

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In BDSM, terminology matters. The community recognizes itself—its practices, its desires—in and through a shared, yet contested, language. In this note, I do not attempt to pin down this complex and proliferating terminology with formalized definitions, but rather to give the reader a few conceptual signposts—some bearings—within the shifting discursive field that constitutes contemporary BDSM.

The terms *SM* and *BDSM* are used interchangeably to denote a diverse community that includes aficionados of bondage, domination/submission, pain or sensation play, power exchange, leathersex, role-playing, and fetishes. The community embraces a wide range of practices, relationship types, and roles, ranging from the more common (for instance, rope bondage or flogging) to the less so (playing with incest themes or playing at being a pony), yet all of these variations fit under the umbrella term *BDSM*.

BDSM is of relatively recent (and, many suggest, Internet) coinage. It is an amalgamation of three acronyms: *B&D* (bondage and discipline), *D/s* (domination/submission), and *SM* (somasochism). The use of *SM* (sometimes *S/M* or *S&M*) as the inclusive term predates *BDSM*, but *BDSM* is fast becoming the acronym of choice, especially in the *pan-sexual* community—the mixed *BDSM* community, made up of practitioners of various gender and sexual orientations. *Leather*, on the other

hand, is used most often in gay and, in some cases, lesbian SM communities to describe an SM community that includes leather fetishism and motorcycle clubs (see also Kamel 1995; Rubin 1997). Some practitioners use the acronym *WIITWD* (for “what it is that we do”) to encompass the entirety of BDSM practices; another inclusive linguistic term for the community and its practices and practitioners is *kinky* (with its opposite, *vanilla*). The community is also called *the scene*, which refers to a network of BDSM-oriented people, organizations, meeting places, dungeons, web pages, e-mail lists, conferences, and so forth. The scene is differentiated from *a scene*, which refers to a particular BDSM encounter. The SM scene stresses the modern mantra of BDSM: all BDSM practices should be *SSC* (for “safe, sane, and consensual”). BDSM practices are often called *play*, where play refers to any particular BDSM scene (“Jon and I played last night”), as well as to general categories of BDSM activities (“Sara is really into hot wax play”). BDSM gatherings that feature designated play areas are called *play parties*.

B&D, *D/s*, and *SM* each have their own linguistic histories. The *B* in *B&D* refers to *bondage*. Bondage has become an ever-more specialized technique—a highly technical, even transnational, practice. A recent craze for “Japanese rope bondage” (sometimes called *shibari*), an elaborate, aestheticized form of bondage, is one example of this emphasis on new techniques. Practitioners specialize in rope harnesses, suspension bondage, bondage on a budget, leather bondage, encasement bondage, and more. Classes, books, and workshops by San Francisco Bay Area experts have proliferated, and bondage remains a typical sight at play parties and events. The *D* refers to *discipline* or spanking, an outgrowth of the mostly heterosexual fetish-bondage-spanking communities that blossomed in the 1950s in the United States and Europe (Bienvenu II 1998). In many parts of the United States, the spanking community is separate from the BDSM community, and many spanking devotees do not identify with the SM community or its practices. Meanwhile, many SM practitioners view spanking as “SM lite,” a sort of beginner activity. Spanking communities tend to be interested in formal discipline; practitioners are often heterosexual and married; and scenes involve minimal toys, clothes, or other SM paraphernalia, which is one reason it is considered “beginner” by some in the SM scene. At the same time, however, spanking, discipline, punishment, and caning—all classics of *B&D*—are also very common forms of BDSM play.

D/s, for *domination* and *submission*, refers to the explicit exchange of power. The phrase *power exchange* emphasizes that *D/s* relationships are explicitly about power (more than sensation, pain, or role play, for example), but also that they are an exchange: although dominant and submissive roles may be relatively stable, power is understood to be mobile, shared, or routed between practitioners during play (see also Langdridge and Butt 2005). *D/s* practices range from long-term, live-in *M/s* (*Master* or *Mistress* and *slave*) situations (where one has “ownership” of another in a variety of ways, sometimes including formal contracts of service) to short-term scenes between play partners (for example, a scene where a “naughty schoolgirl” has to write “I will not touch myself” on a chalk board, or a submissive must stand perfectly still while being tickled by his dominant). *D/s* practices might be a component of a scene or an overarching relationship structure; more specialized power exchanges include the collared slave who organizes her Master’s business schedule, the submissive who gratefully cleans his Mistress’s home, and the slave who is an always-available demonstration model for his *prodomme* wife’s SM classes (*prodomme* is a contraction of “professional dominant,” a term, like *dominatrix*, used to describe women who work as paid dominants. Men in this profession are called *prodoms*). These scenes and relationships are primarily about symbolic power; they may or may not involve physical contact or sensation.

D/s dynamics—the consensual exchange of power—are, as many argue, the foundation of *BDSM* play. As the sociologists Thomas Weinberg and G. W. Levi Kamel write, contrary to mainstream perception, “much S&M involves very little pain. Rather, many sadomasochists prefer acts such as verbal humiliation or abuse, cross-dressing, being tied up (bondage), mild spankings where no severe discomfort is involved, and the like. Often, it is the notion of being helpless and subject to the will of another that is sexually titillating . . . At the very core of sadomasochism is not pain but the idea of control—dominance and submission” (1995, 19). Practitioners and other SM researchers agree that sexual control, power exchange, or what Pat (now Patrick) Califia calls “the power dichotomy” or “imbalance” between partners is central to all *BDSM* (1994, 162; see also Alison et al. 2001; Langdridge and Barker 2007; Taylor and Ussher 2001).

In the community, *SM* has a double meaning: it can be used like *BDSM* to refer to the entire scene, and it can also be used comparatively,

to refer to more explicitly physical or bodily practices, also called *sensation play* or *pain play*. Sensation play can range from very mild (being rubbed with a rabbit fur glove) to very intense (being struck with a single-tail whip). *Pain*, here, is a tricky word; basic to the dictionary definition of pain is its aversiveness, and thus no one who enjoys these activities would describe them as “painful” in this sense. In the scene, practitioners differentiate between “good pain” in SM and “bad pain,” like stubbing your toe. They also use analogies to describe these sensations: the feeling that results from a flogging is like the relaxation of a deep tissue massage, the high of eating spicy food, or the cognitive release of meditation. Common examples of SM sensation play include flogging, caning, whipping, cutting, and temperature play. Most BDSM practitioners engage in some bondage, some sensation play, and some power play.

Although the term *sadomasochism* and the acronym *S&M* are more common in mainstream usage, within the scene, practitioners tend to use *SM* (and, less often, *S/M*). This points to the ways contemporary practitioners position themselves vis-à-vis the pathologization of sadomasochism in sexology, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry. Coined in 1890 by the sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing and popularized in successive editions of his *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the terms *sadism* (“the desire to cause pain and use force”) and *masochism* (“the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force”) were classed as paraphilias, or sexual perversions ([1886] 1999, 119). Krafft-Ebing included “lust murder,” the dismemberment of corpses, and what we would now call marital rape as examples of sadism; he linked masochism with flagellation, abuse, foot and shoe fetishism, and various “disgusting acts” (such as smelling “sweaty slippers” or eating excrement). This late-nineteenth-century definition remains remarkably current; the latest version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the standard diagnostic guide for mental health practitioners, defines “sexual sadism” and “sexual masochism” as psychopathological paraphilias, in which individuals “use sexual fantasies, urges, or behaviors involving infliction of pain, suffering or humiliation to enhance or achieve sexual excitement” (American Psychiatric Association 2000).¹ This history—and contemporary reality—of pathologization is why practitioners today tend to use *SM* and not *sadomasochism*: *sadomasochism* embeds the eroticization of pain

within a psychiatric model of pathology, whereas contemporary practitioners understand their SM to be about mutual pleasure and power exchange.

Practitioners are also less inclined to use *S&M*. As the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF; an advocacy group that serves BDSM and related communities) advises, if you are talking to the press about BDSM, “try to get the reporter to write SM, not S&M—that evokes the old stereotypes and we are trying to get around that. S&M stands for sadism & masochism while SM stands for sadomasochism; inherent in the word is the mutual necessity for both as well as the consent involved.”² In this logic, *S&M* deemphasizes the relationality of SM power exchange; similarly, *S/M* still separates sadism and masochism (although it is preferred by some who see it standing for “slave/Master”). And, although theorists after Krafft-Ebing have debated whether sadomasochism ought to be considered a single desire or drive, or separated into two, many practitioners feel that *SM* brings the *S* and the *M* together, eliminating the slash.³ This definitional complexity—where *SM* both refers to and resists an originary pathology, and where it is both an umbrella term for all dynamics of consensual power exchange and a narrower term referring to pain play—is part of the reason why *BDSM* is gaining adherents: for many practitioners, it seems more encompassing, and less problematic, than *SM*.

As this note begins to demonstrate, these linguistic terms shift over time; they refer to contested and contextual concepts used with different shades of meaning by different practitioners. This shifting discursive notation is representative of the ways such terms are used in practice. Because of this, I retain the notation my interviewees or sources use (*BDSM*, *S/M*, *S&M*, and so on); I also retain the terms they use to describe themselves. Some of these identity terms are more common: *top*, for example, refers to the person on the giving end of any form of BDSM; *bottom* is the corresponding word for the person on the receiving end. A *dominant* is the top in a more explicitly power-based relationship; *submissive* refers to the bottom. A *switch* is a person who enjoys both top and bottom, or dominant and submissive, roles. Other terms are less common, and practitioners use creative combinations to describe their interests and practices: a *pain slut* (a person who enjoys particularly heavy pain play), a *service top* (a top who gets off

on pleasuring, or otherwise servicing, a bottom), or a *SAM* (a smart-assed masochist or a bratty bottom), for example. Thus, rather than providing a full glossary of terms here—an impossible task—I ask the reader to allow these terms and their referents and contexts to accumulate over the course of this book.⁴