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Abused submissives in the BDSM community through a gendered framework

A qualitative study

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Summary

This study examines how abuse is viewed and talked about in the BDSM community. Particular attention is paid to gender actions and how a gendered framework of masculinities and femininities can further the understanding of how abuse is discussed within the community. The study aims to explore how sexual abuse of submissive men is viewed and discussed within the BDSM community, as compared to that of women. The study furthermore focuses on heterosexual contexts, with submissive men as victims of female perpetrators as its primary focus.

To my knowledge, victimological research dealing with the BDSM community and its own views and definitions of abuse has not been conducted prior to the present study. Thus, the study is based on previous research into consent within BDSM, as this research provides a framework for non-consent as well.

To conduct this study I have interviewed six BDSM practitioners. Their transcribed stories were then subjected to narrative analysis. The analysis of the material shows that victim blaming tendencies exist in the community, and that these vary depending on the victim's gender.

The findings indicate that the community is prone to victim blaming, and that this manifests itself differently for men and women. Furthermore, my results show that male rape myths can be used to understand cool victim-type explanations given by male victims of abuse perpetrated by women. After discussing my results, I suggest possible directions for further research.

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1 Introduction to the Field

Within criminology in general and victimology in particular, many have published articles and books on the problems of abuse and its victims (See for instance Heber, Tiby & Wikman 2012, Ryan 1971, Davies, Pollard & Archer 2006). Since its early days victimology has grown and now incorporates several different approaches, dealing with a multitude of problems victims of crimes risk facing in the court room, in the press or when reporting a crime to the authorities (Heber, Tiby & Wikman 2012:18). The theoretical developments in victimology have led to research on themes ranging from how society treats victims to how the victims themselves feel and talk about their experiences. For instance, there are plenty of studies in the field of victimology which deal with sexual abuse and domestic violence; however few of these deal with monogamous heterosexual contexts with male victims. As Fisher and Pina point out, “sexual victimization of males by females still remains relatively ignored and under-researched” (Fisher & Pina 2012:55). One group which still, to my knowledge, has not been made subject to victimological research is the BDSM community.

In the past couple of years, women in the kink scene have been drawing attention to the problems of sexual abuse within the BDSM community¹. At a congress in May 2013, RFSU determined that more insight and understanding was needed regarding the BDSM community and the problems its members might face².

While the problem of abuse in the kink scene is currently being addressed by kinksters³ worldwide, there is one thing which seems to be lacking in the discourse; the abuse suffered by submissive men in the BDSM community.

1.1 Aim of present study

This study aims to explore how sexual abuse of submissive men is viewed and discussed within the BDSM community. Abuse against submissive women will serve as a comparison. The study focuses on abuse in heterosexual contexts. To understand the phenomena of gender projects and abuse I will be using a framework of gender theory, comparing how abused submissive men and women are regarded in terms of victimization within the BDSM community. The terms submissive men and submissive women refer to these men and women as they view and present themselves in BDSM contexts, it is thus not to be considered as an

¹ http://www.salon.com/2012/01/29/real_abuse_in_bdsm

² http://rfsubloggen.blogspot.se/2013/05/okad-insats-mot-stigmatisering-av-bdsmf_19.html

³ The terms *kink* or *kinkster* were created by sexual minorities in their own discussions of themselves (Ortmann & Sprott 2012:19). Kink includes several fetishizes and does not refer exclusively to BDSM.

all-encompassing characteristic. Henceforth submissives and dominants will be referred to as subs and doms respectively.

In society at large, men are encouraged to be aggressive, outspoken and decisive – in short, dominant. Meanwhile submissive activities are generally associated with femininity (Pettersson 2003:142). Thus, practitioners of BDSM may either exaggerate or contrast these conceptions. This could influence how the community views and talks about abuse and victims thereof. As such, the study's research questions are;

How is abuse against submissive members viewed and talked about within the BDSM community, and how can this be understood through a gendered framework?

1.2 Defining BDSM and the BDSM community

The term BDSM is a compound acronym. It is derived from the terms bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism and masochism. While it is commonly said to describe a set of sexualities which involve some (or all) of these aspects, it is worth noting that acts belonging to BDSM are not inherently sexual. Regardless of whether or not participants consider a scene to be sexual, BDSM hinges on communication. To communicate one's limits and expectations is paramount. BDSM can vary immensely with regards to degrees of pain, discipline and so on. Thus, a key part of BDSM is negotiating scenes beforehand to ensure that everyone is informed of one another's boundaries (Ortmann & Sprott 2012:80). This brings us to another term which might need clarification; safewords. While there are exceptions, most of the community seems to be in agreement that safewords are a good way to signal consent (or rather, the revoking thereof) during a scene. Safewords are words that, when uttered during a scene, mean that whatever is going on needs to stop or slow down. These are agreed upon beforehand and are used to ensure safety, which can be especially important when it comes to scenes where no is not actually meant to mean no. Common safe words are yellow for slow down, and red for stop (Ortmann & Sprott 2012:81). Furthermore, consent can be given to ignoring things like a person's limits, or for things such as edge play where exploring and pushing boundaries is a key part of the scene. Scenes such as these make grey areas almost unavoidable, and variations such as these make defining abuse within BDSM rather difficult.

The BDSM community varies somewhat regionally as members will inevitably be conditioned by the society in which they live outside of the community. My sample consists of Swedish BDSM practitioners, thus making my findings somewhat regionally

specific. Nonetheless, research shows that BDSM practitioners share many values and social norms all over the world (Fulkerson 2010:21, Ortmann & Sprott 2012:35); therefore I shall be referring to them as belonging to one community as opposed to dividing it into several, regional or national communities. The reason for this being that there are both local and international online forums for BDSM practitioners, thus there is an international exchange of ideas and experiences in the community now that has not always been available. This largely erases the regional borders and in their place creating a network, which previous research has found to be of crucial importance to members of the BDSM community (Surprise 2012:120). Community members arrange parties, workshops and discussions to socialize with likeminded people, both regionally and internationally. There are, of course, people who enjoy elements of BDSM without being part of the community; the sexual is not intrinsically linked to the communal (Fulkerson 2010:45). Problems in the community are primarily discussed through online forums. Furthermore, abuse and grey areas are not the only thing which are primarily discussed through forums but the social networking that is meant to establish a safe place for curious newcomers is also something which is mainly done online.

While there is previous research on the BDSM community at large and on the importance on consent within it, to my knowledge there is none on abuse within BDSM. On the contrary, much of the previous research emphasizes the difference between abuse and BDSM (Fulkerson 2010:24-5, Ortmann & Sprott 2012:75). For example, Ortmann and Sprott discuss how the BDSM community as a subculture is to be understood. Since their research has to do with BDSM and alternative sexualities in general the definition of the BDSM community as a subculture could be considered a reasonable one; however Ortmann and Sprott do not define exactly what is meant by use of the term. They point out that this subculture has important things to say about “BDSM versus abuse”, how to practice BDSM safely and that the subculture can provide “tools for sexual exploration and growth” (Ortmann and Sprott 2012:35). There is nothing explicitly stated about this subculture’s way of dealing with abuse or the grey areas which border on abuse in BDSM.

1.3 Disposition

The study begins by outlining relevant previous research and how it pertains to the present study. Secondly, the theoretical basis of my own research is presented, which is then followed by a chapter on the methodology used in the study, and its problems. After that, I present my own findings and analysis thereof in connection to the theoretical framework and previous

research. In conclusion, a discussion of these results and their implications is conducted and then followed by suggestions for future research.

2 Previous Research

While the research into abuse within the BDSM community is, to my knowledge, bordering on nonexistent⁴, there is research into consent within the community. Fulkerson studied consent in BDSM communities, attempting to define what constitutes consent in this context (Fulkerson 2010:24-5). Inadvertently this definition also serves as a backdrop for defining abuse and grey areas in BDSM, since by ascertaining what is consensual Fulkerson also provides a framework for defining what is not. A topic of interest for Fulkerson as well as for Ortmann and Sprott, who have researched kink sexualities in general through qualitative interviews, is the distinction between abuse and BDSM. They clearly show how consent, intent and communication define BDSM as non-abusive (Ortmann and Sprott 2012 p.75, Fulkerson 2010 p.1). However, the problem of abuse within BDSM is not directly touched upon.

Though Fulkerson does not directly discuss problems of abuse, she brings to light certain difficulties regarding consent withdrawal which can be fundamental in creating an abusive context. Held in the notion of consent is the idea of nonverbal communication, for instance the importance of body language. Fulkerson found that there is an emphasis on the importance of a dominant party's ability to read the submissive party's body language and other non-verbal communications, since consent can be withdrawn at any time without verbalization (Fulkerson 2010:25). Surprise's research into the BDSM community also focuses on consent (Surprise 2012:126), and the similarities between the work of Surprise and that of Fulkerson is notable with regards to their findings. Surprise, like Fulkerson, found that consent in BDSM and kink contexts hinges on thorough communication. Research on and definitions of consent in BDSM contexts furthermore imply a definition of non-consent as well, providing a basis for my own research.

2.1 Abuse and consent

At this point it seems only fit to specify the meaning of abuse and consent in this context, as these terms will be frequently used in the following discussion. Consent should be given

⁴ While there is research into court cases where BDSM has been a factor (see for instance "Lika barn leka bäst?" by Klapčič), it generally studies legal aspects rather than abuse defined by the community itself. In contrast, this study is not aimed at legal dimensions or reported cases of abuse in BDSM, but rather at the community's own views and discussions of problems of abuse.

while fully aware of the decision, in other words; while unaffected by endorphins, alcohol or something else that might impair judgment. This notion was brought to light by previous research by Fulkerson (Fulkerson 2010:28), as well as by several of my interview participants. Consent can be given for a specific time and context such as a scene, or for a longer period of time (Ortmann & Sprott 2012:75). It is worth emphasizing that while BDSM can look abusive to outsiders; this basis on the continued practice of consent marks a strong difference from abuse. Firstly, there is consent when it comes to planning a scene or any kind of kinky encounter. Secondly, this consent will be reestablished in some way throughout the scene⁵, and thirdly, BDSM distinguishes itself from abuse through the presence of aftercare. As Ortmann and Sprott put it; “Aftercare ratifies the consent, signaling the joint intention of the scene that just concluded. Abuse does not have joint intention” (Ortmann & Sprott 2012:76). In short there is a clear distinction between actual abuse and consensual activities that might look abusive to others (Fulkerson 2010:1).

2.2 Various forms of abuse

To the extent that abuse in this context can be clearly defined at all, there are three main points to discuss. These are the inclusiveness of sexual abuse in the term abuse, the importance of communication when defining situations, and the definition of grey areas.

2.2.1 Abuse and sexual abuse

First of all, abuse is perhaps to be regarded as a wider term than usual when applied to the BDSM community. This is due to the role of pain in BDSM as a possible (but not necessary) part of the sexual experience. As an example, whipping might be viewed as completely non-sexual and even abusive in and of itself by outsiders. However, to members of the BDSM community whipping can be extremely sensual. In BDSM there are activities that are not sexual in themselves, but which may be experienced as erotic (Ortmann & Sprott 2012:3). As such, being whipped too hard or for too long when one’s consent has been revoked can be considered tantamount to sexual abuse, given that the scene as a whole has been identified as sexual. In short, non-consensual acts that could be considered abuse outside of the community can be considered *sexual* abuse within it. However, I will only be using the term abuse in this study since I have no way of knowing if abuse mentioned in participants’ narratives is identified as sexual or not. As previously stated not all members of the community view

⁵ This practice is not to be considered as being identical in its construction for all BDSM practitioners. Consent as a concept is not, nor does it have to be, identical for all members of the community.

BDSM as inherently sexual and thus not all scenes are sexual in nature. Therefore, while being whipped in some non-consensual way can be considered sexual abuse by one sub, it can just as well be considered abusive but non-sexual by another. The definition of abuse as told by my interview participants, sexual or otherwise, hinges on communication. This also applies to the distinction between abuse and grey areas.

2.2.2 Abuse and grey areas

In addition to outlining the definitions of abuse and sexual abuse in BDSM contexts, a clarification of abuse and grey areas is required. If a safeword is ignored, this cannot be viewed as a grey area if the dom is aware of crossing the line. Contrariwise, not hearing the safeword or not recognizing the revocation of consent as such would give the same action a different meaning. As such, the pre- and post-event communication are key when it comes to differentiating between abuse and grey areas, as this is how joint intention is confirmed. One could label a non-consensual event as being either abuse or as being a grey area depending on the intentions, reactions and feelings of the participants. Fulkerson briefly discusses these concepts in terms of “consent violation” (Fulkerson 2010:32-3), however the study does not differentiate between abuse and grey areas, nor does it discuss abuse victims in the community. Rather, it focuses on the bad reputations doms can get if they are said to violate consent, with or without intention. The fact that Fulkerson labels all abusive situations as “consent violations” further implies that a lot of the problems within the community seem to be defined as grey areas rather than abuse, or that abuse is considered part of the grey area or vice versa⁶, making the terms potentially mutually inclusive. Therefore, understanding the processes of a negotiated scene and the communication surrounding consent enables understanding of abuse and grey areas in this context.

2.3 Abuse and consent through a gendered framework

While Surprise briefly discusses gendered roles in BDSM play (Surprise 2012:72), there is no discussion of whether or not the concept of consent is different for men and women. There is no discussion of the possibility of different models of consent for men and women in Fulkerson’s study either (Fulkerson 2010). Since previous research suggests that expectations on abuse victims vary based on gender, we can suppose that expectations of consent differ as well (Davies, Pollard & Archer 2006:287). For example, blame toward abused men has been shown to vary based on the victim’s sexuality in relation to the perpetrator’s gender (Davies,

⁶ I will return to this in more detail in the results section. See 5.2.

Pollard & Archer 2010:286). In their research, Davies, Pollard & Archer found that straight men were often regarded as improbable victims of sexual abuse by female perpetrators, since consent was assumed; it was difficult to “imagine a man being unwilling if the opportunity for sex occurred” (2006:277).

3 Theoretical Basis

In this study, abuse in the BDSM community will be understood within a gendered framework of masculinities and femininities. Connell defines masculinity as something that cannot exist except in contrast with femininity, and vice versa (Connell 2005:68). Furthering this line of reasoning, Pettersson presents a dichotomy of ideal types of masculine and feminine qualities (Pettersson 2003:142). At the top of the list of masculine qualities one can find being superior, contrasting being subordinate at the top of the list of feminine qualities. Other examples are active/passive and strong/weak. In BDSM one can find quite noticeable archetypes of this construction in the examples of the hypermasculine dominant man and the submissive woman (Davis, Yarber, Bauserman & Schreer, 2005:473). As noted by Matza and Sykes, the act of exaggerating one’s behavior in accordance with the norms common to mainstream society is not necessarily to be considered deviant (Matza & Sykes 1961:717). Since both Connell and Pettersson were studying aspects of mainstream society, we can assume that in society at large the actions identifying someone as submissive are allotted to women. Thus, it can be argued that being submissive is to be doing gender in a feminine way. It could also be hypothesized that this translates to the BDSM community as well as society at large, creating different codes of conduct for submissive men and women. If submitting is feminine, enacting masculinities in submission will need a somewhat different approach to submission in order to still be considered an enactment of masculinity.

3.1 Subordinate and complicit masculinities

Connell outlined two types of masculinities which contrast and complete hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005:77). Subordinate masculinities, for instance, are those which are considered to be “at the bottom of the gender hierarchy among men” (Connell 2005:78). This manifests through insults blurring the lines between masculine and feminine qualities, used among men in order to thoroughly insult other men by questioning their masculinity. Examples of this abusive vocabulary are insults such as wimp, sissy or pushover (Connell 2005:79). While Connell’s writings on subordinate masculinities are primarily focused on gay men’s masculinity projects, the main points are still applicable to straight, sub men in BDSM.

The sexual preference for other men is not in itself the reason for Connell's subordinate masculinities being oppressed by hegemonic ones in society; rather gayness is "the repository for whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity" and is thus "easily assimilated to femininity" (Connell 2005:78-9). Arguably, submission is thus the key factor rather than the sexual preference for other men. As such, this concept is applicable to the present study. In line with this, I suggest that sub men in BDSM are not only sexually submissive towards the dominant women with whom they engage in BDSM play, but also socially submissive towards the dominant men in the community at large. This can account for the difference in willingness to recognize and discuss abuse among submissive men compared to that among submissive women. If women are "supposed" to be submissive, the conflict present for submissive men is absent for women, making women more credible as victims due to the lack of discrepancy between gender roles and submission. Furthermore, since straight men are often thought to be implausible victims of sexual assault by women and are thus disbelieved (Davies, Pollard & Archer 2006:277, 286), it seems probable that submissive men run a heightened risk of being disbelieved due to this socially constructed masculinity/submission discrepancy.

In addition, Connell's complicit masculinities can also be read as especially applicable to the BDSM community. Connell states that a majority of men, not only the ones actively enacting hegemonic masculinities, benefit from the overall submission of women intrinsic to a patriarchal dividend (Connell 2005:79). If women are generally considered subordinate to men in society at large, and a majority of men benefit from this submission, a submissive man is still in some sense dominant given the premise that society's conditioning is stronger than the roles of BDSM play. In combination with the subordinate masculinities discussed above, this places submissive men under dominant men in the societal hierarchy of the BDSM community; but above both submissive and dominant women. These types of masculinities, like any gender actions, are not to be regarded as static, but as "configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships", to borrow a phrase from Connell (2005:81).

3.2 Cool victims

Åkerström's studied men who spoke of events during which they had been victimized while emphasizing their masculinity. In their stories, they presented themselves as tough through their own experiences, but also as victims of crimes through the eyes of witnesses. By describing how brutal others had found the situation while maintaining that they themselves

were able to shrug it off, they presented themselves as both victims (though by other people's definitions rather than their own senses of self) and as strong men (Åkerström 2007:429). However, had they seen a woman be subjected to the same treatment they would consider the event a crime, and her a victim. Similar lines of reasoning were brought to light through my interviews, where submissive men were described as being prone to explain acts of non-consensual violence against their own person in terms of being tough enough to take it. Elements of a situation which creates an ideal victim include the notion of freedom from responsibility; the victim had no share in the creation of the abusive situation, and thus is viewed as innocent (Christie 2001). Contrary to this, the "cool victims" in Åkerström's study would speak of the situations in which they were victimized in terms of actions, how they themselves stood up for themselves or their friends; actions which would then result in fights. Negations were a big part of these stories – they spoke of what they were through describing what they were not; namely passive or defenseless. Furthermore, abuse was often described through negations as well. Phrases like "one got a bottle thrown at one's head" was a far more common expression than "and then x hit me" (Åkerström 2007:433). Such expressions emphasize the narrators' own coolness in the face of the abusive situation; they were not altered as individuals by the occurrence. Apart from negations, using laughter to emphasize that they did not regard the situation as serious (at least not in retrospect) was an important part of how the men in Åkerström's study balanced presenting themselves as both victims and capable men (Åkerström 2007:453-4). I found similar ideas concerning masculinities in my participants' stories; however since I will not be studying people who were victims of crimes I cannot compare the types of narration found in my study to those of Åkerström's too closely.

4 Method of Study

Qualitative design was chosen due to the nature of that being studied – issues of abuse and victimization within the BDSM community and the role doing gender plays in these questions is something which is prone to nuances I doubt a quantitative approach could properly capture (Bryman 2011:423). To gather data on the thoughts and feelings that make up the interplay of the BDSM community, interaction with said community is needed in order to understand the ideas surrounding and permeating it (Sohlberg & Sohlberg 2011:241). As Karlsson and Petterson point out, studies which aim to understand the perspectives and ideas surrounding a certain phenomenon through interviews do not strive to find absolute truths but rather to understand the perceptions and experiences of the interview participants (Karlsson & Petterson 2012:68). Furthermore, this constructionist standpoint goes in line with the basic

assumption common to gender studies; namely that gender is socially constructed and as such subject to change depending on context (Alvesson & Due Billing 2010:31).

To study abuse in the BDSM community I conducted semi structured face-to-face interviews with three men and three women who, in various ways, are by their own definition part of said community. Kvale and Brinkmann list criteria for assessing the quality of an interview, stating that the extent to which the questions are short but the answers long and informative as well as the interviewer's follow-up questions to clarify these answers are two important components of a successful interview (Kvale & Brinkmann 2012:180). I would argue that a semi-structured interview offers the best chances of meeting these criteria, because it demands planning beforehand which enables the researcher to formulate several well-posed questions while simultaneously being spontaneous enough to allow for following up on new concepts. Bryman emphasizes the usefulness of semi-structured interviews through pointing out this flexibility of focus. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer and the participant to co-create the conversation, since follow-up questions are posed based on the answers to previous questions. As such, this model affords great range with regards to the themes explored (Bryman 2011:413).

The interviews varied in length from around one hour to around two hours, and were then transcribed by me, amounting to just over one hundred and twenty single-spaced pages. Doing this myself enabled me to combine the transcribed material with my field notes regarding my interview participants' tone of voice, body language and so on (Bryman 2011:209). While this information will not be visibly added to my results discussion, remaining aware of these factors aided in the analysis itself. The transcribed material was then examined for overlapping themes, as well as commonly held definitions of certain terms.

4.1 Preparations and ethical dilemmas during sampling

The men and women chosen for this interview were mainly found through a snowball sample via online forums. Even though it is not overly difficult to get access to online forums of this kind, the BDSM community could be said to be a somewhat hidden population and as such it could prove problematic to find willing interview participants. As Surprise puts it, the BDSM community is self-protective and often reluctant to participate in research due to a fear of researchers' possibly negative bias (Surprise 2012:27).

However, after posting about this project online I received responses from volunteers as well as emails from people saying that they knew someone who might be willing to participate. I received several messages from men and women who were happy to

hear that someone was researching this matter; but there were some exceptions. A few men who identified as dominant contacted me and professed an interest in the study, however as they attempted to alter the focus of my research by denying the very possibility for abuse in BDSM contexts, or made demands that would be unethical towards other interview participants they were not included in the sample. No men who identified as submissive made these kinds of demands; neither did women of either dominant or submissive persuasions.

In preparation for the interviews I searched forums, youtube, blogs and online magazines for texts created by people in the kink scene, dealing with issues of abuse⁷. I wanted to base the interview guide on the BDSM community's own current discussion of these issues to a certain extent. Since there is still, to my knowledge, a gender imbalance in this debate, I decided on focusing my interviews on the potential differences between submissive men and women in terms of victimization. These themes were then developed into questions, forming my interview guide (Kvale & Brinkmann 2012:146). However, as my interviews were semi-structured and largely consisted of follow-up questions based on my participants' stories (Kvale & Brinkmann 2012:150-51), I did not always strictly follow this guide.

4.1.1 Limitations

The question of whether or not the six people interviewed are representative of the BDSM community as a whole is of course pressing, especially in the cases where some of them knew each other to some degree. The limited size of the sample further means that the participants' narratives cannot be read as providing a complete picture of the BDSM community, but must rather be read as individual parts of the whole. However, interviewing participants who knew or knew of one another allowed me access to data regarding how members of the BDSM community interact which might otherwise have been unavailable to me. Furthermore, the six interview participants came from different cities and social backgrounds, had different levels of education and belonged to different age groups, allowing for different perspectives on the questions at hand. In addition, qualitative methods aimed at furthering understanding explore cases that provide in depth-information, rather than generalizable truths (Karlsson & Pettersson 2012:62).

⁷ The method of this search consisted of entering key terms into several search engines, emailing editors of online magazines, searching for key terms in forums for BDSM participants where abuse and/or grey areas was a topic of discussion, emailing members of the community and posting inquiries in forums asking advice regarding where to find information.

To ensure anonymity I have chosen not to specify the age, sexual identity or other defining characteristics when quoting interview participants. For the sake of transparency I will clarify that I have interviewed both men and women who identify as subs, as switches and who work with events within the community. As such, perspectives of defining importance for this study are evenly spread throughout my sample. This study does not focus on age; however it is not assumed that age is unimportant.

4.2 Positions of power

Some of the people I interviewed were strictly submissive while some added the perspective of a dominant by being switches⁸. Some were part of the community in an all-together different way, not as either doms or subs but as event- and party planners. I wanted to talk to these people especially, since they are in a position of power within the community and are privy to information about several disputes as well as the solutions to these. Through them I hoped to gain perspectives I might not be able to acquire from other members of the community. Interviewing people who are in a position of power can of course lead to somewhat biased answers, if these people want to present their own establishment in the best possible light at the expense of truthful information⁹. This was discussed by Becker in terms of a “hierarchy of credibility” (Becker 1998:90-1), stating that those at the top of any organization are perceived to have access to information which is unavailable to those of a lower rank within the same organization, which might cause problems. He points out that these people will always try to present their organization in the best possible light, and as such it is imperative to doubt anything someone in power will tell you. This is applicable to my study of the BDSM community as well, since the event planners I interviewed do have access to information many other members of the community do not, and it is probable that these people want to present their establishments in a positive way. Thus they might want to withhold stories that would paint their clubs or the community at large in an unfavourable light. In my case I did not find any indication that this happened on a scale that would greatly influence the material, however this is impossible to control for.

An instance where the balance of power favoured an interview participant is held within the fact that as a woman, I was denied access to certain forums for submissive men. Thus I could not base my questions on what I would have found there. One of the men who volunteered when I was in the process of finding participants and developing my

⁸ A switch in BDSM is someone who identifies as both submissive and dominant, albeit not at the same time.

⁹ In this context, “truthful information” is to be regarded as information divulged because the IP believes it to be true, i.e. information that is not deceitful on purpose.

interview guide posted in said forum on my behalf, however, as I could not see it for myself all the information I gained this way is secondary.

4.3 Locations

To ensure that the interview participants felt as comfortable as possible given the potentially delicate nature of the subject matter, the interviews took place in different locations, primarily chosen by the interview participants. While many members of the BDSM community are open about their involvement, some are more discreet. For this reason, I decided to interview each participant separately, rather than conducting a focus group interview. Some scholars claim that every aspect of an interview situation contribute to the outcome (Karlsson & Pettersson 2012:59), and I reasoned similarly when contemplating the settings for these interviews. Since I wanted my participants to tell me both what they wanted to tell me and what I wanted to know, I wanted them to feel as at ease as possible with their surroundings. However, this was not entirely unselfish as I also considered my own risks of stress beforehand. For example, I decided early on that I would not visit any participants in their homes due to the added stress this might cause and, as an extension, the detrimental effects it would have on my abilities to partake in creating the material. Conducting the interviews in a neutral setting seemed the best option to ensure that neither I nor the participants would become stressed and thus decrease the quality of the conversation¹⁰. Like Skrinjar, my epistemological standpoint is that knowledge is created between interviewer and interview participant in the given context (Skrinjar 2003:109). Therefore, that context is an important part of how knowledge comes into being.

4.4 My relation to the field and its implications

The fact that I am linked to the BDSM community through working in latex- and fetish fashion has most likely helped me not only to find volunteers but also to make them feel comfortable in telling me about the community and its issues. On the other hand, researching a known field increases the risk of a biased analysis¹¹. Comparing my link to the BDSM community to those of Fulkerson, Surprise or Ortmann, however, presents this risk as relatively minute. Fulkerson is herself an active participant in BDSM, as is Surprise. Ortmann is a psychotherapist and sex therapist with a particular focus on BDSM and kink. While these

¹⁰ However, these neutral settings were not without negative aspects as they were largely beyond our control in terms of privacy etc. See 4.7.1.

¹¹ In this case, bias is to be considered as the choice to present one's field, results or material in as favourable a light as possible even if that would be at the expense of the quality of one's research.

relations give them more insight into the community, it also heightens the risk of bias due to personal involvement. Since my own involvement is not in the community itself but in the fashions often associated with it, this creates a position where I may be close enough not to be regarded as an outsider to those in the field, however still distanced enough not to be overly influenced by preconceptions or personal relations. Thus both my preconceived knowledge of BDSM and the BDSM community as well as the risk of a biased analysis in my results discussion is arguably less than those of Fulkerson, Surprise or Ortmann.

4.5 Lived experiences and unexpected data

Participants were asked if they would agree to have the interview recorded, and assured that they would remain anonymous and that none of the questions were of their own, personal experiences of abuse. In the cases where the participants themselves wanted to discuss such matters I adjusted the follow-up questions accordingly, however, I never instigated such conversations. Even so, there are ethical considerations that must be made regarding whether or not to follow up on these accounts, since I cannot control for what made them decide to divulge this information (Kvale & Brinkmann 2012:92). The participants who offered insight into their own experiences of abuse and grey areas had already discussed their past online and as such were not afraid of the community finding out. The risk of identification is nonetheless important to take into account, and as such I decided to include these examples to a certain extent, attempting to preserve the source material without giving away too much detail.

However, it is theoretically possible that interview participants would be prone to discuss things that they later find reason to regret (Kvale & Brinkmann 2010:91). Furthermore, being interviewed by a woman might have a different impact on interview participants than being interviewed by a man (Walker 1997:224), which might alter the flow of the discussion and in effect also alter the production of knowledge (Skrinjar 2003:109).

Women were more prone to tell me of their own experiences of abuse than men. This division can of course be attributed to the relatively small size of my sample. While there were instances of male participants talking about things “getting out of hand”, they did not describe these experiences in the same way female participants did. Female participants described abusive situations as serious; however male participants were prone to laugh them off much like the men in Åkerström’s study. In addition, men and women spoke in different terms of other men and women as well, so these different types of descriptions were not only used pertaining to their own persons. Whether or not my own gender influenced these conversations is debatable, but I suspect that certain things were disclosed to me which might

have been more difficult for participants to disclose to an unknown man (Skrinjar 2003:112-13). Especially in the cases where some participants told me of their own, personal experiences with abuse. As Walker points out, previous research has shown men to be more open towards women than other men, and thus being interviewed by a woman might make it easier for men to admit to behavior and experiences that might contradict hegemonic masculinity (Walker 1997:225).

4.6 During the interviews

All six interviews took place during the same week. This enabled me to have a clear memory of previous interviews when conducting new ones, because of which I was able to analyze overlapping themes and such during the interviews themselves which Kvale and Brinkmann claims is preferable (Kvale & Brinkmann 2012:180). To narrow the field of study, the interviews focused on heterosexual, two-participant BDSM contexts, however not all participants identified as heterosexual or monogamous.

4.7 Interpreting the material

As stated, the interviews were to some extent subjected to ongoing analysis. The interpretations were mainly focused on the actions described, rather than the people involved in the contexts at hand. This approach is described by Becker as turning people into activities (Becker 1998:44-5), and is perhaps particularly well suited when studying the BDSM community. If we did not make the assumption that people do “whatever seems good to them at the time” depending on their situation we might, for example, make the mistake of assuming that men and women who are submissive in BDSM play are always submissive, regardless of what situation they are in.

4.7.1 During transcription

All transcriptions were done during the week after the interviews. Whilst transcribing the material, I was made aware of certain similarities between interview participants’ accounts. As other researchers have pointed out, the analysis of a material is ongoing not only during the interviews themselves but also during transcription (Karlsson & Pettersson 2012:71). The question of how to transcribe as faithfully as possible was solved through allowing the meanings expressed by interview participants to be the primary focus. As I am not analyzing the material with a linguistic approach stutters, hesitations, and such have not been included in cases where they do not emphasize the meaning of what is being said. This is of course subjective and as such a result of the researcher’s own interpretations (Karlsson & Pettersson

2012:60). Deciding between staying true to the exact phrasing of one's interview participants or rendering the material easily readable and understandable to the recipients of the research would have been harder if I would have interviewed people who made severe linguistic errors, but as this was not the case the decision was readily made (Karlsson & Pettersson 2012:72).

Themes which seemed prolific throughout the material as a whole were colour coded during transcription. Since all interviews took place during the same week and all transcription the week after that several aspects of the interviews were still memorable to me, which in combination with field notes aided the ongoing interpretation. Even so, during transcription certain aspects of the interviews were reevaluated, especially regarding the balance of power during the conversations (Karlsson & Pettersson 2012:57). Not just in terms of balance between interviewer and interviewee, but also regarding the influence of our surroundings which at times seemed to have a greater impact on the interview than what was at first assumed. For example, one participant who was originally very nervous about talking about BDSM in public became a lot more relaxed once we found a secluded table in a nearly empty café. Contrariwise, another interview participant went from being very open to being a lot more reserved when a group of loud teenagers sat down at a nearby table.

Once everything was transcribed these themes were investigated again, to ascertain which ones were most commonly overlapping. In the final stage these themes were grounded in theory, though theories have of course served as a major part of my preconceptions and understanding throughout the process as well (Karlsson & Pettersson 2012:75, 78).

4.7.2 During translation

Since the interviews were conducted in Swedish, they have been translated. The translation into English was in itself a process of interpretation. To avoid altering the meaning of the participants' stories in this process, I translated everything on two different occasions and compared these translations to each other and to the original recordings, in order to ascertain the accuracy to the extent this is possible, given the subjective process of interpretation. I considered having someone double-check the translations, however doing so would not be ethical since all participants were assured that no one else would be allowed access to the original material.

4.7.3 The quotations

The transcribed interviews are written to read as fluently as possible. During transcription, words that were stressed by the participants were italicized, and pauses were marked with ellipsis. I have not taken the various lengths of pauses into account, nor have I differentiated between different ways of emphasis used by the participants. For example, some would raise their voices to emphasize certain words; some would speak faster or use their body language to add emphasis. However, this is subject to interpretation as well. For the readers' sake, I have chosen to focus simply on the emphasis itself in the transcriptions, not the actions creating it. Where something has been left out, this is marked by an ellipsis within brackets. When additional information has been added by me to clarify, this too is done within brackets.

4.8 Notes on validity and reliability

Validity deals with the question of whether or not a study measures that which it sets out to measure and reliability with the possibility to replicate research. However, in qualitative research measuring phenomena is seldom prioritized, instead we aim to understand phenomena. Since the researcher is thus a key factor in what information we gain (Lander 2012:34), validity and reliability are somewhat less applicable to qualitative studies than they are to quantitative ones. Replicating the circumstances with a different researcher will lead to different interpretations, and to measure understanding would be difficult. Therefore, credibility (i.e. looking at whether the researchers' results are credible) sometimes substitutes validity, and dependability can be used instead of reliability (Tiby 2012:52). This is achieved by transparency and reflexivity throughout the study. Preferably the study should be read by colleagues during the research process (Bryman 2011:355). In my case, this was done by my advisor and a fellow student.

5 Results and Analysis

The most commonly overlapping themes during my interviews were the concepts of shame, blame and responsibility in relation to gender roles and victimization. These themes were often intertwined, and as such it would be difficult to completely isolate them from each other in the analysis. Shame was found in connection with models of explanation that emphasized masculinity in contrast to victimization, but also in connection to female victims of abuse. However, the concept of shame seems to have different implications for men and women. Similarly, responsibility appears to be gendered. This concept was mainly found in stories regarding victimization and what led up to it. Lastly, blame was found in narratives

concerning victimhood, often intertwined with ideas about responsibility. These themes will be discussed in relation to theory and previous research.

5.1 Gender roles

To a certain extent, the rules for submissive men and women appear to differ in ways which go in line with the activities assigned to each gender; for instance men still need to retain some aspects of dominance and activity even in their submission, an action which stands in contrast with the actions valued in submissive women:

I: About being a sub... Would you say that there are differences, like different rules for how men and women should be to be a good submissive?

Sophie: Well... yes, I would think so. [...] I get the feeling that there are a lot more *demands* on guys. Girls are expected to look good, to be *pretty* and all *that* stuff, but it's almost preferred if they don't *know too much*. If you can, if you have a lot of experience, it's like *no*, I wanted to train you from the start, why do you *know* so much already? You're supposed to be fresh and new, somehow. While guys, going by the emails I get even though I don't ask for emails like that, they try to prove that they *know a lot* and that they can fulfill *all* my needs, and they're so good at this and that and they've already been trained by someone else.

The mentioned differences between female and male submission go in line with the normative gender actions outlined by Pettersson (2003:142). This suggests that gender roles are stronger than the community-specific roles of submissive or dominant. Furthermore, the narrative indicates that men do not surrender their control the way women do, since men are emphasizing that they are knowledgeable and active, in that they can “fulfill all [her] needs”, as opposed to submitting. This notion also translates into how men deal with abuse, even if they do not necessarily define it as such. For instance, when Sophie dominated a man and later asked how he had liked the scene, he talked about disliking some of the painful elements of it in the following way:

Sophie: [H]e said that “nah, I just *took it anyway*. I can't just *give up* like that!” [...] Then, later on he said that “well, you were *pretty wimpy*” [as a dominant].

By refusing to “give up” while also refusing to admit to having felt overpowered in a negative sense, the man in Sophie's story exemplifies one way in which submissive men can express a need to retain control. By maintaining that he actively “took it”, but also that she was a “wimpy” dominant, he places himself in control of the situation by making himself out to be the strongest. This kind of controlling actions while in submission was not encountered when participants described submissive women; however several similar accounts regarding

submissive men surfaced during interviews. It seems probable that this prevalence of traditional gender actions over BDSM specific sexualities accounts for submissive men's tendency to avoid discussing abuse as openly as women do:

I: So there's no support group or some such for submissive men, if there's abuse?

Arthur: We're *men*, we don't *talk*. No, we don't talk about stuff like *that* [abuse]. We don't come together like that. In general, at least the subs I know, we talk to each other if we're friends. We can't talk the way women do, y'know, just because we're all subs.

This could be understood as a collective masculinity project among sub men, with the purpose of upholding what is considered as normative masculinity. As Fisher and Pina suggest, masculinity entails strength and dominance which stands in opposition to normative femininity, meaning that men cannot be victims of abuse by female perpetrators due to their superior strength. Thus, "if a man [is] to report a sexual attack by a woman he could [...] be considered as having lost his masculinity" (Fisher & Pina 2012:58). Arguably, loss of masculinity could induce feelings of shame. Especially given the premise that normative masculinity contrasts normative femininity and the societal expectations attached to these conceptions "discourages men from reporting sexual attacks [by women] because of fear that they will be labelled effeminate and essentially weak" (Fisher & Pina 2012:58).

5.2 Differentiating between grey areas and abuse

According to interview participants, the distinction between grey areas and abuse (to the extent they can be differentiated at all) largely lies in communication, intention and insight. Furthermore, some participants led on that to parts of the community abuse is nonexistent:

Arthur: Sometimes people say that BDSM *is* consent and that as soon as there is no longer consent then *it's not BDSM anymore*, then it's something *else*.

This implies that the concept of grey areas is, in fact, the only scope within which abuse can be made to fit in the BDSM community. This could be understood as denial of abuse in BDSM contexts, meaning that the idea of grey areas is to be understood as containing the idea of abuse. In the cases where they are considered as different concepts, grey areas are still not necessarily preferable to outright abuse:

I: So grey areas are not safer or... more innocent, than abuse?

Emma: No, no, no. You know that *this* is the line, then you shouldn't go *right up* to it. Maybe you could build up to it, over time, like one small step and then another next time if it feels okay. You can't just *jump right into* a grey area and hope you land on the right side of a boundary.

However, there are basic rules for BDSM play most participants agreed the breaking of which constitutes abuse. These are things such as ignoring safewords or other revocations of consent, though not all participants agreed on these rules. Furthermore, some argued that while continuing an act without consent is wrong, it still might not be abuse. As such, the line between abuse and grey areas is difficult to outline:

I: How would you say abuse is different from grey areas?

Nathan: I think a lot is in the talk you have afterwards. If someone is really feeling bad and crashes¹², that you'd catch that and realize that shit, I messed up, or that, woah, this is *my responsibility*, I've made this person feel bad and that makes it my responsibility to make them feel *good* again. As a dom you can't explain it all away by saying "you should've said no", or "you should've used a safeword", *no*. It's *your* responsibility. [...] So a lot of it is in accepting responsibility, if you accept responsibility for your actions I think the risk of it being abuse lessens.

I: So it's not about the act itself as much as it is about the reactions to it?

Nathan: Yeah, that and the talk you have *before*. If there's a line drawn, and someone crosses that, and then tries to talk about it a lot... If you've *crossed* an explicit, clearly set boundary and you were *aware of that*, you *meant* to do it, then that's abuse.

What this implies is that a situation can be defined as either abuse or as a grey area depending on several factors, to whatever extent the community can differentiate between the two at all. These factors include practitioner's intentions, insight into their own actions as well as into the feelings of their partner(s), communication before, during as well as after the scene, and the parties' willingness to accept responsibility for their actions. Two possible outcomes thus exist in a nonconsensual situation; either it was abuse, or it was a grey area. Furthermore, these two terms seem to exemplify the same type of situation, which perpetuates the notion that the two concepts are mutually inclusive to some extent:

Arthur: We can't *know*, in BDSM it's enough that someone *messes up*. And I know, I've even seen that, someone *didn't hear* a safeword, and then that *becomes* abuse.

When someone does not hear a safeword and continues to act out a scene without consent, this "becomes abuse", regardless of the dom's intention. Even though the victimization was unintentional, the situation was still defined as abuse. Thus, intention cannot serve to differentiate between grey areas and abuse. Furthermore, grey areas were described by participants as including all kinds of potentially abusive situations:

William: If you've *gotten yourself into* this, especially as a sub, you should probably be *prepared* to find yourself in... situations you hadn't counted on. And then you shouldn't necessarily *blame* that on the partner you're with, rather maybe you should've thought it *through* from the beginning. [...] If you'd see

¹² To crash is a strong, negative psychological and emotional response to an event within a scene. Some participants described it as highly traumatic and as having potentially life-long consequences.

abuse as a concept as a grey area, I'd say that in one end of the scale it might not be much to talk about but as it gets worse there might be reasons for dealing with it differently at the opposite end of the scale.

In conclusion, abuse and grey areas are not easily defined in opposition to one another, quite the contrary. This implies that the concept of grey areas could in some cases be a substitute for the concept of abuse or that grey areas serve as a term which includes abuse in its definition. This could be detrimental to a victim's credibility; since grey areas is a wider term than abuse in that it also incorporates a lot of less severe actions. In turn, this could explain some of the victims blaming tendencies found in the community, since the ideas about shared responsibility inherent to communicating about grey areas in BDSM are similar to ideas incorporated in victim blaming¹³. Furthermore, this responsibility, as well as the community's views on abuse, grey areas and victims, seems to be different for men and women.

5.2.1 When situations are defined as abuse or grey areas

According to the interview participants' stories the community not only defines submissive men and women differently, but also defines abusive situations in different terms depending on the victims' gender.

Sophie: I think it might be a bit different in different groups, but from what I've heard [about female victims] they say things like well maybe she was young and thoughtless, maybe she was a bit credulous, maybe even... a bit stupid. But when they talk about *men* I think people often have this idea of them as... as having to be pretty... pretty *weak*, mentally too, not to be able to *stand up* to a *woman*.

While women are blamed for their own victimization to some extent, men seem to have not only their actions, but their masculinity questioned. Female victims are regarded as naïve; however male victims are regarded as mentally and physically weak because they were unable to stand up to a female perpetrator. Therefore, according to participants it is shameful for a submissive man to be abused by a dominant woman:

William: If a woman abuses a man, I think a submissive man would have a tough time talking about his *experiences* because the perpetrator is a *woman*. Because this is shameful, there is a lot of shame *placed on it* and there is nothing desirable about that kind of shame, there is nothing pleasant to it.

As opposed to types of degradation incorporated in BDSM play, the kind of degradation men experience from admitting to having been abused by women is described by BDSM practitioners as potentially detrimental to one's masculinity, as being overpowered by a woman (as opposed to submitting to one consensually) contrasts conceptions of typically masculine actions (Pettersson 2003:142). As previously stated, this goes in line with male

¹³ I return to this theme in more detail in 5.3

rape myths. These, in turn, have been found by previous research to be strongly related to victim blame (Fisher & Pina 2012:57). For instance, responsible submissive men are supposed to know better than to engage seemingly bad dominant women in the first place, but if they fail to do so and are subjected to abuse, they are still not considered as victims. According to the participants, the community is seemingly prone to share an idea of toughness as an ideal masculine behavior, regardless of sexual identity.

I: Do you think the community treats men differently from women, as abuse victims?

Sophie: I think that when it comes to men there's more slut-shaming, like... You should've *known better*, why did you go home with her in the first place, if you thought she was nasty, *why* did you *have sex* with her?

One noticeable aspect is that when asked about the community's attitude towards men as victims of abuse, the participant still talks about a man's responsibility in relation to consensual sex, and the "slut-shaming" associated with not living up to it. This narrative goes in line with male rape myths and attitudes towards male victims of female perpetrators as pointed out by previous research (Fisher & Pina 2012:57, Davies, Pollard & Archer 2006:277). This could explain the way in which men present themselves as victims. For example, men seem prone to shame dominant women as being incompetent as BDSM practitioners when things go wrong, rather than talk about their own feelings in terms of victimization. This could be understood as a defense, in order to avoid the shame connected to being blamed "for not preventing the assault" (Fisher & Pina 2012:57).

5.3 Responsibility and victim blaming as gendered phenomena

In the early days of victimology Hans von Hentig (1948) stated that the victim of a crime contributes to his or her victimization through the participation in the events leading up to the crime. This has since been heavily criticized as being the foundation for victim blaming (Ryan 1971:3-4). Ryan points out that "victim blaming is often cloaked in kindness and concern" (Ryan 1971:6); which is a statement that my interviews have validated to some extent. When talking about the responsibilities of others, several interview participants led on that the community's line between responsibility and victim blaming is as blurred as that between grey areas and abuse:

Isabelle: It really is *incredibly important* that the dominant *owns up to* their mistake and is mature enough to say that I was *wrong* and I'm so, so *sorry* about that, to *really apologize*. It isn't to lie down or grovel,

to apologize because something went bad. And then the sub has to be able to say that it's not *just your fault*, I *encouraged* you to do this. And then you can straighten out what happened from there.

While Hentig's notion of varying degrees of shared responsibility¹⁴ between the victim and the offender is critiqued as being tantamount to victim blaming, many of my interview participants nonetheless seem to express similar ideas regarding abuse and grey areas within BDSM. This similarity is not to be read as an indication that BDSM has any inherent processes of victimization. Rather, this similarity is brought up to further illustrate the complexity of abuse and grey areas in BDSM, since consensual participation can become non-consensual at any time¹⁵. The process of negotiating scenes beforehand, verifying consent throughout the scene and the process of aftercare thus require that both the submissive and the dominant parties accept their responsibilities towards one another and themselves. However, the concept of responsibility appears to be gendered. While responsible submissive men are supposed to know better than to "have sex" with "nasty" dominant women (as exemplified in 5.2), submissive women are viewed as irresponsible if they fail to avoid high-risk situations:

Sophie: This woman was just starting out in BDSM, as a sub, and she felt that she wanted to try this out with someone who was experienced, that felt like a smart move. [...] So she looked around and found this guy who she thought seemed nice, and he asked if she wanted to meet up for coffee and talk, see how it feels. So she said that yeah, we can do *whatever you want*. She said that a lot, we can *do whatever you want*. They go out for coffee, it felt good, he asked her if she wanted to follow him out to his car. She said sure, so he said that they were going out into the woods to enact a scene and asked if she was okay with that. She said that she thought it sounded very interesting and went along, so they went into the woods and he tied her to a tree. She was kind of scared, and then he told her that just so you know, I could do *whatever I want* to you now. I think you should understand what a *bad position* you're in, and that you should *never* do this again [...] He wanted to show her that it's a bad move to say that you'll do *whatever* someone wants, especially when it's someone new, someone you don't *know*.

While underlining the importance of clear communication on BDSM, this narrative shows tendencies of victim blaming. Having said "we can do whatever you want" is viewed by the dom as tantamount to contributing to her potential victimization. While this is a story of a submissive woman and a dominant man, the narrative focus is still on the woman and her failings even though the dominant man could be construed as the one at fault. Seemingly, responsible submissive women should know better than to agree to anything presenting a risk. While this is similar to the "you should've known better" line of reasoning in the previous example, the implications are somewhat different. Both submissive men and women are supposed to "know better"; however for men the results of not doing so are discussed in terms

¹⁴ <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1272632/Hans-von-Hentig>

¹⁵ This, of course, is not exclusive to BDSM or kink sexualities.

implying consensual sex rather than victimization. The previous narrative shows a view within the community which makes submissive men responsible for abusive situations while denying them the role of victim, since they should “know better” than to “have sex”, not know better than to say something (e.g. “we can do whatever you want”) that could lead to them being abused. This implies that the concept of men being abused by women is regarded as unlikely in the BDSM community, which goes in line with previous research into attitudes towards male victims of abuse by female perpetrators (Davies, Pollard & Archer 2010:286).

While both men and women are made out to be responsible for finding themselves in abusive situations, abused women are made out to be bad BDSM practitioners while men are made out to be weak *as men* if they are victimized.

An example of blaming women for their own victimization, as well as shaming their incompetence as BDSM practitioners, is provided by the following narrative:

Emma: They [dominant men] sent emails like “well this [the abuse she was subjected to] happened because you’re not *supposed* to use safewords. Then you’re not really submissive, so it’s *your* fault. It’s *you*, you’re not really submissive, that’s why it happened to *you*”. This happened a lot when I crashed, for months I wrote about how I felt and stuff. A lot of people were supportive, but then there were these guys who said that maybe you’re not submissive, maybe that’s why you crashed. Or maybe you need more spanking to get over it, and I was like... well, *no!* They were questioning *me* but not the guy I was with. They never questioned him, *never*.

Again we see how men explain abuse through women’s ineptitude as BDSM practitioners, blaming them for their own victimization while simultaneously shaming them for being irresponsible. According to the dominant men in the narrative, her responsibility can be considered as being towards the dominant man in question, as well as to herself. Someone who is “really submissive” would never use safewords, meaning that if she would have taken her responsibility as a “real” submissive and learned how she was “supposed” to behave to fit in, she would not have been abused. Thus, she is blamed for her own victimization. However, her femininity as such is not questioned, even though her sexuality is.

In conclusion, the case of the male sub who should have “known better” than to “have sex” with a “nasty” dominant woman implies that what he experienced was an unpleasant, but consensual, sexual encounter. His masculinity thus denies him credibility as a victim, as it is assumed that he consented to having sex. The narrative also points out a tendency to shame dominant women for being bad at what they do, rather than to accuse them of perpetrating abuse. In the case of the female submissives, both narratives show them to have been abused (or to have run the risk thereof) due to their own inability to accept responsibility for their own safety. As a result, all three situations include an element of

emphasizing female incompetence at BDSM and its social rules as a fundamental part of the explanation. This line of reasoning goes in line with the overall submission of women inherent to the notion of complicit (and thus also hegemonic) masculinities.

5.4 Complicit masculinities shaming female dominance

Connell's writings on complicit masculinities serve as a useful framework for understanding the concept of shame in relation to abuse the BDSM community. According to the interview participants, shaming women for being bad doms is one way for submissive men to avoid presenting themselves as weak while still addressing the problem of abuse. Thus, the dominant/submissive dynamic is placed as as secondary to the male/female dynamic through "the overall subordination of women" which benefits men in general (Connell 2005:75). As such, submissive men are still higher up than dominant women in the social hierarchy in the community at large. This is partially realized through the masculinity in men's submission being accentuated by their placing shame on feminine enactments of dominance:

Arthur: We had this... *situation* at a club. This... *old* dominant woman was coming on to this young, submissive guy [man 1] *like crazy*. We could see how *uncomfortable* he was, like, he *really didn't* like it, but as a guy you just don't say *no* to stuff like that, we're not *taught* to say *no* to that stuff. And after a while, we sort of, we thought it was getting *really hard* for him, and he was new there, so... eventually we told a friend of ours [man 2] to go over there and take care of it, help him out. So he went over there and grabbed hold of her, *led her away*. That new guy made it out okay, he left pretty soon after that [man 1 leaves the club, and the narrative, at this point]. Then it turned out that this woman, she'd *beat up* my friend [man 2] out on the stairs. And it's not allowed to play there. I don't know how *much*, but I know he was *not happy*. [...] But what he said was that "nah, you have to take stuff like that", because somehow he'd got that in his head. But *no*, you really *don't* have to take that stuff. So even though it was as *wrong* as it can *possibly* be, he just took it, he just accepted it. He didn't *think*, if he'd seen that happen to a *girl* he'd been *furious*, but when it happened *to him* he didn't even consider that it could be *wrong*.

The dominant woman in question is being presented as unattractive from the start, as the interview participant takes care to underline that she was both older than and unattractive to the submissive man she was "coming on to", while giving her actions an air of mental instability by adding "*like crazy*". As such, she is being presented as enacting femininity which contrasts normative femininity and the expectations placed on a woman. While this study does not focus on age in particular, it is worth noting that the age difference is presented as an important part of the narrative. She is old, and therefore unattractive. This can be understood as a way of emphasizing how unlikely it would be for any of the men in the narrative to consent to sexual activities with this woman. Furthermore, this is a factor I have not come across in previous research regarding men as victims of abuse by female perpetrators; the importance of attractiveness. When describing the woman as old and unattractive, the interview participant implies that this is a key part of why the men in the

narrative dislike her advances. In order to clearly show that any sexual interaction between the straight men and the straight woman in the narrative is undesirable, the woman is portrayed as stereotypically unattractive. This can be understood as a protection against ideas of straight men as unlikely victims of abuse by females (Davies, Pollard & Archer 2006:277). This line of reasoning is furthered by presenting her as coming on to them like “crazy”, which in this case seems to mean sexually aggressive; something that further contrasts ideas about normative femininity. As the situation progresses, she is presented as violent as “she beat [him] up”, as well as ignorant of the rules of the establishment as it is “not allowed to play there”. In short, the narrative focus is on her failings which in turn seem derived from a discrepancy between dominance and femininity, mirroring the masculinity/submission discrepancy discussed earlier. Disregarding the dominant/submissive dynamic and replacing it with a male/female one, the narrative presents the situation based on traditional gender expectations; while the woman is presented as contrasting the things a woman is “supposed to be” (Lander 2003:33), the men are shown as active, competent and strong.

5.5 Cool victims

What we are told of the victim’s response in the example above goes in line with Åkerström’s study of cool victim-type enactments of masculinity, as he “took it” without contemplating the abusive nature of the situation, even though he would have been “furious” if a girl was subjected to the same treatment. This model of explanation can in turn be understood through the idea of complicit masculinities as being socially superior to femininities. As a result, the situation is shown to be abusive (since a girl would be regarded as a victim) while the man in question is presented as remaining above being victimized by it, since the feminine enactment of dominance is still socially inferior to his own masculine model of submission. This furthers the assumption that the submissive role is different for men and women, while also implying that “victim of abuse” in heterosexual BDSM contexts is regarded as an exclusively female role by the community. In addition, he “took it” in order to “take care of” the problem at hand, which creates the impression of him as an active, capable man. Underlining what he does (e.g. “takes it” to help a friend) rather than what he is subjected to (i.e. abuse), allows him to retain aspects of normative masculinity in his submission. He was not abused by a woman; rather he acted to help a friend. However, the woman was at fault as she was found to be undesirable as a woman and incompetent in her actions of dominance.

5.6 Subordinate masculinities' compliance

The archetypes of the hypermasculine man and the submissive woman serve as the extremes of the gender hierarchy as constructed in the BDSM community. Subordinate masculinities (Connell 2005:78) as a social process related to that of complicit masculinities places submissive men between dominant men and women of any sexual identity in this gender hierarchy. Subordinate masculinities are still complicit in this context; since different types of masculinities are not static submissive men are still complicit in the sense that as men, they are above women in the gender hierarchy.

William: About how abuse is defined in BDSM, I get the feeling that... that it's dominant men who make the rules based on a male culture where the strongest survive. [...] I think that it's a result of living in a society where traditional masculinity is the norm, and I get the feeling that this norm might get a bigger... It's sort of intensified in this community.

We have previously seen that submissive men are described by participants as enacting submission in different ways than submissive women do. They enact masculinities in submission, meaning that normative masculinity takes precedence over sexuality. Submissive men thus incorporate aspects of “traditional masculinity” in their submission, meaning that normative masculinity is not only “intensified” for dominant men. This also creates active, dominant aspects of male submission, aspects which are ideally lacking in their female counterparts. However, submissive men still enact subordinate masculinities in relation to hegemonic masculinity (the dominant men). Thus, submissive men are socially superior to women, while being inferior to dominant men. Since the definitions of abuse are based on a “male culture”, this places men above women in the gender hierarchy regardless of sexual identity. The narrative also perpetuates the idea of hypermasculinity as hegemonic in the BDSM community, since dominant, “intensified” varieties of masculinity are the norm. These social processes could be used to understand submissive men's tendency to shame dominant women (thus asserting their own social dominance) for being bad practitioners while giving cool victim-type explanations of non-consensual events (thus avoiding being labelled as effeminate by dominant men), rather than discussing having felt victimized. In this way, ideas associated with male rape myths are perpetuated; (strong, active) men cannot be abused by (weak, passive) women, etc.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

In relation to the research questions, this study has found that the BDSM community largely talks about abuse in terms of grey areas. Furthermore, the study found expressions of denial regarding the existence of abuse in BDSM, thus making the concept of grey areas include abuse by default. While the concept of grey areas is important given the sometimes complicated boundaries involved in BDSM play, it seems to include cover for victim blaming given the premise that grey areas include abuse rather than contrasts it. The notions of shared responsibility which are intrinsic to grey areas then lend themselves to placing responsibility on abuse victims. The implication is that by discussing abuse in terms of grey areas, victims of abuse are found less credible since abuse is often not defined as such, but rather as a grey area where both (or all) parties are equally responsible for the outcome.

The study has also shown that there is a tendency to discuss abuse and grey areas in different terms depending on the victims' gender. The discrepancies between traditional gender roles and submission (for men) and dominance (for women) could be used to understand the victim blaming tendencies and their gender variation. Abused submissive women are often described as having been labelled as bad submissives by the community in BDSM practitioners' narratives. However, while they are presented as naïve or irresponsible, their femininity as such is not questioned. Contrariwise, abused submissive men are described as either giving cool-victim type explanations or as mentally and physically weak. Ideas which fall in line with male rape myths seem prevalent, which ties into the cool victim-type explanations given by abused submissive men. Through their denials of abuse, submissive men are in a sense dominant to the women who dominate them sexually in the social interplay of the community at large, since women are thus described as too weak to be a threat. This could be understood as an effort to minimize the masculinity/submission discrepancy. It could also be understood as an expression of male rape myths; the men might not think themselves credible victims. As such, men seem to have difficulty being recognized as victims of abuse by female perpetrators.

As I stated in the introduction, the abuse suffered by submissive men is seemingly missing from the ongoing debate in kink communities. The cool victim-type presentations offered by interview participant's stories lend themselves to the idea that traditional gender roles take precedence over the dominant/submissive dynamic. Since none of my interview participants' stories contained information about submissive men openly discussing abuse suffered by dominant women in terms of their own feelings of victimization,

one could assume that maintaining traditional enactments of masculinity is valued by the submissive men in the community. This could explain why men seem reluctant to discuss abuse openly online the way women do. However, that tendency could also be understood through the lack of credibility ascribed to men as victims of female perpetrators.

In conclusion, based in the interview participants' narratives the BDSM community seems to incorporate ideas about traditional gender roles and the expectations attached thereto as well as victim blaming phrased accordingly in its discussion of abuse. This implies that a gender/sexuality discrepancy exists in the (heterosexual) BDSM community. For submissive men this results in their giving cool victim-type explanations in cases of abuse, possibly in order to stay close to the ideas of what a man is supposed to be. It also results in the prevalence of male rape myths, which may be part of the cause for these mentioned cool victim-type explanations of abusive situations.

I would like to suggest a couple of areas for future research based on my findings in this study. Firstly, recreating this study on a larger scale could provide more insight than the present study, since my sample was relatively small. A larger sample would lead to greater insight into the BDSM-community as a whole.

While this study does not pay particular attention to how to identify and interpret intent as a means of defining abuse in the BDSM community, emphasizing that in further studies could contribute to research in the legal area. Another possible area for future research would be a study including or focusing on dominants and their ways of discussing and defining abuse in the BDSM community. Studying their definitions and insight could provide further insight into the victim blaming tendencies of the BDSM community, as well as the implications of discussing abuse in terms of grey areas.

The cool victim-type explanations I encountered during some of my interviews imply that the perceived attractiveness of female perpetrators is a factor in how men explain non-consensual situations with straight, male victims. Therefore, I would suggest a study along the lines of that conducted by Davies, Pollard and Archer (2010), examining the implications of victim sexuality and perpetrator gender; but including the perceived attractiveness of the perpetrator as a factor. Seemingly, describing the perpetrator as unattractive is a way to emphasize the non-consensual nature of an event. I suggest that this was done to gain credibility as a victim, even though cool victim-type explanations were given. Cool victim-type explanations could be understood as an extension of, and protection against, male rape myths. In relation to theories on male rape myths, this implies that straight men could be more or less credible as victims of abuse by female perpetrators based on the

perceived attractiveness of the woman in question, not just depending on the expectations placed on the victims because they are generally attracted to women. As part of this idea and based on my own findings, I would suggest that age differences play a part in this definition.

I would also recommend further research into the concept of grey areas, in other fields as well as in BDSM, drawing on the complexity of defining grey areas from abuse. Since communication regarding boundaries is such an intrinsic part of BDSM, this community lends itself to research aimed at defining these concepts. Understanding how the concept of grey areas is understood in BDSM could potentially further victimological research in other fields as well. My findings indicate that while there is abuse in the BDSM community, it is not labelled as such as frequently as it is labelled as a grey area. This definition of the terms could be understood as part of a process serving to defuse the problem of abuse, which in turn could be part of how victim blaming is socially constructed. Such processes are not likely to be BDSM-specific; however the BDSM community could be used as a starting point from which to advance the understanding of these kinds of defusing definitions and their implications for victims of abuse. Thus, more research into BDSM practitioner's ideas and definitions of abuse as part of a grey area could benefit victimological research at large. Furthermore, understanding processes such as these could further research into what factors influence victims' decisions whether or not to report cases of abuse.

Lastly, I would like to suggest that research into the models of consent in BDSM could be used as a means to develop a more consent-oriented view of sexual abuse in other contexts. The concept of informed consent could be used to further research regarding sexual abuse in society at large. Since sober, informed consent to all BDSM related activities is required from all participants, any kind of abuse needs to be discussed in light of this consent. Rather than focusing on a perpetrator's intent, focus thus has to be placed on what he or she knew to be consensual and how this was communicated. Thus, this could be a reasonable addition to research into how intent functions as a deciding factor when discussing abuse. Using informed consent as the starting point when discussing sexual abuse could be an informative perspective when evaluating legal definitions as well as societal norms, since such a perspective would potentially lessen problems regarding whether or not victims are thought to be credible in cases of abuse.

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Interview guide:

HUR BESKRIVS OCH BEMÖTS ÖVERGREPP INOM KRETSEN?

Kan du beskriva hur du ser på gemenskapen inom BDSM-kretsen?

Vad är viktigt för att bli accepterad inom kretsen?

Hur ska en bra Sub/Dom vara, enligt dig?

Kan du berätta lite om subspace/domspace?

Vad är viktigt att tänka på när man ska leva ut sina kinks med en helt ny sub/dom?

Hur skulle du definiera vad ett övergrepp är när det kommer till BDSM?

Finns det gråzoner?

Hur öppet pratas det om övergrepp inom kretsen?

Vad händer inom kretsen när övergrepp sker?

HUR BESKRIVS OCH BEMÖTS OFFREN? SKILLNADER MÄN/KVINNOR?

Vem/vilka blir utsatta för övergrepp?

Pratas det öppet om övergrepp om någon blir utsatt, sprids informationen?

Hur är stämningen inom kretsen när någon (trovärdig/inte trovärdig) blir utsatt för övergrepp?

Upplever du att det är skillnad på hur submissiva män och kvinnor pratar om sin utsatthet?

Upplever du att det är skillnad på hur andra pratar om submissiva mäns och kvinnors utsatthet?

Finns det diskussionsforum/stödgrupper för utsatta? (Män/Kvinnor/Neutralt?)

Presentation of research to possible participants

The following presentation was posted online (in forums for kink sexualities) when looking for background information and interview participants. Similar messages were emailed to possible participants.

Hej, hej!

Jag håller precis på att dra igång ett examensarbete inom kriminologi/viktimologi. Efter att ha pratat med vänner och bekanta inom BDSM (och kanske framför allt efter att även ha läst den

här artikeln: <http://www.thefetishistas.com/index.php?menu=7&sub=47&display=662>) så bestämde jag mig för att undersöka övergrepp inom BDSM. Efter att ha sökt runt på vetenskapligt hörn så har jag konstaterat att det finns pinsamt lite forskning på området. Nu söker jag personer som är insatta i BDSM och i det kringliggande communityt som skulle vilja diskutera hur just övergrepp behandlas inom kretsen. Fokus på mitt arbete ligger på offerskap, så jag är framför allt intresserad av hur man bemöter personer som utsatts för övergrepp. Hur fungerar gemenskapen när det kommer till att skydda sina subs från dominanta parter som kliver över gränserna? Det är alltså inte fråga om egna erfarenheter, utan mer om hur ”snacket går” inom communityt. Jag skulle hemskt gärna intervju personer i Stockholmstrakten, om någon känner sig intresserad. Det är bara att dra iväg ett meddelande till mig om man är nyfiken så berättar jag gärna mer. Om den här diskussionstråden skulle kunna komma till liv vore det också fantastiskt! Även om jag själv inte är helt oinsatt så skulle jag verkligen uppskatta att prata med folk som har mer insikt i BDSM-communityt och hur den sociala biten ser ut där när det kommer till den här typen av problem. Och om någon har dokumentärer, artiklar etc. att föreslå så är jag all ears! :)

- Tea