

The Prevalence and Some Attributes of Females in the Sadomasochistic Subculture: A Second Report

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Nonprostitute women in the sadomasochism (S/M) subculture have been believed to be rare. A sample of 45 women from the S/M subculture of whom 34 were determined to be nonprostitutes was obtained. This sample is compared with a similar sample obtained by Breslow et al. (1985). Despite methodological differences between the present investigation and that of Breslow et al., interstudy similarities permit conclusions about women in the S/M subculture in addition to the fact that they occur with sufficient frequency to study. The women become aware of their orientation as young adults and most are satisfied with it. They tend to be better educated and less often married than the general population. A majority designate themselves as heterosexual but a substantial minority are bisexual. They tend more often to prefer the submissive role but preference for the dominant role or no preference are found with considerable frequency. Oral sex and bondage are favored activities.

KEY WORDS: sadomasochism; sadomasochistic subculture; nonprostitute sadomasochistic women; bondage and discipline.

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INTRODUCTION

The term *sadomasochism* (S/M) has been variously defined though all definitions have a common core. Possibly the most concise yet clear definition was proposed by Scott (1991): "exchanges involving eroticized mental, emotional, or physical pain" (p. ix).

Until the landmark study by Breslow *et al.* (1985), it was generally believed among sexologists that women who derive true pleasure from sadomasochistic activities were rare and would be found too infrequently in the S/M subculture to permit meaningful research. A primary proponent of this position was Spengler (1977) whose own pioneering study of sadomasochism was restricted to men. T. Weinberg (1987) commented that "the assumption made by a number of writers that few nonprostitute women are participants in S&M...may reflect the difficulties of obtaining a sample as much as it may be an accurate statement about the actual level of S&M activity among females" (p. 65). A minority opinion was offered by M. Weinberg *et al.* (1984) who argued that many women in the S/M scene were not professionals.

Breslow *et al.* (1985) found 52 women involved in S/M among their 182 respondents, over 28%. Twelve were self-reported as prostitutes and were dropped from the study. Nevertheless, the proportion of women remained almost one of every four subjects.

We report here on another sample of women involved in sadomasochism. The data were obtained in 1978 as part of an investigation that also involved a male sample (Moser, 1979), as did the Breslow *et al.* (1985) study. A report on the Moser male sample was published earlier (Moser and Levitt, 1987). Since the data collection preceded the publication by Breslow *et al.* (1985), a deliberate comparison of the two female samples could not have been planned. Not unexpectedly, however, there are overlaps in the two sets of data which permit comparisons.

METHOD

Our methodology differed from that of Breslow, which may account for the intersample differences we present in this report. The Breslow sample was obtained primarily by sending a questionnaire to 300 individuals who had placed personal advertisements in an S/M contact magazine and by publishing the questionnaire in two other magazines that cater to the S/M subculture. We collected only 11 of our sample of 47 women through media sources.⁵ More than three quarters were obtained at meetings of the two major S/M support groups in this

country, the Society of Janus in San Francisco and The Eulenspiegel Society in New York.

The Breslow questionnaire allowed the respondent to indicate if she was an S/M prostitute. Our survey instrument did not include this question. Our view is that the professionals who gravitate to the S/M subculture enjoy sadoomasochistic activities and are not distinguished from nonprofessionals except by the number of partners and frequency of contacts. Clinical and anecdotal reports support this hypothesis, e.g., Scott, 1991; Smith and Cox, 1983; Stoller, 1991. However, to compare our data with the Breslow findings, we attempted to identify the prostitutes in our sample.

THE PROBABLE PROSTITUTE SUBSAMPLE

We sought to accomplish this partition of our sample by sorting out the most multipartnered subjects. We found 11 who reported having had more than 50 lifetime S/M partners and/or more than 100 lifetime heterosexual partners. This subsample had a mean of 563 heterosexual partners compared to 20 for the main sample of 34 subjects, a difference that is significant, $t(43) = 2.90$, $p < 0.01$. They had also had 262 S/M partners compared to only 11 for the main sample, a difference that falls short of significance despite the 24-to-1 ratio, $t(43) = 1.07$, $p > 0.10$. Only 1 subject (9%) in our sample was married compared to over 11 subjects (32%) of the main sample. This difference is also not significant, $\chi^2(1) = 1.39$, $p > 0.10$, though again in the right direction⁶ Finally, our subsample of 11 reported a mean income of \$25,818 per year while the main subsample had a mean of only \$10,219 per year, a highly significant difference, $t(41) = 7.12$, $p < 0.001$. Our probable prostitutes were seldom married and had more income. In sum, the various indices support our identification of a probable prostitute subsample which we then discarded for purposes of comparing our data with those of Breslow. We may have inadvertently eliminated a few highly sexually active nonprostitute women but we believe that this loss does not seriously damage the comparison.

⁵Our original sample contained 47 women. Two data cards could not be read clearly so that $n = 45$ for all statistical analyses in this report except the comparison of proportions of females in the total samples (see Result, The Comparisons).

⁶Yates's correction has been applied to all chi-squares with 1 degree of freedom in this report.

RESULTS

The Comparisons

The Breslow sample contained 52 women or 28.6% of the total. Our sample of 225 subjects included 47 women, 20.6% of the total. The difference is not significant, $\chi^2(1) = 2.80, p > 0.05$. The proportions of prostitutes in the two samples is also not significantly different; the chi-square of 0.00 indirectly supports our choice of criteria for identifying the professionals in our sample. The mean ages of the two samples also did not differ significantly, $t(62) = 1.45, p > .10$. (Table I). The samples do differ in educational level and marital status. The Breslow sample had more than three times as many subjects with a high school education or below, $\chi^2(1) = 4.59, p < 0.05$. Our sample had twice as many single women and significantly fewer married women than the Breslow sample, $\chi^2(1) = 4.10, p < 0.05$.

The samples also differ with respect to mean monthly income, as shown in Table I, $t(60) = 3.85, p < 0.01$. Breslow data were collected between 1982 and 1984 whereas our data were obtained 4 or more years earlier. The difference could therefore be a simple function of inflation.

Another explanation resides in the intersample marital status differential. An analysis of variance shows that our marital status groups differed significantly in mean annual income, $F(2, 31) = 5.33, p < 0.01$. The never-married subgroup had a mean income of \$5700 per year, the separated/divorced group a mean of \$9600, whereas the married group—presumably

Table I. Demographic Characteristics.

	Breslow <i>et al.</i> (<i>n</i> = 40)	Levitt <i>et al.</i> (<i>n</i> = 34)
Prostitute (%)	23	24
Mean age	33.4	30.7
Educational level (%)		
College & >	28.8	41.1
Some college	35.5	47.1
High school & < ^a	35.6	11.8
Marital status (%)		
Currently married ^a	57.5	32.4
Divorced/separated	22.5	26.5
Never married ^a	20.0	41.2
Mean monthly income ^a	1,560	851

^aDifference between samples is significant.

reporting a family income—had a mean of \$16,400. Since the Breslow sample had more married and fewer singles than our sample, this could explain the difference in annual incomes.

The seven-point Kinsey scale in Table II has been condensed into three categories because of the small samples. In our data, 0 and 1 categories (exclusively or predominantly heterosexual), the 5 and 6 categories (exclusively or predominantly homosexual) and the 2, 3, and 4 categories (bisexual) were combined to form the three categories. Breslow *et al.* used only six categories, dropping 2 and 4 and adding a “forced” bisexual category (aroused by bisexual behavior only when “forced”). They pooled each of the two extremes and the two bisexual categories to arrive at three categories. A chi-square analysis comparing the two sets of Kinsey scale data was, $\chi^2(2) = 3.37, p > 0.10$.

The same computational arrangement was applied to the S/M role preference data. Breslow *et al.* combined their “dominant” and “usually dominant” categories, and the “submissive” and “usually submissive.” We employed seven points, analogous to the Kinsey scale and combined categories as we did for the Kinsey scale. In both scales, the central category identifies those respondents who have expressed no clear preference for the dominant or submissive roles. They have been termed “duals,” “middles,” or “switchables” (M. Weinberg *et al.*, 1984) or “versatile” (Spengler, 1977), the term adopted by Breslow *et al.* (1985). Moser’s (1979) expression “equally dominant and submissive” seems to us to be the clearest designation.

Table II shows the comparison of S/M role preference data. Again, the intersample difference is not significant, $\chi^2(2) = 2.85, p > 0.20$.

The Breslow investigators asked their subjects to “give the age when they first realized that they had sadoomasochistic interests.” The mean age was 21.6 years. A similar but possibly not equivalent question in our in-

Table II. Comparison of Orientations

	Breslow <i>et al.</i>	Levitt <i>et al.</i>
S/M role preference scale (%) ^a		
Dominant	27.5	11.7
Equally dominant and submissive	32.5	41.2
Submissive	40.0	47.0
Kinsey scale (%) ^b		
Heterosexual	57.9	67.6
Bisexual	39.5	20.6
Homosexual	2.6	11.8

^a $\chi^2(2) = 2.85, p > 0.20$.

^b $\chi^2(2) = 3.37, p < 0.20 > 0.10$.

strument asked the respondent to state "how old were you when you first 'came out' about being into S/M?" The mean age was 22.7 years which does not differ from the Breslow mean, $t(69) = 0.52, p > 0.10$.

Breslow subjects were required to report the "number of different sadomasochistic encounters during the previous 12 months." Our parallel question asked "how often have you had an S/M scene?" but the time period was the past 6 months. The means are 53 and 66, respectively. Though these means are obviously not directly comparable, we note that the difference is nonsignificant, $t(60) = 0.06, p > 0.10$, as a preliminary to a more logical, though artificial, test of this variable. Assume that our sample mean for a full year would have been twice the 6-month mean and the variance would remain the same, certainly not inconceivable events. This assumed mean of 132 is significantly greater than the Breslow sample mean, $t(60) = 3.76, p < 0.001$.

An hypothesis that explains this substantial intersample discrepancy in reported frequency of S/M contacts concerns the intersample differences in marital status and educational level. If married women and those with lower educational attainment tend to have fewer S/M contacts these tendencies could account for the intersample discrepancy, since these two groups are overrepresented in the Breslow sample. These conjectures are reasonable in light of the surveys that consistently show that unmarried women and those with more education tend to be more active sexually.

In fact, this turns out to be the case. As Table III indicates, college-educated women had 50% more S/M contacts on the average than those with no more than a high school education. The never-married women had 70% more S/M contacts than the married women. The differences in Table III are actually not statistically significant, $F(2, 31) = 0.81, p = 0.43$, and $F(2, 31) = 1.54, p = 0.23$, respectively but statistical significance is not a requisite for these variables to have influenced the frequency of S/M contacts. It is the absolute differences that are meaningful.

Table III. Relationships Between the Frequency of S/M Contacts and Educational Level and Marital Status in the Levitt *et al.* Sample

	Education			Marital status		
	High school and less	Some college	College grad and postgrad	Never married	Divorced/separated	Currently married
<i>n</i>	4	16	14	14	9	11
Mean frequency of S/M contacts	34	87	51	62	109	36

Table IV. Percentages of Subjects Reporting Various S/M Activities as Pleasurable

Activity	Breslow <i>et al.</i>	Levitt <i>et al.</i>
Oral sex	90	74
Bondage	88	77
Spanking	80	79
Master-slave script	76	65
Masturbation	73	59
Humiliation	61	47
Anal sex	51	41
Rubber/leather fetish	42	47
Whipping	39	62
Urolagnia	37	24
Enemas	22	15
Cross-dressing	20	9
Coprophilia	12	0

$\rho = .91, p < 0.001$

The Breslow subjects were asked to estimate how frequently they felt "dirty" or "perverted" because of their sexual interests, on a 5-point scale ranging from *never* to *always*. Our subjects were required to respond to the true-false statement, "I wish I were not into S/M." Again, these stimuli appear parallel though perhaps not directly comparable. We combined the five categories of the Breslow question into a dichotomy in two ways: pooling *sometimes* with *never*, and *sometimes* with *always*. The former yielded 15.4% who felt dirty or perverted, the latter, 7.7%. Of our subjects, 12.5% responded "true" to the item asking if they wished they were not into S/M. Comparisons with the rearrangements of the Breslow item yielded $\chi^2(1) = 0.00$ and $0.08, p > 0.70$, respectively.

Breslow listed the percentages of subjects reporting that they enjoyed any of 21 S/M activities. We asked our subjects to tell us which ones of 57 activities they had experienced and enjoyed. A comparison of the 13 behaviors that are common to the two investigations is shown in Table IV.

The point of Table IV is the similarity of interests in the two samples rather than isolated differences which could easily be a consequence of sampling error. Both samples manifested clear preferences for bondage, spanking (the traditional bondage and discipline duo), oral sex, and the master-slave game, activities that go together. Neither sample expressed much interest in coprophilia, urolagnia, enemas, or transvestism, the latter not unexpected in a female sample. Over the 13 activities, the rank order

correlation, Spearman's $\rho(11) = .91, p < .001$, indicates a highly significant relationship between the two rankings.

DISCUSSION

Accurate comparison of the two samples is hampered by differences in methodology and the need to identify a probable prostitute subsample in our sample. We have proposed hypotheses to explain the intersample differences in income and frequency of S/M contacts. However, these differences, as well as the differences in marital status, may be due in part to the discrepancy in methodology. For example, individuals who attend meetings of an S/M support group with any regularity would surely have greater opportunity to find partners and hence to be more active sexually than persons who apparently need to advertise to find partners. Despite the methodological differences, an inference that is clearly feasible from the joint impact of the two samples is that women are indeed found in the S/M subculture in sufficient numbers to study. On the assumption that our identification of a prostitute subsample is reasonably accurate, the following additional inferences concerning non-prostitute women in the S/M subculture are warranted.

Women in the S/M subculture tend to be better educated and less often married than in the general population.

Women in the S/M subculture become aware of their orientation as young adults.

A plurality consider themselves submissive in the S/M role but a substantial minority enjoy, or are at least able to play, either dominant or submissive roles. Those who express a clear preference for the dominant role are a smaller minority.

A majority designate themselves as heterosexual but a substantial minority are bisexual.

Four of five are satisfied with their S/M orientation.

S/M behaviors that are most liked are in the constellation that include oral sex, bondage and discipline, and the master-slave script.

S/M behaviors that are least liked are those involving excretory processes though even these behaviors are enjoyed by more than an occasional participant.

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