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# 'Like nothing I've ever felt before': Understanding consensual BDSM as embodied experience

## Abstract

This paper aims to illustrate how the consensual sexual practice of BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance & submission, and sadism & masochism) can be interpreted as a method of embodied exploration. It will detail the various ways that engaging in BDSM, either as the dominant/top or submissive/bottom partner, is able to enhance feelings of corporeality and explore bodily relationships with the world and with other people. For many practitioners, BDSM places the body into central focus, and this work will elucidate the ways that this can be conceptualised as 'embodied exploration'.

Taken from a project examining the erotic experience of BDSM, this research adopted an existential phenomenological approach. Existential philosopher Merleau-Ponty argued that the body is not simply another object in the world, but that people are inextricably linked to the world through their bodies; as body-subjects. Nine participants were recruited for the study, and variation in self-identified sexual role, gender, sexual orientation and age was deliberately sought for the sample.

Template analysis, a method of hierarchically organising and structuring thematic findings, was used to analyse the interview data of the research participants; the salient themes relating to BDSM as embodied exploration are discussed in this paper with particular reference to unfamiliar physical and emotional sensations, imposed corporeal limitations and experience a sense of embodied liberation.

Keywords: BDSM; sadomasochism; embodiment; corporeality; phenomenology; template analysis

## Introduction

The acronym 'BDSM' refers to bondage, discipline, dominance and submission and sadism and masochism; a set of consensual practices that usually involve the eroticised exchange of power and the application of intense sensations, usually within a sexual context (Barker, Iantaffi & Gupta, 2007). There is a variety of assorted activities that can be termed as 'BDSM', and practices are particularly diverse, subjective and individually nuanced (Turley, 2012). Some examples of activities defined as BDSM include, but are certainly not limited to; participating in fantasy role play that contains an unequal power dynamic, engaging in bondage using ropes, scarves or handcuffs, and applying or receiving intense physical sensations such as pain. These activities become eroticised within the context of the BDSM play (Turley, 2012; Yost, 2007). There have been few studies estimating the proportion of individuals with BDSM-related interests and while the figures vary, these studies have illustrated that interest in BDSM practice is not particularly rare. In a seminal work, Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin and Gebhard (1953) reported that 22% of men and 12% of women sampled reported some sexual reaction to BDSM stories, while Moser and Kleinplatz (2006) propose that about 10% of the population is involved in BDSM.

Until recently, research on BDSM was mainly focused on explaining and categorising behaviours, which often served to pathologise activities and practitioners. This notion of pathologisation can be

seen in line with the latest editions of the DSM 5 and ICD 10, which contain psychiatric diagnoses relating to BDSM. Over the last decade however, there has been a marked increase in non-pathologising work in this area. This new stem of research aimed to understand the many diverse people and practices involved in BDSM and challenge the commonly perpetuated myths around danger, pathology and consent (see Landgridge & Barker, 2007; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006; Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011). Work by Beckmann (2001), Taylor and Ussher (2001), Barker et al (2007) and Turley (2012) reported positive psychological outcomes for participants engaging in BDSM, ranging from the cathartic to the spiritual to the therapeutic. Following on from this, the current research aims to illustrate how the consensual practice of BDSM can be interpreted as a method of embodied exploration. Taken from a wider project examining the erotic experience of BDSM, this paper will detail the various ways that engaging in BDSM, either as the dominant/top or submissive/bottom partner, is able to enhance feelings of corporeality and explore bodily relationships with the world and with other people. For many practitioners, BDSM places the body into central focus, and this work will elucidate the ways that this can be conceptualised as embodied exploration.

### Theoretical and empirical background

Although less well known than his contemporary, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty was hugely influential on the development of existential phenomenology. His radical description of the primary experience of embodied human existence presented in his challenging seminal work, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962), aimed to offer corrections to 'distorted' explanations of experience provided by mainstream scientific and philosophical traditions, including the Kantian and Cartesian paradigms. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) recognised that these mainstream positions all assumed a dualism; a separation of mind from body, of body and world and of self and other. Fundamental to his version of existential phenomenology was the collapsing of these dualisms. Following Heidegger, reuniting the subject and the object (or the self and the other), and more radically, eliminating the distinction between body and mind which had been problematic for both Descartes and Husserl, Merleau-Ponty introduced the concept of the body-subject (Langer, 1989). Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) contends that bodies give us a situation in the world, meaning my perspective on the world is determined by where my body is now; human beings are inextricably connected to the world through our bodies. He noted that we all have a physical body, and although some bodies are likely to be dissimilar to other bodies, the variation in bodily form means that ontological interactions with the world will be different (MacKenzie & Scully, 2007). The body is not something to be observed objectively, but is in fact something that is lived and something fundamental to our engagement with the world. By adopting a flawed, dualistic philosophy and splitting subject and object, it would be impossible to account for our interactions with the world since consciousness is expressed by embodied activity, and embodied activity is permeated by consciousness (Langer, 1989). Being able to think, consider, reflect, imagine, is only possible because of our embodied nature; we always take the perspective of the body to carry out these actions, while remaining aware that the variations in our bodies, and therefore our embodiment, are a distinct set of perspectives. The body, in its various forms, is the subjective vehicle of experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962), therefore subjectivity can only be expressed through the body, as without a body subjective experience would not be possible.

Merleau-Ponty's view on sexuality is particularly pertinent to this paper. He argued that because the primary experiential vehicle of sex is the body, then it is from the perspective of the body that sex should be studied. Butt (2005) suggests that Merleau-Ponty viewed sex as an 'atmosphere' that can hold myriad meanings for individuals, and frames perception. Sexuality characterises our bodily experiences as both a subject, for ourselves, and as an object, for others, thus illustrating the ambiguous nature of existence.

Although there is limited empirical work that focuses on embodied sexual experiences (Brown, Cromby, Harper, Johnson & Reavey, 2011), Merleau-Ponty's innovative approach to sexuality has proven popular with some scholars who have adopted his version of phenomenology to investigate various aspects of sexuality and gender. A particularly interesting piece by Sara Ahmed (2006) examined sexual orientation through a Merleau-Pontyan lens, proposing the notion the bodies that become heterosexual have acquired these tendencies as a result of social and familial orientation to certain (heterosexual) objects rather than others (non-heterosexual or queer). For Ahmed, heterosexuality is both an orientation towards others, and also something people are orientated around. Queer or non-heterosexuality develops in the lifeworlds of those who do not inhabit the pathways and lines of heterosexual space. From this, Ahmed developed a queer phenomenology. Other work taking this perspective includes Heinämää (2003) who employed some of Merleau-Ponty's ideas to investigate sexual differences, while Rubin (1998) used Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as a method of studying transgender identity. More recently, Riach and Wilson (2014) introduced the concept of 'bodyspace' to investigate how sexuality at work is spatially embodied and the ways that spatial possibilities arise if sexuality is understood as a bodily phenomenon. The anti-dualist, embodied nature of Merleau-Ponty's work offers a refreshing approach to the study of sexuality, providing an alternative to the traditional methods available to researchers.

### The study

The study was scrutinised by the University of Huddersfield's ethics committee and was granted ethical approval, all participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and provided informed consent for extracts of their interviews to be published. The original study from which this data were taken examined the lived erotic experience of participating in consensual BDSM. Nine participants were interviewed for the study, ranging in age from mid-twenties to mid-forties and comprising four men and five women who were recruited via a purposive snowball sampling technique. The selection criteria were that participants should have frequently occurring regular lived experiences of consensual BDSM participation, and have done so for at least six months. The initial three participants were recruited via a key informant: an academic in this field, and subsequently the recruited participants contacted BDSM practitioners within their networks, who contacted the author to take part in the research. A range of sexualities and BDSM role preferences from across the spectrum were deliberately included to reflect the varied experiences of the practitioners. Although I attempted to recruit transgender and disabled participants for the study, this attempt was unsuccessful, and it should be noted that all but one participant was white and all were able-bodied. In order to recruit a diverse range of embodied experiences, I attempted to recruit transgender-identified and disabled participants, though this attempt was unsuccessful; it should be noted that all but one participants was white, and all were cisgender and able-bodied. In addition to these limits of the sample, all but one participant were British, with the other having

relocated to the UK from Spain. Five out of the nine participants were employed in professional roles, while one had recently retired from a professional role due to ill health, one worked in retail and the other participant described herself as a home-maker. Data were collected using a combination of written accounts and in-depth semi-structured interviews, with a close focus on particular aspects of embodied experience. The research participants were asked to write two descriptive accounts of an experience of engaging in BDSM. One account based upon a successful erotic experience and the second on an experience of BDSM that was not enjoyable. A specific interview schedule was then developed for each participant containing a small number of more general questions and questions that were specifically informed by the written accounts they had provided. In the phenomenological tradition, each interview was understood as an embodied relationship between those taking part.

Data were analysed using template analysis (King, 2011) within an interpretive phenomenological framework. The template analysis approach is a method of thematically analysing data that involves the development of a coding template to represent the thematic findings of a data set (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley & King, 2015). The themes were organised hierarchically on the template in terms of their salience and importance, beginning with broader themes that then encompass narrower, more specific themes. In line with this analytical method, the analysis began with four pre-defined, broad a priori themes that were informed by the author's previous research; these were authenticity, anticipation, safety and danger, and outside/within scene relational aspects, which were subsumed in the subsequent analysis. The analysis involved the preliminary coding of all interview transcripts, before an initial template was produced. This initial template was then modified by applying it to each interview transcript, all the while attaching new themes to segments of text, or modifying existing themes so they included the new material. As the analysis is advanced, the initial coding is developed by changing the scope of a theme, if it is deemed too narrow or too broad to be useful. The hierarchical level of the theme can be altered by promoting more salient themes to a higher order, and demoting less prominent themes to a lower order. Themes can be moved from one thematic cluster to another where this provides a more suitable representation of the data. The a priori themes utilised at the beginning of the process were integrated into the various thematic clusters, as lower order themes (see Brooks, McCluskey, Turley & King, (2015) for more detail regarding this process). The final template was considered complete once it accurately reflected the data, and provided an account of the erotic elements of the BDSM experience for the research participants. As this paper is exploring consensual BDSM as an embodied experience, only the thematic findings most relevant to this will be discussed. The findings will be organised by reporting the themes in order of salience. As template analysis uses a hierarchical organisation of findings, therefore relevant higher and lower order themes will be discussed in the analysis. Lower order themes are akin to subthemes and contribute to higher order, or main, themes. Both higher and lower order themes elucidate the embodied elements of BDSM for these participants.

## Findings

### Exploring corporeality

Participating in BDSM was framed as an exploratory experience, allowing participants to explore their sexuality, their senses and their bodies in a way not featured in 'vanilla' (i.e. non-BDSM) sex. A

fundamental erotic aspect of BDSM participation for all of the participants is the many and varied bodily sensations one can experience, which can be explored and manipulated to provide participants with a multi-sensory experience. The sensory experience can take a variety of forms and can incorporate smells, sensations on the skin, distorted perceptions and sounds. For example, different spanking implements can impose different sensations upon the recipient, as can the various types of application of pain to the skin. One participant, Patrick, finds the physical, olfactory and visual sensation of rubber erotic during BDSM, and this material features heavily in his play.

I could just smell rubber in the air, which was great because I adore the smell of rubber [...] I enjoy the tactile nature of rubber, it feels so soft on the skin and silky smooth. I love the tightness of it, it just clings to you. I like the restrictive nature of that, and the inescapability, if that's even a word, of rubber. The sound it makes when you're wearing it, or hearing someone else in it. I also like the aesthetic value of it. It hugs bodies so tightly and snugly which can look amazingly sexy... I also feel very attractive to people, especially guys when I'm wearing it, much more attractive than I usually feel in a regular nightclub out on the pull. It just gives me so much confidence to know I look good wearing it and other people think I look good in it too.

Patrick's BDSM play is enhanced by the way the rubber alters his sensory relationships and his own lived bodily experience. The material is not only pleasing because of his own bodily reaction to the smell and feeling on his skin, Patrick is also aroused by the way he appears to other people when wearing rubber, enhancing his feelings of attractiveness and arousal. Interestingly, Kim, dominant participant, also reported that her BDSM experiences are enhanced by the various sensory inputs of particular clothing.

'I mean...I really like leather. It just signifies sex and power to me. Totally. I don't know why I always go to leather over anything else...I quite like the tightness of latex and how it looks, but with leather...there's just something about the texture...the roughness of one side and smoothness on the other. It's tough and I feel tough when I wear it. It's the smell of it and the way it moves when I'm wearing it, it doesn't mould to me and I don't mould to anyone when I'm in that position of power...I just associate it with being respected and being in control.'

Both Patrick's and Kim's corporeal relationship with the world and with others is altered. Corporeality is an important exploratory element of BDSM, and being able to use BDSM paraphernalia and activities that explore the bodily relationship with the world and with others featured frequently in participants' accounts. Some BDSM experiences places the body into central focus, as much of the experience is concentrated on eliciting various uncommon and unusual physical sensations. Participants are able to concentrate on exploring this assortment of bodily sensations and reactions elicited by BDSM. Tom explained the unusual and unique physical sensations that BDSM enables him to experience through the use of urethral sounds and catheters:

It's the sensation you get from them. There is no other way to stimulate that area. It's a steel rod that goes down the inside of your penis, it's a weird experience, and it feels cold and hard, it's a strange experience. You can stimulate the prostate if you do it right, which is a very enjoyable sensation. It stimulates nerves you wouldn't normally stimulate and you're doing it from the inside rather than the other way round. [...] and when you've got the sound [metal rod inserted into the urethra] inside you have to be careful about how you move around and things because you've got this piece of metal inside your body which is restrictive...

Tom's quote illustrates the way that BDSM enables participants to explore their sexuality, their senses, their physical movements and their bodies and clearly expresses how participating in BDSM can alter their embodied relationship with the world.

#### Increased bodily awareness

A lower order theme relating to exploring corporeality related to participants' sense of experiencing increased bodily awareness. Participants expressed the view that practicing BDSM leads to an increased or a specific kind of awareness of their own bodies, which is not present during everyday life. Participating in BDSM allows an exploration of this different bodily awareness. All of the submissive participants described how through dominant partners' experimentation and manipulation of their corporeal sensations, they were able to erotically explore their bodies in manners impossible during non-BDSM acts. The concept of changing both the appearance and the physical sensations of the body as a result of deliberate, direct and uncommon manipulation was an illustration of the dominant partner's power and status over the submissives. The visual and physical stimulation attained through this bodily manipulation is also an arousing element for the participants. Annie's quote explains how practicing BDSM can enable and facilitate these uncommon bodily experiences.

I did some breast bondage a couple of times, and I liked to see how the shape of my breasts altered. I have quite small breasts but the bondage made them swell until they were really quite large, and they became so sensitive with the stretched skin. It was exciting to see and feel my body in that way. [...]It's actually changing the appearance of the body. Even just down to the feeling of the rope pressing against skin is an out of the ordinary experience, so it does make you very, very aware of your body.

This quote from Steven illustrates a dominant partner's perspective of how the focus can shift from a cognitive awareness of the sensations experienced during BDSM to an embodied awareness;

I was very aware of my power...I felt completely confident, focused on the scene, at ease with myself, which I don't usually...I felt peaceful...inside...calm inside, totally relaxed. That sounds like a 1970s hippy thing to say but...I felt, erm, at ease with my body, how I looked, my actions, my movements, my decisions, what have you. I didn't second guess or overthink like I can do sometimes, it was like something inside me took over my mind. I had...faith in myself but it felt...almost complete in a way. I was living in the moment for me and him, doing my best for us both. I had utter, erm...faith in my own capabilities and I felt completely strong, physically as well as mentally, it was...like...an all-consuming awareness of power but also a strong need to do my best for him in that moment.

Participants expressed that it was possible to engage with their own bodies and the bodies of others in this way during BDSM, giving them a new sense of embodiment in the world. These unfamiliar physical and emotional sensations experienced during BDSM play allowed for the development of new bodily perspectives, forming part of the erotic lived experiences for these participants.

#### BDSM as embodied liberation

A particularly interesting lower order theme of corporeal explorations was the idea of BDSM as embodied liberation. These were politicised comments about the kind of freedoms participants

experienced while doing BDSM, and how they were experienced in a bodily manner. It is important to note that this aspect of BDSM reached beyond eroticism for these participants, but was however, necessary and significant to participants' lived experiences of BDSM.

The transgressive nature of BDSM participation evokes a sense of liberation in the participants, which can be experienced as a series of novel and interesting bodily sensations. This idea of total sexual freedom is an exciting and multi-faceted prospect, and it is the endless sexual possibility that inspires eroticism. There were frequent references to the non-constraining nature of BDSM, comments apparently contradictory to the many activities, and the ways the BDSM can relocate experiences of autonomy and choice back into the body from a usual disembodied, cognitive state. Submissive partners described that despite being physically and/or psychologically restrained, they still experienced feelings of sexual freedom from the constraints of the wider world because of the living of the experience through the body. There are no set constraints in BDSM (although many practitioners subscribe to 'safe, sane and consensual') and no limits can be imposed by outsiders, the only limits are those set by the participants themselves. Practitioners are able to have choice when engaging in the acts offered by BDSM, and being able to engage sexually this way enables embodied sexual experiences not offered by the conventional sexual experience. These visceral bodily experiences creates a sense of openness and possibility, which enable powerful emotions around liberation to reposition from the realm of cognition into a more corporeal state. The endless potentials of BDSM, and the sheer scope of limitless opportunity were arousing to many of the participants. Through embodied sexual action participants, regardless of their approved sexual role, were able to experience;

- A sense of freedom from socially approved sexual practices
- A release from the constraints of the wider world
- A lack of constraints from things like humanness (being human) or gender. One of the participants mentioned earlier, Tom, found the notion of shedding his humanness to become a puppy, particularly liberating, and Kim was able to identify as a man during her BDSM play.

It is the scope BDSM has for these possibilities that is described by the term embodied liberation. These static, everyday states could be left in the 'real' world that exists outside of the bubble of fantasy, as illustrated by Kim's quote;

It can be a liberating experience because you can leave all your hang-ups with you and take on the persona of someone new, and that persona can be anything in the world you want it to be. That's what I like about role play, there's no end to the possibilities, you can conjure people up and mould and shape them how you want. You're not restricted by race, gender, class, ethnicity, intellect, ability, it's like taking a break from yourself, and in a way having lots of new partners. [...] You can have a variety of partners while still having your own it's the same with sex, you can have lots of different sex but without having lots of different sexual partners.

Both dominant and submissive participants described experiencing a sense of freedom arising from not conforming to conventional rules governing sex. BDSM allows sex to be removed from the traditionally genitally focused acts, which allows participants embodied freedom to further explore the sexual potential of non-conventional practices and sexual experimentation. This sense of



freedom is experienced as embodied, as novel and innovative practices are ascribed through, rather than on, the body and erotic actions shift from specific bodily parts to the whole embodied individual. BDSM allows the fulfilment of fantasies which on the surface, are not sexual, but have deep erotic connections for those involved, for example Tom's sexual enjoyment of puppy play. This would not be an option for him to explore when engaging in non-BDSM sex, but through BDSM he is able to experiment with and fulfil this fantasy. Feeling liberated from conventional, approved sexual practices leads to a sense of embodied confidence which manifests as a freedom of sexual expression. Participants are able to express their sexuality, sexual desires and sexual enjoyment in whichever manner they choose. Submissive partners described how they did not have to appear visually immaculate at all times as their bodies were not under societal control; submission gave them the freedom to scream and cry, and in fact, marks on the skin, welts and bruises were a sign of an enjoyable session. Dominant partners were able to behave in a legitimately sexually selfish manner due to the nature of the dominant role, something they felt pressured to avoid avidly during non-BDSM sexual encounters. This defiance of social norms was experienced as a bodily sensation of power, satisfaction as these emotions are lived through the body rather than simply processed through the mind. This quote from Joe illuminates his embodied experience of power;

I felt really in control...all over, in myself. The other guy was very submissive and willing to submit to my control, my willpower, my mental and physical power. That experience was very much dominant and submissive and he was willing and compliant. I remember the session because of his willingness and submissiveness that just sort of...made me feel incredibly powerful, incredibly confident inside, incredibly wanted, attractive outside. You know, all the ego boosting things when someone submits to you, you're almost...worshipped I suppose. I felt almost God-like to be honest. It's the big buzz all around your body...your insides, you get from being the Dom, and feeling in control of...everything, your destiny, for once and being important, and top of the tree for once...you're special and that's a big thing for me.

Sexual norms constrain sexual expression, according to the participants, and BDSM encourages freedom of sexual expression via acts of transgression, as Patrick's quote illustrates;

Everyone tells us how sex should be and shouldn't be. Sex should be loving, sex should be safe, it shouldn't be with a stranger, or more than one person at a time, it should be clean and sanitised, or it should be diluted. Sex should conform to Cosmo [Cosmopolitan magazine] standards where orgasm is the achievement. It should include foreplay and lube and shouldn't deviate. What I'd just done broke all those rules and more! It was sleazy because it was all about sex and pleasure and using one another to get what you want, there was no love, no...fondness or familiarity, it was simply about gaining maximum pleasure and maximum enjoyment. It was dirty, I didn't know these guys, they didn't know me. And we certainly weren't safe, or even careful. He was in control and I wasn't. It was taboo because it is. BDSM and fetish is taboo, except the cleansed and sanitised versions allowed. I loved the fact that BDSM was all these things to me, and still do.

Through BDSM participation, individuals are able to explore the kinds of sexual experiences they want to have while not being limited by social convention. This is embodied liberation.

Imposed corporeal limitations

Participants discussed limitations that can be imposed on the body by a partner as an erotic element of BDSM participation. This can take many forms, some examples given by participants include how;

- Being restrained leads to the physical sensation of not being able to move
- Being gagged prevents communication in the usual way
- Being catheterised inhibits natural urine excretion

Once again, the usual, everyday embodied relationship with the world is manipulated and can be explored. The corporeal limitations are imposed and controlled by someone else, which was reported as an exciting aspect of the submissive experience and also can elicit unusual psychological reactions, adding another exploratory dimension to the experience. In the following quote, Lucy described how her dominant partner imposes restrictions on her movements by tying her with restraints. This is an uncommon sensation as she is used to moving how and when she wants to. BDSM enables practitioners to explore their limited physicality along with an exploration of how it feels to give over control of this to another person.

I like the fact it makes me feel vulnerable and...helpless. I'm unable to move so I'm unable to resist my husband and his desires, not that I'd want to! It's a very strange experience because you're used to moving when and how you want to, we don't even think about it in everyday life, we just move as and when we want to...When you're tied up or handcuffed you realise how mobile you are, and when it's removed from you, it's removing so much of your power and control. You can't even scratch an itch if you want to, you can't do anything you can usually. So that's an unusual experience to begin with, it's putting you in a position an able bodied person would never normally experience. At times it can be a little painful, if the rope is tight, or if I'm tied in certain positions, but that's fine because I'm not supposed to be comfortable in those situations.

Participants who assumed the dominant role commented that being able to make these impositions and limitations and enforce them onto their submissive partners was a source of eroticism for them. They had the power (within the realm of the consensual fantasy) to govern the other person's entire spectrum of physical movement, to allow or prohibit one of the most basic functions available to individuals – the ability to move and negotiate physical space at will. Joe's quote demonstrates how engaging in BDSM as the dominant partner can change another's bodily relationship with their inhabited space.

He was restrained, with his hands cuffed quite tightly behind his back... I was teaching him how to deep throat, and other sexual activities he'd never done before, and taking him places he'd never been before physically or mentally. There was that buzz of taking him to new places. He couldn't control how deep I went, that was up to me and I knew just how far to take him...physically...as well as mentally so he would enjoy it.

Increased bodily awareness

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- A lack of constraints from things like humanness (being human) or gender. One of the participants mentioned earlier, Tom, found the notion of shedding his humanness to become a puppy, particularly liberating, and Kim was able to identify as a man during her BDSM play.

It is the scope BDSM has for these possibilities that is described by the term embodied liberation. These static, everyday states could be left in the 'real' world that exists outside of the bubble of fantasy, as illustrated by Kim's quote;

It can be a liberating experience because you can leave all your hang-ups with you and take on the persona of someone new, and that persona can be anything in the world you want it to be. That's what I like about role play, there's no end to the possibilities, you can conjure people up and mould and shape them how you want. You're not restricted by race, gender, class, ethnicity, intellect, ability, it's like taking a break from yourself, and in a way having lots of new partners. [...] You can have a variety of partners while still having your own it's the same with sex, you can have lots of different sex but without having lots of different sexual partners.

Both dominant and submissive participants described experiencing a sense of freedom arising from not conforming to conventional rules governing sex. BDSM allows sex to be removed from the traditionally genitally focused acts, which allows participants embodied freedom to further explore the sexual potential of non-conventional practices and sexual experimentation. This sense of freedom is experienced as embodied, as novel and innovate practices are ascribed through, rather than on, the body and erotic actions shift from specific bodily parts to the whole embodied individual. BDSM allows the fulfilment of fantasises which on the surface, are not sexual, but have deep erotic connections for those involved, for example Tom's sexual enjoyment of puppy play. This would not be an option for him to explore when engaging in non-BDSM sex, but through BDSM he is able to experiment with and fulfil this fantasy. Feeling liberated from conventional, approved sexual practices leads to a sense of embodied confidence which manifests as a freedom of sexual expression. Participants are able to express their sexuality, sexual desires and sexual enjoyment in whichever manner they choose. Submissive partners described how they did not have to appear

visually immaculate at all times as their bodies were not under societal control; submission gave them the freedom to scream and cry, and in fact, marks on the skin, welts and bruises were a sign of an enjoyable session. Dominant partners were able to behave in a legitimately sexually selfish manner due to the nature of the dominant role, something they felt pressured to avoid avidly during non-BDSM sexual encounters. This defiance of social norms was experienced as a bodily sensation of power, satisfaction as these emotions are lived through the body rather than simply processed through the mind. This quote from Joe illuminates his embodied experience of power;

I felt really in control...all over, in myself. The other guy was very submissive and willing to submit to my control, my willpower, my mental and physical power. That experience was very much dominant and submissive and he was willing and compliant. I remember the session because of his willingness and submissiveness that just sort of...made me feel incredibly powerful, incredibly confident inside, incredibly wanted, attractive outside. You know, all the ego boosting things when someone submits to you, you're almost...worshipped I suppose. I felt almost God-like to be honest. It's the big buzz all around your body...your insides, you get from being the Dom, and feeling in control of...everything, your destiny, for once and being important, and top of the tree for once...you're special and that's a big thing for me.

Sexual norms constrain sexual expression, according to the participants, and BDSM encourages freedom of sexual expression via acts of transgression, as Patrick's quote illustrates;

Everyone tells us how sex should be and shouldn't be. Sex should be loving, sex should be safe, it shouldn't be with a stranger, or more than one person at a time, it should be clean and sanitised, or it should be diluted. Sex should conform to Cosmo [Cosmopolitan magazine] standards where orgasm is the achievement. It should include foreplay and lube and shouldn't deviate. What I'd just done broke all those rules and more! It was sleazy because it was all about sex and pleasure and using one another to get what you want, there was no love, no...fondness or familiarity, it was simply about gaining maximum pleasure and maximum enjoyment. It was dirty, I didn't know these guys, they didn't know me. And we certainly weren't safe, or even careful. He was in control and I wasn't. It was taboo because it is. BDSM and fetish is taboo, except the cleansed and sanitised versions allowed. I loved the fact that BDSM was all these things to me, and still do.

Through BDSM participation, individuals are able to explore the kinds of sexual experiences they want to have while not being limited by social convention. This is embodied liberation.

## Discussion

This analysis aims to illustrate how consensual BDSM as lived can be understood as embodied experience. Four themes were detailed in this paper, exploring the various ways that BDSM as lived can be conceptualised as embodied experience.

### BDSM as embodied experience

Many of the participants discussed the notion of BDSM as exploration, allowing new and novel bodily experiences, and these bodily transformations are made possible by the transformation of situations (Crossley, 2001). The shift from vanilla sex to BDSM occurs within a sexual context;

therefore these exciting embodied experiences are occurring outside of the habituated body (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Merleau-Ponty proposed that people live and exist in habituated bodies, a pre-reflective way of being-in-the-world. I argue that vanilla sex can be conceptualised this way, as 'habituated', but with reflection, new bodily opportunities can be explored and experimented with via BDSM participation. Foucault (1997) argued that there has been a shift from external bodily regulation via authoritarian surveillance to a regulation, which has become self-managed and self-enforced. Engaging in consensual BDSM is a way of resisting such self-regulation and enables a resituating of the habitual body for these participants. Bodily engagement through erotic play with others enables a blurring of bodily borders and limits, leading to a more holistic sexual experience with the availability of more choices and bodily possibilities. This analysis has found that the experimental and experiential aspects of BDSM participation enable a discovery of new sensualities and bodily relations with the world and with each other.

Foucault (1990) also criticised the genital fixation in the conceptualisation of sexuality. BDSM allows sex to be removed from the traditionally genitally focused acts, which in turn allows participants freedom to further explore the sexual potential of non-conventional practices and sexual experimentation. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) theorised that there is no fixed sexual instinct, rather, sexual arousal is triggered by the meaning of situations, akin to an atmosphere (Butt 2005). Ascribing alternative meanings to traditionally non-sexual practices enables a focus on bodily awareness and exploration. The de-genitalisation of the sexual during BDSM disrupts societal conventions and expectations about the erotic, and illustrates how the body holds a multitude of possibilities for both genital and non-genital oriented pleasure. Giddens (1992) frames the transgression of BDSM as a form of 'plastic sexuality' which decentres sexuality and eroticism from the needs of reproduction and from the rule of the phallus. Giddens (1992) argues that sexual transgression such as BDSM, should not be classed as a perversion but as another manner of expressing sexuality and self-identity. Grosz (1995) understood the practices involved with BDSM as a means of heightening affective intensity of bodily sensations. It is certainly the case that participants in the current study enjoyed the vast array of unusual sensations available to them through BDSM practices. In her ethnographic research, Beckmann (2001) also notes the potentials of BDSM as an exploratory and genitally unfocused practice, echoing the findings of the current analysis.

The inherently transgressive nature of consensual BDSM participation was found by this analysis to be an important experiential aspect of BDSM, enabling an embodied liberation. Although the accounts differed between individual participants, all participants' accounts involved interpreting BDSM as a conscious rejection of the social norms surrounding sex, and creation of a fresh set of sexual rule, which prompted feelings of embodied liberation. This was not necessarily a rejection of normative, vanilla sex, but rather a rejection of the social and political rules and constraints attached to sex by society. Rubin's (1984) sexual hierarchy illustrates how society ranks and judges sexual practices in terms of a 'charmed circle' and 'outer limits', and Weeks (2003) agrees that normality and sexuality are locked into a fixed hierarchy. Normative, vanilla sex was described by these participants in terms of being a 'lesser' experience than its BDSM counterpart; less exciting, less stimulating and with less potential for novel bodily experiences. This differs from the findings of Taylor and Ussher (2001), who presented the discourse of 'SM as dissidence' positioning practitioners as hostile towards normative, vanilla sex. Instead of a rejection of this type of sex, the current research supports Langdrige and Butt's (2004) concept of BDSM 'extending the norm'. Participants were rejecting the social norms surrounding sex, rather than the act of normative sex,

and they participated in BDSM to produce opportunities for the extension of norms and the creation of new sexual rules.

Rofes (2002) argues that cultural and societal norms expect individuals to fix their sexual desires around concepts of heterosexual 'love' and 'romance', and hence by engaging in practices that are contrary to the norm, individuals are rebelling against normative sexuality. It is certainly the case from the current findings that the majority of these participants enjoyed challenging the notion of a fixed body; participants experimented with gender and even the concept of being human. The potential BDSM has for opening up new kinds of embodied freedoms was a significant aspect of participants' experiences. Many of the participants were proud that their sexual desires were linked with the taboo, and took pleasure in defying cultural and social norms by making a wider political statement through their BDSM participation. Individual sexual practices such as BDSM serve to destabilise the normative hierarchy of sexuality and extend the arguments relating to sexual citizenship and sexual rights.

#### The embodied research process

Brown et al (2011) claim there is a lack of empirical work that focuses on modalities other than discourse to investigate phenomena in the world, specifically there is a paucity of work adopting the embodied perspective is often neglected (Finlay, 2006). Psychology has frequently held a reductive view of the body, subscribing to the Cartesian view that separated mind from body and body from world. From the stimulus-response mechanism of behaviourism to the computer systems metaphors of cognitive approaches to clinical scales and measures of psychological illness, the body has been rendered all but invisible in psychology (see Stam, 1998 for further detail). Brown et al (2011) cite a small collection of research that attempts to develop an 'embodied psychology', however, mainstream psychology generally remains a disembodied discipline with a disembodied approach to research. Brown et al (2011) discuss the methodological problem of the body in psychology, reporting that many approaches claiming to take account of embodiment are simply paying lip service of sorts. The current research has recognised the importance of the lived body in the practice of BDSM, and foregrounded this as embodied experience.

The embodied nature of research practice is often overlooked by researchers. Finlay (2006) argues that during phenomenological interviewing the researcher can become fixated on words rather than on the bodily relationship between researcher and participant, a key phenomenological feature which is often ignored. She contends that because bodies are the subjects of experiences in the world, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee should be recognised as a bodily one. King and Horrocks (2010) concur and advise researchers to be sensitive to the bodily aspects of the interview. I was aware of such bodily aspects of the interviews by watching carefully for bodily actions and how these corresponded to what was said, and I was conscious of my own bodily reactions during the interview. This made for very successful interviews where bodily interactions were at the centre of the interaction, rather than considered later.

#### Limitations

The sample was limited in terms of diversity and intersectionality as all bar one individual were white, all were able bodied and cisgender and all were employed or not working out of choice. Individuals that engage in marginalised or criminalised behaviour can be difficult to recruit, along

with non-white, disabled, older and trans\* participants (Langdridge & Barker 2007; Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010) and these difficulties were realised in the current study. Issues of intersectionality are important, however, in an already difficult to reach group of participants it is even more problematic to recruit participants that reflect this, however, readers should bear in mind issues of privilege. The racial, able-bodiedness, and cisgender composition of the sample leads to an incomplete representation of the embodied experience of BDSM, as the limited diversity excludes the voices and experiences of particular members of the BDSM community. There are significant gaps in the knowledge base relating to BME, trans\* identified and disabled individuals (Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010). Encompassing a more inclusive sample in this research would likely have furthered understandings of the lived experiences of these groups of people, in particular with reference to the intersections between marginalisation of the basis of race, age, gender identity or disability and engaging in a marginalised sexual practice. A related issue was the size of the sample. Nine participants were selected on methodological and pragmatic grounds. As the interviews were expected to be lengthy and particularly detailed, the pragmatic choice of choosing depth over breadth was made. (Patton (2002). illustrates the contrary positions when deciding on the focus of a study. In order to achieve breadth, it is possible to examine an experience in less depth but with a larger number of participants. Contrastingly for depth, there is a focus on examining the experience more deeply with fewer participants. The purpose of this study was not to produce generalisable results, rather to understand the embodied experiences of this group of individuals that participate in BDSM, therefore the relatively small sample size is suitable. It is also noteworthy that small samples are considered acceptable for phenomenological research, and issues of quality and adequacy should be foregrounded (Idhe, 1986; Giorgi, 1997).

#### Concluding thoughts

This paper has argued that BDSM can be understood as lived, embodied exploration. The nature of BDSM allows participants exciting opportunities to experiment with their sexuality and/or sexual partners, experiments that they would not otherwise experience without BDSM participation. The BDSM practitioners can be conceptualised as explorers, adventurers travelling to an uncharted territory of embodied exploration. It is clear that participating in BDSM enables participants to learn things about themselves, their bodies and sexuality that otherwise would remain undiscovered. Participants' accounts of their experiences of BDSM were rich and illuminating. Each practitioner spoke vividly and candidly of their desire to embark on unconventional sexual adventures, and their portrayals were always colourful, exciting and often unflinching.



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