

Submitting to the discipline of sexual intimacy? Online constructions of BDSM encounters

by

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Abstract

BDSM (bondage, discipline/dominance, submission/sadism and masochism) has recently gained greater visibility in dominant discourses around sexuality. However, these depictions are often constructed in rigid ways to typically exclude experiences of sexual intimacy. Despite this apparent exclusion, constructions of subspace (an altered mental state induced through BDSM encounters) on online blogs intrigued me to consider it as an alternative to widely accepted notions of sexual intimacy. Using a poststructuralist theoretical framework, I conducted an online ethnographic study in which I explored the varied ways in which self-identified South African BDSM individuals construct meaning around sexual intimacy. Through a Foucauldian discourse analysis, I consider how constructions of intimacy in the BDSM community might have been silenced through exclusionary definitions in dominant discourses. I identified four discourses in the text: A discourse of romantic vulnerability, a discourse of knowledge, a discourse of difference/sameness and a discourse of role differentiation. The findings suggest that BDSM practitioners, in constructing meaning around intimacy, at times comply with dominant discourses and at other times subvert normative ideas around sexuality, gender and sexual intimacy. I conclude with implications for gender and sexuality studies as well as the discipline of psychology in its engagement with BDSM identities and practices.

Key terms: BDSM, sadomasochism, sexuality, Foucauldian discourse analysis, poststructuralist theory, social construction theory, South Africa

Glossary of key terms

Dom: A Dom refers to a person who assumes a role of power and authority in the BDSM power exchange by taking psychological control over another person who has submitted their power (Veaux, 2012). Also referred to as a “top” (Richie & Barker, 2005).

Domme: A female Dom.

BDSM: BDSM is an acronym used to describe consensual sexual interactions involving bondage, discipline/dominance, submission/sadism and masochism. BDSM is also referred to as “sadoomasochism” or SM (The BDSM Store, 2007).

Heteronormativity: Heteronormativity refers to the “vast matrix of cultural beliefs, rules, rewards, privileges and sanctions that impel people to reproduce heterosexuality and to marginalise those who do not” (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005, p. 144).

Queer: Queer is a term historically used in a derogatory manner to refer to same-sex sexualities but reclaimed as an umbrella term used to indicate varied positions that resist heteronormativity, generally referring to but not limited to LGBTI genders and sexualities (Seidman, 1996).

Scene: A scene refers to a specific period of BDSM activity (Veaux, 2012).

Sub: Sub refers to the person who assumes the role of submission (intentional, consensual powerlessness) in the power exchange relationship in BDSM. Also referred to as a “bottom” (Veaux, 2012).

Switch: Switch refers to a person who can change roles from being either dominant or submissive (or occasionally sadistic or masochistic) at different times with different partners (Veaux, 2012).

Vanilla: Vanilla refers to a person who is not interested in or involved with BDSM related activities (Veaux, 2012).

Polyamory: Polyamory refers to a consensual non-monogamous relationship configuration premised on honest and open communication with all partners involved (Barker, 2005).

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Glossary of key terms.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	i
Chapter 1:.....	1
Introduction and rationale.....	1
1.1. Introduction.....	1
1.2. The research problem.....	2
1.3. Aims and objectives.....	5
1.4. Outline of the mini-dissertation.....	5
Chapter 2:.....	6
Literature review.....	6
2.1. Introduction.....	6
2.2. The emergence of BDSM discourse.....	7
2.3. The influence of religious discourse.....	8
2.4. The legal context.....	9
2.5. Media and popular culture representations.....	10
2.6. The role of informal resources.....	12
2.7. BDSM as sexual violence.....	13
2.8. BDSM and psychology.....	14
2.9. BDSM and therapy experiences.....	17
2.10. An affirmative view of BDSM.....	18
2.11. Intimacy.....	20
2.12. Conclusion.....	24
Chapter 3:.....	26
Theoretical and paradigmatic point of departure.....	26
3.1. Introduction.....	26
3.2. Postmodernism.....	26
3.3. Poststructuralism.....	28
3.4. Discourse.....	28

3.5.	Foucault.....	30
3.5.1.	Discourse and power	31
3.5.2.	Disciplinary technology	31
3.5.3.	Surveillance and technologies of the self	32
3.5.4.	Biopower.....	33
3.5.5.	Punishment	34
3.5.6.	Possibilities for resistance and agency.....	35
3.6.	Conclusion.....	36
	Chapter 4:.....	37
	Research approach.....	37
4.1.	Introduction	37
4.2.	Research question.....	37
4.3.	Foucauldian discourse analysis	38
4.4.	Online ethnographic research	39
4.5.	Sampling.....	40
4.5.1.	Participant characteristics.....	43
4.6.	Data collection strategies.....	45
4.7.	Data analysis	49
4.7.1.	Discourse analysis	50
4.8.	Ethical considerations	53
4.9.	Personal context	54
4.10.	Conclusion.....	56
	Chapter 5:.....	57
	Findings and discussion.....	57
5.1.	Introduction	57
5.2.	Into/me/you/see: Intimacy as romantic vulnerability.....	57
5.3.	Two heads are better than one: Intimacy as knowledge.....	62
5.4.	Soft serve: Intimacy as different from vanilla.....	67
5.5.	(S)he/(s)He: Intimacy according to identification.....	75
5.6.	Conclusion.....	82
	Chapter 6:.....	84
	End scene: Concluding discussion.....	84
6.1.	Introduction	84
6.2.	Implications of the findings.....	84

6.1. Limitations and suggestions for future research	90
6.2. Conclusion.....	91
References	92
Appendix A: Online Discussion and Interview Guide.....	103
Appendix B: Informed Consent.....	105

List of Figures

Figure 1: Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon	32
Figure 2: Screenshot of the "home" page on the blog designed for the current study	46

List of Tables

Table 1: Final selection of participants	44
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Chapter 1:

Introduction and rationale

What is it, where do I go? It's just submissive, masochist headspace. But I don't always get into subspace when I submit, and I don't always get into it when I take pain either. I'm not sure what the other ingredients are: some amount of trust, of course. And strong feelings about my partner make everything more intense ... way more intense. Orders of magnitude more intense. Still, I've had new partners put me under with surprising thoroughness. (Thorn, 2011)

1.1. Introduction

The above extract is from a blog post by Clarisse Thorn. She describes herself as a feminist and pro-BDSM sex-positive activist (Thorn, 2011). BDSM is an acronym used to describe consensual sexual interactions involving bondage, discipline/dominance, submission/sadism and masochism (The BDSM Store, 2007)¹. Upon reading Thorn's (2011) post, I felt challenged to try and understand this alternative (to dominant discourse) way of expressing a shared yet very personal sexual experience. The idea of subspace - a term used by BDSM practitioners² to describe an altered state of consciousness (Veaux, 2012)- particularly fascinated me as it seems to be an intense personal experience, akin to what might often be described by non-BDSM couples as sexual intimacy. Sexual intimacy has been constructed by various social and religious discourses in socially acceptable, heteronormative ways (Foucault, 1992). The excerpt presented from Thorn's (2011) blog post suggests something quite the opposite and yet, in some ways similar.

¹ Considering the scarcity of academic research on BDSM topics, informal resources created by the BDSM community provide a wealth of information which can be drawn on where it may be relevant.

² I recognise the complexity that surrounds how people define their identities in relation to their sexual practices. For some BDSM practice remains purely a behavioural activity, while for others, participating in BDSM is regarded more as a part of their identity. Although Weinberg (2006) notes BDSM groups transcend the typical scope of sexual orientation, gender role identifications and bodily ideals by allowing for participation by nearly anyone from any of these sexuality inclinations, integration of BDSM into a sense of self can vary. I used the term "BDSM identified individual" mindful of this fact.

In this social constructionist study I explore (through online focus group discussions) how BDSM practitioners construct meaning around sexual intimacy. Basten (2009) comments on the nature of online communities, where individuals who experience marginalisation in offline spaces often find support and a sense of belonging in online spaces such as blogs, forums, and social networks. Various such online spaces exist that are dedicated specifically to BDSM practitioners – who in many ways defy the dominant gender and sexual norms and consequently often face marginalisation - and the proposed study will focus on this online context of meaning-making through conducting a discourse analysis. Discourse both constructs and constrains social reality through making certain versions of reality possible while closing off or marginalising other versions (Foucault, 1972). In this study I make use of a poststructuralist conceptualisation of discourse, based on a Foucauldian approach to conducting discourse analysis. Following from this, a discourse can be described as “a system of statements which constructs an object” and has implications for subjectivity since our experiences of the world become intelligible through discourse (Parker, 1992, p. 5). Through conducting a discourse analysis of online interactions of BDSM practitioners, I aim to examine some of the ways in which sexual intimacy is constructed and negated in participants’ accounts, with implications for dominant as well as marginalised understandings of sexual intimacy in academic discourses.

1.2. The research problem

As the literature review that follows in chapter 2 will indicate, there is a lack of research exploring sexual intimacy generally and in the context of BDSM encounters specifically. Psychology as a discipline, both locally and globally, has typically assumed a heteronormative focus when researching sexuality. Heteronormativity refers to the “vast matrix of cultural beliefs, rules, rewards, privileges and sanctions that impel people to reproduce heterosexuality and to marginalise those who do not” (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005, p. 144). Gendered and sexual configurations or practices that challenge heteronormativity – such as sexual practice that does not occur within monogamous, marital, opposite-gendered relationships – are mainly cast in dominant discourses as unintelligible, deviant, sinful or pathological (Burman, 1994a; Rubin, 1984). Several authors have commented on the manner in which psychological research has maintained heteronormativity and contributed to the silencing of genders and sexualities that disrupt

this norm (such as Barker, 2007; Burman, 1994a; Cosgrove, 2003). This historical trend has been challenged by the emergence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) psychology, queer studies and critical research regarding heterosexualities (Clarke & Peel, 2007). Yet, even in subject fields that aim to challenge heteronormativity, BDSM practices and identities typically remain excluded. For example, authors such as Jeffreys (1996) – in a text aimed at deconstructing heteronormative notions of sexuality – describes BDSM as “eroticis(ing) the crude power difference of gender which fuels heterosexual desire, reinforcing rather than ending it” (p. 86). This statement illustrates the manner in which not all queer texts include BDSM as part of a project to resist heteronormativity. Further to this, as the literature review in chapter 2 illustrates, when BDSM is in fact included as a research focus in “mainstream” psychology, it is typically in a manner that serves to reinforce a pathological construction (e.g. Baumeister, 1991; Sandnabba, Santilla, Alison, & Nordling, 2002; Southern, 2002). This small body of available research in the discipline overwhelmingly “assumes that people engaging in SM [sodomasochism] are psychologically unwell, despite evidence demonstrating their relative psychological health” (Barker, 2006, p. 34).

South African research in the discipline of psychology indicates a similar heteronormative focus. A review of articles published in the South African Journal of Psychology (SAJP) over approximately the last two decades (1990-2013) yielded only six studies that included LGBTI genders and sexualities - using the search terms “LGBTI” and/or “lesbian”, “gay”, “bisexual”, “homosexual”, “transgender”, or “intersex” (that of Blythe & Straker, 1996; Henderson, 2012; Henderson & Shefer, 2008; Lubbe, 2007; Nel, Rich, & Joubert, 2007; Polders, Nel, Kruger, & Wells, 2008). This demonstrates that heteronormative genders and sexualities remain the unstated norm in local research in the discipline. A similar literature review of the SAJP including the same time period yielded no publications that make reference to BDSM or other related search terms (i.e. “sodomasochism”, “sadism” and/or “masochism”). A broader search of all peer-reviewed South African publications listed in the international social science and humanities databases JStor, PsycInfo and Pubmed (using the same keywords but with the added data

field “South Africa”), yielded only one study³ by Noyes (1998), described in more detail in Chapter 2), emphasising the dearth of local research on this topic. Further underscoring this silence in local research is the fact that the Sexual and Gender Diversity Position Statement published by the Psychological Society of South Africa, with the aim of challenging the heteronormative focus in South African psychology, includes discussion of LGBTI concerns, polyamory and other diverse genders and sexualities, yet makes no reference to BDSM sexualities (Psychological Society of South Africa, 2013).

This general heteronormative focus in psychology as a discipline and sexuality studies as a subject field is carried over into research specifically focused on sexual intimacy. Research focused on sexual intimacy typically centres on monogamous and heteronormative sexualities with the sporadic focus on same-sex intimacy (Dawn, 1993; Mohin, 1996; Haggerty & McGarry, 2007). Further to this, although few clear definitions of sexual intimacy can be found; academic discourses concerned with its meaning (or what it “should” mean) are strict enough to exclude BDSM sexual practices. For example, Langan and Davidson (2010) note how certain taken-for-granted ideological assumptions inform dominant constructions of intimacy as achieved only in romantic, heteronormative relationships. They go on to state that dominant discourse “neither questions intimacy as a desirable goal nor considers alternative ways in which intimacy might be experienced” (p. 2). Such dominant definitions do not allow for BDSM practitioners to claim the experience of intimacy as constructed within dominant discourses around sexuality. While narrow definitions do not allow for alternative experiences of intimacy, vague definitions are simply too vaporous to allow the possibility of nuanced descriptions of BDSM experiences of intimacy, if they are present.

Added to the invisibility of BDSM sexualities in research accounts, several authors have noted that BDSM practitioners often face stigmatising and marginalising responses from psychology professionals (Barker, Iantaffi, & Gupta, 2007; Bridoux, 2000; Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006). This further motivates the need for research that contributes to greater understanding of the experiences of individuals who identify with this particular sexual preference. Additional to this, the lack of research on BDSM practitioners’

³ A second South African study - that of Eagle and Watts (2002) - was identified using the keyword “sadism”, but was eliminated due to it referring to trauma in the context of violent crimes of a sadistic nature rather than being concerned with sadism as it relates to BDSM activities.

experiences and the need for destigmatisation around such sexualities motivates conducting this study.

1.3. Aims and objectives

In this study I explore meanings of sexual intimacy in the context of BDSM encounters. Specific objectives in support of this aim include the following:

- To explore how BDSM practitioners construct meaning around sexual intimacy in their online accounts
- To explore how these constructions may differ and depend on the specific role a BDSM participant might be in
- To provide a critical view on constructions of intimacy within mainstream definitions through the lens of BDSM experiences
- To contribute to the deficient body of knowledge on BDSM sexual intimacy in South Africa

1.4. Outline of the mini-dissertation

The current chapter introduced the focus of the study. In chapter two I provide an overview of relevant research, as it relates to BDSM, sexuality and psychology. In chapter 3 I discuss my theoretical and paradigmatic point of departure. In chapter 4 I provide an overview of my research approach and discuss the process of data collection and analysis. In chapter 5 I present the findings of the current study and discuss these within four different discourses. I conclude the mini-dissertation in chapter 6 with a discussion of the implications of the findings generally as well as in the field of psychology. I also provide possible limitations of the study and suggest recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2:

Literature review

2.1. Introduction

This review of existing literature aims to provide some indication of the broader academic landscape in which the study is conducted as well as situate the current study within the field of BDSM research. I first provide a brief history of BDSM practices, followed by a review of media representations of BDSM and the utility and influence of informal resources on informing discursive constructions around BDSM. This is followed by a brief history of the relationship between BDSM practice, psychology and research regarding intimacy. I conclude the chapter by presenting some findings on previous research done on therapeutic experiences of BDSM practitioners.

Wiseman (1996) defines BDSM as the “knowing use of psychological dominance and submission, and/or physical bondage, and/or pain, and related practices in a safe, legal, consensual manner in order for the individuals to experience erotic arousal and/or personal growth” (p. 10). Taylor and Ussher (2001) similarly suggest that BDSM is characterised by a manufactured, consensual but unequal distribution of power which involves the giving and/or receiving of physical and/or psychological stimulation. This often involves acts which are in general terms considered painful or humiliating for the purpose of sexual arousal. These expressions are multifaceted and varied and range in different degrees of importance to its participants. While it might be difficult for those who are not involved in BDSM practice to understand what is meant by “power” and “pain” and how these are applied in order to achieve sexual arousal, a degree of power and pain exchange is also present in most vanilla sexual encounters (Barker et al., 2007).

BDSM practitioners have been described as distinct social group or subculture, in that persons who identify with this practice have shared goals, relationships, roles and sanctions (Sherif & Sherif, 1956). However, BDSM “groups” transcend the typical scope of other subcultures that cohere around sexual orientation, gender role identifications or bodily ideals, by allowing for participation by nearly anyone from a range of gender and

sexuality inclinations (Weinberg, 2006). Clear role identifications are however claimed by many BDSM practitioners (for example Dom/Domme, sub, masochist, sadist, switch etcetera). Further to this, many BDSM practitioners distinguish between persons who “live the lifestyle” through enacting their BDSM practice in an integrated manner with other daily activities, such as a relationship characterised by a master-slave power differential which is consistently adhered to by both parties in the relationships, compared to BDSM practitioners who only occasionally engage in BDSM acts (Veaux, 2012).

Although elements of BDSM practices are present in most sexual encounters, significant stigmatisation still exists for BDSM practices/practitioners in both popular and therapeutic discourses. As presented in the following section on the history of BDSM, it becomes evident that the current intricacies of sexual stigma can be drawn to the historical construction of sexual stigma. Rubin (1984) explains:

The consolidation of Victorian morality, and its apparatus of social, medical, and legal enforcement, was the outcome of a long period of struggle whose results have been bitterly contested ever since. The consequences of these great nineteenth-century moral paroxysms are still with us. They have left a deep imprint on attitudes about sex, medical practice, child-rearing, parental anxieties, police conduct, and sex law. (p. 268)

2.2. The emergence of BDSM discourse

In this section I introduce some of the historical background against which BDSM discourse has developed. This creates a richer understanding of how historical discourses around BDSM and sexuality might have contributed to current understandings. The first documented occurrence of BDSM interactions in Western history is found in the Victorian era: described in erotic fiction such as *Venus in Furs* (Sacher-Masoch, 2000) and flagellation manuals for prostitutes dating from this era (Tannahill, 1992). The Victorian era is infamous for its regulation of sexual interaction evidenced in domains such as medicine, psychology and morality (Desautels, 2009). Foucault (1992), in his analysis of the history of sexuality discourses, states the following:

The use of the word [sexuality] was established in connection with other phenomena: the development of diverse fields of knowledge... the establishment of a set of rules and norms – in part traditional, in part new – which found support in religious, judicial, pedagogical and

medical institutions; and changes the way individuals were led to assign meaning and value to their conduct, their duties, their pleasures, their feelings and sensations, their dreams... an experience that cause individuals to recognise themselves as subjects of sexuality. (p. 3)

Foucault (1992) explains that the Victorian era necessitated personal scrutiny in nearly all domains. Sex had to be identified in order to be revealed and dealt with. This combination of extremely negative associations with sex and a heightened awareness of sex produced a need to release and interpret these experiences of sex through the experience of sex. Easton and Hardy (2001) explain that BDSM provides an opportunity to explore feelings, roles and interactions that may not be acceptable in normative contexts. Taylor and Ussher (2001) describe BDSM as a reaction to this oppressive sexual regime by presenting itself as a mockery of these attempts to control sexuality by turning “normal” sex upside down, making fun of it, disrespecting it and simultaneously exposing and exploiting it.

Foucault (1976/1990) explores the liberating potentials of an oppressed sexual practice by stating that the mere speaking about these sexual acts appears to be a deliberate transgression. This is especially true when taking this Victorian milieu into consideration: A time when even heteronormative, marital reproductive sex was silenced and restrained. Speaking about these transgressions permits the speaker to experience feelings of defiance of established law, the elusion/illusion of power and the anticipation of coming freedom (Foucault, 1976/1990).

2.3. The influence of religious discourse

Foucault (1992) emphasises the role religion has played in sexual socialization. Christianity, specifically Catholic Christianity, has a long history of confession and flagellation rituals. These practices establish and maintain a sense of hierarchy: The priests being superior and in direct contact with God and the followers who need to recount all sinful transgressions (including those of a sexual nature). Self-flagellation could be seen as a form of punishment or a gesture of voluntary penance for these transgressions (Knight, 2009). This practice of confession and flagellation has served effectively in creating a particular sexual discourse in the Victorian era. Restrictive views on sexuality and the subsequent reaction through BDSM acts have filtered through to jurisdiction, general interaction and in

shaping the view of sexuality which is passed down from one generation to another. It is in this time that the practice of pleasure became a matter up for debate, something to be considered in the domain of moral experience (Foucault, 1992). The historical legacy of such a process may simultaneously create, name and label the pleasures of BDSM sexual practices as problematic.

Keeping this religious backdrop in mind, I am curious to loosely attempt to link this type of self-restraint, with a different expression of religious constraint. Older research by Benjamin (1983) suggests that sexual eroticism appears to have inherited religious eroticism in that sexuality has become a religion or the substitute for one in its own right. Specifically, the desire for recognition from a “higher being” appears to surface in sadomasochism in the same way it did in confessions by Catholic saints. More recently, Shullenberger (2005) explores this idea more explicitly by identifying three aims of spirituality (and perhaps also religion) which are also potentially present in BDSM relationships. First, a sense of transcendence is present. The sub looks to her or his Dom for satisfaction by obeying them so as to become an instrument of their will. This is also presented clearly by always presenting “Dominant” as capitalised where the “sub” is always written in lower case - similar to religious writings where the reference to the deity is capitalised. Second, there is a sense of self-abandonment. This refers to a permeability between the god figure and the submissive/servant through the yielding to the power of the deity/Dominant. Third, the desire of the submissive/servant to be recognised by the deity/Dominant is similar to religious needs for recognition (Shullenberger, 2005).

2.4. The legal context

Religiosity has certainly played its part in informing judicial systems, both historically and presently. While the flexibility of legal policies around BDSM varies between countries, one specific case has caused major upheaval in the BDSM community. In 1990, in what was later termed the Spanner case, 16 gay men were convicted in the United Kingdom of assault for participating in consensual BDSM acts. The sentences for these men ranged from fines to four and a half year prison sentences. One of these members, Jaggard, describes the trauma he suffered from the case, as cited by Champion (2010):

This SM [sado-masochistic] part of me is a fundamental part of my makeup as a human being that I am having to suppress and it's not at all easy to do. Indeed I think I am slowly falling apart with the internalised stress of the suppression. I shall be quite relieved when my time to die finally comes. No more having to struggle on from day to day. (p. 11)

While similar legal accounts are not available in South Africa, sexuality was heavily regulated during apartheid through laws and policies aimed at preserving (white, heterosexual) privilege (Morison, 2011). Before South Africa constructed one of the most liberal constitutions in the world, the manipulation, criminalisation and censorship of sexuality for the purposes of social control pervaded the apartheid system. This was inspired by a very rigid Calvinist morality inherited from the early Dutch and Huguenot settlers (Beresford, Schneider, & Sember, 2004). In recent apartheid legislative history sexuality was regulated, with psychology as accomplice, by the construction and maintenance of normalised “white” sexuality which was heterosexual, aimed at procreation and informed by Christian ethics (Klausen, 2010; Morison, 2011). Contrasted to this, other sexualities were constructed as deviant (e.g. same-sex sexuality) (Jones, 2008) or dangerous (e.g. black male sexuality) (Shefer & Ratele, 2010).

Against this historical backdrop of strict sexual regulation and control, South Africa today is one of the countries with the highest incidence of sexual violence, some of which is committed as a way of correcting what is, in the current discursive environment, regarded as “deviant” sexualities. For example, “corrective” rape is a phenomenon where it is believed to be a way of punishing and “curing” women of their non-heterosexual sexual orientation (Di Silvio, 2005). This points to complex interactions between what appear to be discrepancies between policy and practice concerning sex and sexuality in South Africa. I cannot help but wonder if this would create some kind of sensitivity towards the incorporation of “violent” acts into consensual sex.

2.5. Media and popular culture representations

For many people, the media and popular culture are the only encounters they have with BDSM (Wilkinson, 2009). The media is a context which reflects the way a certain society is constructing sexuality while simultaneously informing and maintaining these constructions (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006). It is therefore necessary to attempt to understand

these influences on BDSM. There seems to have been an increase in BDSM imagery in Western popular culture since the 1990's (Weiss, 2006). Wilkinson (2009) argues that it is perhaps not the practices of BDSM which have become more visible and to some extent acceptable in the mainstream context, but rather images associated with the lifestyle such as leather clothing or handcuffs which have turned into a subculture of "SM (somasochistic) chic". These images and some of the associated paraphernalia have been presented in popular magazines as ways of "spicing up" an otherwise monotonous sexual life - mostly in the context of heterosexual vanilla sex (Wilkinson, 2009).

BDSM imagery has also become more prevalent in advertising campaigns (Wilkinson, 2009). This could create an illusion of a loosening of restrictive boundaries and a general acceptance of BDSM practices, however, these campaigns could only rely on the potential for successfully engage audiences precisely *because* of its taboo and controversial connotation. It is worth exploring what role this forbiddance plays in the attraction to the BDSM lifestyle in its media representation, but also in being/becoming part of the lifestyle. Weiss (2006) argues that although mainstream media representations are increasing, these images are represented either in a normalising light or are pathologised or criminalised. Wilkinson (2009) problematises the normalising of BDSM encounters, stating that considering the manner in which BDSM encounters are increasingly commodified in the media through toned down and accessible imagery with mass appeal, it might be necessary to question if the radical potential of BDSM is not perhaps diminished.

A further potential influence on popular portrayals of BDSM is the increasing accessibility of pornography through the internet and other technologies and the consequent increase in the kinky nature of available pornography (Wilkinson, 2009). However, pornography does not provide an explanation of why or how the actors have come to experience sexual interaction in the manner depicted, "it simply *just is*" (Wilkinson, 2009, p. 189, emphasis in original). In other words, little is provided on the finer dimensionalities of the actors' experiences, the focus remains behavioural and immediate. A similar issue might be noted in the production of self-help publications on how to practice BDSM acts. While there is a lack of academic research regarding BDSM, there has been a proliferation of non-academic texts in the form of popular self-help publications describing

how to spice up a monotonous vanilla relationship with elements of BDSM interactions (Weiss, 2006). Such publications are however, similar to pornography, focused on immediate behaviour, with a lack of nuanced descriptions – omitting how individuals experience BDSM and whether or not they construct intimacy as part of their experience (Weiss, 2006). However, Califia (1994) explains that pornography should not be underestimated as tool for the marginalised. It potentially normalises lust and communicates that the body is not merely a vessel but can also be enjoyed and that there are other people who have the same pleasures you do.

These seemingly conflicting functions of the increased popular visibility of BDSM (in the media) can be understood more clearly through reference to what Foucault (1979) describes as “compulsory visibility”. He states that “in discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of power that is exercised over them” (p. 187). It seems as though compulsory visibility might be the lesser of two evils (the other being invisibility). While the case remains open on whether intimacy plays a part in BDSM encounters or not, the focus on sexual acts only in popular accounts overlooks the possibility.

2.6. The role of informal resources

While academic accounts are sparse, it is perhaps not surprising that much of the information available on personal BDSM experiences can be found in informal resources such as online blogs and forums. This space is dense with BDSM interactions and should not be excluded from a review of available accounts, but rather seen as a significant part of BDSM expression. I understand this as a call to speak about/for BDSM experiences where a lack of available platforms for these expressions, necessitate creating them. According to Basten (2009), online environments can serve as space where members’ decisions are regarded as normative and advice and social support can be provided. These online spaces create the opportunity for exploration of a rich source of BDSM experiences. The numerous online informal spaces serve a function which may have been missed or suppressed by academic platforms. These sources are useful in highlighting the specific needs of the BDSM community and serve as introductory insights into the lifestyle. As a marginalised community, it is possible that these online forums meet the needs for solidarity which are

not always available in other offline public domains. For this reason online forums are sources of rich personal constructions often silenced in popular discourses. The internet plays a very specific role in creating potentials for challenging stereotypical representations in that there is much less surveillance and control over what is publicised and broadcast on the internet than there is in other media such as television or print media. This allows for the BDSM community to be agents over their own stories and how they are represented (Alexander, 2002).

I find it important to include media and informal resources in my research as it provides a sense of cultural context or ethnography vital for any further interpretational attempts or understandings of BDSM experiences. I will discuss ethnographic data in more detail in the section on methodology.

2.7. BDSM as sexual violence

A common theme in available literature is a construction of BDSM as sexual violence. Deckha (2011) discusses this tendency in dominant heteronormative discourse as an inclination to attribute BDSM to (bad) violence instead of (good) sex. In popular discourse both the sensation of pain as well as the infliction of pain onto someone is regarded as disturbing. In this particular discourse, BDSM encounters are typically equated to torture (Deckha, 2011). These discourses are specifically problematic for feminists who debate that BDSM reinforces painful practises from other power structures such as genital mutilation (Deckha, 2011). However, what must be kept in mind is that these practices are culturally bound; just as BDSM is a subculture (which seems to be heavily marked as “Western”) in its own right.

This nervousness around accepting BDSM “violence” can be understood as a fear of the escalation of violence in general and an eventual acceptance of all kinds of violence into social culture (Deckha, 2011). A single South African study relating to this topic suggests that there is a link between (at the time) the increase in the availability of s/M material and violent crime in South Africa (Noyes, 1998). Although the research is not empirical (i.e. the author does not draw on participant accounts), he constructs his literary findings within a discourse of “normal” versus “bizarre” or “perverse” sexualities.

BDSM specific philosophies or codes of conduct such as RACK (risk consensual kink) emphasises mutual consent between all participants and, along with it, the awareness of possible risks involved in scenes (Veaux, 2012). A participant in a study by Taylor and Ussher (2001) expresses the absurdity in thinking that because she is a sexual masochist she must also enjoy going to the dentist. From these accounts it becomes clear that BDSM cannot be equated to violence as understood in general terms and that the consent in participating is probably just as unethical as it is to give consent when getting a tattoo or playing a rugby match. Furthermore, the misconception of seeing BDSM as sexual violence limits our ability to see BDSM as a form of adult play in the way that we see aggressive sports as a form of adult play while a “play” discourse seems to be quite dominant in BDSM practitioners’ accounts (Taylor & Ussher, 2001).

2.8. BDSM and psychology

While the social and historical environment is certainly intricately interwoven with the construction, enactment and regulation of sexuality, this complex interaction is also present in the relationship between psychology and sexuality. Considering that my own perspective is largely within a psychological perspective, it is important to keep the relationship between my own disciplinary context and BDSM in mind for two reasons: First, it serves as a form of epistemological reflexivity. Willig (2008) uses the term epistemological reflexivity to denote the manner in which the researcher’s assumptions about the world and about knowledge impact on the research and its findings. My positioning within the discipline of psychology necessarily shapes my approach to the topic under study and influences my interest in understanding how psychology has contributed to constructions of BDSM. Second, a review of the discipline’s engagement with BDSM, as well the section on psychotherapeutic experiences that follows, can facilitate my own process of personal reflexivity. Personal reflexivity refers to “the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identifies have shaped the research” (Willig, 2008, p. 10); my own identity as an emerging psychology practitioner then becomes relevant in that my interest is also in how I can, as a psychologist, engage with the topic in ways that do not perpetuate a pathologising treatment. As I review and reflect on psychology’s engagement with BDSM discourse, I am necessarily implicated as a

psychology practitioner and am simultaneously reflecting on how I do or do not participate in a similar engagement. I elaborate more on my personal context in the final chapter.

Taylor and Ussher (2001) state that psychology has, instead of being impartial and descriptive, played an active role in shaping the subject it studies. Early theorists such as Freud (1962) and Krafft-Ebbing (1901) viewed BDSM experiences as symptoms of pathology. These ideas were reflected in pathological definitions within psychological discourse of BDSM experiences in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (3rd ed.), 1980). As the review that follows will indicate, these descriptions often assume dysfunction, are focused on finding some underlying aetiology that can explain this presumably deviant sexual behaviour and are concerned with the possibilities of treating these dysfunctions (Brown, 2010).

The first record of BDSM encounters labelled as pathological is documented in Krafft-Ebing's (1901) work. He diagnoses both sadism and masochism as sexual disorders. Although he considers sadism as a hyper version of normal male sexuality, he also considers it a moral failure, personal deficit and clinical disorder. Masochism, on the other hand, he sees as a phenomenon even more pathological as it is in direct contrast with his definitions of normal male sexuality. Freud (1920) lingers on this idea of BDSM as pathology by suggesting that sadomasochism is part of a number of disorders arising from the repression of the subconscious. He describes masochism as a perversion common in women and sadism as one more common in men and arising from pent up violent energy. He further explains sadomasochistic behaviour as a metamorphosis of the Thanatos (death drive) or very simply that sex and aggression have been intertwined (Levitt, 1971). Freud places the aetiology of BDSM behaviour in the combination of childhood sexual development with the disciplining acts such as spanking or beating (Ehrmann, 2005).

While BDSM challenges Freud's "normal sexual" aim, it also troubles the "normal sexual object" by allowing individuals to experiment with different combinations of passivity/activity, gender roles, sexual orientation and dominance/submission. This opposes the idea of fixed heteronormative sexuality and shatters the reproduced permanent, static identity by emphasising the idea of nearly limitless, ever-changing sexual fluidity (Halperin,

1995). Ehrmann (2005) sets out to explain how a better understanding of Freud's psychosexual stages of development should lead to a better understanding of the sexual "deviation" of sadomasochism. She further explains how fixation in these stages could cause sexual deviance.

The most recent version of the DSM (IV-TR) (American Psychiatric Association, *Sexual and Gender Identity Disorders*, 2000) defines Sexual Masochism under Sexual and Gender Identity Disorders as involving the act of "being humiliated, beaten, bound or otherwise made to suffer" (p. 572) and Sexual Sadism as one "in which the individual derives sexual excitement from the psychological or physical suffering (including humiliation) of the victim" (p. 573). Besides the fact that sadomasochism is in the DSM, the placement and language used to describe sadomasochism is also pathologising. Sadomasochism is placed amongst non-consensual disorders such as paedophilia and voyeurism. Furthermore suggesting that there is a "victim" involved in BDSM experiences suggests non-consent. Kleinplatz and Moser (2005) draw similarities between the inclusion of homosexuality and sadomasochism in the DSM where it is likely to experience distress or impairment merely for the fact that BDSM (and more so in the past than presently, homosexuality) is significantly stigmatised in dominant discourses.

Other examples of a pathological treatment of BDSM include Baumeister (1991), who explains masochism as a type of self - escapism; Blum's (1977) claim that masochism is an expected step in female development; Santtila, Sandnabba, Alison, and Nordling (2002) who link attachment theory dysfunctions with the development of sadomasochistic preferences; and Southern's (2002) classification of sadomasochism - along with addictive disorders - as a result of trauma.

Sagarin et al., (2009) suggest that the tendency to see BDSM interactions as pathological stems from traditional views of the self which suggest that any form of sadomasochistic tendency could be generalised to the whole individual as being sadomasochistic. It is therefore possibly not the actual practices of BDSM interactions which bring it under moral criticism, but rather the idea that it is practiced by a bunch of "deviants".

2.9. BDSM and therapy experiences

As a mental health practitioner, I consider this section of significance since I am directly involved in enabling the wellbeing of patients. This, by implication, involves an understanding of the patient and a sincere empathy for the patient. Considering how little research is available on BDSM experiences (especially for patients who disclose their sexual interests in therapy), this section serves as a backdrop for what still needs to be achieved by mental health practitioners in order for BDSM practitioners to feel accepted, respected and understood in psychotherapy. While attempts have been made to depathologise BDSM experiences (such as Barker, 2007, discussed in more detail in the subsequent section) it might be that individuals enjoy this taboo as part of the BDSM thrill and would not necessarily prefer it being depathologised in popular discourses. However, research by Barker et al. (2007) has shown that BDSM members experience significant stigmatisation in therapeutic settings (which is often for issues unrelated to sexual practice) because of their kinky preferences. These types of stigmatisation come in the form of therapists and healthcare workers assuming childhood sexual trauma or other types of pathology as a valid “explanation” for these “deviant” preferences; assuming that BDSM members experience psychological tension from their BDSM needs and subsequently have come to therapy to get rid of these needs, assuming that all issues brought into the therapy has a roundabout relationship to BDSM pathology; and furthermore having limited knowledge about the lifestyle and providing a deficient service (Barker et al., 2007). These concerns cannot be ignored if psychotherapists aim to provide a setting of acceptance and a useful and high-quality service. While these researchers have pointed out the lack in psychology’s understanding of BDSM, there seems to be a complimentary need to inform therapists of the psychological and individual experiences of BDSM practitioners.

While the focus of this research is not to depathologise BDSM experiences as such, there appears to be a need for a more considerate and thoughtful approach from a therapeutic point of view towards patients who are involved in the lifestyle. It does not come as a surprise that this kind of prejudice still exists in psychotherapy since, as the preceding section indicated, most texts and training courses for mental healthcare workers either assume a pathologising stance or have very little content dealing with sexuality and

much less so on BDSM sexuality (Barker et al., 2007). Taylor and Ussher (2001) accurately sum up this notion:

Psychological theories need to be able to incorporate variability, contradiction and dissent within their abstraction and to be aware of individual freedom and autonomy and the role of society and culture, particularly in the definition, regulation and organization of sexuality. Further to this, and in contrast to much of the existing literature, any theorization needs to be firmly grounded in the actual experiences and psychologies of persons who practice SM, rather than making judgmental a priori assumptions. Theories need to be developed that attempt to account for SM without recourse to explanations that necessarily involve 'pathology'. Within such a framework, a coherent psychological account of SM can perhaps be developed. (p. 311)

The relevance of this kind of involvement is especially important for practicing psychologists as the wellbeing of the mental healthcare user (at least within the therapeutic session) is largely dependent upon the therapeutic relationship and process between the patient and therapist. If this relationship is stained with an uninformed prejudice on the therapist's behalf, the therapy is certainly also similarly affected.

2.10. An affirmative view of BDSM

The preceding sections indicate a consistent pathologising trend in psychology's treatment of BDSM. There have, however, been recent attempts to depathologise BDSM and advocate for a more affirmative stance in the discipline as it relates to gender and sexuality broadly. There have been suggestions to include definitions of BDSM interactions that are not labelled as pathological (American Psychiatric Association, Proposed revision, 2010). The latest version of the DSM – DSM V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) for example states the following:

A paraphilia is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for having a paraphilic disorder, and a paraphilia by itself does not necessarily justify or require clinical intervention. (p. 686)

In contrast, if they declare no distress, exemplified by anxiety, obsessions, guilt or shame, about these paraphilic impulses, and are not hampered by them in pursuing other personal goals, they could be ascertained as having masochistic sexual interest but should not be diagnosed with a sexual masochism disorder. (p. 694)

Many individuals who self-identify as fetishist practitioners do not necessarily report clinical impairment in association with their fetish-associated behaviours. Such individuals could be considered as having a fetish but not fetishistic disorder. (p. 701)

Clinical assessment of distress or impairment, like clinical assessment of transvestic sexual arousal, is usually dependent on the individual's self-report. (p. 703)

While these statements seem promising (in the same way homosexuality travelled through the different hues of pathology), certainly, a qualitative and integrated understanding of BDSM practitioners' experiences is not automatically supplemented to what the DSM prescribes.

Various researchers have focused on the potentially psychologically healing effects, potential for self-discovery and understanding, as well as a gateway to healthier and more authentic self-awareness (Barker et al., 2007; Beckmann, 2001; Comfort, 1978; Desautels, 2009; Langridge & Barker, 2007; Lindemann, 2011; Norman, 2004; Richie & Barker, 2005; Rubin, 2004; Sagarin et al., 2009; Weille, 2002). Specifically, Ortmann & Sprott (2012) discuss their experiences in therapy with BDSM practitioners and describe the journeys of several couples as they explore and process psychological pain and previous trauma through the deliberate scripting of BDSM scenes.

Nicholas (2006) provides an affirmative account of BDSM in order for psychology professionals, when responding to relevant content raised by BDSM practitioners, to be better equipped to "affirm their sexuality and guide them in their exploration" (p. 291).

Research concerned with the psychological wellbeing of BDSM practitioners indicates comparable psychological health relative to non-BDSM practitioners (Moser & Levitt, 1995). In fact, Wismeijer and Van Assen (2013) found increased psychological wellbeing among BDSM practitioners, compared to a control group - they note that BDSM practitioners were found to be "less neurotic, more extraverted, more open to new experiences, more conscientious, less rejection sensitive, had higher subjective well-being, yet were less agreeable" (p. 1943). Richters, De Visser, Rissel, Grulich and Smith (2008) similarly note that BDSM practitioners in their study were not more likely to be anxious or depressed and male BDSM practitioners "scored significantly lower on a scale of

psychological distress than other men” (p. 1660). While more research is warranted, it is possible that these emerging findings might lend support to the notion that engaging in BDSM might have therapeutic benefits for some people, or at the very least not have a psychologically harmful impact, thus challenging the discourse of BDSM as pathological in a similar manner to how pathologising treatment of same-sex sexuality has been challenged over time.

2.11. Intimacy

While the discussion so far has focused on how BDSM has been constructed in available literature, I now turn to a review of relevant research concerned with sexual intimacy. This section serves to facilitate a better understanding of how sexual intimacy has been constructed through history and what might be understood from contemporary discourses of sexual intimacy. As Foucault (1992) argues, sexuality has historically been presented very much in a constant and singular form through various mechanisms of repression. A social constructionist approach however would assume plural meanings in that various sexualities are available in a particular discursive economy (Willig, 2008). Rubin (1984) expresses this when she refers to how certain sexual preferences are normalised while others are marginalised:

Most people find it difficult to grasp that whatever they like to do sexually will be thoroughly repulsive to someone else, and that whatever repels them sexually will be the most treasured delight of someone, somewhere... Most people mistake their sexual preferences for a universal system that will or should work for everyone. (p. 283)

Similarly, various constructions of *intimacies* are also available, with some gaining more authority than others. However, little research seems to be available on the topic of alternative ways of experiencing sexual intimacy. Research by Dawn (1993) highlights a predominantly Christian approach which maintains a singularly formulated perspective valuing only matrimonial sexual intimacy. Califia (1980/2000) suggests that vanilla heterosexuality is still presented as the psychiatric gold standard. The implication is that what is considered as normal, socially accepted and healthy sexuality (and by implication, sexual intimacy) is that which exists only within the limits of long-term, heterosexual,

monogamous relationships. These heteronormative presentations remain generally unchallenged by mental health professionals (Barker et al., 2007).

An example of a more critical approach towards intimacy is provided by Langan and Davidson (2010) in which they challenge the notion of intimacy as an accentuated goal in romantic relationships. They claim that dominant discourse does not take into consideration the many alternative ways of experiencing intimacy and that this idea is seldom put on trial. They maintain that intimacy is an ideology held up with some of the following themes: that intimacy is a desired experience which should be achieved in romantic relationships; that these relationships are also sexual and that this sexual element should be restricted to heteronormative, monogamously committed couples; that this kind of intimacy develops naturally over time in such a healthy relationship; that intimacy requires mutual self-disclosure and an appreciation of each of the two partners' unique qualities; that intimacy can only develop if each partner contributes equally to the relationship and finally; that physical closeness between the couple is necessary for achieving intimacy. In this line, Langan and Davidson (2010) believe that we have been socialised to accept the value of intimacy as an innate human need. What they propose is that (sexual) intimacy has been socially constructed in historical conditions where people's lives were entirely knit together on most levels (Gadlin, 1977).

While the idea of (sexual) intimacy as being socially constructed does not necessarily make the need for intimacy any less real, the challenge to sexual intimacy as an inherent human need allows for the opening up of other options in experiencing or (deliberately) excluding intimacy from sexual interactions. What is also brought to the fore is a prod in the direction that the exclusion of (this narrowly idealistic) intimacy in sexual experiences does not mean the experience should be pathologised. I believe that the study done by Langan and Davidson (2010) largely reflects my open stance towards participants' expression of their experiences of intimacy in the current study.

While literature in the field of psychology certainly has included intimacy, it appears as though the focus has been mostly on theories of attachment and the role attachment plays in permitting or obstructing experiences of sexual intimacy later on in life, rather than focusing on studies of sexual intimacy per se (Cassidy, 2001). Such research regarding

attachment and intimacy suggests that in order for someone to experience intimacy there are four abilities required. These are: the ability to seek care, the ability to give care, the ability to be comfortable with an autonomous self and the ability to negotiate (Cassidy, 2001). Although these abilities may appear in unconventional ways in BDSM encounters, they are not usually associated with BDSM.

According to attachment theory there are also four different possibilities for childhood attachment to a primary caregiver and these attachment styles may serve as a predictor for experiences of (sexual) intimacy later in life. These four possibilities are: a secure attachment; an insecure/avoidant attachment; an insecure/ambivalent attachment; and an insecure/disorganised attachment (Cassidy, 2001). According to Cassidy (2001), the four attachment styles will influence which of the four abilities necessary to achieve intimacy will be attained successfully. To clarify, research following this argument suggests that secure attachments predict healthy sexuality, i.e., open communication, less sexual anxiety, more of a tendency towards commitment and more sexual satisfaction. On the other hand, any type of insecure attachment has a variety of complications predicted within a person's sexual future. These include tendencies towards the use of physical force and coercion, the evasion of sexual or romantic commitments, sexual anxiety, avoidance, and are unlikely to provide an environment motivating of emotional closeness (Johnson & Zuccarini, 2010).

Relevant to the current study these approaches indirectly suggest pathology in attachment for BDSM practitioners: Attachment anxiety and avoidance in men seem to make the adoption of physical force and coercive strategies in sexual interactions more likely (Smallbone & Dadds, 2000). It appears that while BDSM interactions are not an explicit focus in these theories, it is automatically pathologised if linked back to attachment as a child - excluding the possibility of healthy, sexually intimate experiences. It should be noted that no evidence has been found to suggest any attachment differences or higher levels of psychopathology in studies comparing the BDSM community with general population statistics (Moser, 2002; Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006). Kolmes et al. (2006) suggest that this misguided acceptance of attachment and childhood dysfunction as a familiar aetiology for BDSM preferences is clearly carried over into psychotherapy with BDSM clients.

BDSM participants themselves have constructed their experiences around intimacy in particular ways. A study by Turley (2011) suggests that BDSM participation is generally a highly emotional experience and that intimacy is constructed between partners. Further to this, it appears as though this experience of heightened emotion and intimacy contributes significantly to participants' experience of their interaction as erotic. Turley (2011) suggests that this experience, for BDSM identified individuals, can only be attained through BDSM and that it is the shared nature of powerful, unique and at times unusual emotions which connect partners in a shared, powerful and unique sexual experience. Turley (2011) further discusses how BDSM may have a positive influence on specifically BDSM partners who are in romantic relationships with one another and that the increase in emotional intimacy is seen as a significant outcome of BDSM. BDSM identified individuals described that BDSM can allow for other profound therapeutic and spiritual experiences. Kleinplatz (2006) concluded that BDSM identified participants appear to be finely attuned to romance, sexual creativity, sexual bonding, emotional healing and authenticity through vibrant sexual interactions.

Turley (2011) suggests that BDSM permits its participants a transformation of certain emotions and experiences which may have caused discomfort or negative pain in another context, to an experience of pleasure and healing. From the participant accounts in Turley's (2011) study, it appears as though the uniqueness of BDSM participation in general as well as the idiosyncrasies of the interaction between specific partners are specific and ruled. The experience of intimacy is permitted within these specificities and rules and particular elements need to be present with others being absent in order for the experience of intimacy to be "activated". Some of the elements which have been highlighted as permitting sexual and erotic intimacy include trust, reassurance, being able to play and experiment and care during and after a scene and being attuned to a partner's needs during the scene (Turley, 2011; Cutler, 2003) These elements appear to be important to all partners, regardless of their role preference.

A study by Cutler (2003) which focused on elements of committed BDSM relationships, participants suggested that the nature of the power exchange between BDSM partners, trust, communication and knowing one is cared for in specific ways contribute significantly to a the experience of intimacy between BDSM partners.

Interestingly, a focus on BDSM interaction and intimacy can easily suggest difference between BDSM and vanilla intimacy, however, one must wonder whether removing all BDSM related terms from the research relating to BDSM intimacies and sexualities would leave the text much different from “vanilla” text. Nichols (2011) effectively dubs BDSM the extreme sports of sexuality: amplifying needs most can identify with – such as the need for peak experiences, the need to combine pleasure and pain/discomfort (as with many sports) and the need for power or for letting go, whether it be in their sexual lives or otherwise. It appears as though BDSM identified individuals are explicitly aware of these needs in themselves and others and attempt to meet these needs through BDSM. Having provided a brief review of research regarding sexual intimacy as well as the link in psychological research between attachment and intimacy, it is worth emphasising that I will approach “definitions” of intimacy in the current study as something just as subjective and self-constructed as the rest of participants’ experiences. Of course, subjective constructions of the self are framed within a social construction which includes broader historical fields of discourse. Considering that this research aims to explore how participants construct their ideas and/or definitions around sexual intimacy themselves, I will not attempt to provide a panacea definition of sexual intimacy. In other words, while constricted constructions of intimacy, as discussed above are available, BDSM practitioners might or might not subscribe to them. For example, while some descriptions of intimacy might involve heteronormative, penetrative sex in order for sexual intimacy to “take place”, BDSM interactions do not always focus on genital-to-genital contact, or even any genital stimulation at all. However, this does not necessarily mean the exclusion of sexual intimacy. I will therefore consider any experience of intimacy experienced while aiming towards or involving sexual arousal as sexual intimacy. It would defeat the purpose of trying to broaden the scope of alternative ways of experiencing intimacy if I were to construct a definition of sexual intimacy from my own perspective only.

2.12. Conclusion

In this chapter I provided a review of available accounts of BDSM, indicating that BDSM experiences have largely been constructed as deviant, pathological and XXX in academic literature in the past. There are however also promising instances in more recent

research which frames BDSM as possibly therapeutic and aiding in self-discovery and authenticity.

I also reviewed research related to constructions of intimacy, where it became apparent that little research exists on the variations in the experience of intimacy. Typical research on sexual intimacy focuses on the elements required in order to achieve such an experience and that these elements are typically framed within a heteronormative discourse of sexuality. In the chapter that follows I outline the theoretical point of departure that informed my approach to the study.

Chapter 3:

Theoretical and paradigmatic point of departure

3.1. Introduction

The paradigmatic approach I have selected to inform the study is post-modernist/poststructuralist. While it is at times difficult to discern these paradigms from one another some theorists strictly assign to only one or the other. The blurring of definition between these paradigms surely supports their stance of the renunciation of static borders between positions; however some differences can be identified. I will set out in this chapter to outline the theoretical background which informs the study by briefly discussing postmodernism, thereafter poststructuralism, discourse and discourse analysis, and Foucault's influence on these theories. I will conclude with a discussion on how Parker (1992; 2002) applied Foucault's theory to a workable approach to discourse analysis.

3.2. Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a term used to refer to a timeframe in history which followed, and opposed, modernity (Kvale, 1992). Postmodernism is also an epistemology which takes an antireductionist stance but is more liberal than radical in its approach – remaining pluralistic and mistrusting of radicalism (Agger, 1991).

Postmodernism (in its spaciousness) is most easily understood when related to modernistic thought. Postmodernism can be understood as a reaction and disillusionment with the positivistic and modernistic ways of approaching knowledge (Polkinghorne, 1992). Assuming a postmodern position would entail being sceptical and critical of any grand narratives or suggestions of universal truths as may be suggested in modernistic schools of thought (Rosenau, 1992). A claim to objective, observable truth suggests a modernistic frame of thought. Postmodernists reject these claims by stating that all truth is a matter of varied subjective perspectives which have been constructed in a certain way, understood in a certain way, and “made” to be true in a certain way in a specific historical context (Gergen, 1992). The historical and cultural specificity of knowledge means that our experiences here and now are not necessarily truer than a construction by anyone else

within their own historical and cultural frame. These truths are essentially explained as different discourses – which I will discuss in more detail later in this section. Instead of the universal truths suggested by modernists, postmodernists would suggest the existence of multiple philosophies and beliefs which are all equally “true” (Berthon & Katsikeas, 1998). While postmodernism does not support the claims made by positivism (which is strongly related to modernistic thought) about the observable objectivity of reality, they see it as one of the many available philosophies available (Beyer, du Preez, & Eskell-Blokland, 2007). Within a postmodern paradigm language plays a very important role. Postmodernist thinkers take a critical stance towards power dynamics involved in social interactions. These patterns of power are created and sustained by languaged interactions and social processes (Burr, 1995).

According to De Saussure (1972/1983), the belief that language expressions directly reflect reality is flawed. He asserts that there is no intrinsic meaningful link between language and reality, other than the one we have created. In other words, the words we have allocated to explain and understand the objects, experiences and phenomena in our experiences, are arbitrary. This construction of meaning is always in relation to other words and expressions which are also arbitrary and essentially meaningless if we do not attribute meaning to them (by using other meanings) (De Saussure, 1972/1983). There is always an unfinished nature to meaning as the mere construction of meaning or definition necessitates the exclusion of other meanings (Agger, 1991). This means that there are many possibilities for constructing the world and that each possibility invites a different kind of action which excludes other kinds of action.

Postmodernism can be regarded as a way of troubling, questioning or problematising the taken for granted truths and assumptions made by modernistic/traditional social sciences (Rosenau, 1992). In terms of social research, postmodernism can also be understood as an invitation to remain reflexive of our own subjective truths and how they may play a role in the research we do/take part in (Gergen, 2001a). Postmodernism is mainly concerned with society, history and culture, while poststructuralism can be understood as a theory of language and knowledge (Agger, 1991). Upon better understanding the broader paradigm of postmodernism, I now turn to discussing poststructuralism.

3.3. Poststructuralism

While postmodernism can be seen as a critique of and disillusioned reaction against modernism, poststructuralism is an extension of structuralist thought (Burr, 1995). Poststructuralism decentres the subject as an autonomous and intentional being and suggests instead that we are constantly in a process of being shaped by discourse and discursive practices – suggesting a sense of fragility, even fragmentation and contradiction in identity (Alvesson, 2002). In broad terms, poststructuralism is concerned with how meanings are produced and reproduced within the relationships between human beings (Belsey, 2002).

Some key poststructuralist texts, such as Foucault and Derrida's first works, were published in a milieu where the individual was predominantly understood to be a free-thinking subject with intentionality (Macleod, 2002). Poststructuralism suggests that subjects are not self-governing designers of themselves nor their social interactional worlds (Namaste, 1994). Instead, poststructuralists suggest that subjects are implanted in complex and multifaceted networks of social interactions which direct the possibilities of which subjects may appear in which situations and what their capacities should be. This implies that the subject is not a priori to socio-political arrangements but is instead shaped by these engagements (Namaste, 1994). In these arrangements various frames of reference and power are at play to bring some characters to the fore and to marginalise others. For this reason, poststructuralists argue that it is necessary to remove the focus on the subject as an autonomous entity and instead deconstruct and trouble these taken for granted roles (Namaste, 1994). According to Namaste (1994), the challenge is "to make sense of the ways in which subjectivities are at once framed and concealed" (p. 221). Poststructuralists who are concerned with marginalised individuals and groups often critique language through deconstruction in order to demonstrate how language functions in a politically loaded and reifying way to construct damaging structures in society (Adams St Pierre, 2000). These constructions of damaging structures are often languaged into being through discourse.

3.4. Discourse

Many poststructuralist theorists focus their analysis on discourses. Foucault (1979) argues that all knowledge can be traced back to the different discourses and discursive practices which edge the knowledge constructed within them. According to Burman (1994a)

discourses can be described as “socially organised frameworks of meaning that define categories and specify domains of what can be said and done” (p. 2). Ramazanoglu (1993) defines discourses as “historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth” (p. 7). Davies and Harré (1990) define a discourse as a “multi-faceted public process through which meanings are progressively and dynamically achieved” (p. 47). Holloway (1995) suggests that discourse can be described as an interconnected “system of statements which cohere around common meanings and values...[that] are a product of social factors, of powers and practices, rather than an individual’s set of ideas” (p. 231). What these different definitions suggest is a process of meaning making which becomes valid “truths” in certain historical contexts. What also emerges when considering various definitions of discourses is that there is an underlying regularity to discourse, that discourse has a constructive feature and that these have implications for meanings and practices (Macleod, 2002).

Foucault (1972) argues that the regularity of discourse can be found within variability. What this suggests is that, although discourse relies on the coherence of certain ideas, practices and ways of being through language in order for a discourse to exist, discourses are not fixed and static. Instead, discourses vary over time and contexts, at times “favouring” certain forms of power and at other times less so (Foucault, 1972). This further suggests that discourses are created or accomplished progressively over time and that the challenge to a particular discourse may lie in a similar approach.

Discourses are constructive in the sense that they do not describe the social world in a simple and neutral manner (Macleod, 2002). They are instead the means through which the world emerges to us. They contain and maintain subjects while simultaneously constructing objects and creating truths and knowledge (Parker, 1990). Fairclough (1992) describes this constitutive function of discourse as occurring in three main ways: Firstly, the construction of subject positions, social identities or self-types (identity function). Secondly, discourse facilitates the construction of social relationships between people (relational function) and thirdly, the construction of knowledge and beliefs (ideational function). Parker (1990) explains that discourses permit us to focus on things that do not really exist until we have created them through discourse. However, once these things have been created it becomes difficult not to refer to them as though they are real. This interconnects strongly with the arbitrary way in which language attempts to name the unnamed as discussed

earlier in this chapter. The importance of this connection between language and discursive practices will be further elaborated on in the section on discourse analysis.

While this complex construction takes place, a simultaneous process of restriction is inevitable in the dual character of discourse (Young, 1987). As discussed earlier, language not only constructs meaning but also eliminates other possible meanings (as by definition of defining that which needs to be defined). Similar to the construction involved in language, a counter dependence is created between that which is and that which is excluded (Macleod, 2002). For example, darkness can only be defined by what it is not – light, and vice versa. Therefore, darkness is dependent on the existence of light for its own definition. In this counter dependence a tension is created between that which is constructed and brought to the fore and that which is restricted, constricted and sent to the background. While this tension is created, a sense of flexibility also creeps in for the challenge of existing dominant discourses. Dant (1991) suggests that Foucault restores a sense of autonomy and agency describing discourse as an “event” which can be challenged within the moment of its happening. This dual character of discourse suggests a concurrent constructive/restrictive process which instantaneously enables and restrains action and understanding - ultimately linking knowledge to power by producing it, supporting it but also undermining it and making it possible to expose its brittleness (Foucault, 1978/2009).

I now turn to some of Foucault’s ideas relevant to the current study. These include discourse and power; disciplinary technology; surveillance and technologies of the self; biopower and punishment. I conclude with a discussion of the possibilities for resistance and agency within Foucauldian theory.

3.5. Foucault

Foucault (1976/1990) provides an extensive deliberation of the contextual and historical specificity of discourse by tracing the development of discourses of sexuality over time in his genealogical analysis of the history of sexuality. I find this work on sexuality discourses very applicable to the current study. He identifies several main themes which contribute to the construction of such discourses. In this section I will briefly discuss themes relevant to this study.

3.5.1. Discourse and power

Foucault (1976/1990) understands power not only in a framework of oppression and subordination, but also considers it a potent personality in the creation of subjective views on reality through different discourses. It is within these moments of production of discourse where he sees power in its most effective form (1976/1990). While traditional views of power considered it a property which is fixed, static, identifiable and subject to ownership, Foucault (1976/1990) radically rejects this view and suggests instead that power resides within relationships, actions and discursive constructions. He uses the example of discourses around sexuality to illustrate how subjects are organised and created through power relations by creating distinctions between which “types” of sexuality are socially acceptable and which are not (1976/1990). While sexuality is generally an excellent topic in which to explore the complex interplay of power and discourse, BDSM lends itself towards specific and deliberately unequal power distributions from which specific discourses may be constructed, with the implication that a Foucauldian lens can be productively applied.

Discourses are not just created by some people and absorbed and acted out without consent by others, these discourses are created and maintained in very specific ways. Various disciplinary strategies are implicated for this osmosis of discourse to take place.

3.5.2. Disciplinary technology

Foucault (1976/1990) describes disciplinary technologies as “the government of individuals, the government of the souls, the government of the self by the self, the government of families, the government of children” (p. 256). The aim of disciplinary technologies is normalising subjects (Macleod, 2002). Normalisation can only take place if a distinction is created between different subjects and if categories are created for these subjects to fit (or at least attempt to fit) into. Through the creation of these categories a hierarchy of observation emerges which allows for a finely attuned structure of partitioning (Foucault, 1979). Through this process disciplinary power functions to create comparisons, differentiations, hierarchies, homogenies and exclusions among individuals and groups (Foucault, 1979). For example, social research often focuses either directly or indirectly on creating categories into which people might fit (Starr, 1992). This creates at least the potential of hierarchical construction – some become categorised as mentally ill, others as more empathetic, others as more prone to certain illnesses and so on. The same is true for

sexuality where homosexuality was created as a category of sexuality and classified as mental illness not too long ago (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), and a more recent classification still marginalises transgendered people as having “gender identity disorder” (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Similarly, BDSM has been ironically placed under the strict discipline of vanilla sexualities – labelled with “restricted access” only to deviants and those who measure and police deviance. Within BDSM practice, discipline is applied in a nearly satirical and agreed upon manner, constructing a temporal hierarchy of submission and dominance. However, the aim of this particular discipline is not to normalise, but rather to disregard and resist normalisation. Within the process of hierarchical formation, various strategies can be identified. I will now discuss two of these.

3.5.3. Surveillance and technologies of the self

In the late eighteenth century, Jeremy Bentham designed a prison building which allows the watchmen to observe all the inmates without them knowing whether or not they were being watched.

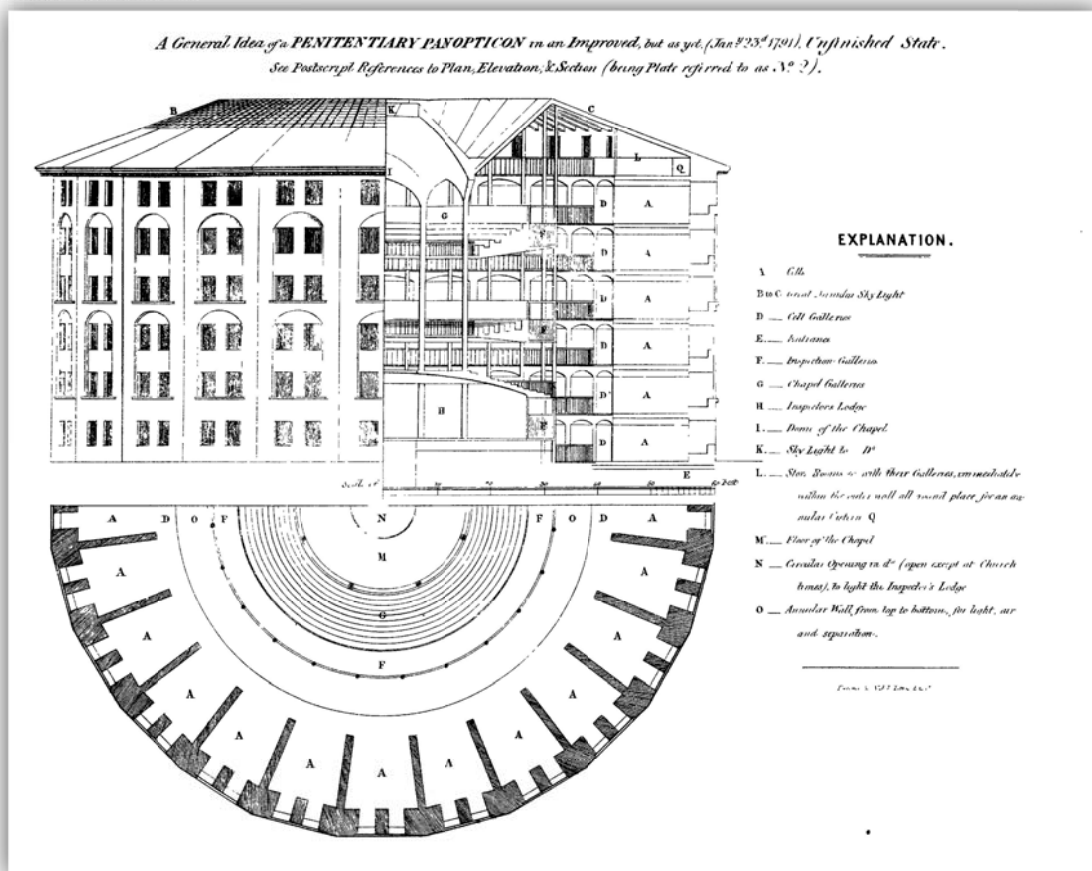


Figure 1: Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon (Bentham, 1995)

Foucault (1979) uses the design of the panopticon to make a comparison to surveillance and technologies of the self by describing it as “the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form” (p. 205). The experience of uninterrupted surveillance induces in the subject a state of virtually permanent paranoia which leads to the automatic functioning of power even when the original surveyor is absent. As an effect, power and a sense of surveillance becomes so internalised that subjects end up policing their own behaviours and identities (Foucault, 1979). This suggests that power is not a property which is exercised by certain individuals onto other individuals, but is rather a general internalisation by each individual to act according to the prescribed discourses (Sarup, 1991). The individual applies various technologies of the self – a process of self-constructed subjectivity and self-understanding - in order to reach this level of “normalcy” (Foucault, 1978/2009). For example, a young man spends more time in the gymnasium, perfecting his physique to what his girlfriend might find attractive and his girlfriend spends more time purging her meals to achieve the same effect. Another example might be of a Catholic follower who goes to the priest to confess their sins and repent. These efforts to conform do not go unnoticed and is rewarded by governing authorities by providing social privileges to those who succeed and punishing those who do not. As discussed in Chapter 1 and 2 BDSM participants are not typically awarded the same social privileges vanilla participants are. In fact, it appears as though BDSM participants defiantly reject and resist such a reward system and instead opt for an internally (as in within the BDSM community) governed system which rewards it’s participants for deviating from the norm as defined outside of BDSM. In a sardonic twist of typical reward and punishment, BDSM participants are rewarded with punishment. I will discuss punishment shortly, but first a brief description on the second strategy in reaching hierarchical formation.

3.5.4. Biopower

Biopower refers to the various ways in which disciplinary power is exercised onto/through the body (Foucault, 1976/1990). Foucault (1978/2009) describes biopower as “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (p. 1). Biopower relates to the individual on a macro and a micro level. The macro level of control involves the social body or the entire population (Macleod, 2002). Through this regulation, the

population is governed on aspects such as health and reproductive rights, mortality and all conditions that might influence these aspects (Foucault, 1976/1990). On a micro level, the individual is controlled in a more direct manner in order to produce docile and productively contributing bodies by wringing out the body of all its capabilities and potentials and integrating it into systems of economic efficiency (Foucault, 1976/1990). In controlling the body, by extension, sexuality is also under strict control. BDSM identified individuals apply biopower in a deliberate manner to produce “deviant” sexual pleasure instead of economic efficiency, instead of docility, instead of productivity, instead of reproduction.

3.5.5. Punishment

Foucault (1979) starts out his work on punishment by graphically describing the brutality and cruelty involved in medieval disciplinary practices. He describes how all punishment for nearly all crimes were focused on inflicting pain onto the body. Many of these scenes include being tied up and tortured – often to the point of death (Foucault, 1979). The pain inflicted on the perpetrator seemed to have been at least equal to or surpassing the pain caused by their crime. The reactive response to seeing the punisher in the same light as the perpetrator is bypassed – surely they are not doing this for their own entertainment? A discourse around pain is created: If you are tied up or if pain is inflicted upon you, evidently you must have done something wrong. The body has become an instrument and an intermediary to deprivation of the subject’s property and rights (Foucault, 1979).

With time, it became clear that these methods used for punishment could be less brutal and more effective. Instead, a silence became attached to punishment – no more spectators, no discussion regarding the punishment – instead it became a strange secret kept between the punisher and the punished. Methods changed to excluding the intimacy of physical punishment and instead made way for a withdrawal of all touch with execution being cold and clinical and solitary confinement preceding it (Foucault, 1979). However, there is still a trace of torture present – Foucault (1979) cites Mably stating: “Punishment, if I may so put it, should strike the soul rather than the body” (p. 16).

This second order of punishment had a focus on regulating and governing the individual instead of punishing the body for its behaviours (Foucault, 1979). These kinds of

punishments were much more subtle than the spectacles of before. In its place were structures that fit gracefully into the broader pre-existing structures of society. These imprisoning structures were disguised as, among others, mental institutions, churches, governments, and scientific laboratories (Foucault, 1979). The crime disappeared but the individual became responsible. In this manner, the process of hierarchical categorisation emerged virtually unnoticed. The unacceptability of those outside of the normative categories was masked by their being accepted into the category of innocent lunatics – thereby cleverly stripping them of their autonomy and casting them into the hands of expert disciplinarians in the field of psychiatry (Foucault, 1979). This has also been the case for BDSM identified individuals. If we cannot torture the body and may not judge the soul, the best we can do is pretend that it does not exist.

Foucault (1976/1990) applies this notion of the second order of punishment to sexual discourse in the Victorian era. He explains:

Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. In the subject of sex, silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy. (p. 3)

He further explains the consequences for those who did not abide by the normative rules:

If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere: to a place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit. The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance: the prostitute, the client, and the pimp, together with the psychiatrist and his hysteric – those... seem to have surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 4)

3.5.6. Possibilities for resistance and agency

The preceding sections emphasise the restrictive functions of discourse, but Foucault's (1976/1990) theory is not entirely pessimistic – he describes possibilities for resistance in his notion of reverse or counter discourses. For example, in his discussion of

the historical construction of the homosexual subject, he describes that while regulative discourses around sexuality created the “perverse” category of homosexuality and in that way certainly functioned in an oppressively, the same discourses opened up opportunities for resistance through making “possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 101). It is precisely the dual nature of discourse that opens it up for challenge and resistance.

Butler (1990) describes such resistance in her theory of subversion – regulative discourses can be “troubled” through citations of gender norms that subvert the norm through showing up its reliance on the marginal term. She mentions drag (cross dressing) as example of such troubling gender parody (Butler, 1990). Butler (1990) explains this through the poststructuralist concept of the constitutive outside: as outlined in Derridean theory, dominant terms rely on marginal terms for their meaning and coherence. Following from this, subversion of dominant discourses is possible through “marginal practices and identities that exploit the paradoxical ‘constitutive outside’ of the hegemonic norm” (Boucher, 2006, p. 117). “The subversive repetition of gender norms in unprecedented contexts, in other words, displaces and denaturalises the hegemonic universality of heterosexuality, constituting a practical deconstruction of the politics of gender normalisation” (Boucher, 2006, p. 117).

3.6. Conclusion

In this chapter I provided an overview of the main tenets of postmodernism and poststructuralism, as they informed my theoretical approach to the study. I also discussed discourse and related this to Foucauldian theory. I specifically considered discourse and power, disciplinary technology, surveillance and technologies of the self, biopower and punishments of Foucauldian theory around discourse. I concluded the chapter by considering some of the possibilities for resistance and agency within discourse. In the next chapter I give an overview of my research approach.

Chapter 4:

Research approach

4.1. Introduction

In this section I provide an overview of the research process that informed this study. I discuss the research question in order to frame the applicability of the research process in addressing my main research objectives, followed by a description of Foucauldian discourse analysis as the research design, online ethnographic research as methodological approach, the process of sampling, data collection, and a Foucauldian approach to data analysis. I conclude with a discussion of ethical considerations. Throughout this chapter I reflect on the extent to which my research approach has been suitable to this particular study.

4.2. Research question

In this section I re-examine the research question, aims and objectives in order to provide a background of the “questions” before I explain my process in understanding some “answers”. Once more, the research question is concerned with exploring self-constructed meanings of sexual intimacy in the context of BDSM encounters, as described by BDSM practitioners in their online accounts. Specific objectives in support of addressing this research question include the following:

- To explore how BDSM practitioners construct meaning around sexual intimacy in their online accounts
- To explore how these constructions may differ and depend on the specific role a BDSM participant might be in
- To provide a critical view on constructions of intimacy within mainstream definitions through the lens of BDSM experiences
- To contribute to the deficient body of knowledge on BDSM sexual intimacy in South Africa

Keeping the above in mind, I will now discuss the research design I considered best suited to addressing these objectives.

4.3. Foucauldian discourse analysis

In this section I elaborate briefly on my choice of research design - Foucauldian discourse analysis - and motivate its suitability in addressing the research question. As discussed in the preceding chapter, poststructuralist theory informed by a Foucauldian conceptualisation of discourse and power is concerned with the ways in which language is used to construct and restrict certain versions of reality (Foucault, 1972). Foucauldian discourse analysis is the research approach typically employed to trace the different ways in which a topic (such as sexuality or intimacy) is constructed in particular contexts through language (Gavey, 1997; Willig, 2008). This method attends to the macro-context of discourse, rather than the finer-grained interactional context which forms the focus of discursive methods (Willig, 2008). That does not mean that when conducting a Foucauldian discourse analysis one would not attend to some micro-features of speech; Willig (2008) notes that a “smaller level” analysis of positioning within a text can also form part of this method. A Foucauldian discourse analysis would, however, relate such types of positioning of subjects not only to the interpersonal context within the text but also to wider discourses circulating in participants’ social and institutional contexts (Parker, 2002). As discussed in Chapter 3, a Foucauldian conceptualisation of resistance considers people as having some measure of agency, but generally argues that discourse imposes some constraints on what is possible for people to say, do or feel (Willig, 2008).

Foucauldian discourse analysis provides a description of the way in which various discourses construct particular realities for participants, which allow for particular subjectivities and practices (Parker, 2002). This method aims to produce accounts that are orientated to “what discursive resources people draw on, how those resources came to be culturally available, and what effects they have in terms of the kinds of objects, subjects and positions which those resources make available” (Willig, 2008, p. 120). Discursive methods, in contrast, are focused on addressing questions related to “how... participants use language to manage stake in social interaction” (Willig, 2008, p. 121). An important epistemological implication of this method is that Foucauldian discourse analysts are not concerned with foundational claims to knowledge; knowledge is instead regarded as historically constituted and socially constructed (Burr, 1995). I provide a more detailed discussion of the process of conducting a Foucauldian discourse analysis in the section of

this chapter concerned with data analysis. In the section that follows I provide an overview of online ethnographic research as the methodology I employed to obtain texts for analysis.

4.4. Online ethnographic research

Online ethnography refers to a wide range of ethnographic research methods adapted to study communities created in virtual environments (Kozinets, 2002). According to Chalaby (2002) the internet is well suited for dealing with issues around self and intimacy and especially as an environment for self-definition. Chalaby (2002) also states that this environment is especially useful to minority groups as a way of self-definition as a rich source of symbolic material which has been produced by other members of the community. The taboo nature of BDSM experiences makes the use of online sources as my primary data source appropriate as these experiences might have been more difficult to explore offline. Further to this, addressing the research question requires at least some knowledge of BDSM systems of meaning making and culture in order to attempt any kind of interpretation or even hinting towards academic representations. Accordingly, including elements of online ethnographic research throughout the process of data collection can assist me in situating my understanding of the accounts produced by individuals within the broader frame of online meaning-making associated with BDSM.

There are numerous different methods of data collection available to researchers conducting an online ethnography. These include document collection (such as archived blog posts or online forum discussions), online observation and conducting online interviews (this can occur through synchronous methods such as online “chatting” which mirror offline individual interviews, synchronous or asynchronous focus group discussions or other asynchronous methods such as email communication) (James & Busher, 2006; Skageby, 2011). A popular data source in online ethnographic research is social networking sites, through which online communities can be studied (Gatson & Zweerink, 2004; Kozinets, 2002). Moore (2011) distinguishes between social networking sites that facilitate or support pre-existing social networks, such as Facebook, and online communities that often entail little offline engagement and act as organising mediums for people with common interests, concerns or identities. One such online community can be found on the social network site FetLife. This site is dedicated specifically to providing a space where BDSM practitioners can

feel accepted, can learn, share and explore their kinks and get in touch with an online community designed by the community (FetLife: BDSM & fetish community for kinksters by kinksters, 2007). This seems to resonate with Sproull and Arriaga's (2007) definition of an online community:

An online community is defined as a large, collectivity of voluntary members whose primary goal is member and collective welfare, whose members share a common interest, experience, or conviction and positive regard for other members, and who interact with one another and contribute to the collectivity primarily over the net. (pp. 1-2)

I anticipated that I would be able to use this site to collect data, but as explain in subsequent sections ultimately only relied on the site to identify potential participants and orientate myself to the BDSM community.

Ethnographic observations made during the process of data collection can be captured through keeping field notes commenting on methodological reflections, questions to consider in subsequent online data collection or preliminary notes for analysis (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). These observations became an invaluable resource when conducting the analysis and also served as a reflexive account of the subjective impact of conducting this research – it provided a space to document how my own understanding of BDSM culture was challenged and extended.

Online ethnography can vary in the extent to which the researcher participates in the online interactions (Moore, 2011). In the current study I relied on the ethnographic component of this methodology predominantly in the initial phases of “cultural familiarisation” and made use of online observation and online interviews to collect data for analysis (Hine, 2008). It can also be noted that my involvement throughout the study was at the level of engaging with participants through online interactions; I did not participate in their life world outside of online discussions. I elaborate on these processes of online data collection in subsequent sections of this chapter.

4.5. Sampling

I now turn to the sampling strategies I employed to make initial contact and identify participants as well as some challenges I experienced in this process.

I made first contact with participants by introducing myself and my study on various online forums and letting anyone who is willing to participate volunteer to this end. These forums consisted mostly of sites which were designed specifically for the kink community to share resources, meet, discuss relevant topics and find a common, safe and supportive space to share their experiences. Participants were identified through a number of such online communities, but I predominantly made use of the social network site FetLife discussed in the preceding section.

I aimed to recruit between six and ten participants to ensure a manageable sample size, considering the labour-intensive nature of conducting a Foucauldian discourse analysis (Willig, 2008). I also hoped to achieve a sample that is diverse across gendered identities and BDSM role definitions, consisting of three men and three women – one of each gender in a predominantly submissive role, one of each gender in a predominantly dominating role and one of each in a predominantly switching role. “Dominant” refers to a person who assumes a role of power or authority in a power exchange relationship. A “submissive” is someone who assumes a role of submission in a power exchange relationship and someone who identifies as a “switch” can change between these roles at different times with different partners (Veaux, 2012). This would allow for varied perspectives on personal experiences of sexual intimacy. Additional selection criteria included that participants reside in South Africa (in order to limit the focus of the study) and that participants are 18 years or older. Once I identified a number of interested participants, I made use of snowball sampling to identify additional female participants in particular. This was necessary since, interestingly, an imbalance appeared in the form of a considerable bias towards the number of males volunteering to participate. I could hypothesise that this could be for various reasons. One of these could be that I presented myself as female on the sites which required some kind of a profile construction in order to participate. Participant responses could have been predominantly from heterosexual or bisexual males because the site allows for people to also discuss sexual meetings outside of the site or discuss explicit sexual content on the site as a type of online sexual encounter. This frames much of the interaction on the site as being sexually explicit and thus there is the expectation that, whatever reason a participant might give for being on the site, at some point there will be (non-academic) sexual conversation. Another reason could be that there might be a gendered disparity between the different

roles in BDSM interaction – with males generally identifying more as Dominant and females identifying more with being submissive when participating in BDSM activities. By extension, and in line with these particular role definitions, it is likely that the more dominant characters are more forthcoming in their approach to others.⁴ A short introduction to the final group of nine participants is provided in Table 1 in the subsequent section of this chapter.

My communications on the FetLife site was not without challenge. During the ethnographic stage of my research, I explored the FetLife site by creating a profile for myself and openly stating my research intentions. I made my role as a researcher explicit on my profile, making sure that anyone who interacts with me is aware of this upfront. It became clear to me that this would be an appropriate site to do the study on since it caters specifically for the kink community and would allow me to filter for only local participants. It would also allow me to start group discussions and have online interviews via the messaging service provided by the site. I continued to respond to “friend requests” and group discussions in such a manner so as to keep my research intentions clear. I also briefly stated my aims with the research on my profile so as to maintain transparency throughout any communication with the online participants. Much of my initial time spent on the site was aimed more towards ethnographic observations which would assist me in orientating myself to the lifestyle and the way of interacting within BDSM encounters. Participants I spoke to during this time were not asked for consent, as this stage of the process was aimed at informing how to approach the next step of research and did not yield data used in the final analysis. Any participants who contributed to the second stage – the data collection stage – were asked for written consent before they participated in line with general ethical guidelines and standard ethical practice in conducting online research (Moore, 2011). I elaborate on this in the section on ethical considerations. However, soon into my exploration I received the following message from one of the site’s administrators:

Hi there, My name is Sarah, and I’m a caretaker with the FetLife team. I’m very sorry, but we don’t allow members to solicit for member information or research studies without the

⁴ Although I am not in a position (perhaps by choice) to come to any conclusions regarding a possible correlation between particular personality traits and the BDSM role that they “should” or “would” prefer, it does seem as though communication and the level of interaction which is “allowed” within a BDSM context is structured around specific rules – thus at times deliberately silencing submissive participants.

express permission of our founder, James. We take our member privacy very seriously, and do everything we can to protect our community, so your group and any survey posts you've made have been removed.

We hope you understand, and if you have any questions, please let me know. (Anonymous, 2012)⁵

My response included a sincere apology and a request to further my research on the site. I also offered to provide the site founder with progress reports on my research as well any other necessary documentation (so long as it does not reveal participant details) they might need in order for me to continue doing research on their site. They did not provide me with permission to continue and also did not return any of my lost data to me. While this experience was disappointing, it also spoke of the great mistrust the BDSM community has in "outsiders" and researchers.

Although I was already in contact with some potential participants through FetLife, I still needed more participants to reach my ideal sample size. Fortunately, I was contacted by someone who learned about the study through an academic meeting and who was willing to share my details with potential participants who were also subscribed to the FetLife site. In this manner, and through referrals from the initial participants identified through FetLife, the project finally escalated so quickly that I had to eventually decide on a cut-off line at which point I had to unfortunately turn down some requests to participate. This cut-off was based purely on the number and balance (regarding gender and BDSM role) of the sample. I now turn to a description of the final group of participants.

4.5.1. Participant characteristics

Participants all selected their own pseudonyms and all information provided here was volunteered by participants.

⁵ Names have been changed to preserve confidentiality

Pseudonym	Gender	Preferred role	Additional information shared
biggerthanu	Male	Dominant	Heterosexual, early 30's, prefers dominance play, beatings and sex, a martial artist, not as active in the BDSM scene as he would like, outspoken feminist
budah1802	Male	Dominant	Age 25, fairly new in the BDSM community, is excited about learning more
jolisub	Male	submissive	In a relationship with Tiffany Twisted
kindmasterza	Male	Dominant, sadist	Age 30, enjoys rope work, corporal punishment, sensation play and mind games. In a committed relationship with a masochistic submissive (pincushionsa)
pincushionsa	Female	Mostly submissive	Mostly heterosexual, enjoys the feeling of closeness when her partner helps her through pain (even though he caused it)
scubaoake	Male	Switch, but mostly Dominant, No information offered, sadist	Age 58, heterosexual, preference for sadism, married to a vanilla, active when provided the opportunity, experiences the research as out of his comfort zone but would like to contribute to the understanding of BDSM experiences.
Tiffany Twisted	Female	Domme	Age 41, bisexual, enjoys the sensual and mental aspects of BDSM, would want to be in a permanent D/s relationship
velvitsin9000	Female	Switch	Thirties, bisexual, polyamorous and vocally sex-positive
wilder43	Male		No additional information offered ⁶

Table 1: Final selection of participants

⁶ While not all participants provided their ages, their participation on the FetLife website required them to be at least 18 years of age.

4.6. Data collection strategies

The first stage of data collection involved an ethnographic exploration of various online spaces created for/friendly to the BDSM community. The online ethnographic stage of the study involved informal interaction with BDSM practitioners: observing the conversations of participants in spaces such as online public forum discussions (<https://fetlife.com/>; <http://bdsmforum.info/>; <http://www.collarme.co.za/index.php>; <http://forum.literotica.com/forumdisplay.php?f=26>) and participating in conversations with participants in online discussion groups. The aim of this stage of data collection was to orientate myself to the community, the culture, the type of language used and the rules for interaction. Although I consider this stage a necessary step in the data collection process, I deliberately did not source data for analysis during this stage in part due to the ethical implications of using data not solicited with the intention to use it for research purposes being clear. This step is therefore considered a foundation from which data for analysis could be collected more effectively. I did however keep field notes during this stage, for personal reference and ultimately to inform my approach to analysis (Hine, 2008).

The second stage of data collection entailed somewhat more formal and deliberate interaction through online focus group discussions. Realising that the FetLife site would not be a feasible platform for the study, I merely used the available sites (such as FetLife and private Facebook groups) to announce my study and to direct potential participants to a blog site which I created specifically to facilitate asynchronous online focus group discussions. The image on the following page shows a screenshot of the “home” page of the blog, where I provide information about the study:

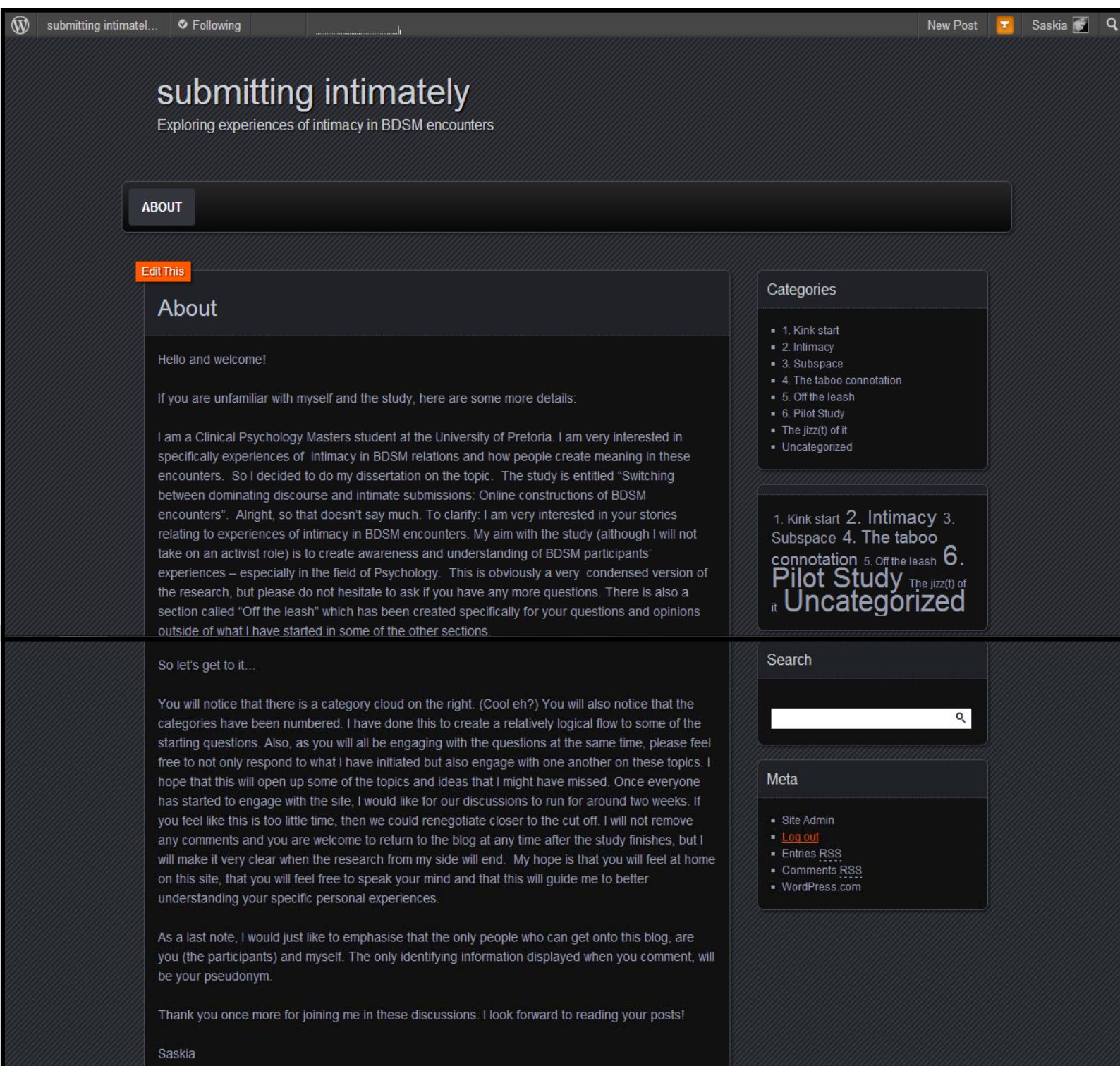


Figure 2: Screenshot of the "home" page on the blog designed for the current study

The blog had to meet strict criteria for specific privacy preferences. The need for privacy was expressed by nearly all participants and some participants agreed to the study subject to these strict privacy settings being in place. In designing the blog, I implemented the following strategies to ensure the anonymity and privacy of each participant's details (both to the public and one another).

- I emailed each participant individually (as opposed to sending group emails which reveal the email addresses of all included in the group).
- I set the privacy settings of the blog in such a way that each participant had to apply for access to the site, which could only be granted by myself. The implication is that the only people allowed onto the blog at any stage are the people I have granted access to directly.
- Participants could only get access to the site through the use of a pseudonym – no email addresses or any other identifying details were revealed by the blog itself.
- Participants were encouraged to share some personal information regarding their participation in BDSM activities, but were advised to avoid sharing any identifying details.

The choice to conduct online focus group discussions, as opposed to individual interviews, was informed by the interactive nature of group discussions where meanings can be challenged, contested and considered among participants (Willig, 2008). This was a fitting strategy considering that I am interested in how participants forming part of an online community dynamically construct and challenge discourses of sexuality and intimacy through language. Online focus group discussions share many similarities with those conducted face-to-face in an offline setting. Both approaches to data collection entail a group discussion organised around a specified topic and facilitated by a focus group moderator (Stewart & Williams, 2005; Willig, 2008). Both approaches encourage active participation and invite participants to interact not only with the researcher but also with each other in a manner that exploits the social setting and produces rich data for analysis (Stewart & Williams, 2005; Wilkinson, 1998). Online focus group discussions differ, however, in that features typical of in-person communication such as eye contact, tone or body

language cannot be observed and noted by the researcher and some of the group's dynamic might be lost in the analogous and deliberated nature of the online discussions (Moore, 2011). Computer-mediated communication does however allow for forms of expression unique to online contexts through the use of emoticons and text-based expressions or slang (Moore, 2011). These are a rich source of data and can add intricate nuances to participants' communication.

Further to this, online focus group discussions also differ in that participants are able to continue responding to the facilitator's posts, as well as the posts of other group members, over an extended period of time, instead of being limited to the typical one- to two-hour duration of an offline focus group discussion. In the case of the current study, data collection took place over a two month long period after which I indicated that although participants were welcome to continue discussions on the blog, none of conversations that took place after that point will be included in the study. An obvious advantage of online data collection in general, discussed earlier in this chapter, is that topics that might be difficult to study in an offline context are potentially more accessible in the relatively anonymous virtual space where participants might be able to express themselves more freely (Tates et al., 2009).

I facilitated the online focus group discussions using a semi structured interview guide (attached as Appendix A) – in a similar to an offline face-to-face focus group discussion. The semi-structured interview guide followed an open ended approach characteristic of qualitative and particularly constructionist research (Willig, 2008). The interview guide includes questions based on the following main areas of exploration, identified during the literature review and aligned with the research aims and objectives: psychotherapy experiences; stigmatisation; experiences of intimacy as constructed within various BDSM roles; BDSM as taboo; perceptions of dominant discourses concerning BDSM; how intimacy might be understood in BDSM encounters; subspace and how it is linked (or disconnected) from the experience of intimacy. This increased the likelihood that I generated and stimulated discussion of all the key areas. A further benefit of using an interview guide is that through explicitly formulating questions/areas of exploration, I make my contribution to the knowledge that is constructed in interaction with the participants explicit and more transparent (Burman, 1994b).

I prepared the blog in such a manner that subsections of guiding questions were grouped under particular topic headings. I did this as a way of organising data and to provide the participants with a convenient interface which allowed them to return to the discussion at any point and still be able to follow from where they left off – an advantage of this was that such a format is typical of online discussion forums where discussions are grouped under “threads” and thus provides a more authentic online experience (Stewart & Williams, 2005). A possible disadvantage of using this format was that discussions were asynchronous (as opposed to dynamic, which allows for more immediate responses such as is the case with a “chat” discussion set-up). While this allowed for participants to plan and think through their responses, it also meant that some responses might not have been as spontaneous as it might have been in a face-to-face or electronically dynamic focus group. I attempted to counter some of the possible disadvantages from having quite a (semi-) structured framework on the site by also providing a section open to the participants to use as they please, whether this be to discuss possible gaps in the study, or to get to know one another or whatever other need they had outside of the guided discussions. Another approach to structure is that, providing the particularly sensitive material of the study, this deliberately controlled environment might lend itself to a more contained and safe experience.

4.7. Data analysis

I now turn to a brief discussion of the data analysis process. The analysis focuses on identifying various discourses around sexual intimacy in the primary text – the online focus group discussions. A further focus is on how the discourses drawn on by participants support or resist dominant discourses of sexual intimacy and how these are implicated in participants’ subjectivity (Parker, 1992).

In preparing for the process of analysis, the format in which the group discussions took place meant that the texts were already transcribed by the participants themselves. I retained all the idiosyncrasies of computer-mediated communication, such as emoticons and other text-based expressions used by participants in their posts since this added richness to the data (Moore, 2011). In order for me to be able to work through the text, I printed out all the correspondence and bound it into a single folder, allowing a margin for notes.

4.7.1. Discourse analysis

I made use of Parker's (1992; 2002) suggested criteria for identifying discourses. Parker (2002) notes that these criteria can be flexibly employed as guidelines for analysis, where the analyst reads through the text while engaging with these criteria and being guided by their research question. In applying these criteria, the aim is to arrive at an understanding of how participants are placed/place themselves within/outside of certain discourses. Parker (1992; 2002), as discussed by Macleod (2002), suggests the following seven criteria for distinguishing discourses, which guided the analysis:

- a. Discourse is a coherent system of meanings

Discourses create a particular view of the world through specific statements and metaphors (Parker, 1992; 2002).

- b. Discourse is realised in text

Parker (2002) suggests that everything is textual as we understand things and give them meaning and this is also the location where discourses inhabit or become actualised.

- c. Discourses reflect on their own way of phrasing/speaking

This criterion refers to the way in which texts reflect on the viewpoint proposed by the discourses operating in the texts. They often serve to confirm to the discourse analyst that a discrete discourse is operating in what the text refers to (Parker, 2002).

- d. Discourses refer to other discourses

Parker (2002) explains: discourses "embed, entail and presuppose other discourses to the extent that the contradictions *within* a discourse open up questions about what other discourses are at work" (p. 150, emphasis in original)

- e. Discourse concerns objects

In doing a discourse analysis, becoming part of a process of objectification is inevitable (Parker, 2002). This process consists of two layers: the first, one in which

the “reality” to which the discourse belongs is identified; and secondly, the layer of the discourse itself.

f. A discourse contains subjects

A variation of the object constructed by discourse is the subject, “who speaks, writes, hears or reads the texts where discourse lives” (Parker, 2002, p. 152). These subjects are positioned in a particular manner through the discursive process where they are situated in interactions as producers of the stories they are part of (Davies & Harré, 1990).

g. Discourses are located in a specific historical context

Discourses are dynamic and can change over time (Parker, 2000). Discourses are also placed in relation to other discourses which were/are applicable within a certain timeframe (Parker, 2000).

Parker (2002) continues to list three other criteria as supplementing the first seven. These entail that:

h. Discourses support institutions

Certain practices serve as validation or support for a discourse – thereby implicating discourse in the structure of institutions by supporting or resisting them (Parker, 2000).

i. Discourses reproduce power relations

Macleod (2002) suggests that, in the complexity and multiplicity of subject positions, there is an equally multiple and complex interaction between power relations, depending on these subject positions in relation to one another.

j. Discourses have ideological effects.

Discourses can be implicated in the support and empowerment of some worldviews while subduing or oppressing others. This process involves the sanctioning of oppression and prohibition of subjugated discourses from participating in the

interpretation of history while promoting narratives from dominant groups in this interpretation (Parker, 1992).

The process of analysis entailed reading and re-reading the texts produced during the online focus group discussions and noting my immediate impressions and associations. Thereafter I identified all instances in the text where participants referred to the discursive object “intimacy”, whether directly or indirectly. This was followed by a reiterative process of moving between the different steps suggested by Parker (2002) and attending in particular to the various discourses drawn on in the text, exploring the functions of deploying different constructions of the object in different discursive contexts, identifying the subject positions evoked by the discourses, considering the relationship between discourse and practice, and finally exploring the implications for subjectivity (Willig, 2008). Throughout the analysis I was mindful of focusing not only on the constructive and restrictive features of discourse but also on identifying instances of resistance or subversion in the text (Butler, 1990).

Parker’s (2002) guidelines for analysis were also helpful in that they sensitised me to how power is implicated in the process of producing knowledge, also in the context of this research project. The poststructuralist notion that each construction of an object essentially excludes many other ways of defining it, implies that many experiences of the BDSM community might have been silenced in this way. This had the implication that I needed to stay alert to these ways of silencing not only during data collection but also during the process of analysis, so as to be mindful of potentially silencing or marginalising participants’ accounts and instead encouraging an opened up discourse in which any experience has at least the potential to be put into language.

In order to increase rigor and quality in the analysis, I focused on coherence in the findings (Willig, 2008). To this end, I refined the analysis to the point where the findings could be organised around a meaningful framework without sacrificing the nuances and contradictions in participants’ accounts. I also found that through assuming a reflexive stance towards my involvement in the process of co-creating this research, I was able to note and interrogate my reading of the text and attempt alternative readings (Elliot & Fischer, 1999; Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000).

It is important to note that my epistemological approach to the data was influenced by and influenced the mutual construction of the research findings. While a Foucauldian approach to analysis allowed me to be meticulous in my exploration of languaged discourses, it limited the amount of micro experiences I could process during analysis. The topic of BDSM is a rich and dense one from any vantage point. This made it difficult to decide what to include and what to discard during analysis. In this process, much of participants' experiences were analysed to the bone, and many others were discarded as not being within the limits of this study. These discarded experiences may be witnessed in future studies.

4.8. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations related to this study generally included assuring privacy and anonymity of all participants. In addition to general ethical guidelines, some ethical considerations specific to online studies are also relevant to this study. These include considerations regarding when it is appropriate to request consent online, when this can be done in public spaces and when it should be attained in private and the level of disguise for participants (e.g. the use of pseudonyms which are not also being utilised by the participant on other online sites and could somehow be traced back to the participant) (Bruckman, 2002). I will now discuss each of these matters briefly.

In light of the resentment and mistrust BDSM participants might feel towards the discipline of psychology, I consider an open and honest approach unquestionably necessary. For this reason, I disclosed my identity to each participant and only used a pseudonym on FetLife as is generally accepted practice on the site. After identifying potential participants in online spaces such as FetLife, I obtained (via email) a signed informed consent form each participant before granting access to the blog I created. This form explained in full my position and intentions with the study, guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, and informed participants of the academic limits of use of the data, as well as assured my sensitivity and mindfulness in documenting their experiences. Informed consent (attached as Appendix B) also allowed the participants to withdraw at any point of the study, had they felt uncomfortable with any aspect of it. I acknowledged the risk of anonymity being

compromised within the context of a group discussion and I made this clear to participants when requesting consent and further requested from each participant on the blog itself to respect the confidentiality of group members.

I expected to be personally challenged by some of the experiences shared by participants. This kind of challenge can easily limit any study as it limits the openness of the researcher to meaningful constructions of participants; in this manner a reflexive orientation to the research is not only an ethical concern but also necessary to ensure the quality of the research (Willig, 2008). In addition to field notes, I kept personal researcher's notes in order to keep track of this process and to allow for later reflection on how my views might have been challenged, changed or maintained. This assisted me in acknowledging the social constructionist nature of my approach and the likelihood of a mutual and simultaneous construction of meaning between myself and participants (Willig, 2008). Should the challenge posed by the research topic have ended up being greater than I anticipated, I planned on seeking therapeutic supervision immediately. However, perhaps telling of how the BDSM community is experienced by non-BDSMers, I was somewhat surprised by how, even though the rules and guidelines around interaction are taken seriously by all involved and some participants live out their lives within a BDSM structure; there is a fascinating sense of adult play between participants. Regardless of whether participants framed their interactions as being "intimate" or not, there was a sense of intimacy which came through unexpectedly. I now consider more elements within my personal context, which may have contributed to the study.

4.9. Personal context

Perhaps the "troubling" potential of BDSM experiences is also reflected in my initial interest in studying it (Butler, 1990). I felt challenged by the idea of intimacy within, what appeared to be, an aggressive interaction. I wondered whether aggression itself is not in fact a deeply intimate experience, and I was struck by the distance constructed between normative sexuality and BDSM sexualities and was interested in what constructed this difference while there were also hints of sameness (as with all marginalised identities).

Further to this, being a Clinical Psychologist in training, I found it challenging to engage with participant responses as researcher, and not a therapist. In other words, I had

to remain mindful that the questions I asked were not related to my own personal analytic and therapeutic interests in individual participants, but were framed in a way which would be guiding towards my research interests but still open enough for broader discourses to present within the discussions. Of course, I cannot be entirely separate from a profession quite as personal as psychology, and potential participants' apprehension and reluctance presented several obstacles. Potential participants challenged me directly on my motives for the study, anticipating being pathologised, and some were bluntly unwilling to participate for the mere reason that my interest was constructed within a psychological framework.

I found it interesting to note how some of the interactions I had with participants were hued by their BDSM role identification and found it interesting that particular identifications made me register a sense of uneasiness. For example, in one of my communications with a potential participant, I was caught by surprise when he - a middle-aged man - addressed me as ma'am, capitalised any reference to me and communicated in a strikingly subservient and accommodating manner. At the time I only registered this as curious but realised later the richness of this interaction in pointing out the invisibility of the implicit discourses. For example, I may not have felt uneasy if this participant were a younger female – suggesting that it is more fitting for females and younger individuals to communicate in this manner, but me being female and relatively young and this participant being male and older, the discourse became a third presence in our conversation.

Although I initiated the study while knowing relatively little about BDSM culture and interaction, there were various instances throughout the study where I was directly challenged to recognise the default and normative discursive position in contrast with what I was presented with. One such a realisation came when browsing through some of the participants' FetLife profiles and discovering an album of what could be described as emotionally very intimate images. This might seem contradictory as one of the participants in the scene depicted was tied up and being punished, and the other was inflicting pain and punishment on her. One of the last photos in the album shows the one participant gently helping the submissive participant out of their bondage ropes, cradling her head so she would land gently from where she was suspended with ropes and looking into her eyes. Perhaps I misinterpreted this album, but I was struck by the idea that there really seems to

be more similarities between BDSM practitioners and non-BDSM practitioners than there are differences and that constructing BDSM encounters as “alien” or other to what is regarded as “normal” sex is perhaps a false dichotomy. Realisations such as this transformed my own understanding of variations in sexual practice and identities and perhaps loosened the constraints I had myself placed on what is regarded as “normal” and “abnormal” forms of relating sexually to others.

I would like to conclude this section with a gracefully delivered quote by Barker (2006), in reflecting on her research focus on “non-normative” sexualities, which resonates with my experience of engaging with this research topic:

I began research in these areas of human sexuality because I felt that they were under-researched and largely misunderstood in the existing psychological literature. As I have continued my studies I have come to the conclusion that these identities and practices may also have important implications for general psychological theories of sexuality, gender, attraction and relationships. If people can be attracted to others regardless of gender, or with the focus being on something else entirely (e.g. certain sensations, submission and dominance), and if people can form more than one romantic relationship at a time, or even relationships which involve three or four people, this suggests that we should re-evaluate psychological theories to ensure that they encompass such possibilities. (p. 3)

4.10. Conclusion

In this chapter I provided an overview of the research process by discussing the research question, the research design and describing the process of sampling, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations. I also attempted to demonstrate throughout why I considered my research approach to be suitable for addressing the research question. In the chapter that follows I present the findings of the study.

Chapter 5:

Findings and discussion

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter I provide an overview of the findings of the discourse analysis. The discussion is structured to consider the varied and at times contradictory ways in which intimacy is constructed in four discourses identified in the text - as romantic vulnerability, as intimate knowledge of one's partner(s) in a BDSM encounter, as different from "conventional" experiences of intimacy and finally as linked to certain roles or identifications in relation to BDSM encounters. Throughout the presentation of the findings I comment on how participants at times draw on constructions of intimacy in BDSM encounters in ways that either normalise BDSM sexualities and interactions or serve to bolster notions of difference from "normative" sexualities.

5.2. Into/me/you/see: Intimacy as romantic vulnerability

The first discourse around intimacy identified in the text is that of a romantic discourse, specifically related to vulnerability. In such a discourse there is a strong focus on acceptance, openness, connection, attraction and trust. The discourse suggests that in order to achieve a sense of intimacy the participants in the scene should be willing to share enough of themselves to be positioned as somewhat vulnerable to the rejection or disapproval of the other participant(s). Further to this, participants also suggested that if these vital aspects are not present, intimacy simply cannot be achieved. What emerged prominently in this discourse is the sense of being able to fully be oneself with another.

biggerthanu explains:

Real intimacy is only possible with someone you can truly be yourself with.

Here biggerthanu hints towards a "real" intimacy, suggesting that other forms of intimacy during which one cannot be one's true self, are equally untrue. The authentic self is suggested as an object employed in the search for the object of true intimacy. The impression is created that a "true intimacy" cannot be achieved with a defended, false or inauthentic self. He explains this more clearly:

You have to hide a part of yourself, so you can never be completely intimate. You can never get to that stage where you know your partner completely accepts you for who you are.

He continues later:

Intimacy means sharing, with another person, parts of yourself that open you up to harm. Intimacy means lowering your defences and letting another person in, and them doing the same for you.

In this description emphasis is placed on being exposed – not “hiding a part of yourself”- in order to achieve a complete experience of intimacy. Further emphasis is placed on the hope for radical acceptance of the completely exposed true self from a partner. The true self as an object is offered as a vulnerable gift with the hope implied that the partner will accept the gift wholeheartedly. This positions the exposed self in a necessarily vulnerable position and places the partner in a position of power to either accept this “self-gift”, or, to reject it. However, such “lowering of defences” is described in the above excerpt as mutual with “them doing the same for you”. In this manner there is an implied assumption of equality in that both partners are required to risk being vulnerable and that the experience of intimacy results from this shared vulnerability and trust. Such a discourse of intimacy as romantic vulnerability echoes the normative (heterosexual) discourse of romantic love discussed in Chapter 2, in which intimacy is popularly constructed as achieved in romantic relationships through a process of mutual self-disclosure (Jamieson, 1999).

Participants did not, however, uncritically invest in such a normative discourse of romantic vulnerability and instead pointed to instances of divergence from such a norm. scubaoke, while supporting the notion of being able to be fully oneself with a partner, also hints at a transformation of this discourse through his identification with BDSM:

So far for me intimacy has come from finding a place where my partner and I can really be “ourselves” in a way that we can’t be anywhere else.

Turley (2011) suggested that the experience of intimacy between BDSM partners is highly dependent on specificities and rules and the presence of particular elements which allow for intimacy to be “activated”. Along a similar line, scubaoke suggests that this “place” is somehow differentiated from other “places”. In other words, this “place” is presented as a

surreptitious object which is reserved only for scubaoke and his partner and is related to their sense of connectedness brought on by fully "being themselves" through expressing their shared non-normative BDSM interest. Further to this, the "place" is somehow charmed in how it allows them both to be fully themselves in a way that no other "place" allows them to be. scubaoke also suggests that this "place" needs to be found prior to the experience of intimacy in describing that "...intimacy has come from finding a place...". This suggests that intimacy may be a separate object to the "place" object which charms the intimacy into being. Similarly, biggerthanu lists some of these charms in activating an experience of intimacy:

I don't believe love is a prerequisite to intimacy, but certainly care and intimacy go together.
Trust too. Without trust and care, there can be no intimacy.

He makes very clear that care and trust are vital prerequisites for achieving intimacy. In this text biggerthanu signals another move away from a typically romantic discourse which involves love, and suggests that trust and care are separate from a love discourse – in other words, that trust and care can be employed without necessarily feeling love for someone: that a discourse of trust and care may exist separately from a discourse of (romantic) love. kindmasterza continues to explain how trust, for him, is also imperative:

With the style of BDSM I do trust is the key to everything: you won't let a person you don't trust pick up a flogger, cane, or length of rope and approach you with the intent to use these objects (or at least I hope you wouldn't).

Various objects are presented in his description. Firstly, he names the obvious objects such as "...a flogger, cane or length of rope...". These objects seem to be employed to give clues as to the "style of BDSM" (another object) he does. kindmasterza creates the impression of danger or at the very least some sense of vigilance. He further describes a less obvious subject – the "person you don't trust". He combines this suspicious person with the dangerous objects to subtly, and yet quite vividly, illuminate why trust is of such importance in BDSM scenes he is involved in. What he also illuminates is an unnamed object of vulnerability. This sense of trust appears to be the only object able to separate the vulnerable and exposed subject from the suspicious subject with her or his dangerous objects. What is created instead is a scene of intimacy and pleasure. He transforms the

reader's expectation of a treacherous scene, into one of pleasure and vulnerable intimacy, with the dangerous subject positioned as powerful in her or his ability to alter this danger into pleasure by tapping into the object provided - trust. kindmasterza elaborates on this idea through the following description:

Trust starts before an object is picked up, discussing limits, hard limits, medical conditions, etc. beforehand.

He alleviates the tension of imminent danger presented in the previous text, by providing clear boundaries of how the scene is set up. Through this process of contracting, trust is constructed between the subjects. Trust is essentially made into a separate object; it is made tangible in the agreeing on and contracting of limits before "an object is picked up". This "place" where intimacy magically enters, is scripted and constructed between the subjects.

A sense of clinical transience is created through this idea of contracting for the immediate scene, thereby resisting the romantic discourse. velvetsin9000 links to this transience suggesting that the temporality of the scene does not necessarily construct it into one which is void of intimacy:

Sexual intimacy for me is feeling a connection with a partner, however deep that may run. Feeling involved and enraptured in what is going on, absorbed and intent on one another. Even if it is transitory, for the duration of the encounter, feeling connected and invested in the other person.

Touching on the brevity of the intimacy she suggests in the same text how this encounter may develop into a longer term "agreement":

On a more long term level, it involves being able to be sexually open and comfortable with that person, willing to explore and reveal and get to know one another's sexual urges, buttons, lines, fears, desires. It's the feeling you get when you grin when you see the sharply in-drawn breath when you touch them just there like so, or feeling like the rest of the world doesn't exist for the duration of the encounter.

She continues:

Sharing of yourself and being shared with in return, and the mutual appreciation thereof. Over time, this means really getting to know the other person on more than a superficial level, or even the facts of their life. It's knowing and caring about the thread that weaves those facts together; and feeling like the other person cares about who and what you really are in return.

While kindmasterza suggested that trust is somehow forged through the contracting of limits and that the neglect of such responsibilities may lead to an implied dangerous situation, velvetsin9000 suggests a more organic process engraved in the mutual presence and sharing of the subjects, regardless of the time span of the interaction. This supports research done by Turley (2011) and Cutler (2003) who suggest that some of the elements valued by BDSM identified individuals in a sexually intimate encounter are trust, reassurance, care and being sensitive to a partner's needs during a scene.

There appears to be much clearer divisions in the power distribution in the scene kindmasterza is describing, however, a similar, more subtle contract is suggested in velvetsin9000's description. She suggests a balance created by the subjects in which they have delicate transactions of investment and presence in one another's pleasure and desires, while the intimacy is meticulously suspended from this transaction. The image previously constructed by scubaoke of a surreptitious place where this interaction can be negotiated in isolation and charm is recalled. However, where kindmasterza's description of the process of contracting provides a clear sense of how power is negotiated in the scene before an "object is picked up", velvetsin9000's somewhat more romantic description suggests the continuous flow of negotiation between subjects in the knowing and trusting of one another's undiluted investment and undivided presence.

To conclude, this discourse feeds off and into a normative discourse of romantic love. The boundaries of a romantic love discourse are however stretched to accommodate particularities around intimacy in BDSM encounters. In particular, participants made reference to a separation of intimacy from romantic love and instead emphasised trust and care - two practices strongly related to BDSM interactions.

5.3. Two heads are better than one: Intimacy as knowledge

A second discourse that could be identified in the text is in some ways in contradiction with the previous discourse of romantic vulnerability allowing its subjects to interact intimately. This discourse relates to the role of knowledge and intellectual consideration in creating the required conditions for experiencing intimacy. The discourse allows its participants to experience intimacy through intimate knowledge of their partner(s)' desires, capacities for sexual arousal, limits and specifics of what elicits their arousal.

scubaoke elaborates on what he experiences to be sexual intimacy:

Extensive knowledge of the partner in mind and body and the exploitation of that knowledge for mutual pleasure and satisfaction.

The word "exploitation" is cleverly used to suggest some kind of manipulation, but he further explains how this knowledge is used to ultimately provide his partner with the experience of sexual arousal, pleasure and intimacy.

He continues to describe the idea of intimacy as instituted through knowledge:

In bdsm intimacy is achieved through knowledge. Knowledge of what the other partner craves and how to raise the sensory perception of that person to a level where intimacy is achieved in the most satisfying way, albeit not in the vanilla sense. The concept "the most active sexual organ is the brain" is given its rightful place. You control the body through the brain, you get sexual arousal by playing the body like the well-tuned instrument it is, each one unique and a new challenge.

From this scubaoke suggests that there is something very specific about BDSM which necessitates knowledge as a requirement for intimacy to take place. He does not describe these specifics here but suggests that there is something mechanical about learning how to play "the body like the well-tuned instrument it is". He constructs the image of a sterile intellectual, even medical experience. He makes use of dispassionate phrasing in describing the brain as a sexual organ which facilitates the increasing of sensory perception and describes how controlling the brain allows him control over the body through knowledge of the partner. This places his partner in an interesting position: she is simultaneously a subject

being manipulated, experimented with, studied and tuned like an instrument as well as the object receiving the culmination of this somewhat scientific endeavour – sexual arousal. In this description scubaoke challenges Turley's (2011) findings which suggest that BDSM participation is a highly emotional experience dependent on shared construction by proposing that an intellectual focus by the Dom(me) contributes to a "successful" scene. Another study by Langan and Davidson (2010) is echoed in this description. Their study suggests that dominant discourse around intimacy typically emphasises the necessity of equal contribution and mutual self-disclosure by sexual partners as requirements for intimacy. Further to this, that dominant discourse typically assumes that intimacy is an aim within sexual interactions for all partners involved. This description by scubaoke challenges these assumptions directly by describing a scene devoid of these elements and focused elsewhere on the achievement of a successful scene.

Foucault (1976/1990) describes biopower on a micro level as the individual being controlled in a direct manner in order to produce docile, tamed and productive bodies which can be applied in exploitative ways. In scubaoke's account, it appears as though he has sharpened this skill to control the body to perfection; however, here it is not applied to stimulate economic production. The body is made docile – in fact, tied down, but is also awakened and controlled for sexual stimulation.

scubaoke also describes this interaction as a sort of performance by suggesting that his partners are "each one unique and a new challenge" and that intimacy is something to be "achieved in the most satisfying way". In this manner, intimacy as an object is presented as a well-deserved trophy for the thorough and meticulous intellectual commitment and study of the partner's cravings and the particular mechanisms in activating their sexual arousal. Near the end of the text, the image is created of a musician who has skilfully practiced his art to the point of perfection. His final performance is suggested to be an intimate experience but in some ways also introverted and solitary: his pleasure comes from the challenge and the accomplishment and the audience's pleasure is in simply being present for this performance. The image is created of a quest, a challenge to be met or a performance to be excelled at. This construction seems to appeal to a gendered discourse of normative masculinity that

associates hegemonic male subjectivity with performance, competition and achievement (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

This fairly removed or detached masculine enactment on his partner's body is further sanitised through scubaoke's exclusion of love from the interaction:

Sort of like the patient is sure she loves her doctor, merely because he understands her needs and relate to them. While the knowledge is intimate, it doesn't constitute love.

In sharp contrast to the romantic vulnerability discourse, a sense of solitude, of clinically sanitised and distant interaction which "doesn't constitute love" is created. The doctor has intimate knowledge of his patient's needs and carries an understanding of how to relate to them, but he remains a distant clinician trained to identify and treat appropriately. The patient is placed in a vulnerable position with the doctor having all this intimate knowledge of her needs – however some sense of trust is implied that he would consider such sensitive information with professional and ethical care. scubaoke once more echoes a clear division of power between subjects: the one submitting to the study of the other, the other in possession of sensitive and intimate knowledge, the one desperately craving the skilful release of this knowledge into a sexual zenith, and the other achieving his own satisfaction by being able to transform this knowledge into something pleasing.

At the point of pleasure, the power distribution becomes blurred as it now becomes clear that although the subject is initially perceived as the owner of the power and control, he is essentially performing for the pleasure of his partner who is initially perceived as powerless: Should the patient subject present with symptoms of a pleasure deficiency, the doctor is put in quite an awkward and vulnerable position where he may be scored on his performance. As suggested by Foucault (1992), the historical legacy of strict policing of sexual practices in the Victorian era left pleasure as something to be considered (and controlled) through the domain of moral experience. In this manner, pleasure is owned by the "moral" and in it being owned, it is also placed out of reach of the immoral – those who choose to abuse pleasure outside of the prescribed and normative boundaries. In this text it appears as though pleasure has simultaneously been released from its chastise but has also been re-established in a very deliberate manner of control. However, while pleasure is taken

hold of, owned and provided between partners, it is done between “deviant” partners – those who cannot qualify for their ration other than through labelling themselves as “other”.

The importance of knowledge and intellectual consideration in the community as a whole is made evident when taking up a wider lens. *velvetsin9000* explains how she considers the BDSM community to be generally more inclined to value intelligence as well as critical and liberal thinking:

I agree that on average the level of intelligence seems to be higher, although that could also be because of the kind of alternative thinking that is encouraged by being left off centerfield – more critical thinking skills and interest in things beyond cars and sports makes people seem more intelligent, to me at least 😊

Once more the idea is presented that there is something particular to BDSM’ers which relates to a particular valuing of intellectual or knowledge capacities. Both *velvetsin9000* and *scubaoke* place themselves in a position of rejecting normative discourse by suggesting this particular difference. *velvetsin9000* positions herself as different from a very specific group who has interests in only cars and sports and is not interested in alternative or critical thinking. She creates a sense of power over these individuals by suggesting that in order for one to be considered intelligent; one needs to meet certain requirements – once more creating a sense of performance. When inverting this othering, one is presented with a parallel construction of an “us” who values intelligence, knowledge, critical thinking and alternative perspectives. Within the community, a sense of intimacy is created through this construction. The idea of Foucault’s (1972) hierarchical categorisation comes to mind: through disciplinary powers comparisons and differentiations, homogenies and exclusions among individuals and groups are created. In the history of sexuality, this has placed the BDSM participant at the bottom of the hierarchy – to be closely monitored and observed for their deviance. However, here, some of the participants are quite deliberately rejecting a normative discourse by positioning themselves within a group who is more intelligent, critical and open minded. This constructs a subject who accepts a position of deviance, but rejects the placement of this deviance at the bottom of the hierarchy and instead repositions her or himself at the top (figuratively, and literally). This also allows them sacred access to intimacy and knowledge around intimacy which is not reserved for mere “normatives”.

scubaoke highlights this point by referring to “we” – the BDSM community:

We tend to be more involved in intimate knowledge of the partner and his/her likes, dislikes and reactions to stimuli.

scubaoke provides a different clarification for separating “us” and “them” in a construction that equates BDSM with intelligence and knowledge:

Given the risky types of play we engage in, knowledge and trust needs to be established in advance.

Here he touches on trust, which relates closely to the discourse of romantic vulnerability. However, as suggested in that same discourse, trust is an object malleable enough to construct through contracting and, hinted at in this discourse, through intimate knowledge.

Challenging this discourse of knowledge as facilitating intimacy Tiffany Twisted suggests the following:

Often intimacy is an aim, but I am one who loves to learn and experience, so sometimes my aim in the encounter is just to learn. I have been topped a few times purely to have the experience of what it feels like and other times to learn about a specific fetish.

Here, Tiffany Twisted suggests that intimacy is an object one can choose to accept or not. More to this, she also suggests that she would at times decline the experience of intimacy in exchange for an experience of learning and gaining knowledge. This adds a novel level of interaction to the scene: one where a scene (object) can be employed by the participants (subjects) to facilitate either an experience of sexually intimate stimulation *or* one of intellectual stimulation. This relates closely to a study by Langan and Davidson (2010) which suggests that dominant discourse typically assumes that intimacy is a desired aim for sexual experiences, however, Tiffany Twisted describes that her aim at times is instead an intellectual one. What may be important to note here, from the same study by Langan and Davidson (2010) is that dominant discourse also typically does not account for the varied ways in which intimacy may be experienced – providing that this may only take place when specific romanticised elements are present. This does not accommodate an intellectual

intimacy which may (or may not) be experienced in what Tiffany Twisted has described above. This proposes a degree of privileged ownership and control over the object of sexual intimacy. The power dynamic in such a scene is presumably somewhat different as the knowledge from one subject is not transformed in solitude and reintroduced as pleasure, but is purely transferred as knowledge.

She endorses this description more clearly:

What I was trying to get at is that in learning experiences, whether sexual or not, there tends to be very little real intimacy most times, although this isn't always the case.

In summary, this discourse accepts knowledge of a partner's desires, capacities for sexual arousal, limits and specifics of what elicits their arousal as an important doorway to the experience of intimacy. This contradicts normative romantic discourses around intimacy by stripping the experience of intimacy down to being an intellectual, skilful and at times solitary exercise. This discourse draws on masculine images of performance, objectivity, and intimacy as a quest to conquer. The value of knowledge and intellectual capacities are also highlighted in the BDSM community as a way of suggesting superiority over other groups and creating a sense of group intimacy within BDSM circles.

5.4. Soft serve: Intimacy as different from vanilla

The third discourse identified in the text compares BDSM intimacy with vanilla (conventional) intimacy. This discourse suggests that there are significant differences between BDSM and vanilla intimacies. Employing such a discourse of difference functions at times to emphasise and subvert the hierarchy between vanilla and BDSM intimacies and at others to deny that there are any differences between the two positions in the hierarchy. biggerthanu initially describes how there is a real difference between vanilla and BDSM intimacy:

Well, if you're into BDSM then you can't be really intimate with someone who isn't into BDSM.

You have to hide a crucial part of who you are.

biggerthanu refers back to the discourse of romantic vulnerability by explaining that intimacy is not necessarily directly bound (in more ways than one) to the actual BDSM experience, but is instead connected with a sense of being authentic, appealing to a modernist discourse of a coherent, essentialised and “real” self (Butt, Burr, & Bell, 1997; Cox & Lynddon, 1997). While this constructs a romantic sense of revealing one’s true self it also positions both the vanilla and BDSM subject in terms of deficiency – the vanilla subject is not granted access to this intensely intimate revelation and the BDSM subject is left unfulfilled and unaccepted. In this text there is an interesting exchange of the object of intimacy and self-disclosure between subjects: The BDSM subject keeps safe the object by hiding it from the vanilla subject, presumably because there is something ironically dangerous about revealing this “crucial part” to someone who potentially may not understand; the vanilla participant is placed in an inflexible position where the BDSM subject simply “can’t be really intimate” with them. The object is not merely *not* offered, it is actively hidden and withheld. While initially one is struck by a sense of empathy for biggerthanu in his dilemma of utter incompatibility, one may also empathise with the vanilla subject who is left in the dark without intimacy. He later continues to negotiate the possibility of being intimate with a vanilla partner but presents this as a sacrifice:

You can be intimate with a vanilla person, I have been for many years. But there will always be that need to experience something that your vanilla partner can’t join you for. There will always be a form of intimacy that you can’t do together.

Here, biggerthanu refers to the possibility of being intimate with “a vanilla person”. He suggests that, as a BDSM participant, one *can* be intimate in a vanilla interaction but further suggests that there is an experience of being left unfulfilled by such an interaction. Once more, similar to the romantic vulnerability discourse, the idea is presented that there is a particular place which is separate and enchanting in its ability to facilitate intimacy and that this place is simply off limits for vanilla participants. Further to this, biggerthanu hints at the idea that intimacy is something one can “do together”. This implies that intimacy is an activity or something to be performed. It constructs intimacy as something which can be constructed. This makes the object of intimacy a more flexible one, as opposed to something which is handed over as suggested in the knowledge discourse. Such an interaction would

infer that the partners who are involved in this activity each have a role to play and that if this role is not a BDSM one, the activity will essentially fail or be disappointing.

What is subtly implied is the consideration of making this disappointing sacrifice in order to be intimate with a vanilla partner. One must wonder what would justify such a sacrifice. The idea of some sort of superficial acceptance or access to the normative discourse of romance, intimacy and sexuality may enter the transaction. However, in this last text, biggerthanu appears to engage himself in an internal conversation where he initially considers the sacrifice in engaging in vanilla intimacy, but rapidly moves to the idea that there remains an untouched part of himself in such an interaction and a final sense of defeat and finality in the idea that the activity of real intimacy cannot be shared unless all partners involved can contribute from within a BDSM framework.

The idea of vanilla intimacy always leaving a BDSM participant with a sense of lacking, or of something being “missing”, positions BDSM as the absent part which adds to vanilla intimacy its much needed sense of combined synergy. Tiffany Twisted’s statement below resonates with this idea of missing parts:

For a long term relationship I would need someone more into the kinkier side of things though, I was in a long term vanilla marriage for many years but always felt there was something missing, I crave the control aspect of BDSM as well, so although I could be intimate with someone in a vanilla sense, for something sustainable I need the added extra of BDSM.

joliesub similarly expresses:

i can’t say that, in the future, i will not fall in love with a vanilla Girl and enjoy great ‘highs’ with Her. Somehow i think i would slowly introduce Her to my kinky side and, if She enjoys it, i would have the ultimate relationship.

joliesub, who identifies as submissive and makes this quite evident even in his use of capitalisation suggests that he would want to somehow introduce his “kinky side” to a “vanilla Girl” he may be in love with. This need appears to take president over his submission as well as over the romantic privileges he might attain from vanilla girl. He refers to the romantic discourse in suggesting that he might fall in love with a “vanilla Girl” and

suggests that he may struggle to sacrifice his kinky desires for the romantic privileges of being in love with a vanilla girl. He concludes that a fusion of these elements would allow him to “have the ultimate relationship.”

pincushionsa links to this:

However, ultimately I have needed to try and bring BDSM into vanilla relationships, because it is a need of mine. I could not live the rest of my life with a vanilla person, because I would always have that something missing and the fact that they don't satisfy me would lessen the intimacy in the end.

She suggests the possibility of having shorter term intimate interactions with vanilla partners but, similar to joliesub, suggests that in order for a longer term commitment to be satisfying, her partner would have to be able to engage with her BDSM need. In fact, she puts this quite strongly by suggesting that she “could not live the rest of my life with a vanilla person”. pincushionsa adds another element to what may cause the demise of a relationship deficient of BDSM interaction by suggesting that her experience of intimacy is reliant on whether she has been satisfied or not. The pressure to satisfy places a vanilla partner at a considerable disadvantage while simultaneously creating an ironic subject position of submission and servitude - their function being to please. What makes this statement more interesting is that pincushionsa identifies as “mostly submissive”. Even so, a naïve vanilla partner would be positioned as inferior to this because of their inability to successfully satisfy. This highlights the blurring of power distribution between a “mostly submissive” partner, a dominant partner, and a vanilla partner.

She presents this blurred handling of power more obviously by suggesting she would “allow someone the power to control my body and control my arousal”:

For me this can be done with power exchanges and beatings. I allow someone the power to control my body and control my arousal. Example; sex is so much more intimate if I'm tied down and he decided when it stops or what happens.

In allowing someone power, one is essentially in a position of higher power. biggerthanu turns slightly from this and suggests different types of intimacies:

They are different kinds of intimacy, and I reckon that the BDSM intimacy is far more intimate.

While biggerthanu has suggested that a romantic vulnerability, exposure and acceptance of the true self may be at the core of a “real” experience of intimacy within a BDSM interaction, wilder43 suggests that there may be something else at play:

All I can say is that when I am intimate in a vanilla fashion, I always crave for the experience to roll over into a BDSM experience. Therefore I have come to the conclusion that it’s the heightened sensory experience of BDSM that attracts me, and vanilla sex pales in comparison.

wilder43 suggests that the heightened sensory experience is somehow related to an experience of intimacy. Similar to what has been suggested in the knowledge discourse, there is the perception that the body is an instrument to be finely tuned and that this attuned awareness is what can facilitate the experience of intimacy. Surely, in normative sexual interactions the body is also acutely aroused in all its senses, however, in BDSM interactions, there is a deliberate hyper-activation of the senses by introducing pain, a sense of danger and in being tied down, vulnerable and exposed. wilder43 clearly states that “vanilla sex pales in comparison”.

Similarly pincushionsa refers to being “high” from being sexually intimate with a BDSM partner and how this intensifies her experience:

With someone I am in love with a simple kiss can be very intimate. Simple touch feels so much better when I’m a bit high, so it makes anything that happens afterwards a lot more intense, I guess.

There is the suggestion that BDSM intimacy is superior to and ideal in comparison to vanilla intimacy: “BDSM intimacy is far more intimate”, providing a sensory “high” to which “vanilla sex pales in comparison”. Other participants also reflect on BDSM partners being more finely attuned to one another’s experiences and desires. This discourse links with the discourse of knowledge. scubaoke clarifies:

BDSM partners are far more in tune with their partners’ minds and bodies. There is a higher focus on reactions and sensations and that in itself creates a higher sense of intimacy.

On the other hand, the Dom(me) knows his/her sub far more intimately than most vanilla couples know each other.

He continues:

That exposes us to a level of intimate knowledge before we even meet, that vanillas only achieve after extended relationships, if ever. I know my sub's bodies better than any of their vanilla boyfriends ever do and better even than their gynaes. I know how they will react to the slightest stimulus or inflection of voice.

What is reflected in his description is a sense of pride in him having been able to acquire such knowledge about stimulating the body and that this level of knowledge is even out of the grasp of specialists such as gynaecologists and especially "vanilla boyfriends" after "extended relationships, if ever". He simultaneously introduces a clinical sense of intimacy (knowledge discourse) and a sense that the knowledge he has of his partner's body extends past the level of intimacy which could be achieved in an extended relationship (romantic discourse). However, by suggesting this he is also implying the inferiority of "gynaes" and "vanilla boyfriends" and therefore, not only gains power over his partner, but also over those who might have had a similar power over her in another context by making his superiority clear. Here scubaoke reiterates what other participants have suggested - that a heightened sensory experience allows for a heightened intimacy experience.

kindmasterza ties these ideas together elegantly:

I've been in vanilla relationships but, with that person I can never be my full self. A mundane equivalent: If you are not a sports fan and someone takes you to a big game you're still likely to be bored no matter how fantastic the players are.

BDSM allows me to hurt the one I love because I know she loves it. (As crude as this sounds it is, in a big way, the base of being a constructive sadist) The same goes for rope work: Seeing the one I love slowly fall into sub space and the knowledge that I am the one that helped her reach that height is a major aphrodisiac that I wouldn't be able to get with someone who didn't enjoy BDSM.

What is also expressed in his description above is the honed power distribution involved in the activity of intimacy. Similar to what biggerthanu has suggested, each

participant appears to have a specific role to play – kindmasterza is cast as the “constructive sadist” in order for his partner to “slowly fall into sub space”. BDSM allows him to hurt the one he loves because he knows that she loves it. Therefore, if these subjects were not so well matched in their interaction, if for example kindmasterza’s partner did not love him hurting her, the interaction could be interpreted in a vastly different way. kindmasterza may be constructed as a *destructive* sadist and his partner into a victim. However, this delicate balance allows both of them to experience an intensely gratifying experience of sexual intimacy.

pincushionsa challenges the discourse presented up to this point: one which subverts a normative hierarchy of sexual intimacy to position BDSM as the ideal and ultimately quite incompatible with achieving intimacy with a vanilla partner. She describes:

I have had some very intimate vanilla experiences. They have been with people I really loved and connected to. I have had some vanilla sex that really was just sex and some kinky spankings that really were just spankings. Not all my kinky experiences lead to an amazing connection with that person. I think they can both be equally as intense. So maybe it does depend on the person and if you have a great friendship and connection first.

She draws on the romantic vulnerability discourse here by suggesting that intimacy is dependent “on the person and if you have a great friendship and connection first.” However, she also suggests that not all her “kinky experiences lead to an amazing connection with that person”. This shifts BDSM from an ideal position to an alternative position where intimacy may or may not be achieved, just as a vanilla experience may lead to the experience of intimacy or not. She illustrates this point gracefully by suggesting that she has “had some vanilla sex that really was just sex and some kinky spankings that really were just spankings”. Whereas previous discursive constructions of vanilla and BDSM intimacies highlighted the disparate nature of these interactions, this description positions BDSM and vanilla intimacies as being equal in at least their potential of providing an intimate experience. They are suggested as alternatives to one another, rather than as being inferior or superior to one another and what pincushionsa provides as an equaliser is the connection between subjects. The romantic discourse of love and connection is presented once more as the object of

enchantment – something similar to, but separate from and active in the facilitation of intimacy.

scubaoke echoes pincushionsa's sentiments by once more referring to intimacy as a state (or enchanting place) which is separate from the type of sexual engagement:

Yes, intimacy is not limited to either bdsm or vanilla, but rather a state of being where both partners are in tune with each other. The route to intimacy may differ.

This challenge to BDSM as being ideal is continued by Tiffany Twisted:

To me intimacy is intimacy, whether in a vanilla or a BDSM setting.

I enjoy the more sensual aspects of BDSM as well as some of the more 'out there' fetishes, so in a vanilla situation, I focus more on the sensual and this can still make for a satisfactory experience.

Tiffany Twisted, in contrast to what pincushionsa had suggested earlier, places the potential of a satisfactory experience in her own ability to "focus more on the sensual" instead of placing her partner in a position of pressured performance. Similarly, velvetsin9000 denies a discourse of difference and instead positions BDSM and vanilla intimacy as equal:

I tend to throw myself fully into the moment during sexual encounters, whether vanilla or BDSM, and experience a sense of intimacy in either vanilla or BDSM.

In summary, this third discourse relies on the previously discussed discourses of romantic vulnerability and knowledge in its construction of BDSM intimacy as being different from vanilla interactions. Participants expressed a willingness to engage in vanilla encounters but also suggested that this would entail a sacrifice of their needs and is unlikely to sustain a longer term engagement. The romantic vulnerability discourse was drawn on here to depict BDSM as allowing for the revealing and hopeful acceptance of the true self. The knowledge discourse was drawn on to construct intimate knowledge of one's partner as being superior in the case of BDSM interactions as opposed to vanilla interactions. In this manner the normative hierarchy that privileges vanilla forms of sexual intimacy is subverted to privilege BDSM encounters. There were, however, also instances in which participants

rejected such a discourse of difference and instead posited BDSM and vanilla intimacy as equal, drawing instead on a discourse of sameness. This relates closely to a study by Turley (2011) which suggests that, for BDSM identified individuals, intimacy can only be experienced through BDSM interaction. In the current study, it appears as though some participants agreed with this (specifically when considering longer term engagements) but that others did not necessarily limit intimacy within a specific sexual encounter to BDSM related activities.

5.5. (S)he/(s)He: Intimacy according to identification

In the following and final discourse identified, participants constructed a discourse around the experience of intimacy according to their BDSM roles (and by extension the positions of power they played into within an interaction). More subtly they also relied on discourses of gender and personality in allowing subjects an experience of intimacy. This discourse suggests that there are differences in the experience of intimacy, depending on these differences in identification.

velvetsin9000, who identifies as a female, bisexual, polyamorous switch, describes her experience of intimacy in relation to switching between different roles in rich detail:

But I find that my personal experiences of it are incongruous, depending on what role I play. When I Domme (or play sadist for a masochist friend), I constantly have to hold myself in check, being in control and thinking and monitoring, which means that I experience a lessening of immediate intimacy in a sexual encounter, but there is something to be said for feeling someone put themselves into your hands, and gratifying to see the impact it has on them.

Here, velvetsin9000 refers to an inconsistent and perhaps fluid experience of “it” (intimacy) depending on the role she plays. Already in this introduction she presents the reader with an interesting image: one of a theatre piece or game where she is a shape-shifting actress who can play the role which is required of her when it is required of her. This description implies that the role does not define her, but instead that she plays the role as required. Introducing the word “play” suggests a light-hearted and flexible interaction. In identifying as bisexual and a switch, she positions herself as a sort of chameleon, one who owns or surrenders power at will, one who constructs power as ultimately fluid and

malleable in her interaction. In the often deliberate and concrete application of power discrepancies within BDSM, she switches between normative gender roles, between the gender of partners, between BDSM roles, between different positions in relation to the ownership of intimacy, and suggests that this is all within “play”. She initiates a mudslide of the hierarchy. She nonchalantly wriggles out of classification into any rigid, reified notion of normative sexual interaction and instead engages with each of them – as if she were an expert player in a game. However, this would also suggest that she is able to mould into roles which are less fluid than her own.

Her switching between roles suggests a certain freedom from their limits but also suggests that these roles are clearly defined and separate nonetheless. Her freedom therefore lies in her ability to switch between them, thereby accepting each subject position along with its specific objects in turn, but also troubling and rejecting these discourses as perpetual and inflexible by moving between them at will. Essentially, her ability to enter and switch between each of them would entail being an expert in each – knowing the rules and limits of each, knowing how to remain within each of them for as long as required. Most profound and striking of these powers however is her ability to also be able to exit them in exchange for another at any time. She is not bound by any one of the provided discourses but is bound to skip between them. Her identity as switch is theoretically abstract. The discourse does not allow for a full-bodied claimed identity as a switching bisexual woman at any point in time unless she is entirely inactive in any of these discourses – she can only be one in a binary at a time. Being both or more may collapse the entire discourse on itself as it relies on these differentials in order for the game or the play to continue. She adds fluidity to power and intimacy, but is unable to liquidise the roles. *velvetsin9000* continues to describe the rules of each role and their potential implications for intimacy. She fittingly describes her role as a Domme first:

When I Domme (or play sadist for a masochist friend), I constantly have to hold myself in check, being in control and thinking and monitoring, which means that I experience a lessening of immediate intimacy in a sexual encounter...

In this extract, she hints towards the discourse of knowledge in being able to play the part of the Domme or sadist. She refers not only to the obvious control implied in

dominating someone, but also refers to the control and monitoring she needs to exercise in her own thinking. She presents this as some sort of distraction from the experience of “immediate intimacy in a sexual encounter”. This links with the clinical and calculated picture described in the discourse of knowledge. From this position of power she is able to transfer intimacy as a gift but her own attainment of intimacy is frustrated through this exact process. Also similar to the knowledge discourse, she suggests that her gratification comes from elsewhere if not from the immediate experience of intimacy:

...but there is something to be said for feeling someone put themselves into your hands, and gratifying to see the impact it has on them.

Here, the submissive or masochist is the one in power by offering the gift of their control and (to some extent) themselves to the Domme or sadist for their enjoyment. pincushionsa identifies as female, and mostly submissive. She describes a friend who plays a Dominant role in her sexual encounters but also generally in her everyday life. She similarly troubles the clear division of power by suggesting:

So if one of the guys takes over to hit her it is more because he is being told to, than he wants to dominate her.

Here she suggests that her friend essentially dominated “the guys” into dominating her. The complexity between the different roles and consequent subversion of fixed notions of identity and role become clear in velvetsin9000’s description:

BDSM in general is not just D/s for me, and is not a package deal. I know masochists who are not submissive, subs who are not into discipline, Dom(me)s who are not into bondage, etc. Every person is unique in their palate of tastes, and exploring where the overlap lies is some of the most fun (and stressful) parts of a new relationship.

She later discerns her experience as a Dom(me) from being a sub:

When I sub, I feel a heightened intimacy as I am vulnerable and place myself in my partner’s hands, being able to let go and let him direct the encounter, my world shrinks down to just my partner, just the sensation, just his or her needs. It’s like a spell. If used responsibly by the Dom(me), I feel a connection to them that feels very profound.

Interestingly, in employing the knowledge discourse when describing her experience as a Dom(me), she now makes use of the romantic vulnerability discourse when describing her role as a sub. She also refers to the place of enchantment which is “like a spell”, allowing her to focus purely on her own sensations and her partner’s needs. This connects with a larger normative idea around knowledge as being superior in its objectivity to the subjectivity of emotional bantering. It begs the question, does the dominant subject gain their power from their claim to knowledge and does the submissive subject become submissive through their emotional vulnerability? It appears as though there is something more deliberate at play in the suggestion that velvetsin9000 is in a position to “place” herself into her partner’s hands. Once more, as suggested in all of the previous discourses, the distribution, ownership, transference and allowance of power is always in a delicately complex balance between subjects. This resonates with Foucault’s (1972) description of power as existing within discourses. It appears that intimacy may linger within the subtleties of this balance between subjects. kindmasterza links to this:

Saskia, the act of inflicting pain upon another for my enjoyment is sadistic, the fact that the one I am with enjoys having said pain inflicted upon them means they are masochistic, it doesn’t change the act of sadism, it just means it is a beautiful symbiotic experience between two consenting people.

He suggests a symbiosis - the reliance on mutual participation and in some way a stripping of power in order for each subject to gain the objects they require.

vanrensburgcandice responds to kindmasterza’s post:

Beautiful explanation kindmasterza, the only difference is i am not a masochist but both my previous Masters were sadists so i understand it very clearly, but as You know Your partner enjoys the pain, they knew that my pleasure came from pleasing them, not the actual pain but from the pure surrender and when i cried the tears were real and heart felt and that only made them love me more....

Her description emulates a more rigid distribution of power. She addresses kindmasterza in a capitalised manner as she does with her “previous Masters”. She positions herself in a submissive role even here (while challenging him) by referring to herself in the

lowercase. She describes her full submission and “pure surrender” to her Master’s need to inflict pain and describes how her “pleasure came from pleasing them, not the actual pain”. This mimics vaguely the suggestion that a Dom(me) gains their pleasure from pleasing the sub. However, in their mutual consent of their interaction, she is essentially not submitting, but lending her power to her Master as the entire interaction, the entire discourse as well as her Master’s pleasure relies equally as much on her submission as it does on his domination.

scubaoke (who identifies as a male switch, mostly Dominant and sadistic) suggests that intimacy is shared between these roles:

No, it is shared, but from a different perspective. For the Dom it comes from the trust he experiences and for the sub, the attention she gets.

scubaoke also introduces another role variation in this excerpt: gender. He refers to both BDSM roles in a way that creates an automatic synthesis between gender and BDSM role: Dom being (implied to be) male and sub female. In fact, the Dom is presented in a somewhat heroic fashion in that he has somehow won the damsel’s trust while the female is presented somewhat histrionically or narcissistically in craving attention, wanting the entire spotlight. He presents a three-dimensional perspective on power by introducing BDSM role discourses, linking them with normative gender discourses and providing the subtle linguistics to fixate the scene.

scubaoke further describes:

Yes, the sub experiences intimacy more directly, while the Dom(me) is a bit more removed.

The sub is more dependent and on the receiving end of intimacy.

Here he suggests a dynamic of an objectively distanced Dom in relation to a dependent submissive character on the counterbalance and suggests that this is the balance which facilitates direct intimacy for the sub. He does not make mention of how the experience of intimacy is distributed more directly to the sub, but pincushionsa suggests:

I don’t have that much experience as the top but I know they speak of a “high” from having power over someone. That all sounds well and good, but I know I can go flying at times. So I think the bottom gets the more intense experience.

Here she reclaims intimacy as something the bottom (sub) “gets” and allows her to “go flying at times.” She goes as far to place herself in a position of superior pleasure over the dominant subject by suggesting that their experience of “power over someone” “all sounds well and good, *but...*” and continues to describe how “the bottom gets the more intense experience”. It presents a picture of a mechanical dominant character who is allowed whatever they gain from fulfilling a specific task but is ultimately there to provide the sub/bottom subject with the object of an intensely intimate and pleasing experience. Tiffany Twisted, who identifies as a female Domme, denotes a similar gender role differentiation:

I’ve been topped before and can testify that the level of intimacy feels deeper in a submissive role for me even though this isn’t the role I prefer. Although I do find most male subs can disassociate themselves from the intimacy of the situation easier than I can, but I think this is more a gender related thing than a role thing.

Tiffany Twisted eliminates the possibility of dissociation being implicated in playing a submissive role by suggesting that it is “more a gender related thing”. She further implies that she may be more able to experience a deeper level of intimacy in a submissive role even though this is not the role she prefers purely because she is female. This necessitates a specific character in order to experience this “level of intimacy” which “feels deeper”: a submissive female. This makes a claim on female identity as being more romantically and emotionally vulnerable since they are less able to dissociate – making them obvious candidates for a submissive role as well as the receptacle of intimacy. Furthermore, she implies that intimacy may be something one wants to dissociate from since it is something more easily escaped by males than females. Perhaps this links with the idea that in order to be dominant, one ought to be (if not male), at least normatively masculine: knowledgeable, able to perform to satisfaction and able to resist and dissociate from intimacy. *pincushionsa* challenges the notion of an automatic fusion between gender and BDSM roles by “mismatching” them:

Okay, as I have always understood things, a Dominate is someone who fits well in the leadership position, which is their personality type. They are good at taking charge and organizing things. I have a friend or two who very much are like that, they organize their husbands tell him to make tea, tell them how the chores in the house are going to be shared

out. And these men are more submissive and happy to have someone else take charge of that.

In this description she attaches BDSM role definition to personality traits rather than gender roles by suggesting that “a Dominate is someone who fits well in the leadership position, that is their personality type.” She emphasises this by contaminating the clear gender/BDSM role fusion by placing a female in the “leadership position” because it is her “personality type”. Specific to the submissive subject is the experience of subspace. *velvetsin9000* elaborates:

I guess it sort of is like an “out of body” experience, as during subspace, I feel very far away and almost disconnected from my body and surroundings. I am still aware of my body and surroundings, but it seems like someone else, and like the sensations of the current play experience are the only links you have back to that body.

Everyone seems to have a slightly different take on what subspace is, and how it makes them feel, but the common thread seems to be zoning out into a different “headspace”, and having a powerful (and spiritual in some ways) meditative experience.

What she presents here seems to be some sort of hyper-focus which could be paralleled with “a powerful (and spiritual in some ways) meditative experience”. While this experience seems solitary, it is also presented as an intimacy with the self. An interesting process can be identified: intimacy is originally owned by the Dominant subject, handed over to the submissive subject in a complex transaction of power transfers and the submissive subject is left in subspace – having an intimate experience with himself/herself. The Dominant partner experiences a sense of gratification in successfully delivering the gift of intimacy to the submissive partner.

In summary, this final discourse was concerned with the different roles participants identify with and how these enable them or disallow them to experience a sense of intimacy. Participants drew on discourses within the BDSM frame in constructing their experiences but also drew on discourses around personality and gender in expressing their experiences of intimacy. One of the participants challenged the seeming rigidity of these discourses by identifying as a switch – suggesting the possibility of moving between these roles at will.

However, it also appears as though these roles remain in their specific definitions and are not flexible in themselves. Some participants suggested typical features an individual needs in order to have an immediate experience of intimacy. These features related to being female, submissive and emotional. What participants also implied subtly was that there is a necessary and somewhat symbiotic interplay between the different roles in order for the scene to be successful. This mutual reliance acts to uphold the discourse of what allows for intimacy and sexual pleasure to develop within a BDSM interaction. Interestingly, this mutual reliance also subtly blurs the boundaries of control and power between participants.

5.6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered the findings within four discourses. The first discourse drew on a sense of romantic vulnerability which suggests that in order for participants to be able to experience a sense of intimacy, trust and care needs to be present between participants. Participants indirectly supported a normative discourse around being able to be one's true, defenceless and exposed self in order to be able to experience a sense of intimacy. However, participants also resisted a normative discourse of love and instead emphasised specific aspects of interaction which allowed for the experience of being within a charmed "place" allowing for intimacy to be present.

The second discourse, in contrast to the first, was a discourse of knowledge. This discourse suggested the importance of knowledge about a partner's needs, desires and points of sexual arousal in allowing for the experience of intimacy. Through the discourse of knowledge participants also suggested a clinical approach in the giving of intimacy - being able to know the body and play it with the expertise one would expect from a master musician playing their musical instrument. This constructed an image of intimacy as an object which can be handed over or achieved instead of necessarily shared and made evident the possible differences in the experience of intimacy between different roles within the interaction. Participants also drew on a knowledge discourse in constructing a sense of intimacy within the BDSM community by suggesting superiority over other groups in them being more intelligent, critical and open to novel experiences.

The third discourse identified in participant responses drew on both the romantic vulnerability and knowledge discourses in constructing BDSM as different from vanilla interactions. Participants expressed their willingness to engage in short term interactions with a vanilla partner but also expressed their reluctance and sense of sacrifice in considering a longer term engagement with a vanilla partner. This discourse rested on the need to be accepted fully and as a true self, but also relied on a discourse of superiority both in the familiarity and knowledge needed to satisfy a BDSM identified individual as well as the sensory “high” which is unique to the BDSM experience. This discourse excludes and undermines a normative and conventional discourse around the privileges in access to intimacy.

The final discourse identified was one of difference in the experience of intimacy based on the different roles each participant was able to assume. One participant challenged the rigidity of these roles by identifying as a bisexual switch who is able to move between typical gender and BDSM roles at will. Discussion around the different roles participants assume in BDSM interactions ironically also pointed to the blurring of dominance and power between participants as well as the mutual reliance of each participant in allowing the scene to be successful and pleasing to all parties involved.

I now turn to my final chapter to conclude the discussion. In this chapter I reconsider my research question, consider the implications of my findings in a general sense as well as within the framework of psychology. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this study and suggest recommendations for future work in this field.

Chapter 6:

End scene: Concluding discussion

6.1. Introduction

The research question was concerned with exploring self-constructed meanings of sexual intimacy in the context of BDSM encounters, as described by BDSM practitioners in their online accounts. Specific objectives in support of addressing this research question included the following:

- Exploring how BDSM practitioners construct meaning around sexual intimacy in their online accounts
- Exploring how these constructions may differ and depend on the specific role a BDSM participant might be in
- Providing a critical view on constructions of intimacy within mainstream definitions through the lens of BDSM experiences
- Contributing to the deficient body of knowledge on BDSM sexual intimacy in South Africa

In addressing these objectives I made use of a Foucauldian discourse analysis which is typically employed to trace the different ways in which a topic (such as sexuality or intimacy) is constructed in particular contexts through language (Gavey, 1997; Willig, 2008). In the process of addressing these questions, I identified four discourses around sexual intimacy in participant responses – the implications of which I will now discuss.

6.2. Implications of the findings

As discussed in chapter 3, poststructuralist theory informed by a Foucauldian conceptualisation of discourse and power is concerned with identifying the ways in which language is used to construct and restrict certain versions of reality (Foucault, 1972). It also allows for an exploration of the implications of these constructions for subjectivity and practice as well as identifying instances of resistance to dominant discourses. Therefore, in deconstructing constructions of intimacy in BDSM experiences I was mindful of what was being languaged in terms of subjectivity and power and how these expressions contributed

to resisting or supporting normative, conventional or dominant discourses around sexual intimacy.

Although various “micro” discourses could be identified throughout participants’ discussions, some discourses appeared to seep through many of the discussions. While doing the study, I attempted to simultaneously hold the ideas that BDSM is generally considered taboo as well as that some of the findings could just as well have been written in a paper on normative sexual intimacy. This led me to question to what extent participants’ responses troubled dominant discourses of gender, sexuality and sexual intimacy? Some instances could be identified in which participants’ accounts reflected a sense of agency and resistance to the typical subject positions of dominant discourses while others suggested compliance with normative constructions. In the discussion that follows I will first identify some of the instances in which participants appeared to be compliant to dominant discourses.

In BDSM interactions, scenes are typically contracted, planned and played out based on an overt and deliberate discernment in which the participant is (at least for the duration of the scene) the owner of power, control and dominance. However, this deliberate expression may also be considered an amplification of similar (but more subdued) power dynamics in any sexual interaction. In necessitating this power play, roles within the discourse of BDSM become rigid and fixed. The interaction in being labelled “BDSM” depends on the presence of a Dom(me) and sub or sadist and masochist. Without such clear role definitions the BDSM discourse collapses and the scene becomes compliant with a discourse of normative sexual interaction.

A further compliance to normative discourse is the introduction of the romantic vulnerability discourse as a prerequisite in the possible experience of intimacy. This suggests that in order for BDSM participants to experience a sense of sexual intimacy all parties involved must offer of themselves a vulnerable, exposed, undefended, authentic self and that this self needs to be accepted by the partner in power. In other words, one is struck by a sense of irony in contrasting the deliberate infliction of pain and/or humiliation with a romantic discourse of tenderness, care and affectionate acceptance. While the split between these two discourses are likely to be only as clear cut on paper, it implies that the experience

of intimacy remains within the boundaries of normative and conventional expressions of care and sensitive vulnerability.

The discourse of romantic (and to some extent emotional) vulnerability ties with another discourse of compliance: The discourse relating to role definitions in allowing disparate experiences of intimacy. Some participants suggested that there is a specific type of individual who is more able to experience the immediacy of the intimacy between partners. This individual is typically sketched as female, emotional (and unable to dissociate from experiences) and submissive. The dominant subject is sketched in a somewhat heroic and masculine fashion in intelligently conquering the challenge of providing the submissive subject with a pleasing experience of intimacy. This constructs the dominant subject in a somewhat rigid manner in relation to his power through knowledge and traditional masculinity, and the submissive subject equally so because of her emotionality and (traditional) femininity. This complies with a Western gendered discourse which values knowledge, traditionally masculine features of competition, drive and dominance and subverts emotionality and what has been normatively associated with femininity (Noar & Morokoff, 2007). In the suggestion that there is a logical link between identifying as female, femininity, emotionality and submission and suggesting that these are the individuals privileged to have access to intimacy, there remains a compliance to dominant gendered discourse that male or masculine figures are the providers of such pleasure and do not have a role in receiving such a vulnerable object of intimacy. This necessitates that one (the subject in need of such pleasure and intimacy) is in a state of emotionality, femininity, and vulnerability and that the other subject (the providing subject) is masculine, rational, calculating, driven and in control. In the subtleties of language one may even consider it interesting that there are gender distinctive pronouns for dominant individuals (Dom vs Domme) but no such distinction for submissive persons. It is assumed that the sub will be a certain individual, but a distinction needs to be made if the dominant participant is not male. The sub is genderless – or female.

I will now turn to some of the instances in which participants appeared to resist normative constructions of gender, sexuality and sexual intimacy to reflect a sense of agency. A first instance identifiable in the text may appear insignificant at first glance but in

its stealth it emphasises its efficacy in resisting dominant discourses around sexually positioned subjects. One of the participants, in identifying as a bisexual, polyamorous switch female subtly described her ability to leap between BDSM and gender roles. While her ability to do this relies on the clear definition of these roles, the knowledge and expertise in playing each of them at will, the implication of her being able to switch between them, to not only be able to enter them, but also exit them at will suggests a troubling of the fixedness and rigidity associated with such well-defined subject positions. Through her self-identification she introduces a sense of flexibility in each interaction – playing the part required – and by extension insinuates that intimacy and power are both objects, essentially malleable props in the interaction.

Similar to how this participant's mere presence and self-identification troubles dominant discourse, BDSM practitioners do so regardless of whether they claim "other" intimacy or normative intimacy. In the claiming or experiencing of "immoral" intimacy (hereby linking with Foucault's (1979) idea that sexual pleasure is owned by the moral) there is a challenge to the singularity and the necessity for seemingly conventionally perfect conditions for the birth of intimacy to take place. However, in claiming the presence of a romantic vulnerability discourse within a BDSM frame, there is another, more subtle challenge which contaminates the attempted purity of heteronormative sexual intimacy - it suggests that these perfect conditions are in fact, not perfect. It permits access to all the "deviants" to experience all the intimacy they want, and removes the veil from the intimate reward for conventionality. Further to this, while the deliberate and overt expression and discernment of power dynamics within a BDSM frame may amplify normative sexual dynamics, in its deliberate application it also potentially becomes something applied rather than an invisible and vaporous, pervasive, omnipresent discourse. It becomes a role to play for the duration of a scene. While in some ways amplifying normative subject positions, there is also an element of satire and parody in its deliberate application. This relates closely to Butler's (1990) theory of subversion where regulative discourses are "troubled" by means of showing their reliance on marginal terms.

A clue to this satire on finer consideration reveals that these deliberate roles are based on a mutual reliance - a mutual reliance which acts as a subtle equaliser to the seemingly

rigid power distribution. Several participants suggested that while the sub is dependent on the Dom(me) for the experience of pleasure and sexual intimacy, the Dom(me) is equally dependent for their experience of pleasure and achievement in being able to provide adequately. Without the one, the other evaporates. There appears to be a turn from the ownership of power and the lack of power to rather suggesting a lending of power between practitioners in different roles for the duration of the scene. The entire discourse relies equally on submission and dominance which ironically constructs both roles as fluid in the symbiosis, the mutual participation which in some ways strips the interaction of power in order for each subject to gain the objects they require.

A meta-discourse which appears to be present in a number of discourses is one of marginality and interpreting this as difference or sameness. This discourse typically assists its members in dealing with the difficulties of otherness and in gaining a sense of power over the normative group and also appears in other marginalised groups – specifically in race and gender discourses (Clarke, 2002; Williams, 1991). For example, a difference discourse is employed to suggest that it is precisely in their being different that they are superior to the dominant group – essentially attempting to invert the hierarchy. A sameness discourse may be employed as a way of gaining access to the privileges of the normative group – a denial of difference.

In the current study it appeared as though participants were drawing more on a discourse of difference from normative, conventional or vanilla groups. Participants suggested that BDSM practitioners are typically less naïve, more critical in their thinking, more willing to risk new experiences, and more intelligent. While these suggestions were more general, some participants also suggested that there is something magical or enchanted/enchanting about BDSM experiences. This was drawn from the romantic vulnerability discourse – suggesting that the experience of trust is more intense in a BDSM interaction and that elements of trust, care and authenticity allow for a specific “place” where intimacy may develop. Participants also drew from the discourse of knowledge to establish difference in sexual interaction by suggesting that Dom(me) practitioners have such expert experience with and knowledge about their partner(s)’s bodies, needs, desires and points of sexual arousal, that it far surpasses what their gynaecologists or long term

vanilla partners may ever grasp. These attempts at gaining the upper hand over dominant discourses allows the marginalised a sense of agency and subversion in relation to such discourses, but also acts to recreate discourses of power imbalance by suggesting a superior marginalised instead of a superior dominant.

From the findings some of the implications for psychology may be related not only to the specifics of the discipline, but relates to larger discourses and the implicit norms around gender, gendered interactions, sexuality, relationships and intimacy. Echoing my previous discussion on the circular nature of the societal and psychological influence, psychology and psychiatry as ethical endeavours in the wellbeing of all persons are also influential in the construction of these broader (and at times marginalising discourses) around sexuality and intimacy. Therefore, a more inclusive, dynamic and dimensional understanding of human intimacy and vulnerability is vital. The discourses identified in participants' responses subtly but firmly challenge these discourses.

According to Hoff and Spratt (2009) BDSM clients at times feel abused at the hands of mental health professionals. Nichols (2011) provides several useful guidelines for working with patients who identify with BDSM. Some of these include attempting to relate with the patient's desires by understanding them within one's own frame of reference (as discussed, that most people enjoy some of the basic elements which may be involved in BDSM), not forcing the topic of BDSM if it is not the need of the patient to discuss it, and to clinically judge whether the interaction is safe, sane and consensual. However, useful as these guidelines may be, the position taken up in this article appears to be one of assuming that therapists themselves generally assign to a vanilla discourse of sexuality and are fundamentally sceptical and tentative about the patient's desires. It goes without saying that therapists need to be vigilant of non-consensual acts with any patient, regardless of their sexual interests, and that "safe, sane and consensual" are probably as much keywords for therapy as they are for BDSM. A hyper vigilance with BDSM patients may echo remaining underlying prejudice and misconception.

My aim with this study has not been to depathologise BDSM interaction – largely because such an endeavour would position me to assume the presence of pathology to depathologise. On the other hand, however, there is a need to acknowledge the limited

views in the discipline of psychology which restrict the range of positions patients are able to take up in sexual, relational and gender discourse without being marked as deviant. Although some elements of sexual intimacy in BDSM practice coincide with normative experiences of sexual intimacy (such as trust, authenticity and care), the “requirements” demanded by a heteronormative gold standards for intimacy to occur become obsolete (Jamieson, 1999). The dogmatic implication of anything additional to what has been expressed as complex, yet basic elements, become more discernible when the experience of intense sexual intimacy is experienced outside of the heteronormative requirements. For psychology to uphold these heteronormative gold standards of monogamy, gender role compliance and sexual and intimate preferences is a violence committed against those whose experiences do not fit these rigid moulds. The pain and rejection felt by outliers is precisely the material of therapeutic work – to continually contribute to the maintenance of such a system would be considerably unethical. Therefore, I hope that the findings in this study will initiate conversations around these limitations. Ultimately, my hope is for psychology (both academically and in practice) to not only allow for difference but to also celebrate that the validation of difference contributes to the uncovering of alternative and additional options available in the exploration of the manner in which people relate with one another, of sexuality, pleasure and intimacy. My hope is also for the comprehension of the artificiality in the distance typically constructed between vanilla and BDSM intimacies and for an accompanying recognition of sameness.

6.1. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Some limitations to the study can be noted, particularly in how they might inform future research related to BDSM sexualities. This study focused on an online context of meaning-making. It would, however, be interesting to explore the same research topic in offline settings. Chalaby (2002) notes that virtual spaces are well suited to studying the struggle for rights and legitimacy as advanced by marginal groups. Referring to sexual minorities who use virtual settings as “an alternative public sphere” it is argued that online settings facilitate two central processes of community-building: that of self-definition and political mobilisation (Chalaby, 2002, p. 1). In this manner, online communities gain a sense of coherence and along with that, shared systems of meaning. It is possible that these processes take different forms with different implications for how sexual intimacy is

constructed among participants when focusing on BDSM practitioners who are not active online and thus do not form part of an online community.

A second limitation of the current study is that, due to relying on a Foucauldian approach to conducting discourse analysis, I did not focus on the micro-features of text as would be appropriate when conducting a discursive analysis. I was instead interested in a broader description of the discursive resources available to participants, their consequences for subjectivity and practice and their relationship to wider social and institutional structures (Willig, 2008). A limitation of such an approach to analysis is that, although included to some extent in this study, agency remains largely untheorised. Discursive psychology attends to individual agency to a greater extent than Foucauldian discourse analysis and it will therefore be valuable to explore the discursive strategies used by BDSM practitioners to “manufacture, negotiate and deploy” different versions of events using such an approach (Willig, 2008, p. 108).

6.2. Conclusion

In this final chapter I re-considered my initial research question and objectives and the process of addressing those objectives. I discussed some of the general discursive implications of the findings in sexuality, gender, gendered interaction and sexual intimacy discourses and also considered possible implications for the field of psychology. I have presented some of my personal journey during the process of the study and suggested possible limitations of the current study as well as recommendations for future study. In this study I wanted to contribute to the broadening of possibilities in sexuality, intimacy, gender and sex. I quote Butler (2001):

Politically it is important that people ask the question 'what is possible' and believe in possibility. Because without the motion of possibility there is no motion forward. The idea that people might live their gender in a different way, or they might live their sexuality in a different way, that there might be room for a liveable sustainable pleasurable happy politically informed life out of the closet.

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Appendix A: Online Discussion and Interview Guide

Introduction:

1. Introduction of study and research process
2. Clarification of ethical aspects such as confidentiality, sensitivity to participant experiences, anonymity, secure storing of data, limits of data use and right to withdraw at any stage of the process.
3. Accentuation of participants' inclusion in the entire process, allowing for contributions throughout.
4. Asking for any questions the participants might have

Preliminary questions and main themes for discussion:

1. Introductory questions around their own roles and preferences.
2. Intimacy
 - a. How do you understand intimacy?
 - b. How do you understand sexual intimacy?
 - c. Have you experienced a sense of intimacy in your BDSM encounters? If so, please explain?
 - d. Is intimacy an aim for you in BDSM encounters? Why/why not?
 - e. Do you think there are differences in intimacy experiences according to your s/M role?
 - f. How do you think intimacy might be viewed differently/in the same way as how it is viewed in vanilla sex/society in general?
3. Subspace
 - a. How do you understand or create meaning out of subspace experiences?
 - b. Please describe your experiences with subspace.
 - c. How do you think subspace might be related/not related to experiences of intimacy?

- d. What are your experiences with intimacy in terms of subspace?
4. The taboo connotation
 - a. What is your opinion on the broader acceptance of BDSM in popular circles and in the media (television, films, pornography, magazines, books, etc.)?
 - b. Why do you think so many people see BDSM as pushing the boundaries of what is accepted?
 - c. Have you experienced prejudice or stigmatisation because of your BDSM preferences?
 - d. What are your experiences of solidarity in the BDSM community?
 - e. Do you think intimacy experiences might be influenced by how BDSM is seen in general?

Appendix B: Informed Consent



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Department of Psychology

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Submitting to the discipline of sexual intimacy: Online constructions of BDSM encounters

How do BDSM identified participants construct their experiences of sexual intimacy online?

Dear Participant

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research study. The purpose of this study is to explore ideas around the experience of intimacy in BDSM encounters.

Your participation in this project involves participating in online discussion groups I will facilitate as well as individual online interviews. If an appropriate online forum is not available, I will create one specifically dedicated to this study.

Please be assured that any experiences you share with me will be treated with the utmost respect, sensitivity, confidentiality and professionalism. All your identifying information will remain anonymous and I would like for you to provide me with a pseudonym (alias) which I may use to refer to your specific experiences in the documentation of this research study. This will also insure your anonymity to the other participants in online discussions. After you have signed this form, any identifying information will be kept confidential.

To the best of my knowledge, there are no actual or potential risks involved as a result of your participation in this study. Please also be informed that there is no financial incentive

for participating in this study and any potential benefits from this study are likely to be personal (as a result of sharing your story and exploring your own thoughts or reflecting on the ideas of other participants in discussion groups). Your participation is entirely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw all contributions from the study at any time without any consequences to you.

The research documented in this study will be made public through publication in dissertation form, through academic article(s) as well as in conference presentation(s). I would also welcome the opportunity, should you be interested, to share the final report with you before making it public. All documentation will be stored for a period of 15 years in a secure location at the University of Pretoria, for archiving and research purposes.

Please feel free to contact me with any further questions regarding the study.

Your signature below indicates that you have been fully informed of the nature of this research, what your participation involves, that you are at least 18 years of age, of sound mind and agree voluntarily to participate in this study as indicated above.

.....

Participant (Full names or pseudonym)

Signature

Date

.....

Researcher (Full names)

Signature

Date

Yours sincerely,

Saskia Wolfaardt