The Social Organization of Sexual Risk

The willingness to explore alternative sexual lifestyles is related to a variety of factors, ranging from the macrostructure of society to sociopsychological conditions such as role rigidity and nonpassivity in interactions (see Whitehurst, 1975). One of the most commonly noted factors is outright distrust of anything new or different. Fear of the novel and unknown is often played upon by those who encourage conformity with established norms. Conversely, the willingness to try out an alternative lifestyle may involve something akin to a religious conversion. One must "break away from the social control bind of the previous belief system" (Varni, 1973: 169).

Ironically, those who are already involved in what, by mainstream standards, would be considered an alternative lifestyle, in turn show reluctance to further adventure. For so-called "middle America," the gay subculture is an alternative lifestyle. But to the ordinary gay male or lesbian, the gay "S&M subculture" is a world beyond—often a somewhat shadowy, threatening world. Some gay spokespeople have expressed outright antagonism to their "brothers and sisters in leather." John Rechy, for example, has called gay S&M a form of self-hatred, sexism, and sexual fascism (1977). Some lesbian leaders have pronounced flatly: "S&M is a male perversion. There are no lesbians into S&M" (Toronto Gaydays, August 1978).

S&M may mean either sadomasochism, or slave/master. In this paper, for reasons that will be developed shortly, S&M will be taken as slave/master.

This is a revision of an earlier article that appeared in Alternative Lifetyles, Vol. 2, No. 1, February, 1979, 69-100. A section on the political aspects of S&M, originally included when the essay was first published, has been deleted because the topic was addressed elsewhere in this volume. Copyright © 1979 by Human Sciences Press, New York, NY.
It denotes sexual encounters in which one partner plays the role of "master" or dominating partner, and the other the role of "slave" or submissive partner. S&M sex exists in the heterosexual world, though it has rarely been studied (see Greene, 1974; Grumley, 1977; Janus, 1977). What makes gay S&M unusual is the fairly widespread existence of an institutionalized subculture facilitating encounters between those seeking slave/master sex. The institutions include bars (often called "leather bars"), baths, and clubs.

THE RISKS OF CASUAL SEX

The gay S&M world is of particular interest to students of alternative lifestyles because it provides an interesting test case for what might be called the "Looking for Mr. Goodbar" problem. Those who seek casual sexual encounters with strangers (whether gay or nongay) put themselves at risk. The risks range from ego-bruising rejections to venereal disease to injury and even death. While not discounting the other risks, this paper is concerned with the danger of injury or death.

The message of the popular book Looking for Mr. Goodbar (Rossner, 1975), and the film of the same name, is that casual sex, for a woman at least, will lead to terrifying situations and eventual injury and death. It would be much safer to follow the conventional road to marriage. This is very similar to the reaction of many gay men and women when confronted with an opportunity for S&M sex: "There's no way I'm going to let someone tie me up!"

When Roy and Roy (1976: 323) make the important distinction between recreational and casual sex, they identify the latter by an absence of "any depth or structure of relationship." But equally useful would have been a distinction based on the level of risk. The Roys define recreational sex in terms of a sensitivity to the partner's personal needs in contrast to sensual contact of bodies. It follows that the pursuit of casual sex for the "mere" contact without relationship would expose one to more strangers in shorter encounters. It is through depth and structure of relationships, in sex and elsewhere, that trust is built up and risk reduced. At least so it would seem, but this paper will attempt an alternative explanation.

Recent developments in social arrangements for casual sex among heterosexuals have highlighted the problem of risk (of injury, if not death). The media are reporting a new sexual phenomenon: the heterosexual cruising baths (Playboy, July 1977; Village Voice, July 1977; Toronto Globe and Mail, December 31, 1977). The cruising baths have long been familiar institutions in the gay communities of North American and European cities, but places like Plato's Retreat and Night Moves are the first attempt to introduce this facility for organized casual sex to heterosexuals. Every report thus far has noted one significant difference between the social interaction in the traditional gay baths and the new heterosexual baths. There is a much higher
level of anticipated physical injury in the heterosexual facilities. As participant-observer Jay Scott noted, "there is no etiquette of public sex yet" (Globe and Mail, December 31, 1977).

The possibility of an etiquette of public sex is well demonstrated by the gay baths. Interaction is typically well-mannered and gentle among hundreds of men who are strangers to each other and in pursuit of casual, often anonymous and brief sexual encounter. Incidents of disruption are rare, violence almost unknown. In their study of five gay baths, Weinberg and Williams (1975) found a pattern of "nonabrasive rituals and . . . avoidance of hurtful rejections." Feminist author Rita Mae Brown made a disguised visit to New York gay baths: "In heterosexual life the first refusal never sinks in . . . but in the gay baths 'no means no' and the rejection is delivered without insult: No thank you, I'm just resting" (Brown, 1976).

Baths are not the only "ecological areas known as pick-up places" (Davis, 1973: 17). There are risks in a cocktail lounge when it becomes a pick-up or cruising territory. Roebuck and Spray (1967) found that the intermediation of waiters and bartenders often reduced the risks involved in sexual encounters between strangers. Humphreys (1970) described the rules and roles that reduced risk in washroom sex. Troiden (1974) studied the social organization of sexual risk in a particularly instructive situation where the risk of assault was very great. His subject was the "highway rest stop" where heterosexual truckers passing through on long-distance hauls were encountered for sexual liaisons by resident homosexuals.

A SOCIOLOGICAL TEST CASE

In the course of research on the "homosexual ecology" of Toronto (Lee, 1978b) the author was able to confirm the analysis of Weinberg and Williams at six gay baths, and that of Humphreys at several washrooms. However, a more interesting case of socially organized risk in casual sex emerged than any previously examined in the literature: that of the gay S&M subculture. In Toronto, this subculture is organized around several bars, baths, and clubs, mainly for men who are interested in finding short-term (and occasionally long-term) partners for the acting out of master and slave roles in sex.

In these territories men who are often complete strangers to each other (though not to the setting or some of the other men in it) meet for the first time, go home together the same night, and act out S&M "scenarios" in which one will often become the prisoner of the other. This is accomplished through a variety of means, some rather simple and others quite elaborate: rope, chain, and locks, leather belts or thongs, leather restraints, handcuffs, jail cells, dungeons, wooden stocks and racks, and thumbscrews.

This situation looks like the "Looking for Mr. Goodbar" problem taken
to its extreme in risk of physical injury or worse. Yet an examination of the S&M subculture and its institutions and participants revealed a surprisingly low level of reported incidents where anyone was thoroughly frightened or physically harmed. How do the social arrangements of the gay S&M subculture limit the great potential dangers involved?

**Methodology**

The methods used were those of informal, unstructured interview (except in a few cases of formal interviews of leaders of an S&M club) and participant observation. The sample consists of thirty-five men ranging in age from eighteen to sixty-two. They were recruited through personal contacts and by participation in the activities of a "leather club" in which a majority of the members were involved in S&M sex. The data were collected over the three-year period, 1975–1977.

The usual interviewing technique was to encourage the respondent to "tell his own stories" with a minimum of guidance. There were certain basic questions that each respondent would answer, but these were introduced at a natural and appropriate time in a conversation. For example: "Have you ever been really scared during a scenario? Did that happen more than once? How did you handle it? Was there ever a time when you were hurt? Did you have to get treatment? How did you get started in S&M sex? Which role do you like to play most often?"

The sample is not presented as "representative" of men practicing S&M. There is no way of knowing whether this or any other sample of homosexuals, let alone those into S&M, is representative, since no means has yet been found to enumerate the homosexual population (assuming we could develop a widely-accepted definition of "homosexual").

Likewise, there is no way of knowing the total sexual experience of the respondents. Very few could recall the exact number of times they had experienced sexual intercourse, or sexual intercourse with S&M roles. Two-thirds had had sex so many times with so many partners that they had lost count of total experiences, or specifically S&M experiences. It would certainly be safe to say that those in the sample are basing their responses on several hundred S&M experiences.

As a publicly-known spokesperson for the gay liberation movement in Toronto, a participant in the territories studied over a period of ten years, and an occasional participant in the activities of the "leather clubs," the author clearly had no difficulty in obtaining access to respondents, or setting them at ease to the effect that no moral judgments would be made about anything they cared to report.
THE RISKS OF GAY MALE S&M SEX

In any given scenario most of the risks are faced by the partner taking the slave (bound or imprisoned) role. These range from being detained longer than desired, more uncomfortable positions or conditions than desired, being subjected to "discipline" more severe than desired, and to actual physical torture.

One example of physical suffering beyond that desired by the player of the slave role was an instance in which a man of thirty was bound and then entered from the rear by several friends of the partner who played, in succession, the "master" role. Although the slave agreed to be bound, there was no mention by the master of calling upon friends (not in the immediate area at the time) to participate in the scenario.

Some men reported other less frightening events: a beating that went beyond the point of pleasant endurance, bondage in a constricting or uncomfortable position until feeling was lost in the limbs, and an accident involving a piece of unsafe equipment. It is not always the slave who is frightened or harmed, nor always the master who is to blame. No one may be "to blame." In some instances, it was the master who was thoroughly alarmed. The punishment or torture (generally called "discipline") of the slave was taken farther than the slave approved of, and the slave, in each case, rebelled, managed to break free, and in uncontrolled fury turned on the master.

In all, there were eleven incidents of physical harm requiring medical treatment: seven reported by separate individuals and the remaining four by two other individuals. Nine men experiencing injury to the point of requiring medical treatment, out of thirty-five respondents, may seem a considerable proportion. The medical treatment ranged from a visit to a doctor for care of bruises to a week in the hospital for the slave who was repeatedly entered from the rear.

However, eleven incidents of physical harm clearly beyond that which the participant wanted to experience as part of the sex play, out of a total of several hundred sexual encounters, may not seem so fearful a ratio. Considering that some physical suffering is readily facilitated and also actively sought during an S&M scenario, and that many of the encounters are among men who are strangers to each other—and therefore not readily held to account for these actions—a rate of injury of this magnitude does not compare entirely unfavorably with that estimated among married couples, where battered wives and battered husbands may not even have the pleasure of sexual arousal as a result of their physical pains. The low rate of injuries among these thirty-five men is in accord with other evidence on S&M (Fisher, 1973; Greene, 1974; Young, 1973 and 1975; Schwuchtel, 1976; Grumley, 1977).
PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF S&M SEX

Social arrangements that have enabled these thirty-five men in the sample to meet hundreds of partners for scenarios in which the men played both master and slave roles (not in the same scenario usually) with a relatively low rate of harmful outcomes of risk are of more than theoretical interest. Such behavior poses some interesting sociological questions not, to the author’s knowledge, discussed in the sociological literature. There are at least four specific issues:

1. the function of protected territories in facilitating the arrangement of S&M encounters between strangers;
2. the screening processes by which a potential partner is selected as an acceptable risk;
3. the negotiation of the “scenario” itself, so that the risks to be taken are clarified, and agreeable limits set;
4. control of interaction during the actual scenario (the sex act) so that the limits are not exceeded, and real “consent” is maintained and withdrawal possible at any point where one of the participants finds “the action too much to handle.”

I will discuss each of these problem areas in turn by approaching the sexual interaction in gay S&M from the point of view of dramaturgical sociology of the sort advanced in the writings of Goffman (1959, 1963, 1967, 1974).

(1) The Territories Facilitating S&M Encounters

One of the first issues faced by anyone who is interested in S&M is how she/he would go about finding a willing partner. If the intended interaction were to be heterosexual, the adventurer would face considerable difficulty in many localities in locating safe, experienced partners without incurring considerable embarrassment during the search. Looking for a regular “Mr. (or Ms.) Goodbar” for casual sex can be frustrating enough in such territories as the “singles bar.” Some readers would resort to the placing of coyly worded advertisements in appropriate newspapers (see Lee, 1978a).

The gay communities of most large North American cities now facilitate the first encounters of men seeking partners for S&M sex through three specialized territories: the leather bar, the leather baths, and the leather club (keep in mind that not everyone in these territories is into S&M sex). The social organization of gay bars as protected territories has already been examined, and needs little additional comment here (see Achilles, 1967; Warren,
1974; Freedman and Mayes, 1976; Lee, 1978b). One significant observation is that the leather bar is even more a defended home territory (Cavan, 1973) than the ordinary gay bar. Those who enter without the accepted dress and demeanor are likely to be made to feel unwelcome. Leather or denim clothing is the rule, and "swish" or "camp" mannerisms are taboo. Some bars formally require a "uniform" (e.g., motorcycle, cowboy, cop, or military outfit).

Contrary to frequently offered psychological accounts of the "fetishism" of the leather crowd, the use of costume has little to do with the psychological characteristics of the participants. It serves as a means of identifying the "wise" (in Goffman's sense) and structuring accessible engagements (Goffman, 1963:195). Costume signals to those present that it is acceptable behavior in a public place to proposition another person for an S&M act. A proposition for S&M sex may be rejected by the party proposed to, for various reasons (the proposer is not the right physical type, or the party proposed to is not looking for sex at that moment, or whatever) but a proposal for S&M sex per se will not be out of place. The "etiquette" that makes the territory an acceptable one for S&M proposals will be concretely symbolized by the costumes worn. Thus, one of the first risks of seeking S&M is minimized, compared to what one might expect in rude or even violent reaction if a stranger in a regular gay bar were approached for S&M interaction.

If the use of costume in general helps to control access to the territory, the specific components of costume go much further; they provide the basis of a vital "information game" (Goffman, 1958: 8), which protects and facilitates the interaction of partners. The time wasted in finding a suitable partner is greatly reduced, as is the probability of miscues and misunderstandings (see Henley, 1977: 82 ff. for a heterosexual comparison).

Since their description in Time magazine (September 8, 1975), the key and handkerchief components of S&M costume have become fairly widely known, or at least known about, both inside and outside the gay community. Briefly, a set of keys dangling from the left hip signals a preferred "master" role; the same keys on the right hip would indicate a "slave" preference. A color code for handkerchiefs in the rear hip pockets is combined with the choice of side to add more data to the information game. For instance, a black hankie stuck in the left rear pocket signals a desire to beat or whip the partner; from the right pocket it says "I'd like someone to beat me." There are several widely standardized colors.

Men in leather bars may also wear other components of costume to further define their interests. These include handcuffs dangling at the waist, a slave collar (similar to a dog collar), leather chaps, gloves, cockrings and titrings. Even short lengths of rope or chain may be worn from the waist or shoulder (as a sort of epaulette). A man "in full gear" can be quite a sight—perhaps an amusing one, but often intimidating to the uninitiated.
An intimidating look is, of course, deliberate. Very few S&M practitioners are “taken in by their own act” (Goffman, 1959: 17). Privately they are usually amused at their own appearance and will refer to their “leather drag.”

The costume signals are by no means fixed, even for a single evening. A man who spots what appears to be an attractive potential partner, but notes that the partner’s signaled preference is the same role as his own (e.g., both have their keys on the left) can quietly (or if it suits his information tactics, quite ostentatiously) remove his own keys and place them at the opposite hip. He has now made himself available for the complementary role in an S&M scenario, should it prove possible to negotiate one.

Much the same sort of interaction goes on in the other two specialized territories, the leather baths and the leather club. The baths have the advantage of even more protected accessibility than a bar (Weinberg and Williams, 1975). Such baths are known among the gay communities and even their names (e.g., The Barracks) indicate the expected type of sexual interaction. Such baths also offer on-site facilities (e.g., a dungeon or jail cell). Leather clubs are frequently focused on a motorcycle theme, though many members in such clubs do not own a bike (Fisher, 1973; Lee, 1978b).

(2) Screening Potential Partners

The patrons of leather bars tend to form more closely-knit networks than those of regular gay bars. Often there will be only one leather bar in the city (as is the case in Toronto). Faces become more familiar, developing a sort of localized “face block” (Suttlle, 1972). There is more likely to be a pub atmosphere than a posed and distanced one of the kind familiar in many singles bars. Civil inattention (Goffman, 1963: 83) is less rigidly maintained. Indeed, the costumes invite self-introductions rather than formal (third party) introductions.

The screening of a potential partner is therefore left largely to the initiatives of the individual himself, but the searcher can also find out something about a stranger by making inquiries through his own network. There is likely to be someone who knows someone who knows him. Networks tend to build up along lines of preferred roles, and to carry appropriate information for possible sexual encounters. Thus a man acquires a reputation not only for being “good sex” (or not) as in a regular bar, but also for providing convincing performances (or not) in the role he advertises. “Yes, he’s a great slave.” Or, “Huh, he’s no master. He should have his keys on the other side, where they usually are!” Or, “Watch out for him. He gets rough once he has you tied up.”

A man’s reputation, built up over perhaps several years of frequenting a leather bar, and filtered through a network of friends, acquaintances, and
“one night stands,” may grow to include not only a general estimate of his performance, but also some details of his specialties: “he’s got a fabulous dungeon in his cellar”; “he likes to be hung from the ceiling.” The most important information will be that relating to the man’s reliability during a scenario. Does he respect the limits agreed to? That is, as master, will he go no further than promised; or as slave, will he let you go as far as he said without complaining or reneging? A slave who “won’t let you do much” is not only an unattractive choice for a would-be master with an elaborate scenario in mind; he is also a bad risk. Such a slave may give off the impression of willing submission until well into the act, and then suddenly and dangerously rebel. And there are, of course, many risks with a master whose reputation is one of not respecting a slave’s limits.

Most of my thirty-five respondents definitely preferred one or the other role; only three claimed to be completely flexible as to master or slave performance. However, all but two men were prepared to “switch keys on occasion” and had done so at least once for a partner they really wanted whose keys were on the same side. The two exclusively assigned respondents (both masters) believed that it was “too risky to let a slave play the master role.” This belief is not widely shared, but a modified version of it is not uncommon, namely, that it is risky to let a slave change to a master role during a scenario. Certainly the process of screening a partner will attempt to determine how experienced the person is in the role he has indicated a desire to enact.

If the proposed partner is a familiar face in the bar, or his reputation is known, or information has been gleaned by asking an acquaintance (or occasionally, a waiter or bartender), then little further screening may be needed. A question may be in order about the costume signals, if there is any doubt. “Do your keys really mean it?” Or, “Does that blue hankie mean what I think it means?” Occasionally someone does wander into the bar with costume he has seen others wearing, and adopted himself without learning the code.

Naturally the ordinary kind of social interaction in a pick-up occurs; we are focusing here on the special problems of risk when the interaction is expected to lead to a “prisoner” situation. The proposed partner must possess the necessary qualifiers and be cleared for encounter (see Davis, 1973; Goffman, 1963). It is worth noting, however, that the S&M setting helps to reduce the need for exploratory conversation, and moves the partners more rapidly toward the “action” (Goffman, 1967: 149ff). Like Goffman’s examples of the policeman’s, soldier’s, and actor’s roles, the S&M hunter’s role is a “practical gamble” (Goffman, 1967: 170ff).

One of the objects of conversation with the proposed partner will be a determination of his concern for the enjoyment of both participants in the scenario. This hardly differs from the ordinary chance encounter with casual sex in which a woman may well want to know whether the man “just
wants to get his own pleasure.” But, in the S&M situation, the mutual enjoyment question is more crucial, especially for the slave. He will want to assure himself that the master is not a “real sadist,” but rather a person who enjoys playing the sadist role within limits that give pleasure to the slave. Moreover, a master may want some assurance that the slave is not a “real masochist.” That is, the slave will not insist on, or allow himself to experience so much stress or pain that injury, which would be unacceptable to the master's conscience, will be done. We will return to this question later.

“Promises without delivery” are perhaps more difficult in the S&M screening than in a typical male-female pick-up at a bar where a man may feign affection and commitment, or a woman physical response. In the S&M situation visible cues are available about the proposed interaction from both the partner's costume and, later, on arrival at the location for the sex act. Final screening (that is, a willingness to begin the scenario) may await arrival at the location to make an assessment of the host's “equipment.” Either master or slave may play host; a slave as well as a master may keep a dungeon.

If this screening process fails to produce a sexual partner, the bar patron may resort to the leather baths in those cities where they are available. The baths have some interactional advantages over typical bar-to-home encounters.

In a leather bath a patron who seeks partners either wanders the halls, past the open doors of others, or he waits in his room for other patrons to pass by (see Weinberg and Williams, 1975). Various signals and equipment in rooms indicate the desired kind of S&M interaction. For example, a man wearing a sort of leather harness sits on the pallet-bed while handcuffs rest beside him. The visitor to his room begins to speak, but the occupant gestures silence. He points to the floor, and if the visitor is a novice, he may even push down his shoulders so that the visitor kneels head down. “Good. You will speak only when given permission. You will always address me as ‘Sir.’ You will not look me in the face. Now, raise your hands.” The visitor must now decide whether to participate, or exit. If he raises his hands, the handcuffs go on, the room door is closed, and the scenario begins (see Henley, 1977, concerning the relationship between eye encounters and dominance).

Screening is much more elementary in this situation than in the bar because the bath is a safer territory than a possibly isolated or imprisoning cellar. There are other patrons just outside the door, as well as an attendant at the front desk. Withdrawal from an unpleasant scenario is possible for either party at any time. Besides, there's not much scope for elaborate “discipline” in the typical four-by-seven-foot room. A leather bath is therefore a suitable place for the novice in gay S&M to begin his career. He may also have the opportunity to study other couples in performance, since some participants get further pleasure from the scenario by leaving the door open for onlookers.
The leather club (whether it has its own premises, or holds its functions in members' homes or in accommodations rented for the occasion) also provides a safe initiation into S&M. At least in Toronto it has so far been unknown for the membership of a gay leather club to "gang up" on anyone against his will. This might be a greater risk in cities with a higher general rate of violent crime and street offences.

(3) Negotiation of the Scenario

It is rare to negotiate the actual events of a proposed scenario in the bar itself and, as we have seen, the baths make such negotiations elementary. However, when a couple who began an hour before as strangers settle the question "Your place or mine?" some negotiation of the scenario is likely—on route and at the site. In such negotiations the partner taking the master role will appear to an untrained eye simply to be dictating the script for the scenario. It would not look like "negotiation" at all. Nevertheless it is, since the slave will be responding, or not, with the appropriate cues and deciding whether or not to "go through with it."

For example, in the car or bus on route to the site the master says, "When we get there, I'll go inside. You will wait ten minutes, then knock. When I open, you will pretend to have lost your way and ask for directions. I will invite you in, offer you a drink, and then, when you least expect it, overpower you. I will tie you up, and accuse you of really being a spy. I will torture you until you confess." Depending on how well the slave knows the master, questions may be asked about the form of torture, the equipment to be used, and so forth.

This is an example of a fairly elaborate "script." Scenarios range all the way from "grand performances," lasting perhaps hours to quite elementary interactions. Thus, negotiations may involve nothing more than a simple exchange at the bar, "Do you want to go home with me?" "Ok." "You mean 'Yes sir' don't you?" "Yes sir." "Good. Let's leave now." "Yes, sir." A player eager for the slave role may even address a stranger at the bar with "Sir" from the moment of introduction.

"Scripts" in S&M scenarios fulfill somewhat the same control functions as "ground rules" in other alternative sexual lifestyles. In both cases they may be explicit or implicit (see Neubeck, 1969, and Libby, 1973: 136). Ground rules in an open marriage may limit the risk of emotional damage from jealousy and possessiveness, or even the risk of breaking up. In S&M, the "script" is almost never written, and often more implicit than explicit, depending on its complexity. It is important to note that the "master" and "slave" designations may take many forms. They may become cowboy and rustler, sheriff and outlaw, cop and crook, householder and burglar, Arab sheik and lost traveler, Roman patrician and slave boy, military police and
serviceman on AWOL, inquisitor and heretic. Different scripts may call for
different equipment.

Establishment and any necessary explication of the script provide an
opportunity for each partner to assess the risks involved. Many players will
already have “performed” some of the scripts in fantasy and/or mastur-
bation. They will know, for example, that being tied up for an hour in a cer-
tain position is extremely uncomfortable, and more than they could bear.
An indication that the partner is unaware of, or indifferent to this fact
could be a warning to demur, submissively suggest an alteration in the
script, or possibly withdraw from the interaction.

Either partner may suggest a signal word to be used during the scenario
to indicate that the slave's limits have been reached. However, my
respondents generally agreed that among experienced players such signals
are rarely necessary. “A good master will know my limit has been reached
without my having to spoil the act by saying so.” “I know how to beat the
slave so that he begs for more, even when he is pleading to be let go.”

It must be kept in mind that the S&M scenario is a performance, set in a
“theatrical frame” (Goffman, 1974: 124ff.). A plea to “Stop beating me”
may well mean “I love it. Keep going.” It “breaks frame” for either partner
to have to step outside the performance role: “Am I hitting you too hard? Do
you really want me to stop?” If there is a risk of the play “getting out of
hand” then either partner may “rekey” the performance (Goffman, 1974:
359ff.). The master may switch from beating to the use of tit clamps until
he is clearly convinced that the slave was not “really being hurt,” and then
resume beating. The slave may play down his protests against the beating
because it is not hard enough, then “protest” more when the pain reaches
the desired intensity.

Before the scenario is actually begun it will be necessary for each partner
to assure himself that the other understands this process of “theatricality”
and even “fabrication” in S&M sex. This will hardly be done by an intel-
lectual or sociological analysis. Rather, it will be done by simple cues. For ex-
ample, a slave who needs to be repeatedly reminded to say “Sir,” or a master
who overlooks omission of “Sir” after demanding it of the slave is certainly
indicating that he does not understand how to put on a performance.

The successful and enjoyable fabrication of a scenario requires
something of the finesse of a diplomat or an actor. The novice may begin by
reading novels or serious studies in S&M (see Fisher, 1973). He may practice
simple scenarios alone, for example by tying himself up while masturbating.
In some cities he may view S&M pornographic movies. When he begins to
seek partners, he will most often present himself in the slave role.

Gay S&M folklore holds that “a good top man (master) begins as a good
bottom man (slave).” All but three of the thirty-five respondents began by a
sort of apprenticeship to an experienced master. The other three were “shown
the ropes” by an experienced slave. It may be possible for two novices to start
out together, but this is apparently uncommon. Initiation as a slave is probably more common because it is the master who must “do things” once the slave is bound. The fact that the anticipatory socialization of masturbation fantasies would also be more convenient if the solitary player is playing slave (it would be difficult to tie himself up, then play master), may also help to steer most novices first to the slave role. In time, a proportion of the slaves learn the master’s performance and find it more to their liking. However, as noted earlier, they may still revert, from time to time, with a suitable partner, to the slave role.

(4) Controlling Risk and Maintaining Consent in the Scenario

Not every slave-master scenario involves bondage or imprisonment. For example, a script may call on the slave to play the role of butler or houseboy and serve his “lord” dinner. In such instances the voluntary withdrawal of the slave from the scenario is always possible. All but five of my respondents reported that such scenarios were seldom or never performed. The preference was for situations in which the slave (whatever the scripted role) was limited in his freedom of action, either by walls or bars, or by some form of bondage. The bondage might still permit withdrawal. For example, one respondent enjoyed going to the leather baths with his partner, who led about on a dog chain and collar. The partner obviously enjoyed this “humiliation,” but could have withdrawn at any time.

The scenarios relating to our problem are those in which the slave may have entered bondage or imprisonment quite willingly, but then discovered that the “discipline” was more than he could bear. Obviously the eleven cases of sexual interaction where medical treatment was necessary fell into this category, but they were not the only ones. Every respondent, including even the two who played only master roles, reported at least one situation where voluntary withdrawal was delayed for at least a few minutes. In the two “master-only” cases the slave had gotten “out of hand” and the master wanted to end the scenario but the slave refused.

The respondents could not accurately recollect all the instances in which the action continued beyond the point of voluntary participation, but they numbered more than a hundred. In the great majority the delay before withdrawal (or at least down-keying) went only “a minute or two” too far. A master may have struck “a few blows beyond the limit.” There was no strong objection to most of these incidents. Indeed, both respondents who preferred the master role and those preferring the slave role suggested that it “added realism” for a master to go just a little beyond the slave’s limits. A slight amount of real fear helps to structure a convincing fabrication in S&M just as, in the theatre, a moment’s anxiety that something “staged” is really happening can greatly enhance the entertainment (see Goffman, 1974).
Risk of really frightening denial of voluntary withdrawal during the scenario is likely to increase both with the complexity of scenarios and the containment possibilities of the equipment and the site. A location isolated from any appeal for help by distance or soundproof walls, locked chains and a gag, or a hood or blindfold are all likely to cause the slave greater anxiety. A scenario involving complicated equipment from which extrication may prove lengthy and difficult should “something go wrong” may also cause concern. Some practitioners have an astonishing variety of “abusive furniture” which they have constructed or purchased through mail-order companies. For example, there are revolving racks, hoisting harnesses, and several designs of stocks, and there are collapsible “jail cells” that will fit into an apartment closet when not in use.

A wise practitioner about to become the willing victim of such scenarios and equipment will certainly inspect such devices to assure the improbability of collapse or failure leading to permanent injury. He will also be sure that the “master” is not under the excessive influence of any drug. But a wise master will do the same, for he faces risks too. A permanent injury to a slave could lead to lawsuits, criminal charges for involuntary detention, the possible loss of his job, or at the very least, embarrassing publicity. However, while such precautions are sensible and desirable, they do not really account for the fact that, in the great majority of instances, among my respondents, the scenario was recollected as enjoyable throughout, with no point at which withdrawal was desired, or if desired, denied. How are we to account for this?

First, there are general restraints on excesses, both in the socialization of the practitioners—against violent injury to anyone except in extreme self-defense—and in the fear of consequences after the scenario is over, should either party wish to “get revenge” on the other. But, at a deeper level it became apparent that very few, if any, were “true sadists” or “true masochists” in a psychological sense. This finding agrees with that of others (Delora and Warren, 1977; Schwuchtel, 1976; Young, 1973 and 1975).

True sadism would involve the desire to hurt and punish the partner without regard for the partner’s pleasure. True masochism would involve the desire to be hurt, without regard for the master’s conscience or enjoyment. In the gay S&M subculture, it appears that most masters are “sexual sadists,” not true sadists. They enjoy inflicting pain in a manner and to an extent that visibly arouses the slave. “Perversity...is where the means become the ends in themselves; where one loses sight of the fact that the goal is mutual pleasure” (Schwuchtel, 1976). When respondents reported experiences of real fright or injury, they often referred to the partner as a “real sadist.” It was quite clear from the terminology used that a man setting out to play the slave role does not look for a “real sadist.”

Even these observations—which are essentially social-psychological—do not provide an adequate sociological account. By using dramaturgical
sociology, we may delve deeper. An S&M scenario is a special kind of "team" performance (Goffman, 1959: 77ff). The players frequently change, but the "routine" often remains the same. Instead of each player relying on the "tact" of the other (Goffman, 1959: 13ff) as a "protective practice," he must rely on the framing of the situation. This is so because, unlike the case in many team performances, the players are strangers to each other, or at least only recently acquainted; they cannot count on each other's cooperation to stage a single routine. When the partners become a "couple," regularly involved with each other in S&M, and even living together, the problem of risk obviously declines. None of the thirty-five respondents restricted himself exclusively to S&M scenarios with his "lover," though some of them did live with a lover.

The framing on which the fortunate practitioner of S&M relies for a mutually pleasurable scenario is that of theatricality. Except in the relatively rare incidents of real fright or injury, it is clear that both players conducted their performance of a sexual script as if they were in a private play. Each partner served as an audience to the other, and in the process, contained the other (Goffman, 1974: 135).

The great risk of S&M sex is not an encounter with a "real sadist" so much as a scenario with a psychologically normal person who, in the social situation of an S&M scenario, "gets carried away." Role engulfment increases the risk, and as Goffman has so often emphasized, role distance is the most common precaution. The safe partners are therefore those not taken in by their own act, even in a bar. As Goffman first illustrated with the joking surgeon, humor is a great role-distancer. Master and slave must be able to laugh at themselves.

Ironically, laughter often threatens to "spoil the performance" between partners comfortable with each other in an S&M scenario. The master shouts a firm command, and has to suppress a giggle at his own act. The slave pleads for mercy, desperately trying not to snicker. The presence of the potential for laughter just below the surface is a reassurance to each player that role engulfment is not threatening to break down the vital limits that make the S&M only play, only theatre.

Conclusions

The notion of sex as "play" (Foote, 1954) or as "recreation" (Roy and Roy, 1976) is not really as new as some suggest. The Roys calls it "a very recent addition to the ways in which sexual expression may be viewed" (p. 323). A reading of Ovid's Art and Techniques of Love (1968), first published in Rome in the year 1 A.D., or even of de Sade's Bedroom Philosophers (1965) will remind us that, at least among the patricians and aristocracy, sex has long been recreational as well as procreative. However, there are
certainly more people who accept the value of sex as recreation today among heterosexuals. It would be difficult to demonstrate that argument among homosexuals, for whom sex has never had a procreational function. Gay male sex has long been playful sex (probably one of the reasons for the intense disapproval of it by those who valued only procreational sex) so it is not surprising to find a greater evidence of S&M sex among contemporary homosexuals than among heterosexuals. S&M sex is the epitome of recreational sex.

Romantic love, and thus relationship sex (Roy and Roy, 1976: 322) is largely out of place in a dungeon. The sexual theatre practiced by the respondents was not meant to be “taken seriously.” The partner who is too much in love with his slave may make a poor master. He will find it difficult to fabricate, and realistically dramatize, dominance and discipline. A slave who is too much in love with his master may lose the capacity for role distance during discipline, and rebel and attack the master for “not loving me the way I love you.”

There was no evidence among the respondents to support Stoller's contention (1975) that S&M sex is “the erotic form of hatred.” There was no ground for concluding that those who play the master role hate their slaves, nor that the slaves hate themselves. The respondents who prefer the slave role are not taken in by their own act, and can joke about it readily. It may be that such role distance is easier for homosexuals in our society, since many must play at being something they are not (i.e., pass as heterosexuals) during much of their daily lives (see Freedman, 1971). The respondents' attitudes do not support John Rechy's argument (1977) that both gay masters and slaves hate themselves, and are merely acting out their rage against heterosexual oppression and their own need to “pass.” Rechy goes so far as to claim “There is no S (sadist) in these gay relationships . . . the whimpering masochists and the tough posturing sadists are in reality all masochists groveling in self-hatred” (1977: 262).

Yet even Rechy agrees that “much S&M is strictly play-acting” and no one gets hurt (1977: 254). Kantrowitz (1976), another gay author critical of S&M sex, makes the same admission. These authors are critical of the ideological implications of S&M for the gay liberation movement. They see S&M as a bad kind of game to want to play, but they agree with pro-S&M writers (Fisher, 1973; Young, 1975; Schwuchtel, 1976) that it is a game, and that few players get badly hurt.

It is the nature of S&M as play, game, recreation, and theatre that undoubtedly accounts for the control of the great potential risks involved. Thus, similar social organization of sexual risk in the case of casual sexual encounters among heterosexuals—for example, at a singles bar—might have to await the more widespread acceptance of the value of sex as play among heterosexuals. As Alex Comfort has noted, the relatively recent arrival of recreational sex as a more widely accepted value among heterosexuals
is closely connected to the availability and adoption of effective contraceptives (Comfort, 1976: 370).

The separation of the sex act from procreation increases the significance of "foreplay." S&M sex may be thought of as unusually extended foreplay. Acute genital stimulation leading to orgasm takes up only a small part of the total time and energy involved in an S&M scenario. A majority of the respondents mentioned at least once, in their descriptions of S&M acts in which they engage, that "S&M slows down the sex" or "takes more preparation" or "makes the fun last longer." The mere setting up of equipment and the application of bondage consumes time in which there is considerable sexual excitement and arousal, but no genital contact. The acting out of scripts of varying complexity further extends the excitement before genital stimulation and orgasm.

The "ground rules" of a scenario may be set up so as to prolong the foreplay as long as possible and, at the same time, maximize the amount of "discipline" to be given. The slave is thus pushed to the limits of his desired experience of pain and the limits of arousal just-short-of-orgasm.

For example, the scenario might be that of "stolen property." The script's bare essentials are these: the slave plays robber; he takes something belonging to the master and hides it well; the master "discovers the theft" and confronts the slave, who denies complicity; the master "tortures" the slave to make him confess and reveal the hiding place. This may sound like an unpleasant situation for the slave, except for the rules of the game. It is agreed that the slave loses the game if he reaches orgasm under torture, so part of the torture is the controlled use of genital stimulation (combined or alternated with beating or whatever). The slave also loses if he confesses as a result of pain. A clever slave can continue this game for many minutes by sending the master on wild goose chases after false confessions. During these respites the slave relaxes and is ready for more. Since it is also in the interest of the master to prolong the game and maximize his pleasure, he will collaborate with the slave by "believing" each confession and making another futile search. The sexual foreplay becomes an elaborate team performance (Goffman, 1959: 79).

In elaborate S&M scenarios, as in other highly dramaturgical social interaction rituals, the raison d'etre ceases to be pragmatic. "Consequentiality" shifts from "utility" to elegant performance (see Goffman, 1967: 167ff). Comparable examples would be a formal dinner or funeral, where the utilitarian purpose (eating food, burying a corpse) becomes a relatively minor consequence of the event. S&M may be seen as the formalization of recreational sex.

Highly formalized, social interaction rituals or ceremonies may bring together individuals who would otherwise be dangerous enemies, without risk of their even being rude (much less violent) with each other. S&M may bring together, under similar ceremony, men who are strangers and who
play antagonistic (dominant-submissive) roles. Gay practitioners of S&M have developed an "etiquette" equivalent to that of political opponents shaking hands and eating with each other at a royal funeral or a political summit meeting. Breaches of this etiquette do occur (as reported by the respondents), but the social organization in which the events take place keeps them to a minimum.

REFERENCES


Ovid (1968) Art and Techniques of Love.
Schwuchtel (1976) (Zeitung der Schwulenbewegung), special issue on S&M, various authors but mostly anonymous. Heidelberg: Rosa Presse Verein, No. 4.
Toronto Gaydays (August, 1978) (leaflet) Toronto.
Gay Ghetto

MARTIN P. LEVINE

We are refugees from Amerika. So we came to the ghetto.
—Carl Wittman

Gays have claimed that there exist within major cities “gay ghettos,” neighborhoods housing large numbers of gays as well as homosexual gathering places, and in which homosexual behavior is generally accepted, designating as such certain sections of Boston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles (Aiken, 1976; Altman, 1971:42; Brill, 1976; Chicago Gay Liberation, 1970:3–4; Kantrowitz, 1975:48; Nassberg, 1970:1; Russo, 1976; Shilts, 1977:20; Whitmore, 1975:45; Wittman, 1972:167–68). Sociologists have picked up the term, repeatedly using it in homosexual research. For example, Humphreys (1972a:80–81) labels as “gay ghetto” a neighborhood characterized by marked tolerance of homosexuality and a clustering of gay residences and bars. Weinberg and Williams (1974:43) use the term “lavender ghetto” for districts with large numbers of homosexuals and their institutions.* Typically, however, these authors offer no observations to support their use of the term.

This paper analyzes the validity of “gay ghetto” as a sociological construct, limiting the discussion to the male homosexual community.

---

An abbreviated version of this paper appears in the *Journal of Homosexuality* 4, no. 4 (1979), in press. Reprinted by permission of The Haworth Press and the author.

I am grateful to Margot Abel, Dr. Edgar W. Butler, Dr. Carol Corden, Dr. Claude S. Fischer, Kenneth Rosow, and especially Dr. Wagner Thielens, Jr., for their invaluable comments and suggestions. I would like to thank Fredric Bell for translating the street maps into spot maps.

* The color lavender has been traditionally used to symbolize homosexuality.

---

196