated with it. Some representations lessen the stigmatization or link it to other subcultures.²⁴ Industrial music scenes are very good examples of the latter, as they may seek to intentionally offend the sensibilities of the mainstream public (see Keenan, 2003, for examples). On the other hand, a negative representation may be harmful to a sadomasochistically oriented individual's image, self-image and well-being: Popular culture, particularly in movies and literature, has notoriously connected sadomasochism with insanity, especially consensual sadism with antisocial sadism, and masochism with severe depression.²⁵ Truly positive or even neutral depictions are rare exceptions. Likewise, most classical books supposedly about sadomasochism do not describe the consensual form as we now know it: De Sade's sadists (e.g. 1904), for example, are not at all interested in consensuality, and Desclos' (Réage, 1954) *O*, while voluntary, initially submits in order to please her lover, not because she herself enjoys masochism.²⁶ A central exception to the rule is the bestseller *Fifty shades of grey* (James, 2011), which very centrally deals with issues of mutual consent. It too, however, presents sadomasochism as connected to mental trauma and deviance, and thus falls under the umbrella of somewhat inaccurate, some might say "harmful" or even "offensive") fantasy interpretations.²⁷

²⁴ The first academic mention of sadomasochists as a subculture dates back to Litman & Swearingen (1972).

²⁵ The associations seem to arise from both public misconceptions about sadomasochism and academic views on its deviance (see Litman & Swearingen, 2002, for an example). Good examples include Elfriede Jelinek's book *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983), the movie based on it, *La Pianiste* (2001), and the film *Going Under* (2004). Even supposedly positive interpretations, such as the movie *Secretary* (2002), tend to be formatted as "recovery stories", where people learn to live with their sadomasochism-as-disability.

²⁶ It could however be argued that O is simply displaying the for especially women statistically typical (61,8%, according to Breslow, Evans & Langley, 1985) pathway of finding sadomasochism (that she eventually enjoys) through introduction by another person. Notable also is her very formal training at Roissy and Samois, which does not correlate with how most sadomasochists seem to learn the activities. *Fifty shades of grey* (James, 2011) also follows the stereotypical template of a dominant male and an inexperienced potentially submissive female.

²⁷ For example, an advertisement in its 2012 edition for its sequel *Fifty shades freed* describes the dominant, Christian Grey, as "damaged" and with a "compulsion to control", and the non-masochistic protagonist, Anastasia, as needing to be able to share his lifestyle "without sacrificing her own integrity". This kind of "sadomasochist-as-sick" approach is very common in popular media usage of BDSM elements.

What mainstream depictions do appear to understand, nevertheless, is the strongly ritualized aspect of sadomasochism, even if they do not always show how playful that aspect is.²⁸ Both Mains (1984/2002) and Harviainen (2011; in press) have shown that a strong ritualization is a key part of many forms of sadomasochism, used for heightening drama, turning safety rules into matters on enjoyment, and so forth. Suits (1978) goes so far as to suggest formalized sexual activities may actually count as games, if they are not orgasm-oriented. This too, very much applies to some forms of sadomasochism (Harviainen, 2011), and it fits perfectly with Goffman's (1982) idea that people tend to complicate things important to them (see also Deleuze, 1967). It also contributes to how elements are learned by practitioners through appropriation, up to and including what parts should be seen as playful and what serious.

One of the key facets of formalized play, games included, is that they function under a different set of rules than does normal life (Suits, 1978). This also includes morality (Tavinor, 2009): At play, especially highly ritualized play such as sadomasochism, it is "right" to sometimes do things that would be completely unethical in other circumstances (Lappi, 2010). That transgressive element gives those activities a strong part of their attraction (Lappi, 2011).

Furthermore, as noted earlier, ethnographer Staci Newmahr (2010; 2011) has shown that both the commitment of sadomasochism practitioners and their ritualization of it (even as she does not use the word "ritual") can fruitfully be viewed from the perspective of serious leisure. As the level of seriousness has a significant impact on practitioners' information seeking habits, that factor too ties in to their application of information literacy skills. To understand this tangled web, we now turn to issues of methodology, chosen so as to incorporate all this.

²⁸ This goes also for some scholars (see Deleuze, 1967, for an example).

3. METHODOLOGY AND SUBJECT-RELATED PARAMETERS

My primary research question is “how do sadomasochists apply their information literacy skills to learning sadomasochism-associated skills, subcultural factors and practices?” To answer it, this thesis builds on two sets of resources. The first one is formed of my own ethnographic observations amongst Finnish sadomasochists during the last 20 year, as sometimes a member of the scene, sometimes an outsider. In this, I have followed the path of recognized BDSM ethnographers Geoff Mains (1984/2002), Joel I. Brodsky (1993) and Staci Newmahr (2010, 2011). Because of past membership in, and contributions to, the Finnish BDSM scene, I have been permitted to observe several events closed to outsiders, even when I have no longer been associated with any group within that field. At the time of writing this thesis, I am not a member of any such organization.

Two fields can be said as having been the most popular for the study of sadomasochist phenomena. The first one is medicine, including psychiatry, which as noted in section 2.3 has mostly been used on people who due to one reason or another have required medical assistance (see Krueger, 2010a, 2010b). This has biased its results (Huuska et al., 2010). The second one is sociology, from Gebhard (1969) onwards (see also Weinberg, 1978, 1995). It explains the umbrella phenomenon better than the medical approach (Weinberg, 2006), but is dependant on generalizations. As shown by Mains and Newmahr, ethnography gets in this case closer to the subject at hand. It has been practiced rarely, however, with researchers concentrating rather on participants’ self-reports or on interviewing practitioners of online BDSM, who can not be trusted to really practice the same activities in real life (see Newmahr, 2010, p. 317, for an overview of both approaches). Ethnography does have its own inherent limitations, however:

Sometimes ethnographic knowledge frustrates all the parties involved: the academic audience because it is not objective and strictly analytical enough; the more general public because it is not popular, descriptive or journalistic enough; and, finally, the research participants and their society because it does not describe reality according to their categories of self-understanding. (Utriainen, 2010, p. 120.)

Because of this, I have sought to breach these limitations. Having once been included in the scene, I have the possibility of both a critical, objective view as well as the insider's ability to

report according to the categories of self-understanding. As furthermore noted by Jackson (1989), sometimes integration to a community by learning its skills, i.e. "radical empiricism" is the only way to get ethnological data from a community. This is the approach very effectively used by Newmahr (2010; 2011), and I follow it. To quote German sexologist E. J. Haeberle:

A sexologist who knows things such as bordellos, dungeons, gay bathhouses, nude beaches, sadomasochist clubs, and similar places, solely from books, has missed his calling. (Haeberle, 1989, p. 75; translation by Harviainen.)²⁹

As shown by Moser (1998), some parts of the scene are nevertheless best observed from a distance. I have thus combined both ideals, as well as parts of Mains' (2002) from-within-the-scene approach. Full surrender to an activity at hand precludes proper observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), but in the case of this thesis that is not a problem: As it deals with learning processes, not moments of heavily immersive play, maintaining an objective distance was not problematic in any way.

Spradley (1980) states that in ethnography one should learn from people, not study them. I agree with this. In active participation, one should increasingly engage in their practices, in order to understand them in their proper cultural contexts. Such findings can then later be tested with other methods (Agar, 1996). As this thesis furthermore deals with the learning processes of sadomasochists, making it was effectively learning about learning. The work is furthermore grounded in the community I have observed (as per Atkinson, 1992), and any extensions from that grounding are therefore made by combining my local findings with existing research from other similar communities. I have from early on been open with my researcher status amongst the Finnish sadomasochistic community, including the fact that I may publish (anonymized) material on it later on, and that position has elicited a highly positive reaction from members of that community. There is thus no ethical dilemma involved in my work. I have nevertheless taken extra care in the work, because it for many of the interviewees deals with describing their sexuality to outsiders (see Madison, 2005, on using ethnography relating to sexuality).

Like Brodsky (1993), I am practicing retrospective BDSM ethnography, which has the problem that the researcher will not have perfect recall of every detail. Such work is not

²⁹ "...hat seinen Beruf verfehlt."

systematic. The advantage of the method is in its naturalness and the way it does not alter the situation: The presence of the researcher as primarily a community member, not an outside observer taking notes, enables the practitioners to behave more naturally. To prevent data distortion, notes were made after such encounters, and I have intentionally sought at all times to apply the *epoche* (“suspension of judgement”: analytic distanciation; bracketing), memory retention and analysis defined by Edmund Husserl (e.g. 1913) as necessary for phenomenological analysis. I very much share Husserl’s (1954) view that once learned, the technique for *epoche* becomes a habitual process one learns to apply in certain contexts by rote. It is re-actualized without a change of interest, allowing thus both active participation and the suspension of judgement and the memory retention following it.

I do not view my work as autoethnographic, in the sense of writing about my experiences within the community I have studied. Like Newmahr (2011, p. 16), I observe that the focus of my research is not the experiences or observations of my “self”, but rather in using my own experiences to understand the phenomena that take place within the Finnish sadomasochist scene and the answers of my interviewees and discussion partners. As shown by Mains (2002), such an approach leads to a more thorough understanding of the BDSM scene than does an outsider perspective, yet it carries the risk of the analyst being biased in his observations. To combat this problem, I have as rigorously as possible again applied Husserl’s (1913) ideas on mandatory objectivity. Like Husserl, however, I accept not just actual evidence, because also potential evidence, in the sense of “habitual evidence”, contributes to the constitution of objects and concepts (see Heffernan, 1998). The sadomasochist communities have furthermore transformed significantly around the world in more recent years (Newmahr, 2010), so I have at each stage compared the current state of affairs with my notes on earlier practices.³⁰

The expanded information literacy approach makes particular sense, if one grasps a vision of sadomasochist communities as communities of practice (q.v. Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000) that seek to increase the amount of pleasure and safety for their members. In other words, sadomasochist communities are informal learning organizations, ones with very flat but nevertheless existing, chaotic, power structures (as per Morgan, 2006). In my

³⁰ Discourses on BDSM practices, like many other hobbies and serious leisure forms, have very significantly been altered by the coming of the Internet. Therefore, data on learning sadomasochism from before that time has to be judged very carefully, as it may no longer be at all reliable on current-day practices.

observation, their members, even when very private about many personal details, are highly willing to share information with other members. They also use many open signs, clothing included, to broadcast information to each other. I believe this relates to the fact that while they tend to play it very safe when it comes to sharing anything personal, their desires and play preferences are the binding factor, and thus very willingly and openly shared.³¹

Sadomasochist communities exemplify the way organizations learn through their members' learning, because the transgressive nature of the activity forces practitioners to explore and learn new things. As noted by Kim (1993), while consisting of individuals, organizations can learn independent of any individual, but not without all individuals. Argyris and Schön (1978) claim that learning happens only when new knowledge is translated into replicable, different behavior. In Kolb's (1984, p.41) terms, "[k]nowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience."³² These tie directly into the Ricoeurian idea of appropriation and meaningful action as readable text, supporting Lloyd's (2007a) view of practice community members learning much by observation of activities.

The learning process, on a community level, however, drastically differs from individual learning, even as it relies on it (Kim, 1993). According to Mills (1967), team learning (which I claim in this case also applies to informal community learning) is a reconfiguration of a group's purpose in order to achieve a greater, continually more complex purpose. The community develops as it responds to progressively more complex demands of purpose achievement. Mills describes five levels of team development, which I have repeatedly observed to match sadomasochist communities:

In the first stage, members seek immediate, individual gratification, and the group exists for them as a means of achieving that goal. In the second stage, they come together to sustain gratification. On the third, they start to pursue a common goal. That is where members must transform individual learning into activities that also benefit community learning, and have to learn how to coordinate and to adapt to goals and external demands. On the fourth level, the

³¹ The exception to this are individuals with preferences that are not accepted or tolerated by the community majority. Notable also is that expectations of privacy vary very strongly between individuals, due to things such as how damaging the revelation of one's orientation to outsiders would be to each individual, their relationship status, and so forth. This also affects how, where and how openly they can search for pertinent information on sadomasochist practices.

³² Note, however, that no unified theory on experiential learning exists (Lainema, 2009).

community no longer necessarily adapts but instead starts to influence change in its surroundings instead. This frees it to pursue its own agenda - and allows members to start once more to pursue theirs, with increased liberty and acceptance. At this stage, external constraints are not yet completely eliminated, but they are no longer totally or almost totally prohibitive. On the fifth level, growth, the community is able to allow multiple, even conflicting goals and to foster significant innovation. Its members are at that point also able to influence the birth and development of new communities that are neither doctrinal splinters of the original nor direct derivatives of it. Individual members' safety and sense of safety both increase as the community develops (Kayes, Kayes & Kolb, 2005). Furthermore, the stage affects the inclusion of members - at the lower stages, some people tend to get ignored, especially newcomers.³³

Sadomasochist communities therefore have to develop and learn, constantly, in order to provide their members with necessary, reliably updated information as well as the potential of social acceptance that comes along with the agenda of the higher stages.³⁴ This is achieved through the sharing of described situational scripts, often told in the form of anecdotal narratives. Some of them are distributed orally, others make their way into guidebooks (see Moser & Madson, 1996, for a good example of the latter). They don't have to be at all equal, as community members are expected to have different roles, based on personality, perceived inclination and skills, environmental and situational demands and so forth (Kayes, Kayes & Kolb, 2005). The inherent narrativism of sadomasochism makes this process a natural fit. I would furthermore argue that such a narrative and anecdote-using system as one (but not sole) key training system is also strongly present in the communities studied by Lloyd. "*No shit, there we were...*", as popular media puts it.

The parts of an organization's memory that are relevant for organizational learning are those that constitute active memory - those that define what an organization pays attention to, how it chooses to act, and what it chooses to remember from its experience - that is, individual and shared mental models. they may be explicit or implicit, tacit or widely recognized, but they have the capacity to affect the way an individual or organization views the world and takes action. (Kim, 1993, p. 44)

³³ At those stages, a strongly authoritative newcomer may on the other hand influence the community's direction very strongly (see Moran, 2006).

³⁴ Not all practitioners desire this - when we worked on Huuska et al. (2010), several Finnish sadomasochist scene members, though a clear minority, expressed an outspoken wish to remain stigmatized and even potentially persecuted by law, so as to keep their practices more transgressive.

The narratives are also important in spreading the acquired information. If the information is not distributed, compared against the practices and experiences of others, and reflected upon, there is a high risk the learning remains purely situated (Kim, 1993). As all learning experiences are, effectively, situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the essence is in whether the learning becomes information that is provided others for potential appropriation (as per Ricoeur, 1981). In harmfully situated learning neither that takes place, nor does the individual him- or herself learn to adapt the new knowledge to new situations. In Lloyd's (2007a) terms, this means that experiences with simulated fire do not translate into useful habits when encountering real fire. As the chaotic structure of BDSM communities leads to specialization and fragmented learning (as per Kim, 1993), and individual preference differences strongly increase that fragmentation, preserving at least approximations of instructive narratives is a must for any serious sadomasochistic community. It is up to each member to then apply their information literacy skills to make sense of the fragments. As Kayes, Kayes and Kolb (2005) point out, team (or in this case community) members have various goals,³⁵ some of which relate to information, as either directly or indirectly. The real challenge, in my opinion, seems to be the realization - or even just pursuit - of these goals amidst the jumble of potentially conflicting, yet authority-claiming sources a process further complicated by authority figures who, as a result of being abstract learners, concentrate on problem-solving instead of noticing individual preferences. This is why I have chosen to concentrate on the information literacy skills - the skills that assist in avoiding potential and factual information-source based problems - as the focus of this dissertation.

I have furthermore intentionally limited my scope to self-defined sadomasochists who practice such activities in a physical form. This is because online sadomasochist play differs from it in structure (see Cross & Matheson, 2006) and perceived roles (see Mortensen, 2003). Most importantly, the lack of a physical body and the availability of fictional tools enables participants - some of whom may not at all practice sadomasochism outside chatrooms or virtual worlds - to create scenes that would not be possible in real life (see Brown, 2012; in press). Therefore, such players may learn very different things, and thus their information literacy falls outside the scope of this thesis.

³⁵ Leading, relationship building, helping, sense-making, information gathering, analyzing information, theory building, working with quantitative data, using technology, goal-setting, action-taking and taking initiative (Kayes, Kayes & Kolb, 2005, pp. 345-346).

To sum up my method, I have chosen to conduct a combination of sub-cultural ethnography, supplemented by discussions-as-interviews, while at the same time both immersing myself in the subculture, so as to understand its concepts, and keeping up the necessary epoche that allows me to analyze its phenomena with a sufficiently objective perspective.³⁶ Moving from “how” to “what”, it is now necessary to define which interpretation of the concept of information literacy this thesis uses.

³⁶ As noted by Husserl (1954), pure objectivity is an impossibility, as the researcher inevitable starts from a subjective perspective, being a human being in the world.

4. LLOYD'S INFORMATION LITERACY

Becoming information literate is the process of knowing and becoming embodied within the specific discourses that characterize context. The process is facilitated by the discursive practices of the experienced members of the community of practice, who have a vested interest in ensuring that newcomers come to develop an understanding and meaning about practice in similar ways. (Lloyd, 2007a, p. 197.)

Various descriptions and definitions exist for the concept of information literacy. In its commonly used form, it refers to the ability to recognize information needs and to identify, locate, evaluate, and use information for a current task (see Webber & Johnston, 2000, for an overview of varying information literacy concepts). Such research tends to concentrate on workplace or educational contexts (see Bruce, 1999, for an example). It deals with an individual's acquisition of skills and attributes that make it possible for him or her to "access and evaluate information, to think about information, and to demonstrate and document the process of that thinking" (Lloyd, 2005, p. 83).

In this thesis, however, I follow the more inclusive outline set by Annemaree Lloyd (2005; 2006; 2007a; 2007b; 2010). This is because in my view, Lloyd's subject of study - the learning of firemen and ambulance officers - is in fact very close to mine: Both groups deal with tangible risks in their practices and need to adapt formal information sources into actual knowledge, usable in situations that may differ very strongly from what is represented in the formal material. The outline will furthermore be tied to Ricoeur's (1981) view of the readability of any meaningful action as a kind of text.³⁷

According to Lloyd (2007a, p. 182), information literacy is "*a way of knowing the many environments that constitute an individual being in the world*". It is based on not just the ability to access, evaluate and process information, but also to *perceive* it. Therefore what is needed is "whole person in the landscape" perspective on information literacy. To become information literate is to start "knowing" the current "landscape", or transforming from novice to expert. Based on Wenger (1998), Lloyd (2007a) argues that such learning does not

³⁷ Notably, the works of Daniel Langdrige (e.g. Langdrige, 2005; Langdrige & Butt, 2004) also apply Ricoeurian ideas to understanding sadomasochism, but as their material comes from online sources, they do not apply this embodied facet of Ricoeur to studying BDSM practices.

take place in isolation, but is constructed through discourses with the local community of practice.

According to Lloyd, information literacy deals with three sets of sources which act as sites:

- textual sources, which act as a site of conceptual knowledge;
 - physical sources, which act as a site of embodied knowledge; and
 - social sources, which act as a site of community knowledge.
- (Lloyd, 2007a, p. 197.)

The trainee firemen and ambulance officers Lloyd has observed are, in my opinion, very good examples of Ricoeur's (1981) idea of meaningful actions as text, as a literacy where people learn by reading and analyzing the actions of more experienced practitioners (Lloyd, 2007a). The observer's pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) creates the initial connection needed for interpretation and appropriation (Ricoeur, 1981), but at the same time infects the reading with the reader's own bias. Information literacy can be seen as the skill to analyze and reduce that bias (Harviainen, in press). Such a reading also includes the appropriation of non-verbal cues which, as noted by Argyle (1972), include numerous factors, ranging from clothing to micro-gestures. What is read is then selectively appended into the learners' knowledge structures (as per Brookes, 1980; Todd, 1999), once it has been interpreted and appropriated in a manner that makes the initially alien (as its producer's intent, and thus its original meaning, cannot be fully known) information the reader's own (see Ricoeur, 1981).

[O]ur bodies, the information they possess, produce and disseminate are central for understanding the information experience we have created when we engage with learning and knowledge acquisition through the collective and situated practices that shape our specific information landscapes. As such, the body is part of this experience. It is not only a source of embodied knowing, but also the visible enactment of knowing and situatedness. (Lloyd, 2010.)

Information literacy is, in addition to the abilities of appropriation and appending, about the ability to change perspectives to match the current landscape. As noted by Max Black (1962), descriptions of domains of reality in terms of theoretical models (i.e. frameworks) is a way of seeing differently by changing the our language on that subject. Ricoeur (1976, p. 67) expands on this, saying that the process functions through a construction of a heuristic fiction, which is then applied on reality. Information literate people therefore create models inside their heads, testing out if they help make sense of the current context in which they are acting. Successfully applied models then become behavioral, social scripts.

As communities, my subject and Lloyd's differ in one key aspect, however. Crisis workers and firemen have a strong history of accepted practices, honed techniques and so forth, in a regulated manner. When newcomers enter the fire station, they enter an already agreed-upon and regulated world (Lloyd, 2007a, p. 195). The sadomasochist communities, however, are quite chaotic, flexible, and tend to change due to societal factors, the in- and outflux of members, and so forth. In them, much less is inscribed in the proverbial stone. Their members therefore need to be much more adaptive in their information literacy skills.

5. SADOMASOCHIST ENCULTURATION AS AN INFORMATION PHENOMENON

According to my observations over the years, the central challenge to many sadomasochists is how to learn to use the necessary parameters and guidelines of the activity without losing the transgressive joy necessary for enjoying it. I argue that to navigate and solve this problem, (future) practitioners turn to special techniques of information literacy.

Many high-quality guidebooks and manuals exist for beginning sadomasochists, such as Christoph Barndhurst's journalistic *Kinky Sex* (2011), Jay Wiseman's *SM 101* (1999), Mathias T. J. Grimme's *Das SM-Handbuch* (2006) and Jack Rinella's *The Master's Manual* (2006) and *The Compleat Slave* (1992). I have observed, however, that only a very small minority reads those. Despite being a reportedly mostly white-collar activity (Moser & Levitt, 1977; Spengler, 1977; see also Nordling, 2009)³⁸, sadomasochism appears to for many be such a visceral activity that many people, regardless of education level, simply decide to skip written instructions. A part of this can furthermore be attributed to stigma, as buying or owning such books can easily be seen as a negative social trait by many outsiders (as per Goffman, 1963).

Curiously, also a scene-internal stigma appears to influence learning: The Finnish sadomasochist scene, despite many its members having academic education, perceives itself as a non-white-collar community.³⁹ Openly academia-oriented people like myself have been rare exceptions within it from the start, and even most university employees in the scene tend to downplay their level of education when interacting with other practitioners. I have repeatedly observed that this downplaying goes to their scene-related learning habits as well, due to reasons unknown. When interviewed, they stated personal humility and not wanting to stand out in the crowd as their primary reasons for the downplay.

³⁸ Both Spengler and Moser & Levitt noted, however, that the nature and structure of their survey may have made answers by highly educated respondents more likely, thus potentially altering the results somewhat.

³⁹ Santtila, Sandnabba & Nordling (1999, p. 274) had a disproportionate amount of highly educated people among their Finnish respondents. 21.3% of them had college-level education and 37.8% university-level. Among the general Finnish population, the percentages at that time were 3.7% and 5.5%. This discrepancy is far too large to be explained through just an increased likelihood of educated people answering their surveys.

To avoid the feel of book learning, sadomasochists try to learn through practice, by both performing and experimenting themselves, but also by observing the actions of others, integrating what they hope are the best ideas to their own repertoires while also watching for signs of what not to do. Formal, written information, if at all, is then added to that pool of appropriated but not yet embodied knowledge. In this, sadomasochists strongly differ from the communities of practice studied and described by Lloyd (e.g. 2007a): As hobbyists and practitioners of serious leisure, sadomasochists do not have mandatory formal learning requirements. No one tells them that they must first read through a curriculum before they are allowed to partake in physical information acquisition.

Despite this, the use of written and visual material as tools of learning is frequent. The comment of one of Lloyd's (2007a, p. 187) informants very much applies to many sadomasochists' attitudes as well: Conceptual information plays a significant role, because *"you learn to act, because you know what the rules are"*. However, the same respondent's continuation also applies (Lloyd, 2010): *"so that's the start, that's the base level. but when you come here you see how the other guys act."* A dissonance exists between written instructions and guidelines, perceived (possibly totally implicit) rules, and practices performed physically, observed as such, and then possibly learned as embodied knowledge. This appears true of both firemen and sadomasochists, with the latter just having more freedom to choose when to enter the community of practice and when to read written materials.

Signification systems for information rely upon embodied experiences, because the body works as out primary reference point for interpretation and information acquisition (see Brier, 2008). Our bodies also function as important reference points and information sources for other people, particularly in shared practice communities (Lloyd, 2010). Therefore bodily learning either anchors or replaced written information, even if that has been well appropriated.

Information drawn from the body about the effectiveness and application of technique is used for future guidance, action and reflections, and eventually becomes part of the conceptual knowledge domain where it is internalised and connected to previous knowledge. This form of information locates the body in relation to the material and sociocultural practices of work and emphasises observation of practice as an important source of information. (Lloyd, 2010.)

In fantasy play (be it fire drill, role-playing or something else), it is important where exactly the intended learning target takes place, despite the factual placement of the physical body. Fantasy (which I see as very important to BDSM practices), according to Whitton (2011), can be intrinsic, in which case the learning takes place within the fiction and is reliant on it (potentially beneficial, yet possible also leading to harmfully situated learning; see Kim, 1993, and Harviainen, Lainema & Saarinen, 2012), or extrinsic, in which case skill and learning are not dependant on the fiction. Malone (1980) has stated that intrinsic fantasies tend to be more educational and interesting, whereas extrinsic fantasies tend to serve personal (wish-fulfillment and/or competitive) goals.

As this thesis does not really delve into actual learning issues, but rather into the question of acquiring and evaluating information for *potential* learning, I have chosen to abstain from evaluating learning paradigms, and am using them more from demonstrative purposes on potential appropriation systems than as statements on how sadomasochists learn. However, some frameworks do appear far more rational and /or suitable than others.

As indirectly noted by Lainema (2009), five of the 11 constructivist learning principles defined by Jonassen, Peck and Wilson (1999) fit extremely well into the paradigm I am utilizing here, corresponding with both Lloyd and Ricoeur. According to Jonassen et al, 1. A knowledge construction process is produced by a dissonance between what is known and what is observed (i.e. there is a problem). 2. Knowledge building needs articulation of what is learned. 3. Meaning making can also result in conversation. 3. Meaning making and thinking are distributed throughout our tools, culture and community. 5. Not all meaning is created equally.

This paradigm idea actually corresponds extremely well with what Newmahr (2011, pp. 84-89) observed about the sadomasochist scene she studied. The use of toys and tools is learned almost completely from other practitioners. The same goes for safety information. Other sadomasochists work as guides for experimentation and thus experiential learning, by either topping or bottoming. The effects of each practice are learned in action. More formal information, such as on where it is safe to hit someone with what kind of an instrument, is shared in a community of practice kind of manner. Teaching by demonstration is very common (see Newmahr, 2011, p. 37, for a good example), as is studying by observation of

others' play. As a community of practice, sadomasochists enact Bruce's (1999) seventh face of information literacy: "*information literacy is experienced as using information wisely for the benefit of others*". The community also polices itself as much as possible, so that transgressions made due to malice are not tolerated, and those done due to ignorance are corrected so that people do not repeat them (Fulkerson, 2010; Newmahr, 2011)..

Most significantly for the dominant partners, they must learn to communicate with the submitting partners in an indirect manner, by reading and decoding signs, because direct questions are distractions for the activity at hand. In other words, they need to hone the very kind of information literacy skills described by Lloyd (2007a)! The most effective way, for most, to develop those skills is through sadomasochist play after which one discusses that play with the other participants. The same way is used for learning how to interpret and take into proper consideration the submissive participants' emotional states and reactions.

The key problem therefore appears to be that different people learn best through very different means. Following Kolb (e.g. 1984), Kayes, Kayes and Kolb (2005, pp. 334-336) define four learning style templates that depend on individual inclination, talent and preference. They are: The *diverging* style, in which the dominant learning style is through concrete experience and reflective observations. People using it learn the most through viewing and analyzing actual situations from many perspectives, and they like to gather information. In the *assimilating* style, dominant are abstract contextualization and reflective observation. people following it favor putting information in an organized form, and comprehending a wide range of available information. They tend to work on the level of ideas and abstractions rather than actual people. Those whose dominant style is *converging* combine abstract conceptualization with active experimentation. They tend to focus on practical issues rather than social aspects. *Accommodating* learners, in turn, learn the most from concrete experience and active experimentation, i.e. hands-on experience.

Such differences, combined with highly individual activity-preferences and restrictions (discussed in 5.1 below), would to a great extent explain the diversity in sadomasochists' learning styles and patterns, and variance in guide material on the subject. On the other hand, I have observed how the "relief effect", the sense of having found a community that shares one's ideals and understands one's "deviance" or answers significant questions about life (see

Galanter, 1999), may temporarily sublimate such learning differences. As noted by Newmahr (2011):

Entrance into the community provides immediate reassurance that kindred spirits - and bodies and minds - exist. This observable validation suggests to participants that their interest in SM must somehow be connected to their other marginal experiences. By providing the chance to cast SM as the (essentialist) explanation for why they have been different all along, the community reaffirms a broader and farther-reaching nonconformity and highly values living life “outside the box. (Newmahr, 2011, p. 38).

For the duration of the relief effect, which heightens a sense of community and may make both addictions and mental disorders go into remission (Galanter, 1999), and which may last for any period of time, the believer accepts the community’s dominant teaching as truth. During that time, their information literacy skills may become dormant in relationship to the group’s accepted views, and hyperactive against conflicting information. This may or may not be beneficial to the individual.⁴⁰ mentally it may be helpful for some, but it does hinder learning. When people do not feel safe sharing their experiences- or during relief effect, see key differences in perception as insignificant - they cannot really learn (Kayes, Kayes & Kolb, 2005). For most members, the relief effect is nevertheless just a kind of short-ish honeymoon period. This is a result of the fact that, as noted above, sadomasochists are no more or less dysfunctional or mentally ill than the general populace. In their case, I have observed, the sense of community breaks down because of the preference differences and varying, individual, boundaries on what feels acceptable and/or pleasurable. This is demonstrated in Case Example 1:

Case example 1: In *Tuntematon Maa*, on 25 January, 2008, was published an essay called “Financial submission”, by “Teoretikkokinky”.⁴¹ In that essay, its author gave detailed suggestions on how submissives should serve their dominants on also the fiscal level, contributing an increasingly large part of their income to the dominant’s pleasure, up to and including a prenuptial agreement favoring the dominant. While not explicitly stated, the author seemed to imply that such service was a normal and expected part of being a submissive. In return, the dominant was supposed to take very good care of such a submissive, also to prevent that submissive from giving more than he or she should.

⁴⁰ As observed by Galanter (1999), coming into conflict with a home-like community’s dogma, once the effect ends, may be anything from slightly annoying to very traumatic. The level of trauma tends to be connected to the remission of other problems that was experienced during firm belief.

⁴¹ Eng. “Kinky theoretician”, a pseudonym the owner of which is unknown. The author was not available for contact, meaning I could not present the actual article or its comments here.

In the 10 comments that the essay sparked, several people accused its author of presenting a provocation, or of suggesting a rare practice as a common (or a normative) one, or of promoting a non-same way of playing. The editor of that time responded that the essay's purpose was to explore one type of play (which was, as stated above, actually said in the essay), and to emphasize the necessity of proper care in even such extreme cases. Later commentators did not, however, accept that explanation, and claimed that the text was written as if it were not optional, as if submission required money (and thus blurred the line with professionalism), and, especially, that it was *potentially damaging* towards sensitive beginners, who might read it as a description of standard practices.

The last facet is of particular interest for this thesis, for three reasons. First, it puts to question the essay author's information sharing style. Second, it is a form of blunting directed towards the message content of the essay. Third, it is a strong dismissal of the information literacy skills of (hypothetical) scene newcomers. All these agendas were furthermore intertwined together, sometimes even in singular sentences.⁴² Truth values of all the claims set aside, this example presented a very typical case of polarized conflict over written information among Finnish sadomasochists.

As Case Example 1 shows, information literacy skills, especially in the source-critique sense (e.g. Bruce, 1999), play a significant part in how potential instructions on how to play can be perceived. because of this, I next turn to individual practitioner preferences.

5.1 Diversity - beyond the stereotype

As stated above, sadomasochists are typically classified as either dominant, submissive or both. These are, however, extremely rough categories. In truth, even highly devoted practitioners in one category can be completely unlike beyond the basic desire to dominate or submit. These go well beyond just the learning styles described in the previous sub-chapter. For example, one may prefer physical pain but hate verbal humiliation, while another thrives on just the opposite. This will directly affect both their off-play information behavior regarding sadomasochism as well as their during-session information literacy application (see Kamel & Weinberg, 1995 and Newmahr, 2011, pp. 108-113, for examples on style differences among sadomasochists.).

⁴² Of extra interest is also that the most vocal author of said critique was a person who elsewhere had stated she did not participate in the Finnish scene, beyond using this one forum, yet considered herself as someone with significant expertise on the subject.

During my ethnographic observations, I interviewed (as per discourse-as-interview; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) twenty female and five male submissives on their preferences.⁴³ Their answers were surprisingly different, even as they by demographics fall within the same general classes of behavior.⁴⁴ The most extreme answers came from a male submissive, who said that as a willing slave, he has felt it necessary to give up all personal preferences, so as to be truly able to serve his Mistress.⁴⁵ Others were far more selective, however. The samples below, all from self-admitted female submissives⁴⁶ between the ages 29-39, exemplify such difference:

Fuchsia said she very much enjoyed receiving physical pain, especially from riding crops or a bare hand, particularly when combined with bondage and performed as foreplay to intercourse. While having a very high pain threshold, she had a strong dislike to any sort of verbal abuse or humiliation, considering them turn-offs that would immediately end her interest to continue a session. She disliked all sorts of piercing and cutting, being very partial to what sort of pain she enjoyed.

In contrast, *Burgundy* said she could stand only very light pain of any kind, but thrived on humiliation, especially in combination with light bondage. She had no preference for or against intercourse, claiming that being sometimes ignored while turned on by the humiliation was more pleasurable than any following coitus.

Scarlet stated she enjoyed both bondage (particularly Japanese-style ropes) and a combination of light pain and humiliation, but shied away from any practices that made her think of domestic abuse, such as facial slapping. She also preferred to keep sex and

⁴³ The examples here were chosen so that they represent a large enough group each to prevent the recognition of the respondents, as do the male respondents below.

⁴⁴ The differences correlated strongly with the cluster theory suggested by Alison et al. (2001).

⁴⁵ This particular submissive did not say if he still had some limits regarding to safety, or if he and his mistress had outlined such before he entered her service. Typically, most consensual sadomasochists subscribe to at least a basic idea like “no permanent damage and no significant risk of catching a disease”, but some of my interviewees indicated that they did not. For example, one male submissive said that he strongly enjoyed the threat of castration by his Mistress, and one male dominant said he’d only engage in unprotected sex during sessions. Whether such fit the definitions of “safe” and “sane” anymore is an issue debated by sadomasochists, medical professionals and courts alike. Sadomasochist communities tolerate such edgeplay to some extent, but try to police it if it appears too risky or disturbs others in a public setting (Newmahr, 2011).

⁴⁶ Auburn was an exception to this, defining herself as a switch.

sadomasochism separate, unless with a steady partner, from whom she'd also enjoy receiving types of pain and humiliation she would not have wanted from other play-partners. Unlike the other four, she said she disliked the use of sex toys during sessions.

Auburn said she was into bondage, very heavy humiliation and quite harsh pain, both with and without sexual intercourse included. She was also keen on experimentation and pushing her limits, meaning she admitted to experimenting with various sadomasochism-associated activities, including piercing, cutting and breath control, to see what she actually liked. She also mentioned a sense of semi-constant transgression-seeking, meaning she moved on by increments towards harder play, in order to keep up her sense of novelty. Unlike the other four, she sometimes preferred to provoke the sadomasochism as a punishment (i.e. engaged in "bratting"), instead of reserving it for just sessions.

Crimson stated enjoying beatings, preferably with a riding crop, to very specific areas of her body. She was likewise into certain types of humiliation while completely turned off by others. She disliked bondage, particularly slow rope-work, but claimed to very much enjoy a verbal variant where she'd be ordered to stay still in a similar position or situation. *Crimson* said she enjoyed spanking and flogging both in the context of sex and outside it, but preferred to get sexual release at the end or soon after it. She admitted to being very picky in her BDSM preferences, yet denied that she'd because of this engage in "topping from bottom", i.e. the often frowned-upon habit of certain submissives to direct the actions of their dominant partner while just pretending to submit.⁴⁷

What is curious about all five, as with the great majority of the other respondents, is that they are in direct contrast to Newmahr's (2010, 2011) observations on sadomasochists not typically engaging in sex in connection to BDSM activity. It is quite likely, however, that this is a cultural difference, further emphasized by Newmahr's choice of subject community and her own life situation restricting her play options. In my observation, the great majority (though certainly not all) of Finnish sadomasochist have an obvious sexual component to their play-practices. A now sadly dead discussion thread on the issue in *Tuntematon Maa*

⁴⁷ Cleveland (1749), in *Fanny Hill*, conveniently provides a fictional example of this behavior, as Mr. Barville (under current terminology a switch) directs the first part of their session while supposedly submitting to being just the recipient of given pain. As befits earlier depictions of sadomasochism, Mr. Barville is also depicted as unable to gain a sustainable erection without a sadomasochistic stimulus.

supported this assumption: About 90% of the respondents said that for them, sadomasochism was definitely sexual, whereas the rest strictly denied that it had any sexual significance for them. The responses of both that thread and my interviewees, however, were not at all sufficient to support Darren Langdridge's (2006, see also Langdridge & Butt, 2005) claim that BDSM is at the core a sexual activity. On the contrary, while I do, based on my interviews and observations, certainly argue that it has for most practitioners a sexual component, I would rather define it as to be strongly *associated with sex* than claim that it is *about sex*.

I also interviewed dominant and switching males on their preferences, so as to gain a corresponding contrast. The following answers, from five respondents between the ages of 35 and 55, illustrate their differences:

Azure was a dominant who did not enjoy submission at all. He claimed to read research on sadomasochism, and to follow updates on various fora, yet was very picky on his play practices. He was very keen on the use of safe words, and reported having been severely distressed by the rare occasions when his play partners had not used them at appropriate times. *Azure* was voracious in picking up ideas from various sources, including formal, written material, yet admitted that he tended to skip details not concerned with safety rules, if he found them uninteresting. He was also active in teaching his skills to others, by both informal example and formal workshops.

Cobalt was a dominant with a very long history of sadomasochist practices. He did not believe in the use of safe words, instead demanding what he defined as "authenticity", and considered the ability to practice without them a division point between "average" and "skilled", "true" dominants. As a result, many of his current and former play partners sometimes displayed opinions strongly differing from other BDSM practitioners, particularly on safety, trust and ethics. It was obvious that for his immediate social circle, he was a major second-hand information source and a cognitive authority (as per Wilson, 1983).

Ultramarine switched, preferring a dominant role in private, but submission in public play. He had some small experience of learning BDSM-related ideas from books, but preferred to study by experimentation. He said that having a very high pain threshold had assisted him in

this during his 20 years of practice. Ultramarine said he liked to observe others play, and then try out the same things, up to and including the risky edgeplay described in 5.3 below. He also said that despite decades of experience, he was still frequently encountering new ideas by coming into contact with other practitioners. He said that especially recent, inexperienced arrivals to the sadomasochist scene he frequented managed to surprise him with innovations he wanted to appropriate. His answers strongly emphasized Bruce's (1999) sixth face of information literacy, "*information literacy is experienced as working with knowledge and personal perspectives adopted in such a way that novel insights are gained*".

Cyan was a long-term dominant who, in private, occasionally also bottomed for his primary partner. According to *Cyan* himself, he was "not a reader" and his sole information sources were other practitioners, personal experimentation and internet forum discussions. He said he, as a learning method, preferred trying out the same things with multiple partners, so as to become more and more adaptive and skilled. *Cyan* said he would never play without a safeword, except with his primary partner, as he needed to get the sense of pushing limits in order to be properly aroused.

Cerulean was an exception to the majority, in that he did not want to associate his sadomasochistic practices (which he referred to as his "needs" and "urges") with sex in any way. He preferred long-term bondage, especially very complex Japanese-style knotwork, as an aesthetic endeavor. He sometimes also engaged in pain-inflicting activities, mostly caning and whipping. During the interview, he described extremely developed and adaptive information literacy skills, claiming that he needed to be able to appropriate and alter the very often "tainted" (i.e. sex-related) depictions of sadomasochistic activities for his own, "pure" use, in order to learn new skills and gain new ideas..

All the interviewees, regardless of primary preference, furthermore had in-category preferences. These are of interest, since they often seem to differentiate between what the practitioner considers acceptable infliction of pain or humiliation, as opposed to associations of abuse. For example, pinching and face-slapping may produce reactions related to the latter in certain individuals. I have in many cases observed clear signs of blunting (as per Baker, 1996) by sadomasochists introduced to practices they associate with violence. Both my interviewees and those of Wetzstein, et al. (1993, p. 163), furthermore stated that one of the

most important skills for a dominant (and the occasional submissive, depending on exact preferences) to learn was the recognition of a partner's barriers: Which can be stretched, which should not be transgressed. Just like pain-tolerance levels are individual, so are the points in BDSM-related activities at which mental contaminant-rejection modules activate, causing disgust (Wetzstein, et al., 1993, p. 164). As those modules are one of the key elements defining act-as-if experiences (see Nemeroff & Rozin, 2000), transgressions regarding them can ruin the situation for all involved. Thus practitioners learn to appropriate and append clues relating to potential problem points from very early on.

Differences of practice-acceptance relating to gender, sexual orientation, sadomasochist orientation or even scene status did not seem to exist, however. What differences were observable were mostly on the level of which of the approved practices each individual chose to use and/or study further. This corresponds strongly to the findings of Breslow, Evans & Langley (1985), who noticed that after a practitioner had at least somewhat accepted his/her orientation and sadomasochist inclinations, no significant gender differences manifested.⁴⁸ Variances in when and how people have found their way into sadomasochism are high. As such differences may strongly influence the way they learn the activities, key research on the subject is presented below, in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Diversity in ages of and methods of initiatory BDSM behavior

Age	Spengler, N=237 (1977)	Moser & Levitt, N=178 (1987):	
	"First Awareness"	"First Experience"	"Coming Out"
10 or younger	7%	12%	4%
11-12	10	4	6
14-16 ⁴⁹	25	10	4
17-19	15	9	12
20-24	20	22	20
25-29	12	22	22
30 and older	11	21	32

⁴⁸ The one exception to this was that in their sample, females had had more partners on average over the last year than male respondents, but that may likely have been due to gender imbalances in the BDSM scenes at that time.

⁴⁹ Sic. Discrepancy from Moser & Levitt (1987).

Breslow, Evans & Langley, N=109M, 37F (1985)

Age	Male%	Female%
6 years or younger	9.2	2.7
7-10	12.8	2.7
11-14	31.2	16.2
15-18	24.8	21.6
19-22	9.2	16.2
23-26	6.4	8.1
27-30	3.7	18.9
over 30	2.8	13.5
Means of First Exposure		
Through reading pornography	21.3	17.6
From legitimate movies, TV, etc.	3.7	0
Introduction by another person	8.36	61.8
Natural interest from childhood	63.9	20.6
Other	2.8	0

Sandnabba, Santtila & Nordling, N=161 (1999)⁵⁰

Age	"Awareness"	" First Experience"	"Regular Activity"
<10	9.3%	5.0%	1.3%
11-13	12.3	6.2	4.4
14-17	19.1	10.6	6.3
18-20	17.3	15.5	14.4
21-25	19.8	31.7	33.8
26-30	11.7	14.9	20.6
31<	10.5	16.1	19.4

While gathering such data went beyond my research (and I did not want to delve into issues of underage learning of sadomasochist practices, due to ethical reasons, despite the interviewees now being adults), in my opinion age has to factor in on how people learned sadomasochism-related things. Several interviewees also hinted towards this, with one interviewee, for example, making allusions to having read *The story of O* before the age of ten, and thereafter consciously working towards enacting that sensation in her real life.⁵¹

Because of such variations in pathways to sadomasochism, the age of learning it, background situation and individual learning habits, associative factors (both social contacts and issues of which practice is seen as connected to what), it is no surprise that people seem to learn their sadomasochistic practices and limits as expanding clusters rather than as holistic concepts

⁵⁰ Note that this sample consists predominantly (55%) of homosexual males, who, according to Kamel (1995a), appear to develop their sadomasochistic tendencies, if they do, later in life than heterosexuals.

⁵¹ Given that this interviewee was self-descriptively a primarily dominant-oriented switch, the comment is also a clear sign of content appropriation in action.

(See Alison, et al., 2001), a process which strongly resembles appending as described by Todd (1999).

Some variations have been suggested and refuted, others confirmed. For example, Baumeister (1988) hypothesized that masochism comes earlier and sadism is acquired later in life. The data from Sandnabba, Santtila & Nodling (1999, p. 279-280), however, contradicts this, as the majority of their sample had not changed their BDSM preference, and of those who did, most had moved from sadism to masochism (see nevertheless also Kamel, 1995b, as role models may have influence on this).

Sadomasochists who are exclusively heterosexual seem to recognize their inclination earlier than others, and they appear to start trying out their leanings earlier on (Sandnabba, Santtila & Nodling, 1999, p. 58-59). This is because sadomasochist experimentation, especially with a partner, is quite rare before the acquisition of other sexual experiences, and heterosexuals tend to have more opportunities for those.⁵² Nevertheless, sadomasochist desires are an extra complication in relationship issues, making it more difficult for people with such preferences to find suitable partners in the so far studied (i.e. Western, individualistic) communities (ibid.).⁵³ Certain demographic groups furthermore do not feature some pathways that others do. For example, sadomasochistic pornography is apparently very rare as a form of first introduction among SM-oriented lesbians, probably due to the tendency of most lesbian-themed porn being actually directed towards a heterosexual male audience (Wetzstein, et al., 1993, p. 43). In a similar vein, while BDSM-themed porn (both written and visual) is listed by many people as their way of finding their sadomasochistic inclinations, no causality between such pornography and becoming a practicing sadomasochist seems to exist (ibid., p. 44).

Before we move on to individual variance, one more thing needs discussion: According to the data of Nordling, Sandnabba & Santtila (2000), sadomasochists were much more likely to have encountered sexual abuse in their youth. This still concerned only a minor fraction of those who practiced sadomasochism-associated activities, yet the number was still

⁵² Some strongly gender-regulated societies may be an exception, but their repressive structure has thus far prevented the acquisition of reliable data from them.

⁵³ Again, it can be argued that in a culture of arranged marriages, this point is moot, being replaced with the issue of whether the newlyweds find a suitably compatible partner in each other or not.

statistically significant among both genders (males 7,9% and females 22,7%; the latter sample however being so small as to not be reliable for any generalizations),⁵⁴ and respondents who reported encountering abuse had also a higher probability of having had mental or emotional problems (p. 67). They were also much more likely to have visited a physician due to BDSM-related injuries (p. 58), which is a factor denoting abstract learning. It appears that abuse victims who participate in sadomasochist practices are less able to internalize the social rule-systems of the the activity, ending up either with problem partners, and inability to use safe words to break a session, or both. In information literacy terms, they have an inability to append (as per Todd, 1999) the abstract knowledge they learn into their knowledge structures. This in turn makes them unable to apply the safety rules in situational contexts even when they should, due to perceived social pressure not to do so.

Despite the higher probabilities, these people form only a (rather tragic) minority of the sadomasochist scenes, while most of the communities' members seem to internalize the necessary safety skills well enough. Not all do, however, nor do people necessarily share the idea of what exactly is a good rule. As if the situation were not complex enough as it is, sadomasochists also engage in preferential learning, in blunting and in less-than-optimal information acquisition strategies, all of which will be discussed next.

5.2 Learning patterns, cherrypicking and berrypicking

Sex columnist Dan Savage well summarizes the problem of disinformation in BDSM communities:

YDIW [You're Doing It Wrong] is a social-skills disorder that members of the BDSM community are at particular risk of acquiring. (Others at heightened risk: religious conservatives, sports fans, advice columnists.) BDSMers with YDIW feel they have a right to inform other BDSMers that they're doing it wrong—whatever it might be—even if the "it" being done wrong poses no risk to the YDIW sufferer or anyone else.

BDSM players should speak up, of course, when they witness other BDSMers doing something dangerously wrong. BDSMers who observe dangerous or nonconsensual play at public parties have a responsibility to speak the fuck up before someone is seriously injured. The secondary, tertiary, and quaternary goals of creating a BDSM community were the sharing of skills, the promotion of good play practices, and the holding of dangerous or malicious players to account, respectively. (The primary

⁵⁴ The corresponding numbers among the general population being 1-3% and 6-8%.

goal? Getting BDSMers laid.) But some BDSMers confuse a responsibility to speak up when they witness dangerous play for an invitation to critique other people's kinks, sexual interests, preferred fetish roles, safe words, etc. (Savage, 2012)

As noted by Savage, BDSM communities form in order to teach and protect their members, as well as to introduce them to like-minded people, including potential partners. Given the personal nature of the activity, and its multi-faceted, umbrella nature, it is easy to perceive one's own approach to sadomasochism as the sole right one. This often happens in BDSM communities of all kinds (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006), and is very much affected by the social history of sadomasochism, which has created multiple, often conflicting "truths" about what it should contain and how it should be performed.

Beginners may also look for the "right" ways of practice, "right" answers to their questions, and an acceptance of what they are doing as "right". This includes also validation from therapists (Nichols, 2006), as well as prominent community members. Such people tend, in my observation, to also experience the relief effect (Galanter, 1999) most strongly: People encountering a community that fits their needs and inclinations tend to seek a particularly strong acceptance of that group's values. This produces in them a sense of "having found their way home" (see Moser & Madeson, 1999, p. 49, for an example), which affects their behavior (sometimes up to and including adopting a YDIW attitude and/or a tendency for proselytism), and may even make their mental disorders (if they have any) go into remission. For them, BDSM activity may carry a definite and beneficial therapeutic function (see Lindemann, 2011). Should there later be significant conflict with such a person's viewpoints and the group policy, their breakups with the community may be quite spectacular. This is however quite rare. Such practitioners nevertheless form a very visible, if small, minority of the scene, but formal information channels on sadomasochism usually try to take their presence into account, both for educational and integrative, as well as potentially problem-preventing, purposes.

As Bruce (1999) notes, one of the facets of information literacy is that it is experienced as building up a personal knowledge base in a new area of interest. This is catered to by a multitude of sources, both formal and informal, organize and ephemeral and incidental. A significant number of potential written resources exists online for both the curious and those

interested in practicing sadomasochism-associated activities.⁵⁵ They are all, in Lloyd's (2007a) terms, part of textual sources, forming the conceptual site of information literacy. The way people construct their habits and sometimes even identities from those, however, are strongly tied to their earlier perspectives (see Langdridge & Butt, 2004, on both the identity construction and an overview of potential sources). This extends also to the appropriation of fictional accounts. *Crimson*, for instance, said that she enjoyed all sorts of sadomasochistic fiction, including depictions of non-consensual sadism. Because of this, she said, she was very careful about accepting anything she read in fiction as a safe addition to her palette of actual activities. In contrast, *Auburn* and *Fuchsia* said they intentionally read sadomasochist fiction, so as to both get aroused and to selectively incorporate interesting ideas from it to their sexual practices.

On written sources, interviewees repeatedly mentioned their selective appropriation of interesting, exciting bits for potential future use. To describe the way they “cherry-picked” such optimal ideas, they clearly defaulted to the approaches described by Lloyd (2007a, 2007b). A central tenet appeared to be the habit of considering such ideas “theory learning”, regardless of source, until the practitioner him- or herself had had sufficient chance to try and test the activity in embodied practice.

At the same time, they also engaged in what Bates (1989) calls “berrypicking”: The semi-selective appropriation of conveniently available information on a subject, which may not be optimal, but is easily accessible without undue effort. My hypothesis for why this is popular is the stigma of inexperience: By engaging in berrypicking and avoiding direct questions, participants avoid being labeled as “not-in-the-know”, an image which would significantly reduce their probability of finding willing play-partners (see Newmahr, 2011).

Sadomasochist events may include some guidance for newcomers, but this is apparently very rare beyond the the occasional demonstration of how certain pieces of BDSM-furniture (such as a rack, a St. Andrew's Cross, etc.) are to be safely used. According to Finnish researcher Taru Liski, who specializes in the study of kink-event organizing, it is not at all common to see formalized training of any kind at Finnish BDSM events (personal interview, 2012; see

⁵⁵ They are however unreliable for permanent access, as the sex-related topic makes them particularly high-risk targets for website hijacks.

also Liski, 2010). First-timers, along with the more experienced participants, are reminded of the basic rules of the event, but that tends to be the limit of organizer-provided information. The rest is left up to individual learning. Such cultural practices emphasize the observe-and-appropriate nature of the Finnish BDSM scene. If people ask, experienced sadomasochists usually do volunteer their opinions on various facets of the activity, quite happily so. It is then, however, up to the information-seeker to decide how much of that information was reliable and what may have been biased - a practical, exemplary on-site application of one's information literacy skills.

Such biases, along with YDIW, become more prominent on online BDSM fora. This is in my opinion not so much due to potential anonymity, as most scene members tend to get to know each other at least by face value, but because of differing information preferences and needs. Blunting - the rejection of unwanted information (Baker, 1996) - is very common, as is the omission to study printed materials thoroughly, safety instructions included. Surprisingly common is also a combination of YDIW, personal goals and the provision of distorted information (which the provider may of course believe to be true). For example, I observed on both *Tuntematon Maa* and *Leikkikehä* numerous forum posts from a male submissive, who was apparently seeking his dream dominatrix, and thus fed any female newcomer biased information in order to convince them that they were really dominant (regardless of how they described themselves) and to get them to be a precise type of dominatrix ("A true dominatrix wears...", and so forth). This is a direct example of both the forums as contested information environments (as per Lloyd, 2007a, p. 191) and of an individual trying to take advantage of the women's information uncertainty (i.e. their anomalous states of knowledge, ASK, as per Belkin, 1980, Belkin, Oddy & Brooks, 1982)⁵⁶. Most of the active blunting among sadomasochists is nevertheless intended as positive - practitioners simply want to help others away from information they believe to be harmful.

My interviewees, when describing their information seeking habits, very strongly resembled Adams' (2009) data on online game players, and can similarly be discussed using McKenzies (2002) model of information practices in everyday life information seeking.⁵⁷ They engage in

⁵⁶ Note that many sadomasochist sessions also utilize ASK state manipulation, for the purpose of increased pleasure (see Harviainen, in press).

⁵⁷ See Savolainen, 1995, on the concept of everyday life information seeking.

active seeking, by looking for reliable sources to answer specific questions. They use active scanning, to locate potential information sources for future use. They utilize non-direct monitoring, encountering and recognizing potential sources as they happen upon them. And finally, they use a significant amount of information seeking by proxy, relying on word of mouth and asking other practitioners not just to answer their questions, but also to find out more on a given subject.

Given, however, the precarious and potentially unreliable nature of many information sources relating to BDSM - popular views, medical statements, exaggerated pornography, biased practitioners, and so forth - active sadomasochists require exceptionally good information literacy skills, in order to learn actually useful things. For example, were inexperienced practitioners to try out some of the (in truth very rare) sadomasochist acts presented in the exceptionally popular *Fifty shades of grey* (James, 2011) to spice up its vanilla core, without proper source critique, they would be at a serious risk of harming themselves. What functions well in a fantasy may be very problematic or dangerous in real life (see Brown, 2012 on how some sadomasochists circumvent this problem through online play).

The interviewees' information activity progression, in many individually and thoroughly explained example cases, matched the way Hartel (2006) describes gourmet cooks' information practices: They explored for inspiration, planned potential sessions, gathered up the necessary tools and elements⁵⁸ for the scene, prepared them (also in the social sense of providing anticipatory references to them for their partners, both as tops and bottoms), and then performed the scene itself. Afterwards followed aftercare, which included an evaluation of sorts, in freeform discussion.

Time and again, excluding certain riskier practices included in the categories in 5.3 below (but nevertheless including many of them), all of my interviewees listed two primary means of learning the "thing that they did": experimentation and observation. The key technique appeared to be a combination of the two, described through various terms, but effectively always amounting to Lloyd's (e.g. 2007b) interpretation of information literacy.. First, they would watch others do some sadomasochistic thing, or read about it, or see a mediated

⁵⁸ Which actually matches very closely the cooks' gathering of ingredients - these simply being the ingredients for a BDSM scene rather than a dish.

version (e.g. pornography) they found interesting. They would then evaluate that meaningful-appearing action, read it as a kind of text, and appropriate it into their knowledge schemas. Then, through experimentation, they would try it out, in what in information terms can be defined as iterative implementation. If the practice worked and proved both safe and exciting, it was added to their knowledge structures. Theirs was a very direct, practical application of Brookes' (1981) fundamental equation: What the practitioners learned was through an acquisition of information which was changed by what they knew, and selectively appropriated.

The exceptions, however, nevertheless merit a special discussion, as not all facets of sadomasochism can - despite the hopes of interviewees like Ultramarine, safely learned through just experiential means.

5.3 Exceptions requiring formal learning or workshops

Certain special areas of sadomasochism are, according to my observation, generally regarded as requiring formalized training. What they all have in common is that they are particularly risky areas of BDSM, ones that can easily cause permanent damage. One of these is rope bondage, done typically in either the Japanese *shibari* or *kinbaku* style, or in ways developed from cowboy roping (Grimme, 1999; Midori, 2001). In it, the submissive partner is tied in complex rope patterns, often highly aesthetic ones, for the sake of visual pleasure and potential discomfort. It requires specific expertise for three reasons.

The knotwork is not easy to do, when one moves towards more complex patterns. Like nearly all sadomasochist activities, one needs special skills to do it just right. Whereas in those other forms the dominant partner can wing it, and use personal choice as an excuse even when somewhat ignorant, it is not possible in kinbaku. One has to have sufficient skill in order to be able to improvise functional designs. Without that, the ropes stay too loose or become too tight - or just plain ugly. It is thus quite common for practitioners of shibari to read up on not just the subject itself, but also on the art of making knots, sometimes even mathematical knot theory.

The key point in formal training, however, concerns safety. Wrong types of rope can damage the skin, through prolonged exposure, burns from too fast pulls, and so forth. The most significant risk, however, is more insidious: One can easily get even permanent neurological damage, if bound the wrong way. Such damage manifests initially as just numbness and local tingling, something people are used to ignoring as something that will soon pass.

Inexperienced practitioners may thus miss the warning signs (Midori, 2001). One of my informants reported a case where she had tried shibari with a first-timer, and as a result of not knowing this risk, had her hands bound slightly too tight, causing her thumb to lose the sense of touch for several months.

At the worst end of the scale, mistakes can prove lethal, as in the case of Paola Caputo, who died in 2011 during a shibari suspension session (see Jardine, 2011, for a journalistic description). The person doing the binding was recognized as a kinbaku expert within the local BDSM community. This is consistent with other serious leisure fields such as diving: Experienced practitioners perform said activities more often, and are more likely to push the boundaries, so they run a higher risk of serious accidents in more ways than one (see Newmahr, 2011, chapter 7). Experience is no guarantee against damage in an activity involving transgression and intentional limit-seeking, it simply changes the risks to different ones (see Ninjalicious, 2005, for examples). The involved parties in this particular case had also been using alcohol and narcotics, which drastically increase the likelihood of potential harm in any BDSM encounter.

Furthermore, it is not really possible to anticipate how a new partner reacts to being bound. Some may become sleepy, some aroused, some claustrophobic, and this cannot necessarily be known in advance. These variances can be taught, however, so that one expects them, as can be basic rules such as keeping safety scissors (not a knife, as it is too risky in cases of medical emergencies) nearby, knowing that one should ask in advance if the submissive is an epileptic or too intoxicated, and so forth.

In principle, such workshops and lectures seek to train practitioners in exactly the same way as is done with the trainee firemen described by Lloyd (2006). Physical risks and necessary skills are first iterated, then put to practice in a safe environment, so that the learning individuals can later, hopefully instinctively, apply them in varying field conditions. They are

an excellent example of the kind of information literacy Lloyd describes, combining theory learning, practice, simulation and the observation of meaningful actions of others as a text that is appropriated by the viewer as knowledge (as per Ricoeur, 1981). Having taught several such workshops, however, I have noticed that most participants were far keener on learning the figures of the binds than they were in developing good, safe knots or paying attention to the reactions of the person being bound. This, too is in line with information literacy studies: People will ignore more important details, when something else in the subject matter appeals to them more, or appears to require almost total concentration, or simply because something else is more interesting (see for example Reece, 2005).

The other major formal training subject is not as literacy-based. Piercing, in both permanent and in temporary ("play-piercing") forms, also requires thorough knowledge of certain anatomical details (Myers, 1992). The same applies to other forms of breaking the skin with edged instruments, i.e. "bloodsports" (Newmahr, 2011). Therefore the best way to learn these arts is to get formal training from someone with sufficient skill in them already, be it a teacher at a workshop (see Myers, 1992, for a good example) or a fellow practitioner willing to share expertise. As failures with these skills are particularly risky, they prompt people to seek as formal and reliable information sources as possible. Accidents nevertheless do happen, as does ignorance: I have witnessed a case where a man not only had over two dozen injection needles pushed through his testicles, which in itself is was risky. The session participants furthermore left the needles on the floor when they left, which is not only extremely dangerous, but also a gross breach of event safety rules. The reasons for both risks were simple: Not knowing how to play safe, carelessness, and that it apparently seemed like the right thing to do at the time.

Another facet of "edgeplay", i.e. high-risk behavior in BDSM (or other fields) is breathplay (also known as airplay). In it, the dominant partner restricts the air intake of the submissive. This is done for two reasons: For the dominant, the play with life itself may be a highly arousing rush. For the submissive, the lack of oxygen in the brain creates a temporary sense of euphoria, increasing especially sexual pleasure (see Newmahr, 2011). Formal training in it is quite rare, due to reasons unknown (my assumption is a combination of the high risk and the risk of blame if something goes wrong during training, or if a trainee later does something lethal), but special tools and costumes for such play do get sold. I have personally heard of

workshops on it, but never attended one. People therefore pick up skills from popular media, which is not necessarily safe, as for example the way one places hands in strangulation is not the one used for safe, sane and consensual breathplay - on the contrary, it can crush the throat. It thus appears that BDSM communities would benefit from a more formal training in that area, even if some of the enjoyable aspects of the activity require very high arousal in order to be pleasurable instead of terrifying.

These formal aspects of BDSM enculturation show that while in many other parts of the subculture one may pretend to be experienced until one learns the necessary skills through practice ("faking it 'till making it"), there are exceptions. The community appears very keen to regulate, at least informally, activities which may cause permanent damage - to both a victim and the reputation of the scene itself. I have repeatedly observed situations where on these three subjects, hopeful practitioners have been directly guided to contact more experienced, recognized experts on them, so as to learn from as good a source as possible. Those in the know have also - due to either social pressure or personal preference - almost always been happy to share that knowledge. This is in direct contrast to the tolerance on hiding one's inexperience and the "opinions on how to do it differ, try it out yourself" *laissez faire*, reported above as the way people in the scene are generally allowed (and often expected) to gather expertise.

As a final note, it must be pointed out that my interviewees, on both edgeplay and on the more common aspects, repeatedly echoed (in various words) Bruce's (1999) observation that information literacy tends to be experienced by people as a sense of control over information. Several of them (Auburn, Crimson, Fuchsia and Azure) further explicated on that, pointing out a key dissonance between the illusion of play and a proper sense of sufficient information control during play. This is in line with problems of boundary control in any physical pretence play environment, and worth further study (see Harviainen, in press).

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this secondary master's thesis, I have used a descriptive approach to study the way sadomasochists learn what they do, and the information sources they use for that purpose. Such learning - as is the activity itself - is strongly affected by several factors. Central among them is the stigma associating sadomasochism with sexual deviance rather than thinking of it as sexual variance, the long history of interpretations and re-interpretations of sadomasochistic urges, and the highly open communication culture of socially inclined sadomasochists.

Viewed as a community of practice, the sadomasochist community can be analyzed as a learning organization with a chaotic, low-hierarchy structure. Its members are keen to learn new things and to share much of what they learn with other like-oriented people. Through this practice, the community increases its pool of accumulated knowledge, which is furthermore tested and analyzed by its members through recursive experiential experimentation.

Sadomasochists learn by various means, but despite the existence of very good guidebooks, prefer to learn through discursive and observational practice. To appropriate the skills they need, they use the same systems that Annemaree Lloyd describes as the expanded concept of information literacy she observed among trainee firemen and crisis workers, and which fits the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. Meaningful activities by more experienced (or sometimes much less experienced) practitioners are interpreted as if they were ephemeral "guidebooks", read as texts, and then appropriated from their essentially alien origins into an approximation, something they can add to their own knowledge structures.

The more risky and/or complex the community judges an activity, the more likely they are to organize formal training for it. For example, whipping or spanking is not formally taught nearly as often as is rope bondage or piercing. The community furthermore polices itself from members (or outsiders) who seem to be either dangerous or to have insufficient skills for safe play - including not just practical skills, but also social skills and the ones associated with proper source critique, i.e. information literacy skills.

Due to both social pressure from outside and from within their own communities, and the visceral, sometimes even risky nature of their activities, sadomasochists become highly adept at information literacy skills, at least within their particular spheres of interest. This, combined with the fact that they tend to be well-educated - either formally or in practical skills - in areas outside of BDSM, their information source evaluation abilities appear particularly well developed. Countering this, however, is the fact that the variation of individual preferences, on learning strategies, play habits, attitudes towards sexuality and sadomasochism itself, and so forth, makes the use and sharing of what the community learns through its members quite challenging.

The next logical step from this mostly descriptive ethnographic foray into the learning and information literacy skills of sadomasochists would a comparison work with other communities of serious leisure, so as to establish whether the patterns apparent in the BDSM context exist elsewhere, and to what extent. Few other practices share such a combination of stigma, mismatched media representations and varying information sources - especially not with also a very personal, physical and mental sense of pleasure.

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