

Power and Love: Sadomasochistic Practices in Long-Term Committed Relationships

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Following transcription, the data were analyzed. Eight specific variables were coded.

Length of relationship

- Response to direct question

Commitment in relationship.

- Response to direct question
- Other phenomenological cues, i.e., use of future tense in discussing relationship

History of sadomasochistic sexual orientation (as individuals, as couple)

- Direct question
- Spontaneous discussion

Meaning and importance of SM in relationship

Reference to sexual practice and self-concept

- Number of spontaneous references to meaning
- Response to direct question
- Other emerging cues

Impact of attitude from others

Responses to direct questions

- Spontaneous reference to other-perception
- References, self-esteem

Experiences with psychotherapy

Direct questions

- Spontaneous reference

Attitude of mental health professionals towards SM orientation

Direct questions

- Explore beliefs about how mental health professionals' attitudes

Recommendations to mental health professionals

- Spontaneous reference

Note: All names have been changed.

The data from the interviews was analyzed by methods described by Miles and Huberman (1994). The following steps were taken:

- Themes were identified in the transcribed interviews;
- Margin notes were developed as significant phrases will be noted and key terms used by subjects appear;
- Looking for relationship and patterns between key terms and phrases;
- Isolating these patterns and processes, commonalities and differences, and taking phrases, pattern, put on separate list, look at what themes evolve;
- Gradually elaborating a small set of generalizations.

After all data were collected, individual case synopses were created to construct the essence of each experience according to the identified themes in addition to other emerging themes. The cases were then compared for patterns and trends. The data analysis included grouping and synthesis of participant responses by theme. When themes were identified, descriptive and interpretative codes were administered. Individual and couple themes were identified. Meaning units were searched for and generalizations were made where applicable.

The present chapter presents the results of the study. The four couples, consisting of eight individuals, responded to the interview questions individually. Excerpts of the four transcribed interviews are directly quoted in order to clarify the responses and to provide the reader with illustrative information. Each couple's responses to the original eight themes will be presented: length of relationship; commitment in relationship; history of sadomasochistic sexual orientation; meaning and importance of SM in relationship; impact of attitude of others; experiences with psychotherapy; attitude of mental health professional towards SM orientation; and recommendations to mental health professionals. At the end of this chapter, the similarities and differences between the four couples' responses will be discussed. In addition, the educational video for mental health professionals resulting from the interviews will be introduced.

Couple One: Sandra and Bill

Sandra is a 47-year-old woman. She sells antique paper items (book, brochures, posters, etc.) at large antique paper trading shows. Her husband of eighteen years, Bill, is ten years older than she and works for a large airline in the cargo department. They own a house in San Francisco. Both are Caucasian.

Theme 1: Length of their relationship. The couple has been married for eighteen years. Both Sandra and Bill became animated as they told the story of how they met.

Sandra: So, when they rented the place, it had a stage, a facility to party in different areas, you were able to rent rooms. It was a huge facility, off Folsom Street in a back alley. They had a slave auction for a charity. This place was so huge that there was a stage, and there were opportunities to rent a room; enough party space where people could go off after they purchased a person for that evening for their play, they could go off and play with them.

Interviewer: What does this mean: "purchase a person"?

Sandra: Well, the charity event was...

Bill: *[completing the sentence]:* A fundraiser.

Sandra : They were gonna raise money by putting someone up for auction on the stage ...I had gone to seek someone to play with, but I had at that time been looking for a relationship in our life style, my life style, and I believe Bill was looking for a relationship. I had gone with a girlfriend to this Halloween party, and he (*Bill*) was already up for auction on the stage, and he was in a harness outfit he had made for himself.

Bill : I had made it for the Halloween atmosphere.

Sandra: This party situation was so huge, it was like a football stadium. I was looking down on the stage and I saw him kneeling there. And I knew that he was going to come up next *[for the auction]*, and I am looking for him.

Bill: We made eye contact.

Sandra: ...like, this is the person! A connection from across a long distance. And another woman started the bidding, but I wanted him, I was going to get him, and I got him for eight dollars. *[Smiles and laughter.]*

Theme 2: Commitment in relationship.

Sandra: I think within six months, we were talking marriage, and it was more or less an agreement of talking about it than a proposal. The aspect of marriage was "let's be closer, let's make a commitment for life together as slave and mistress," although I feel that that's a statement that is taken lightly within the community. I feel that our relationship warrants that submissive/dominant role always. So when we were married, we were married by Service of Mankind Church, which performed a ceremony in this living room.

Bill: We bought the house together.

Sandra: We bought the house together. We had the ceremony in here a few days later. *[Turning to her husband]* Was it?

Bill: We moved in in December and we were married in February.

Sandra: OK, a few months later. The vows surrounded our commitment to each other. We made a...video with the wedding ceremony of how we would conduct our relationship for the rest of our lives. And it involves him being submissive for the rest of his life, me being dominant and doing what I want and more or less dictating the status quo of what was gonna happen for the rest of our lives. And that included the commitment of him being my slave forever. I may have many more slaves, but I only have one husband, and he is my husband forever. It was a commitment that you don't forget.

Interviewer: You take this very seriously.

Sandra: Yes, because this is what I wanted, and I think what he wanted his whole life.

Bill: And it works for us, I am committed to S just as much as at the beginning of the marriage.

Sandra: Yes, and he has not changed in his desire to please me, as a submissive man, as a slave to me, it has always been consistent, it is unfailing. I do encounter slaves in my life and I had slaves that I enjoy being with. But there is the husband, there is the security of the knowledge of being home with my husband and being around my husband and having someone who supports me unconditionally is indescribable. It is beautiful.

Interviewer: You have other slaves sometimes, but it is not comparable to this?

Sandra: There is nothing comparable, because I feel very strongly about the marriage as a symbol of family, and he is my family, and I never chose to have children. The family connection to me is very strong. I am not able to be as open with my family and his family, his sisters and family and my father and relatives, so, he is my family, he is my best friend, he is everything to me.

Theme 3: History of the couple's sadomasochistic sexual orientation.

Sandra described her sense of being sexually dominant before she met Bill and that she was unable to explore it in previous relationships.

Sandra: At the time I met Bill, I had been going to therapy for about six years, and my total therapy involved seven years. The relationship I was in previous to Bill was a childhood type relationship with a guy from school. I was so interested in my life style as a dominant woman that it was hard not to reveal that to the relationship I was in, although he was not into that life style at all and thought that my behavior was extremely perverse and deviant... And his manner in treating me was that "we can get married and have children if you go to therapy and solve this problem." So, it was my problem to deal with, even though I thought it was part of my sexuality that could not be stopped or hidden or covered up or changed.

Both Sandra and Bill expressed a clarity regarding what they wanted in a sexual relationship.

Bill: I had a few previous short-term relationships that were SM, but they weren't very satisfying, because in those, even though I was submissive, I had to be directing the so-called dominant woman. They weren't really into it as much as I felt I was. So that I didn't feel comfortable. Their degree of commitment wouldn't have been as important, because it was just another smaller aspect of their lives, which, maybe I filled that niche, but it wasn't large enough niche for me to fill. I wanted a bigger niche, which could only be filled by somebody who was dominant in all aspects of their lives, not just a few minutes every other week or something. And this is what I found with Sandra and it's been that way since the start.

Sandra: Over the years you develop different aspects of what you like and what you don't like. And I felt that at the time I was looking for a relationship with a person like Bill ; I was looking for his type of personality, a submissive personality, a man who wanted to serve a woman at all times. I was into what I felt was an SM control type of relationship. I would express my needs and somebody would respond to them because that's what I wanted. And the SM was a word that maybe was not accurately describing what we're into, because the sadomasochism is sounding very violent, but we are not per se into that aspect, but there are shades of it. I am very much into the controlling men, into the surroundings, controlling what happens to my subject, as well as me being a controlling person in general. It is hard for me to stop that, in any normal situation, as to relating to other people. It gets me going to control the man.

Both Bill and Sandra said that they were more involved in pain-oriented SM at the beginning of their relationship, but that is now more focused upon D&S (dominance and submission): "When we first met it was more of a physical SM, of discipline and bondage, where now, if we are more in this play mode, it is not as intense, but, at the same time, it is very pleasurable." Sandra, in her dominant sexual mode, cross-dresses Bill and dominates him. She occasionally did a more 'heavy' SM scene with a submissive man whom she does not care for like she cares for her husband:

Sandra: I go to parties, I experience different slaves, and I am more severe with other people because I have found that what we have tends to be more mild, and I want to be more loving and more caring with him [*Bill*], and more of a sensual/sexual relationship, where I don't feel where I do SM with a slave I have never met before, I can be cruel, because I have no caring, I don't have any connection.

Sandra also described that their relationship was very therapeutic for both of them. Whereas she formerly felt judged by partners in regard to her SM interests, she felt that in the safety of her relationship with Bill and the SM community as their supportive peers she could be fully herself.

Theme 4: Meaning and importance of SM in their relationship. SM clearly was central in Sandra's and Bill's marriage. They had both looked for a relationship within the SM life style, and when they met, their shared sexual orientations were evident. Sexually, Sandra controlled Bill : their sexual activities always focused on his service to her. The same was true for almost all other aspects of their lives. Bill worked outside the home and he also did other activities on his own.

Bill: We all have our areas where we are more of an expert in. I do a certain amount of financial stuff, I read a lot, try to keep up with what is outside of the relationship, but of course, if you don't make money, you can't live, and certainly San Francisco is a place where you need to make money to live.

Theme 5: Impact of attitudes from others regarding their SM activities. Sandra distinguished between "us versus them", "them" meaning non-SM practitioners or people who lived a more conventional life style.

Sandra: Well, I have felt comfortable around the [SM] community, and I have grown closer to participating with people in the community than not. I have known other artist friends and they have just as wild a life style in other directions. So I feel very comfortable with artists or other SM people. If I know a secretary that works downtown, that's odd! Because I don't usually come across a normal housewife with children. I don't relate to people like that, and they can't relate to me. So, we don't gravitate in each other's worlds. I don't come across people like that.

Sandra and Bill stated that they had not felt judged by others about their SM orientation, but they both expressed a reluctance to talk about it with others.

Sandra: My brother and sister-in-law are aware, but they tend to make...

Bill: ...light of it.

Sandra: Very light. Light to the effect of jokes also.

Bill: But they are not judgmental in the sense of, "Oh, we don't want to talk to you, stay away from us." That never has happened with anybody that has found out.

Later in the interview, Sandra and Bill explained that both their families were very private regarding personal information in general, and that sexuality was not a topic of conversation. When asked whether the fact that their families do not know about their SM has affected their marriage in any way, she replied: "No, I don't feel it has affected us because of the role of marriage, husband and wife. It sanctifies our relationship. What we do in our house is our business." Bill has a similar response: "...if any of my family asked, I would not tell them, I would not lie, but I don't think it would ever come up. It's just not something that they would pry into. I have never been one to broadcast it."

Theme 6: Experiences with psychotherapy. Sandra had a difficult experience with a psychotherapist who was unable to deal with Sandra's evolving SM sexuality. Following Sandra's disclosure, the therapist felt unable to continue to work with her.

Sandra had been in therapy for nearly seven years. The therapist had "encouraged me to break up with the person and develop an independence around my personality, which was a strong personality even then. So, she, it was a woman, kept encouraging me to develop my own interest and to be strong and to do what I needed to do." Then Sandra became involved with Bill.

Sandra: So, I met [Bill] and right after I met him I disclosed [our relationship] to her, and she's like "well, you know, you'll be feeding into that activity, if that's what you want to do, you will be feeding off each other's needs, and I don't know if that's healthy." I was not surprised...but I didn't think of it that way. But I was so strong in my needs that I felt that the love that we had was unparalleled to anything I had ever felt before, and this was stronger than any of [the] destructive relationships of past...That's what I felt before: that my relationships were very destructive, and that I pursued the therapy in order to see how could get out of the relationship or that I could fix myself in terms of my destructiveness. I didn't think that my sexuality had to do with my destructive

behavior; it rather had to do with my relationships with men and not being able to communicate effectively. So, I disclosed my feelings about Bill, to see if it would move towards marriage, and she's like, are you sure you want to get married, you did not want to get married before, you have these issues in your mind. And I am saying, my issues are getting solved by meeting this type of person, and right before we got married she said she was unable to handle my type of situation, that she had no experience with the BDSM lifestyle, she called it SM life style, and that she couldn't recommend anybody who could work with me. I was so in love, and we were on the path towards marriage and in the groove of establishing a life together, I really didn't focus on the fact that she was abandoning me to the wind, leaving me out on a lurch and unsupported emotionally.

Theme seven: Attitude of the mental health professional towards SM.

Sandra: I felt that he (*Bill*) was my support emotionally, and maybe that is leaning too much on him, but I felt that he is such a strong, stable, feet-on-the-ground person, that I didn't think anything of her, OK, she is fading out of my life now, and somebody else is coming in to support me emotionally with my problem. I didn't feel I had a problem. So, I felt that I felt emotionally very secure. She said we're feeding each other. OK! We're feeding each other for support.

Interviewer: She looked at it in a negative way?

Sandra: Very negative.

Interviewer: Sounds like she really didn't understand where you were coming from at all.

Sandra: She didn't, and she really couldn't communicate with me her fears or what she felt was happening between us. She didn't elaborate on anything after I started moving towards marriage with him. She couldn't get into it at all. She, like, oh, I can't touch it.

Interviewer: What do think her attitude towards SM was?

Sandra: That she had no knowledge and that she was fearful of examining it. I think she didn't feel qualified.

Interviewer: You don't think she was judgmental?

Sandra: No, she had her own personal fears, though. She saw that I was a personality to deal with, we always had very difficult conversations, and that my personality was going where she really didn't know how to handle it, where to go with that.

Interviewer: I am glad that you had a good relationship at that time, but I consider it a difficult issue that a therapist basically abandoned you. Good thing you were in good shape. Can you imagine that it could have been iffy?

Sandra: Yes, it could have been a big problem if I were depressed about losing somebody like her. Because I talked with her once a week, we had very detailed discussions and difficult conversations about my background and my childhood and we were constantly evaluating my feelings. After separating from her, I felt the need to communicate with him, and men, being how they are about feelings, are not able to get in touch with their feelings the way a therapist can. So, I felt the hole there, the hole that he did not fill. But I felt OK, it wasn't like I was to emotionally break up about it. I thought OK, we'll have to find other avenues and seek other friends and girlfriends and women who are more feeling, those were the connections I needed to make. Because I think men, most typical of Bill, are unable to empathize emotionally.

Sandra did not clarify what the therapist saw as destructive in Sandra's personality and behavior. The ending of the therapeutic relationship, however, clearly was a difficult experience for her, but one in which the negative impact apparently was alleviated by her new relationship with Bill. Sandra says that she never again tried therapy, and that her trust in a therapist's ability being

able to deal with her SM life style was broken.

Theme 8: Recommendations to mental health professionals when dealing with clients involved in SM. Bill stated a belief that therapists are more educated about SM today than they were 20 years ago:

Bill : They wouldn't have to sit down there and try as a patient explain everything that's going on, except for maybe to say that, well, no, I don't do this, even this was in a movie you might have seen or in a book you might have read. That SM relationships are over a large gamut of possibilities, and everybody doesn't do everything that could be done, just like everybody doesn't do everything that could be done in a heterosexual two-children-type of relationship... So, a therapist would have to know that the degree of intensity isn't always there in a negative, oh, somebody is gonna hurt themselves, I better put them under therapy just to stop them, rather than say, limit what you're doing in a way that's constructive for the relationship. That kind of therapy would probably be more valuable than just say, this is a therapy than we're gonna get you to stop what you're doing. Aversion therapy, no-smoking therapy.

When asked whether he believes that aversion therapy for SM practices would work, he responded.

Bill: I don't think so. I think it maybe have an impact that would drive somebody like me who had a long desire for an SM type of a submissive relationship wouldn't necessarily say, oh well, I met somebody and drop my twenty years of mental relationship and just go on to something else. And if I did do that, and if it was a result of therapy, it would probably be more of a guilt trip and it would come back.

Sandra expressed a hope that a therapist be able to stay with a client who is involved in SM, to stay with the client's issues rather than of judging.

Sandra: I have to agree with Bill on the level of, it's more open, and I think there is more knowledge in general society. I think they [*mental health professionals*] should realize that the SM person has the same needs and emotional wants as anybody else, it's just in another direction. And that the emotional attachments are as strong as any other attachments of any other person. And that the need for security and sense of well-being is just as strong is just as strong. It's just in another direction that's unfamiliar and unrecognizable to the therapist.

...That's the direction the therapist should take, to explore it as, this is another interest that this person has personally, instead of reacting as if it's a social faux pas. And that's what I felt that I was telling her something and that it was a faux pas, that it was wrong. Oh, why am I bringing that up, oh, I don't want Sandra to touch it. Where if she explored it in a [*neutral way*], I think therapists are supposed to be non-committal and non-emotional [*non-judgmental*]. But I felt that her emotions jumped out when I started going down this path that she was unfamiliar with, that she felt so threatened that she didn't know something I was talking about, that she couldn't enter it. So, she needed to be more open.

Couple Two: Hela and Steven

Hela is an African/American woman in her mid thirties. She works as an advocate educating others on domestic violence issues. Hela practices Zen Buddhism. Steven, also in his mid thirties, is of Filipino/American descent. He is a high school teacher and a poet. He practices Sufism. They do not live together.

Theme 1: Length of relationship. Hela began a friendship with Steven in 1997 and they "were physically connecting on a very intimate level" by the end of 1999.

Theme 2: Commitment in relationship. Steven and Hela considered themselves to have an emotionally committed relationship.

Steven: "...we're definitely emotionally and intimately committed, even though...in our play we do play with other people, sometimes together and sometimes separate. How can I put this, we always come back home to one another."

To the interviewer's clarifying question, "You are committed to your relationship together?" Hela nodded affirmatively said "yes." Throughout the interview it was apparent that Hela and Steven viewed their relationship as a committed one, and that they spent much time talking about their feelings and processing their interactions. They also involved other individuals in their sexual activities, if both of them agree to such activities. In a discussion before the recorded interview Hela disclosed that she had undergone a hysterectomy and that her sexual desires have been greatly diminished since then. She viewed Steven's sex drive, in contrast, as being strong. Their solution to this was to agree to outside "play partners." It seems to have solved the problems they were having regarding their different levels of sexual interest.

Theme 3: History of their sadomasochistic sexual orientation.

Steven: I would say it had to have been about 10 years ago...and maybe a little bit longer than that...and in the relationship with that woman...we did a whole bunch of things sexually...like trying to experiment with group stuff. I tend to do all sorts of different kinds of play and we got very heavy into SM...at that point...and what I found since then that my relationships have some BD but it's not like a prerequisite for my relationships...but if SMBD figures into it than that's fine...and I had subsequently had another relationship after that woman that involved SMBD...quite deeply actually...and then after that I was involved in another relationship where there was no SMBD...and then I got together with [Hela], and [in] our relationship, specially at the beginning, there was no mention or inkling of any sort of kinky play. When we were together I told her about my past, about what I'd been into and such...She said one day she wanted to try this.

Steven had already been experimenting to various degrees with SM when he and Hela became intimate. Hela had been exposed to SM photography and some activities before she met Steven, but she was not comfortable with it

Hela: I had no idea. I didn't know what it was. I had had a previous marriage where I was indirectly being exposed to the community, like Mark Chester (*SM photographer, well-known in the scene*). My ex-husband took me to this exhibit of his work and I didn't know what I was looking at. All I know is that I was very upset. I didn't [like seeing] people being strung up, ... meat picks and things of that nature.

It was pretty intense, and it was scary for me to be associating with the male gay thing. I didn't see any woman in a powerful position, and it was done to me in a way that...was unhealthy...It was not safe for me...The things that he would do that would kind of be SM, but it wasn't anything that I know about now. I went to a couple of play parties where there were people just playing around, but I wouldn't know what I was doing. I was standing there looking pretty stupid. I didn't know what was happening.

When Steven disclosed his SM past to Hela, she became curious and wanted to try it. Steven said: "And I have a pretty formed and regimented way of training...we did that and I knew after the first session that she was definitely a masochist." (*He refers here to his "training" of a woman with sexual submissive tendencies. When he talks about a regimented way of training, he means that he has clear roles for the two of them and that he does certain SM activities which may deepen their submissive and dominant roles, within a consensual context.*) Hela thus took a quick liking to SM activities within the safety of her relationship with Steven.

Theme 4: The meaning and importance of SM in the relationship.

Hela: There's some spankings...lots of psycho-dynamic...shadow play work...working through some deep seated issues... domestic violence issue...because that's the kind of issues [I have]."

They engage in "typical SM activities, such as bondage and spankings, but the focus appears to be on acting out real emotional issues with each other.

Hela is the survivor of domestic violence. She explains that when she was a "recipient of domestic violence" she had no sense of power, but that her role as a submissive with Steven was empowering.

Hela: It gave me an opportunity as a sub [*submissive*] to say what I needed. I never had that ever in my life,

and I was able to tell my partner: this is what I need and this is what I want to have conveyed during the session. And it was safe, sane and consensual, a central safe word [*was given to her*]...I could stop anything I wanted to. It wasn't coerced or anything...we worked through some of those power dynamics. ...that was one of our things that we had. He [*Steven*] helped me with it.

Hela: [*After the domestic violent relationship*] I got into therapy...did all the support groups...you know...the (*support groups names*)...all those things...and they only could take you to a certain level...because you can't interact with your therapist on an intimate level...you can't scream and yell and go over and vent: they'll do a 5150! Things like that...and this way I could do it in a safe, sane environment with someone I care about...with holding and aftercare and do everything I needed to get me through the day...

Steven added: I think...one of the things I found interesting...especially in the previous relationships...it seemed more... sort of a sexual foreplay whereas, when I got into the relationship with Hela, and because of her mindfulness, because of her self-examination, it really was coming into focus as a tool [*of*] transformation for working through issues...and I felt ... very responsible and very, very happy with that responsibility she was entrusting me with...It was sort of strange for me because I realized that, even as a dominant, I was going through some of my own issues. Because in my own background and my own family...I had a very violent upbringing... my father was abusive to my mother and I think that I had reacted to that subsequently while growing up...in a way that was...I was extremely protective of my sisters...of my mother...of all the women in my family...and actually getting to the point when I was a teenager...growing up in the project... here in the United States, initiated into a gang, dealing with all the violence in there and I think that a degree of that violence was redirected from my own childhood towards other males that were in my own community...I just did want to say that...in this relationship with Hela ...one of the big things that I knew real...that made the whole thing ... definitely clear...as to what SMD is...it's the issue of consent. With consent it's...in a container where...this is what's ok... Parameters are set and in that time and space (*pause*) all sorts of things can be worked out...or enjoyed...or whatever...I mean...it's like interactive theater but you're actually in it...it's play...but you're in it. It made me realize...first off the male issues. There were male issues for me and I had studied martial arts...[as well as my experiences] growing up too...so there was this thing where I was trying to understand that violence is a part of us...but at the same time something that needs to be...refined to the point where you have complete control over the impulse. And in relationships...I had become sort of in denial of that violent impulse...within me...at some point...I would probably say in my early 20's...just sort of like...the interest in love and peace and all that fuzzy hippie stuff...I just wanted to...be peaceful...but the thing is...is that whenever conflict would arise...I would shut down...just because...that became my thing...just shut down whenever any sort of conflict would arise...and in relationships... conflict happens...and my whole thing was just to shut down or run away or just end the relationship. Now I go ahead and deal with the conflict, in a non-violent manner.

The interviewer next asked Steven about an experience he had mentioned in a pre-interview telephone conversation. The interviewer used the term "slave," a term commonly used in the SM community. The topic of race surfaced as Steven responded, "Well, that's funny, that word, slave--we don't use that word." The substitution of the word "sub", as "submissive," was suggested, but Steven explained "No that's fine...but we should explain why...go ahead and explain why we do not use slave..."

Hela: There's some issues around race and dynamics of historical and ancestry...We had decided that, because of my history on this planet, my people here, who came across the water [*her African ancestors*], they were forced across the water...we don't use the word master, we don't use the word slave.

Interviewer: What do you use?

Hela: We basically use other words that connote...submissiveness, but we add a beauty to it, and there's a respect around the position. And what happens, those words [*slave, master*] for me, they trigger a visceral response. Whether I'm conscious or not, but I hear it, I feel everyone that came before me is there.

The interviewer expressed understanding and Hela said: “So that’s why we decided we couldn’t do that” (*Use the term ‘slave’*)

After this important clarification they talked about their ethnic backgrounds, and Steven spoke of another powerful experience in which the therapeutic effects of consensual SM role play can be witnessed:

Steven: She (*a sexually submissive woman*) had been with us as a couple for a little while before... We had reached the level that we were able to play as deeply as this one session that we had done... Her ancestry is Italian/American, and there was this very interesting thing where one day I asked her if she would, if she could do a session where we would do some race play... It was interesting because [*Hela*] didn’t want to be there for that. I think that she was aware that it was going to be a particularly heavy session... It was a very heavy session... the amazing thing about it is that it was in the context of that container... you know we negotiated. She had a hard time with a few issues, and we agreed [*on*] the safe word. And I reminded her that she must use that if she were having a problem. And she, because we have this relationship with her she was very well aware of the fact that after care was always available and important to us. So (*name of the person*) and I played together alone, and Hela had decided not to be there for that and the session was a full expression of my own ancestral racial rage focused on her. And because she is a masochist she can take a lot of things. She took it onto an emotional level too, expressing a lot of shame and guilt of her own. And the amazing, the surprising thing about it that we went into the session with rage, this horrible bitter issue. We played heavily, more heavy than I remember playing, and how we eventually ended up coming out of it was that, in the end, when the session was winding down after its crescendo, when it started to wind down, she was in tears. But then she reached up to me... as I had unbound her and, as I was holding her in that segment of aftercare, feeling her in my arms, looking into her eyes, feeling her heart beat and the embrace. This is a human being that I was holding in my arms! That the ethnic background, everything had sort of been sort of whittled away, down to this point where it was just two human beings. And then of course I cried myself.

Steven continued to elaborate on the profound meaning that this SM experience had for him:

Steven: I pride myself on being a reasonable person... I’m going to be specific then... [*He is a reasonable person*] with regards to identity politics and stuff like that... I’m a little ashamed to say that these things are still issues. And as hard as I’ve worked on it, whether through therapy or through work and all that, it still keeps creeping up. All I have to do is look at the news or something like that and... it still pushes my buttons... It’s a constant struggle to deal with the race issue... I had never felt so completely... alleviated of it... this session really... was amazingly healing for us, which was very surprising, very, very surprising. And I subsequently went on with a new sort of expanded consciousness. And I am able to look at people as not so much their race but... it’s having the memory of holding (*name of submissive woman*) after that session, feeling her breathing, her heart beat, feeling the wetness of her tears, and her sobs and everything. It makes me realize that human beings are human beings, and it was sort of like me in after care holding an infant.

Steven continued with another experience illuminating how they utilize their SM activities for dealing with personal issues:

Steven: We had this session once. In our regular life she was really annoying me with this issue that kept coming up. I (*addressing Hela*) realize that you’re not proud of this but as an African American woman she had this body issue. She kept talking about her beautiful body in a way that was demeaning, saying like her butt is too big and this that and the other thing, these things that I regard as beautiful and desirable, she was like putting down and then... me saying it to her... that no... these are beautiful, these are beautiful... then her denying it, that was sort of like hitting me on the level like, so you’re saying that what I desire is ugly and wrong. And of course, you have to deal with a media It’s putting on us this... of what the ideal beauty is and all that, which I personally find very boring... and also touch-wise, there’s not much to hold on to. So here she is, the most beautiful woman in the world to me, and she says she’s not. So I said OK, go get the collar... We had a session where... at one point I poured it on... I intertwined in the whole issue... “How can you say that you’re ugly and how can you say that this beautiful African form that you’ve been given is [*ugly*]”, and that was working into the whole thing. And she broke down at some point, and I never had to hear about that again. Now she flaunts it [*her body*].

Steven spoke of about how his SM exposure and practice has influenced other parts of his life:

Steven: It's...interesting because that brings out the issue of the fact that SMBD does inform the other parts of my life. It informs my teaching, it informs how I deal with other people and communicate with other people. I think I'm a much better negotiator. When I started being much more serious about SMBD because, you do this thing where you negotiate. You're very point blank about what the needs are, are they going to be met, are they going to be exceeded, you're really clear on these things.

I have carried that into everything that I do, whether I'm negotiating a new contract or talking to my students or, even MC'ing a show or something like that, topping the audience (*laughs*). It really has greatly informed my other...aspects of my life. And even on a more subtle levels...I kind of think that deep inside everyone there's this little perv that's locked away...I'm not always trying to access it, but I know that from what I've witnessed in play, there are certain things that are true. That a lot of people just won't accept that, and knowing that and keeping that knowledge sort of lets me know where I can go with certain things and where I can't go with certain things.

Hela spoke of spirituality, communication and community and what they meant to her:

Hela: A lot of it has to do with connecting the spirit in different ways, but the communication level was so important. And we've learned through mistakes that when you don't communicate it can explode, you can't get away with not connecting on every little level. It's like people that are not in SMBD, they make all the mistakes, they say I'm sorry...and they keep going, they make more mistakes. They don't learn, but in this situation [*SM*] you really have someone's life in your hands, and so there's a different level of spiritual connection for me. This is my experience with SM and the people I play with, that has to be there, this is my version, people have different versions.

What I've seen has made us really be committed and mindful, and it's also allowed us to bring in the community to help us with whatever comes up. And it's been very supportive, I mean, the community that we attach ourselves to. We e-mail each other, they come to our events, they support us in our activist work or whatever. They show up at events around the city, they come to spiritual requests that we may have...They kind of saved my emotional state because I wasn't sure what I was thinking, what I had a right to think, and I have people I can call and say, hey...am I tripping, or what's going on?

The couple talked about belonging to a group for "BDSM players of color... and they're supportive non-people-of -color..."

Steven: When we're together, we're dealing with real issues...We're not doing it because we're proud of it or anything like that, [*but*] because we have to...such as using those certain words or how does race play fit into our play and how does it not in it or whatnot...This community that we've joined is very surprisingly supportive. I mean these are people of color who are sort of double marginalized. First off being people of color in this country, second off being kinks, kinky people of color.

Theme 5: Impact of attitudes from others. Steven had spoken about feeling [*dually*] marginalized; they now talked about their needs to be discreet about their SM orientation with people who are not involved in the practice themselves. Hela's best friend has not been told about her SM activities.

Hela: I don't talk about, this is not like a topic of conversation. It's something private for me, and some of my best friends, they don't know. We don't talk about it, it doesn't come up. For me this is my private thing I do with the people of like mind. If people are not into it, I don't want to disclose. I don't want to try to explain it, because there's so much mystery. There's too much weirdness, stuff like 9 1/2 weeks and these movies that come out, that's what they identify it [*with*]. I don't need to educate them on this ...subject that can really make people go into orbit with their emotional, religious, spiritual issues.

A known SM photographer asked Steven to be in a photograph, but Steven felt that it would be too risky, especially regarding

his work as a teacher, to be possibly publicly “outed” about his SM involvement:

Steven: Are we like being discrete because we’re ashamed of it?...It wasn’t that I was ashamed of it...I work in education. Even though I had for a moment there lost my *[stance]* “so what if the parents find out, so what if the administration finds out!” And then I realized, wait a minute, my job is my job and, I love my job and I don’t want to have to lose my job because of something that I do behind closed doors...I know that it doesn’t matter, but I realize that some people out there might have a problem with it. Like the parents...And even the kids...that would be kind of funny *[if the kids saw his SM picture]* “I saw you whooping on a woman...”

Hela shared a dream that relates to her playing many different roles in her life:

Hela: I did have a weird dream last week about these lives intersecting, like who am I fooling kind of thing. It was a really strange dream. It was about who am I to all these different people. I’m one person to this group of people, I’m this person to this advocacy group of people, but I’m this to my artistic friends. I’m this way to my family...like I had a split personality, like the three faces of Eve. When are these lives going to intercept and I had this dream of all these waves intercepting and melting into each other. And then they kept going in and out, in and out, in and out, and first of all I was feeling bad that I had to have all these different things here and there, but most of us do have different lives...I know businessmen are one way when they are at work and they’re different when they’re with their chums and with their polo friends and so on...I kept saying: am I doing something wrong, am I being a fake? And I was having this strange epiphany dream thing...I guess it was because I was doing this interview...but it was very strong.

Themes 6 and 7: Experiences with psychotherapy and attitudes of mental health professionals regarding SM.

Steven was seeing a spiritual Sufi counselor. “[My sexual orientation] never really came up...it’s sort of like...I remember trying to bring it up but it’s sort of like in the realm of...that’s what you do sexually...whatever...” When asked about previous psychotherapists he recalled:

Steven: I do remember one counselor that I had, and this is while I was in college. I mentioned that I had done this *[SM]* with a partner...I just noticed the pen moving a lot more...she was just writing a lot more. I’m not sure what that was about, if she was...excited about what I was talking about...but whatever the case may be, she would bring the session back to other dynamics of the relationship...Either she didn’t want to concentrate on or it was more like, OK but what about...I guess she would bring it back to putting the cap on the toothpaste...regular everyday relationship.

Hela had a positive experience with her therapist of two years regarding her self-disclosure concerning SM activities:

Hela: When I told her she didn’t flinch. She didn’t act really weird, she didn’t take a bunch of notes, because she never works that way anyway. She did ask me about communication, if I was adding too much into the relationship that was already kind of being tested with other issues. She felt that this was adding a whole other dimension that could break it because of the intensity of what needs to be done when you’re in SMBD. So she understood that there was a heavier dynamic added onto whatever I was already going through, what we were actually going through. She didn’t judge it, she just wanted to make sure I was safe, sane and doing the consensual thing. She didn’t seem to really know a lot about this kind of play, so I did explain a few things to her, but when I explained it to her, there wasn’t any weirdness in her voice, there was no strange inflections or anything like that.

Theme 8: Recommendations to mental health professionals. Hela expressed a need for therapists to be educated about the topic. She recommended a former dominatrix, Midori, who offers educational courses on the topic. An informed therapist should know that some SM activities can even be therapeutic for their practitioners.

Hela: Then the other thing to know is that within the realms of this safe, sane and consensual, communicative play there could be some insightful transformation, deep, deep issues that they can’t even get to with all that talk,

talk, talk all the time [*in talk therapy*], because it empowers their patient to take their own healing in their own hands, and say yes and no and develop boundaries and connect with community instead of taking it into the back room somewhere and doing a secretive kind of weird thing. I think they could know that it could take you to a different level if it's done in a safe way.

I counsel women that have been in domestic violence situations. This (*SM practice*) never comes up. I would be considered crazy if I brought this up in sessions because the whole issue of someone being disempowered and then going to a situation where they think that they're not being empowered, they tweak this as being a victim.

Steven emphasized the need for mental health professionals to have the knowledge to help clients make a distinction between safe, sane and consensual SM activities and violence.

Steven: I think primary, for the welfare of the client, safe, sane and consensual, always being reminded of that is the principles of play. Those three are the saving graces of what we do, and that's on a very primary level...It's interesting because that also becomes the definition of what separates this from actual violence and coercion and whatnot, and those have no place in SMBD. And I think beyond that, to realize that this is a means of transformation, that this is a means...I know plenty of people come out of their own problems, their own issues, and have effectively transformed themselves into more complete human beings. Although this is delving into the shadowy side of things, a necessary thing for us to do. With SMBD you're sitting down in another...phase or state where you're negotiating and saying, if we're going to do this, we're going to want to play with this issue and...work out the parameters of what that play session is going to be like. But it has a beginning, a middle and an end. And knowing that there is an end to it, what happens in that session is not going to bear the weight of the entire relationship. And it's not going to become this thing "I remember when you said to me..." and it doesn't become this Jerry Springer or circus show. What happens is you're able to rationally sit down and say, OK, what did we do, and that way...when people are doing it unconsciously, it's not in a container. You're just like screaming and yelling at each other. And usually you don't even ...understand why you're acting that way...For me it's been a great tool for self-examination.

Couple Three: Lynn and Brian

Lynn and Brian are married. They live together in their home in Southern California. Lynn, who is about 50 years old, holds a well-paying position in a large company, and Brian, 55 years old, is successfully managing a wealthy person's financial assets. They each have a son age twenty from a previous marriage. The sons spend part of their time with them, part of their time they live with their respective other parents.

Theme 1: Length of their relationship. Lynn stated that they have "known each other over 15 years and we've been married for 13 years."

Theme 2: Commitment in their relationship. Brian said: "You know, we're very traditional people. We don't play outside, we don't do [*sexual*] things with other people." When asked whether they are sexually exclusive, Brian explained further:

Brian: Absolutely. Sexually exclusive and...you know we think of our sex lives as private. It seems a little funny saying that here, interviewing with you. But we do, we see it as private...We live in a conservative neighborhood and we just have sort of a traditional marriage.

Lynn confirmed that commitment is "very important. And we enjoy things together and see each other as being together always."

Theme 3: History of their sadomasochistic sexual orientation.

Brian: I came this way. My first...experiences in sexual inklings were SM oriented. I really didn't have a name for it at that time but they were...I had these feelings and for a long time...I didn't connect them with my sex life at all. I think for a long time I didn't think I had any sex life...I thought somehow I had these interests but I

didn't...(he was not sure for many years, until he was in his forties.)

Lynn did not know about SM until she got involved with Brian and he began telling her about his sexual interests and feelings. She apparently was very understanding and accepting of his SM orientation, and later on in their relationship she discovered what she could enjoy herself:

Lynn: And it took about a year or so for me to actually be comfortable and then it's really evolved...for me to be comfortable and actually participate in it and being tough. But at the time...when we first met...we had a fairly decent sex life and he said to me one day...well maybe if I get a continuous amount of sex then this other side will go away. And I said to him...well...you know...this has been with you since puberty it's probably not very likely. But he did tell me that he didn't think he had much of a sex drive and I said to him...well if you're masturbating three times a day...what is that? So...even though I hadn't been a part of it before...I had read about it and I was accepting of it but also I think I helped Brian accept this part of himself so that he doesn't think of it as dirty and the way he had before. He was a lot more comfortable with it and the other side of it is. Some of the intensity has been taken away for him since it isn't dirty.

they do engage in intense levels of "pain play", where Lynn administers canings and puts nipple clamps on Brian when sexually active with each other. Once in a while, about two or three times a year, they engage in more formal scenes, which Brian loves to do but is not as interesting for Lynn. In these situations, often within the context of an event put on by the SM community, they get into roles, where she plays the dominant woman and he plays the submissive man.

Lynn: Well, once in a while we agree to do it and he pretty much sort of develops the script and he goes to this fantasy and writes the script and rewrites continuously and for a while I was not that comfortable with it because I felt that reality did not live up to the fantasy...During these activities like Brian mentioned, the part that I enjoy is the sensation. I actually like creating pain and there's usually some of that involved with just our everyday lovemaking. So I've never felt like I didn't get my needs met.

Theme 4: Meaning and importance of SM in their relationship. SM has always been important to Brian, and the fact that Lynn was accepting and even became interested in it herself was an important aspect for their marriage to work. It could be that Lynn would be fine if SM was not a part of their sexual activities, but for Brian SM was clearly important. The fact that they found a way of incorporating SM into their relationship that worked for both of them seemed to strengthen their marriage. It also seemed to have had a therapeutic effect on Brian to have his wife embrace his sexual SM orientation. SM community, or rather friendships with people open to and involved in SM, were also important.

Brian: I guess one of the things to tell you is that we're real sexual people; I mean it's a big part of our life. To be in an environment with other people where that's sort of off the table leaves out a lot. You're not going to feel like they're real friends of yours, they're acquaintances. They can never be more than acquaintances. Sex is such a ticklish subject in the United States, so repressed that I would imagine that other people who have strong sexual interests, of whatever variety, probably have the same feeling. They don't feel really like they have acquaintances that don't relate that way and that they probably have closer friends that they feel open to about that.

Theme 5: Impact of attitudes from others regarding their SM activities. Brian shared that he always brought up his SM orientation when he was with a new partner. He spoke about his experience of already having had to come to terms with feeling misunderstood and judged all his life, especially by his father, because of his dyslexia.

Brian: One of the other issues that I have is that I'm dyslexic, and I'm fairly seriously dyslexic...I just had a terrible time...I didn't read until I was 14 and so, of course, I had a terrible time in grade school and...it was at a time when people didn't really know what dyslexia was, and at the beginning...everybody...their first thought was that I was stupid, and I think people thought that for a good long time. They sent me away and tested my IQ and it turned out that I had like 160 IQ. So I'm fairly bright and...so that was a problem to deal with... It was a problem of many, many people coming to the conclusion that you were stupid and you knowing that you weren't...And my father never did get the picture, I mean he just never did get the picture. He got tired, he just wanted me to do...well in school...He was an attorney, he wanted me to be an attorney and he just never did get the

picture. And so I had this sort of parallel activity that was going on and it was in many ways very similar to my sexual life, where I was misunderstood about what this was about... So I felt like I was OK but, for whatever reasons, it was going to be hard for me to have other people understand that... Basically if you (*a new potential partner*) were going to be judgmental (*regarding his SM orientation*) we weren't going to go very far. I was going to talk about this pretty soon. You could imagine that someone [*with an SM orientation*] could have gone from that place and bought in to the idea that they were sick and then, in response to that, not insisted that you have to accept me the way I am. [They] sort of bought into the idea they were sick and then pushed it very far underground and led a double life, even with their mate, and I had no desire to lead a double life with my mate. I think that this issue I had with the dyslexia was sort of a more open model that led me into that. Because I knew I wasn't stupid, but I knew I was having a hard time getting that across, so I think what I felt... I sort of came with a number of potentials and a number of problems and I think that I had some sense that it was a hard puzzle but all these pieces fit together somehow and if we work at it, it will work out.

Both Lynn and Brian had not disclosed their SM orientation to any family members. Lynn said that if her twenty-year-old son were to ask her now, she would tell him: "And I think at this point, I don't know about his son, but if my son were to ask I would feel comfortable telling him, but I would also express to him, it's still a private thing the way people make love is something private."

Lynn and Brian also had not disclosed to anyone who is not clearly involved in the SM community:

Lynn : We are not that close to many people, especially in the so-called vanilla community. We don't have close friends [*outside the SM community*]. Some of the people I work with sometime joke around about SM and I just kind of joke back but I think it would be really shocking to people who see me as such a traditional person that never does anything wrong and if they realized that side of me. In fact one time... I have this leather jacket, it's a blue leather jacket, I can't wear black, and it's very plain looking, nothing SM about it and I wear it to work one or two times a week. And some person said to me one day, you know there's no telling what other clothes you have at home. And I was just thinking, if you only knew!

Brian also was careful whom he discloses to:

Brian: I feel like I take a fair bit of effort to hide my feelings... I've had a variety of experiences when talking to other people, I was like everybody else. I dated and was trying to find a mate and in the course of that had to explain what my interests were, and I've had a whole variety of reactions to that.

I've had reactions all the way from... the "I know a good psychiatrist I could recommend to you"... to a lot of people see it as sick My first wife liked it, was excited by it and then eventually thought of it as sick. And so we had a very unsuccessful marriage that way, and eventually that ended in divorce.

Theme 6: Experiences with psychotherapy. Brian disclosed: "I said earlier I was 55 and I had a fair amount of counseling for a good long time and probably started as early as my early teen years." The early therapy was around his learning disorder, which was not recognized back then. He had a terrible time being misdiagnosed and misunderstood by both mental health professionals and his father.

Brian: I think it's useful to think in terms of... you have some primary issues that maybe you're dealing with (*in psychotherapy*) but it's also pretty easy to get into secondary issues... I think that's where I started talking about my dad, never did get it about the dyslexia and... he never did. And so he wasn't very accepting of me, all he knew was I wasn't doing well at school and I think he somehow thought I was doing it because... [*I wanted*] to be mean to him... and so fairly quickly we got into all sorts of secondary issues. Of not being loved or not being accepted... You end up with self worth issues and anger... and at the time... I'm talking about dyslexia because later on I want to sort of bring in that and use it as an analogy but at the time people didn't know about dyslexia, and when they figured out you weren't stupid, all of [a] sudden they thought you were obstinate. Well, if you aren't stupid then that doesn't explain why you can't read, then you're obstinate because you do just not want to do it or you're lazy because you're not putting in the effort or whatever. There were all sorts of negative

judgmental explanations for why this was happening, and all of those led down into various...what I would call secondary problems, being angry...you knew you were working hard, other people didn't believe you.

Lynn had experiences with mental health professionals in individual and couple's counseling.

Theme 7: Attitude of the mental health professionals towards SM. Brian shared that in the sixties "SM was very much sort of in the closet, very underground and in general I think people thought of it as a (people when I mean people I'm talking about therapists in general), thought about it as a sickness." When he tried to share his SM orientation with mental health professionals he was met with no understanding or willingness to explore at all: "And so I think that some of the early therapist that I dealt with...sort of came from the idea of well just don't do that."

As time went on, Brian had both positive and negative experiences with mental health professionals.

Brian: Later on and I'm not sure, perhaps a certain amount of it was a function of the time, but I think that some other amount was the function or the quality of the therapist. I'm a land developer, that's what I do for a living... You get people that have sort of two ways of thinking about things. A lot of people think in terms of sort of a mechanical/ builder way about things, you take this material and you cut it up and you make it look like you want to, nail it together and you get exactly what's in your mind eye, as a vision and some things work that way pretty well. But many other things are more sort of like a gardening process...The task you have is to sort of figure out what sort of plant this wants to be, how much water it needs, how much soil and your task is to encourage this by providing those things.

Theme 8: Recommendations to mental health professionals when dealing with clients involved in SM. Lynn shared one of her experiences with mental health professionals:

Lynn: We have both gone to counseling a few times since we've been married and I went to this one licensed clinical social worker and he and I were talking about the relationship that Brian and I had and I mentioned to him the SM and this man seemed fairly open about a lot of things but obviously he didn't have a lot of experience with the SM and he made the comment I just mentioned we were involved in SM and his response was "well, that's fine but do you have to do it every time?" And I had not said anything to him about the frequency or anything, and I just took it as, he was very naïve, he didn't know anything about it. I didn't really take it as he was being judgmental and I just basically said to him, well, that's not really my problem here, if I can get back and focus on my problem and, we went on he accepted it.

She shared that she did not want to spend her money educating the unknowledgeable therapist on SM and what it may mean. The therapist that she went to see from time to time together with her husband had a much more accepting attitude towards their SM orientation, although their sexuality never was the focus of the therapy: issues with the kids were. According to Lynn, the therapist did not know much about SM, but he was able to stay with the client's issues, he "does the gardening", as Brian had described it in his metaphor above (the mechanical/builder way versus the gardening way).

Lynn encouraged a therapist to make a distinction between destructive and constructive SM behavior:

Lynn: See how it fits in their entire life. If SM damages the person then they need help with it but if it's a healthy part of their life then why bother with it...why mess with it? Accept it and learn from it.

And **Brian** added:

I'd take that a step back from what you just said. I think perhaps at the early stages many people might...it might appear that...the SM elements in their life are causing them a lot of discomfort and are causing them to be dysfunctional...But I think in that case, whether the right answer is to say "lets explore this" and maybe it will develop into a good part of this person's life or maybe not, maybe there are things behind here that aren't going to work very well and I don't know. I guess what I'm trying to say is that you might very easily see someone who's having a great deal of difficulty with their SM or you might see 10 people and some of them could develop

a great life, accepting their SM and some of them might very well have to do something else and work it through and their SM would maybe disappear. I don't know, it wasn't my experience [*that the SM disappeared*], but I can imagine that it could go either way, and having a strong mindset in either direction, I think could be harmful.

Couple Four: Simone and Tim

Simone and Tim are in their mid-fifties. They live in the house they own in the San Francisco Bay Area. Simone works in the field of social psychology, while Tim, as a Vietnam Veteran, is on disability but works part-time as a hypnotherapist.

Theme 1: Length of their relationship.

Simone: Well, today's our third wedding anniversary but we had a commitment ceremony exactly a year before that. So we've been committed together for four years and then we were together before that for awhile but committed in the relationship four years.

Tim: It was a very short courtship process...it was almost as soon as we found each other we recognized that this was what we were really looking for in a relationship...both of had three previous marriages...or three previous long term relationships. My last relationship was with a woman who was a therapist but it was a completely vanilla relationship (*vanilla means non-SM sexuality*).

Theme 2: Commitment in relationship.

Tim: The way I see it is that what we have is a core relationship. We're polyamorous. We have relationships, sexual relationships, with others, but our relationship remains a core committed relationship because this is going to be here when everyone else is gone. When there's no libido going on, if we can't perform [*sexually*], a lot of our play partners would not be around but we're going to be here for each other and that's the kind of commitment we have, [*a*] kind of work real hard in a head commitment.

Simone: And it's also very important to us that we have a clear understanding of what's important for the other person, in terms of these other people as well. Part of our commitment to each other is to respect and guarantee the happiness of the other person and it that means having other partners, and if it means being alone for awhile, whatever it means, that's part of the commitment. It isn't just paying lip service to, it really is very important to both of us if the other one is getting what they need.

Theme 3: History of their sadomasochistic sexual orientation. Simone explained that it was a part of her all her life, but that she had to keep it mostly hidden until she became involved with Tim:

Simone: I've been in it since I was a child. I had puberty very, very early. I'm 54 now and I had puberty at 10. My first sexual experience was actually an S&M experience. It was with another girl, so I was under the impression that everybody did it. I was sorely awakened that that was not true. So I've actually been doing this for a very long time and involved in the fantasy aspect of it and playing it out, and then there were long periods of my life where I didn't, times when I was married...Other people [*her previous partners*], they wouldn't encourage you to talk about your fantasies until you talk about it up front then... "you're a freak you're a freak!" and then you stop talking about it. But then there were periods when I was very active. I wasn't active sort of in the outside scene, because I was private. It wasn't like in public or doing any of that. And when Tim and I got together 4 1/2 years ago, we came to this together and then it was very exciting because both of us wanted to explore everything. We had been so oppressed in all of our marriages and it was always so wrong and it was so fucked up and it was so sick and then it was like, good, let's be fucked up and wrong together!

Tim shared that he, too, had early fantasies.

Tim: I had what most people in the scene (*have*): I had early fantasies. Most of my fantasies were like rape fantasies. Not like violent rape fantasies. My fantasy was I would capture someone and then force arousal where

they couldn't help themselves.

(I experienced these fantasies) very early, and in 1981. I met a woman in a conference at the University of Santa Cruz and she liked to get spanked, she liked to get fucked doggy style and get spanked and worked on herself with a vibrator. I thought that was like really hot. We had a relationship for 5 years. I liked it a lot, so I kind of like got into it, but mainly private play up until Simone got involved.

When they became involved with each other, they found a sexual role-play which worked well for both of them.

Theme 4: Meaning and importance of SM in their relationship. Simone and Tim considered their sexual fantasy enactment a helpful and enjoyable and even saw it as a therapeutic tool.

Tim: It's interesting to me because *[Simone]* is adopted and early on in our relationship we were kind of looking for the niche. I can bottom or I can top, I like to top. Simone could bottom and she could top but she really likes to top. So really we were kind of looking for how we were going to *[integrate]* that in our relationship.

Simone is adopted and I have an estranged relationship with my own daughters. I was in the military service and we were separated all the time and that's when I started divorcing her mother, we were separated all the time and I really never had the opportunity to be a father to my kids. We *[Simone and Tim]* kind of fell upon this daddy/daughter or daddy/sweet little girl kind of relationship, which was really a power based relationship.

And it is powerful...in a psychological sense...I'll let Simone speak for herself. I think she gets a lot out of that in terms of her being adopted, and I know I certainly get a lot out of it in terms of being able to actually be a father, take care of her, to be the perfect father.

Simone shared how her experience as an adopted child had impacted her and how, in her fantasy enactment with her husband, she felt that she received gratification and satisfaction around her old issues.

Simone: And for me as well. I was adopted at a very young age and I was adopted by a couple who were perfectly fine people, but I didn't have the kind of family life. My mother was sick from the time I was very young, so my home life was screwy and I always had this fantasy. But because I'm adopted and because I knew a little bit about the fact of my heritage and where I came from that...when I was a teenager I sort of constructed this whole reality and I had a image in my head about how wonderful my father was. And in reality he probably doesn't even know I exist, because he was a sailor and he knocked up my mother, and then he went away and then I think he has no basis to think that he has this daughter somewhere in the world. So this fantasy really gives me a healthy, sound, full, rich, empowered place in the world that I never had in my regular life...and knowing that I give Tim that opportunity to be that perfect father, that it is wonderful, it's completely enriching to our relationship. Nobody says you're nuts. In fact my son, who is now almost 14, knows about this and we talk about it and it's our way of telling him that there are lots of ways in your life that you can fix things, and that I had experiences as a child that were not ideal and now I have the opportunity as an adult to make that perfect for me in a way that enriches everything. How could there possibly be anything wrong with that.

Sexuality was important to them, and they also found their fantasy play sexually very gratifying.

Tim: Well the hot stuff is all the taboo things about father/daughter sex. We play that up a lot, especially about the initial part, where I initiated her, we play that again and again.

Simone: It is such an interesting play of emotions...physicality...and there's a lot of adrenaline rushing and there's a lot of sweat and it's an amazing thing. I think it really would benefit a lot of people, the mental health professionals, especially *[those]* who are encountering clients who do this, or who are even thinking about doing this stuff, to understand that this is really an additive effect. I know a lot of people who really have a bad time in life...but they have a bad time in life, whether they're doing this stuff or not, they're determined to be miserable, but people who are having a good time in this arena, playing in this scene, are having a very good time. And it is

so additive to who you are as a person, and I am much happier, much more content and much more stimulated... just having a great time, doing the things that we do, especially doing them together, there's nothing I prefer (*to do sexually*).

Other people, mostly non-SM players and therapists, did not seem to understand.

Theme 5: Impact of attitudes from others regarding their SM activities.

Simone: And it is tremendously therapeutic and it's interesting because the therapist who we see periodically, the two of us, kind of doesn't really get it. I mean, he doesn't say anything like, you shouldn't do that, it's stupid or whatever, but he also doesn't embrace it. He doesn't say "how good for both of you!"

Tim: He doesn't ask pertinent questions about it. A therapist typically asks you. If you say something about this daughter/daddy relationship is really helping my life... [*the therapist*] will ask a pertinent questions: well, how is that, what does that do? There is no probing question.

Theme 6: Experiences with psychotherapy. Both Simone and Tim had had extensive experiences with psychotherapy, individually and as couples. Tim was a Vietnam veteran, diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and he was on disability.

Theme 7: Attitude of mental health professional towards SM orientation.

Simone: And they think that that's something in the whole DS and SM arena. They [*mental health professionals*] don't understand kind of what goes on for people [*who engage in SM*]. They do not understand. They say things like "oh, you must do this because" and then they fill in some blanks about a difficult childhood or abuse. [*Or they say*] You're a large woman and you have a bad image of yourself, all of this stuff, so therefore you must enjoy hitting people or getting hit, and it bears no resemblance to that at all. And I know a lot of people in the scene have this same experience (*with therapists*). A number of woman all sat around one day and said, have you heard this one (*What her therapist's theory was why she was involved in SM*), and everybody had. ...Or counselor or your parents or brothers or people pathologize it in a different way, because you're depressed or it's because you are power hungry or because you never had Tootsie Rolls when you were a child. People make up all kinds of reasons why we do this, and by way of sort of expressing this like there is something wrong with it, and you should not do it, and you should have to be fixed. (*They*) build a theory around it, as opposed to [*accepting*] just that's what we do, like anything else. I think from responses I've received, both from the mental health community and just people who aren't in the scene, there's a misunderstanding of the SM stuff. It's like, how can you want somebody to hurt you, or how can you hurt somebody. It's not like a bad thing, but the DS stuff is almost worse...It's like you get in somebody's head and you really, excuse the expression, fuck them up. And to us that's the juiciest part of it, and to the partner's it's the juiciest part of it. It's something that people really don't get, because...I think a lot of people look at the ideal life as sort of a straight life, just go along and everything is fine, a little bump up, a little bump down. ...And it's interesting to me, especially that therapists with whom I would mention this, not as I'm here because I feel bad because I do this, it's a part of my life, there are a lot of parts of my life, that's one of them, but as soon as I would reveal that this was my sexual preference. I mean anything [*sexual*], I'm bisexual, for example, or I [*am*] into SM, that the therapist [*says*], oh God, we better fix her. It became as if the very act of it [*being involved in SM*] said other things about you...If you're in a company of therapists, ...you must be going to a therapist because you're involved in [*SM*]...because it's an indicator that you're sick, or it's an indicator that there's something not right with you, or how could a healthy person want to do these things, as opposed to, well let's go with the therapy and understand what you're really saying... saying and meaning: "what brings you here today, what is bothering you, what really, what do *you* think needs help, or what is it you want, what are you unhappy about, or what do you want changed" as opposed to assume[ing] that that's part of it, whatever the problem is.

Theme 8: Recommendations to mental health professionals when dealing with clients involved in SM. Simone recommended a therapist to stay with what the client want to deal with instead of assuming the SM involvement needs

attention, when, in fact, the client does not see it as a problem.

Simone: I think an open mind is the first step, because I know for myself, and I've been in different forms of therapy for a very long time, and whether it's an analyst, psychiatrist, or just whatever credentials a person has, I think to really come to it with an open mind and a validation, to legitimize it or not assume that it is a bad, sick, terrible thing, which is what others felt they come to, and to really understand that it isn't necessarily the problem, that's it something that people enjoy doing. And that everybody gets something out of it, and if they don't, they don't do it anymore. And it's no use to say that everybody has a bad time, that's not really true, that nobody gets hurt, people do get hurt and make mistakes. You can get hurt playing tennis. It's not like it's something specific to this arena. And I think if they really come to it, trying to see it as a valid alternative lifestyle, it's like anything else. You mentioned earlier that people in the community have finally accepted homosexuality as something other than some terrible disease and some terrible awfulness. This is kind of like that. I think this is the next frontier to that people are really kind of now accepting Gay Pride parade, and maybe they'll look at Folsom Street Fair [*an annual SM street fair in San Francisco*] the same. They'll look at all this stuff going on and that it really is a spectrum. We aren't all leather boys with our butts hanging out, or we're not pony boys, but this is a real spectrum. This is a real variation of people, all sorts of things, some of them we like and some of them we don't, some of them we try out and some of them we do again. And I used to say all the time, if I like it I'll do it again, if I don't, I won't. I'm pretty much open to trying anything. And I think that is something that I don't see a lot of in the mental health professional arena. There seems to be a prescribed script that within these boundaries that's normal acceptable behavior. If you go to this side, if you go to that side, there's something wrong with you. And I am glad you're here because I can help fix you. It's really coming at recognizing that those boundaries are much broader.

Tim raised the interesting topic of seeing SM practitioners as part of a special culture, and that a good therapist would need to deal with SM as a different culture. According to Tim, a therapist also would need to remain aware of his or her own cultural issues regarding the therapist's culture:

Tim: I guess we all can say is that if you're in a particular therapy session with someone and the person brings up this kind of lifestyle...and you [*the therapist*] feel odd about it, use that moment to explore that for yourself as a therapist. This is the edges of your cultural fantasy, and it's an opportunity for you to push beyond that and see some understanding as opposed to immediately look at it as something that's out of the manual and has a certain pathology to it. If you're feeling uncomfortable about it, good! But recognize that that's your culture talking to you. It's the edges of your culture...That's about you...(*the therapist*).

I have a great deal of respect for therapists. I had a lot of therapy; most of it hasn't gone into the realm of this. Mainly the therapy that I go for is the type of therapy that everyone goes for. So, I have a lot of respect for therapists, for the profession. My belief is that oftentimes therapists get trapped in their own culture. What they may see as enmeshed with an American family would be perfectly fine in an Asian family. So, I think this is one of those kinds of things: it is a different culture that needs to be observed as a culture of itself.

Summary of the Results of the Study

Theme 1: Length of Relationship

The couples had been in relationships between two-and-one-half and nineteen years. The couple who had been together for the least amount of time, couple two, was not married and did not live together; the other three couples were married and own houses together.

Theme 2: Commitment in Relationship

All four couples stated that they were very much committed to their relationship with each other, although the nature of their

commitment ranged from sexual exclusivity within the committed relationship to openness to sexual experiences with others within the committed relationship. Couples one and three were sexually exclusive with each other, although Sandra, the woman in couple one, did do some SM activities with other men, i.e. whipped a submissive man at a party. Couple three was clearly sexually exclusive with each other and committed to their relationship. Couples two and four, in contrast, were open to having sexual as well as SM experiences with other partners. They communicated about their activities with their primary partners, and they did get involved in occasional sexual activities with more than one person at a time. Couples two and four stated that their primary relationship was most important to them, and that the sexual experiences outside of that relationship did not compromise their commitment to each other.

Theme 3: History of Sadomasochistic Sexual Orientation

Six out of the eight individuals had early SM experiences and fantasies in their lives while the remaining two, both women, discovered SM through their partners more recently. Both partners in couples one and four had early SM experiences and SM fantasies early in their lives. Brian, the husband of couple three, said “I came this way.” Tim, of couple four, talked about early fantasies, and that he believed that many people in the SM scene have early fantasies. His wife Lynn did not have any experience with SM until they began to be sexual with each other. Steven, of couple two, had experimented with SM for over ten years. He enjoyed SM activities but claimed that SM is not a necessary prerequisite for a relationship. His partner Hela only discovered SM through him, but took a strong liking to it.

Theme 4: Meaning and Importance of SM within Their Relationship

All four couples gave much meaning to SM within their relationships. In couple one, Sandra and Bill, it was a whole life style that was wrapped around their SM relationship as mistress and slave, and that they were both very happy, having found the right partner for how they wanted to live. For couple two, Hela and Steven, SM activities provided them with the possibilities of working through issues, of healing and transformation besides sexual pleasure. Couple three, Lynn and Brian, and couple four, Simone and Tim, found that their SM activities and their compatibility in their sexual life was a great asset in their marriage. All couples clearly stated that when they found a partner whom they could share SM with, it was liberating, therapeutic and even transformative (couple two) for them as individuals and as couples.

Theme 5: Impact of Attitudes from Others Regarding Their SM Activities

Each couple, and each individual within the couple, had a clear understanding that their SM orientation was not acceptable by society at large and needed to be kept a secret from people who were not involved in SM themselves. None of the couples was disclosing about their sexual SM orientation to their families at large, although two individuals (Sandra, couple one, and Steven, couple two) had hinted at their activities to one family member each, a family member whom they found to be especially open-minded. Generally, they did not disclose to anyone who is not in the SM scene. There was a shared understanding that people who are not involved in SM tend to exhibit some prejudice towards people who are involved, and that an SM orientation needed to be kept private around other people who were not involved. Couple one, Sandra and Bill, did agree several years ago to be filmed for Channel 9. They said that they were only willing to do this because all of their family lived on the East Coast.

Most of the individuals who were interviewed seemed to live a bit of a double life: SM scene versus non-SM life. SM life was shared with other scene members; non-SM life was often experienced at work and could not be avoided. It became more complicated for Hela, couple two, who could not tell her best friend about her SM activities. The other people did not have close friends outside of the scene. Hela experienced some discomfort around leading a double life; she shared a dream that she had a week prior to the interview, a dream which symbolized her many different lives intersecting. Her partner Steven disclosed about how he was considering posing for a more public SM photograph but then did not do it, because he realized that this could create problems at his work.

Brian (couple three) had an interesting perspective. He would always disclose his SM orientation to a potential new female partner, and he explained how he had come to terms being misunderstood: he was dyslexic and as a child never was properly diagnosed. His father and others never understood him. As an adult, his sexual SM orientation fell in a similar category for him: he was misunderstood by many, but he coped with it. His wife was not disclosing to anyone but SM-scene members.

Simone and Tim (couple four), in their private lives, did only associate with people involved in SM. They complained about therapists who did not seem to understand, but they felt secure in their relationship with each other, so that it did not distress them when somebody did not understand. Tim, however, expressed sadness when he talked about how his (adult) daughter wishes he were dead (she detested his SM involvement), and how previous partners were very condemning of his SM fantasies and activities. He also has been pathologized by his psychotherapists at the Veteran Administration Hospital because of his sexual orientation.

Theme 6: Experiences with Psychotherapy

Seven out of the eight individuals had had experiences with psychotherapy. Only Bill (couple one) had no experience with psychotherapy at all. His wife, Sandra, saw a therapist weekly for seven years. Hela and Steven (couple two) both had individual and couple's counseling, and Hela was in therapy with a mental health professional at the time of the interview. Lynn and Brian (couple three) both had individual and couple's counseling; Brian actually started psychotherapy in his teen-age years, when he was experiencing difficulty in school because of his dyslexia. Simone and Tim (couple four) both had experiences with psychotherapy, as individuals and as a couple. Tim also received psychotherapy for his Vietnam war-induced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Theme 7: Attitude of Mental Health Professionals Towards SM

The couple's experiences with the attitudes of mental health professionals ranges from positive to negative with the negative attitudes encountered outnumbering the positive ones.

Hela (couple two) had a very satisfying experience when she disclosed her SM activities to her therapist. The therapist asked a few questions but was able to stay with Hela on what it meant to her.

Both Brian and his wife Lynn (couple three) had some positive and some negative experiences with psychotherapists regarding their SM orientation. The positive experience was with one couple's counselor they saw from time to time, who seemed very able to stay with what they bring in and takes a non-judgmental and nurturing stance. Other mental health professional, in contrast, were not helpful to Lynn and Brian, because they either were judgmental or they asked too many uninformed questions, which meant that the therapist was using the time for which the clients paid for to get educated about the topic of SM. When Brian shared his SM material with mental health professionals in the sixties and seventies, he clearly was met with a negative attitude by the therapists who considered it a sickness.

Steven (couple two) remembered an experience when he was seeing a therapist in college. The therapist took many more notes than usual when Steven disclosed his SM involvement and did not follow up with any questions. He never disclosed to a therapist again; according to Steven, "it never came up."

Couple four, Simone and Tim, both complained about many experiences with mental health professionals who had a negative attitude towards SM, who were unable to understand the positive aspects that the clients believed it had. Simone spoke about therapists tending to construct a theory around SM activities instead of remaining with what it may mean to the clients. Instead of being helpful to the client and helping him or her to explore the material the therapists wanted to "fix" them, according to Simone and Tim.

Of all individuals, Sandra (couple one) had the perhaps most negative experience with a therapist's attitude towards SM. Her weekly therapy of seven years came to an abrupt halt when Sandra finally disclosed her SM interests to the therapist. The therapist abandoned her without a referral. The therapist's attitude, according to Sandra, was very negative and she could not handle her client's material, which was damaging to the client. Sandra said that she never trusted a therapist again.

Theme 8: Recommendations to Mental Health Professionals

All four couples recommended that mental health professionals obtain more education about SM. Sandra and Bill (couple one) and Lynn and Brian (couple three) stated that they thought it wrong for clients to spend time and money educating the therapist. Hela (couple two) even recommended a professional who could provide such education. Many therapists apparently

asked questions which seemed to be very stereotypical and unhelpful to the client(s).

All four couples remarked that therapists should be able to make the distinction between destructive behavior and consensual and safe SM. Again, a good therapist must have a certain amount of information about SM, in order to know the difference. Also, many therapists did not seem to know that people involved in SM may participate in many different types of activities and that it is not just simply one stereotyped of act portrayed in the media.

Further, therapists, according to all couples interviewed, should keep in mind that people involved in SM are still people and have many other emotional needs besides their SM activities. Therapists should generally keep an open mind and remain aware when their own issues may come up when working with clients involved with SM. Often, a client may not see any problems with the SM but came in with a different issue. It is counterproductive, according to the couples interviewed, if the therapist believes that there is a problem that needs to be fixed.

Tim (couple four) even recommended that therapists consider people involved in SM to be part of a different culture, where different cultural rules may apply. According to Tim, the responsibility of a good therapist is to have sufficient knowledge about the culture, so that the therapy can be useful to the client.

Steven (couple two) recommended that therapists should know that sometimes the enactment of SM fantasies can even lead to transformational experiences and healing can take place. According to him, it is very important that a therapist understands the whole range of possibilities: that SM can be abused and abusive, but that when it is safe, sane and consensual, it can even be therapeutic to the practitioners.

Educational Video for Mental Health Professionals

The interviews with couples one, two and four were conducted in video format, while the interview with couple three was done on audio tape only (the couple did not wish to be video taped).

In the educational video, the researcher provided an introduction to SM (somasochism), BD (bondage and discipline) and DS (dominance and submission), explaining terminology and activities. She then followed with a brief introduction to couple one, succeeded by pertinent segments from the first interview. For instance, the couple spoke of their experience of relationship as being therapeutic to both of them, and the wife spoke about her experience of abandonment by a psychotherapist. Next, the researcher introduced couple two, and encouraged the viewer to pay special attention to the couple's own view of SM as a potential tool for healing and transformation. Positive and negative experiences with mental health professionals were discussed in the interview. Further, the issue of race was explored. This was followed by videotaped segments of the interview with couple two. Couple three was presented by the researcher, who pointed out that their experiences with mental health professionals were heavily judgmental, and also called attention to the husband's useful recommendations to psychotherapists when dealing with clients involved in SM. Relevant excerpts from the interview were presented. Finally, the researcher closed the video with a brief summary.

[Go to Chapter 5](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)