

On the Prevalence and Roles of Females in the Sadomasochistic Subculture: Report of an Empirical Study

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The existence of females in the sadomasochistic subculture has generally been denied in the theoretical, clinical, and empirical literature. The assumption that females do not exist in the subculture, or exist in such small numbers as to make analysis impossible, was tested. Questionnaires were placed in two publications that cater to sadomasochists, and additional questionnaires were mailed to advertisers whose ads appeared in a sadomasochistic contact magazine. Of 182 individuals who responded, 130 were males, and 52 were females, indicating a meaningful female presence in the subculture. An analysis of the replies revealed similarities and differences between the male and female respondents.

KEY WORDS: sadism; masochism; sadomasochism; deviant sexuality.

INTRODUCTION

Sadomasochism has not been a popular area for empirical research. The bulk of information on the subject comes from the writings of early sexologists (Krafft-Ebing, 1922; Hirshfield, 1956; Ellis, 1954; Kinsey *et al.*, 1953) or from theoretical papers. Most of the theoretical writings have been produced by Freudians and neo-Freudians (Freud, 1961; Sadger, 1926; Deutsch, 1930; Horney, 1935; Bonaparte, 1952; Menaker, 1953; Panken,

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1967; Eisenbud, 1967), although in recent years behavioristic approaches have appeared in the literature (Brown, 1965; Marks *et al.*, 1965). Since there are numerous theoretical perspectives and variations within each theory, it is impossible to make definitive statements about sadomasochism with any degree of certainty.

The literature primarily concerns itself with the etiology of sadomasochistic behavior. Not surprisingly, the Freudian and neo-Freudian perspectives concentrate on early infantile and childhood experiences. Problems encountered in various stages of psychosexual or ego development are viewed as the roots of sadomasochistic behavior exhibited in adult life. The behavioristic approach is also predictable in its views on the etiology of sadomasochism. Various conditioned responses are considered the cause of an individual's interest in this form of sexual behavior.

Despite these different perspectives, most theorists agree on the absence of female participation in sadomasochistic activities. Krafft-Ebing (1922) believed that sadism was a perversion of normal male aggressiveness; since he believed that females were not normally aggressive, their interest in sadism would be rare, and when found was symptomatic of lesbianism. He considered masochism a more normal state for women, and this very normality raised the problem of detection. It was difficult to distinguish masochistic sexuality from normal female sexuality. Hirshfield (1956) and Ellis (1954) shared this perspective.

Freud (1961) wrote that women's natural state was one of "moral masochism." As women lived their lives in this state, there was no reason for them to become sexual masochists. Freud differed from Krafft-Ebing in the belief concerning the potential for women to become sexual sadists; Freud believed that women were as aggressive as men and, hence, could express this aggressiveness sexually. However, writers from the Freudian perspective have failed to investigate further the behavior of female sadists, concentrating on males instead.

The behaviorists have tended to incorporate investigations on the modification of sadomasochistic behavior with studies in fetishism. Females have not been included in these studies, primarily because they are not considered to be fetishists. Men learn to associate certain stimuli with sexual arousal because their genitals are external and thus states of sexual arousal or nonarousal are easily detected. Females have more difficulty recognizing whether they are sexually stimulated and so do not learn to incorporate extraneous material into their sexual fantasies (Gosselin and Wilson, 1980).

Few empirical studies on the subject have been conducted, and none have included women in the investigations. Litman and Swearingen (1972) placed an advertisement in an "underground" newspaper, which had a large personal section with sexually oriented ads, seeking masochists who engaged

in extreme forms of bondage. They received 30 responses, three from women. Although they interviewed the three women who volunteered as having sexual sadomasochistic interests, the women were excluded from the findings.

Spengler (1977) conducted what is possibly the best empirical study on the subject. He sent questionnaires to men who advertised in sadomasochistic correspondence magazines in West Germany and distributed questionnaires through S and M clubs. He limited his study to men because "it is almost impossible to question sadomasochistically oriented women in the subculture; there are hardly any nonprostitute ads and very few women in the clubs. As a result, we investigated men only" (pp. 442-443). Spengler suggests that female sadomasochistic prostitutes should be studied because only through them do heterosexual males realize their sexual sadomasochistic interests:

We consider the assumption that manifest sadomasochistic deviance among women is very rare (at least within the subculture) to be essential for an understanding of the situation of [male] heterosexual sadomasochists. Accordingly, sadomasochistic prostitution, which in part affords the sole possibility for realization of the deviance for this group, plays a special role. With regard to our unsystematic impressions, nearly all the subcultural groups among heterosexual sadomasochists exist in cooperation with prostitutes. (p. 455)

Gosselin and Wilson (1980) conducted a survey in England that was similar to Spengler's but that concentrated on seeking correlations between the behavior and interests of sadomasochists, transvestites, transsexuals, and fetishists. Although women were contacted for the survey, they were considered to be prostitutes, interested only in financial gain, and so the data generated from their questionnaires were not combined with those of the men.

While the lack of female participation in the sadomasochistic sex scene is one of the few areas of near agreement between early sexologists, Freudians and behaviorists, a number of texts, popular books, and magazines (Comfort, 1972; Green and Green, 1973; Hunt, 1974; Byrne and Byrne, 1977; Victor, 1980; Wolfe, 1981) include females in their descriptions of sadomasochistic sexuality. These publications seem oblivious to the preponderance of technical writings stating that there are no such women. The questions remain as to whether females exist in meaningful numbers within the subculture and, if so, how they resemble sadomasochistic males.

METHOD

The authors contacted 16 nationally distributed, sexually oriented publications that catered either partially or exclusively to sadomasochists. It was proposed that the publications include a questionnaire in their issues. This

was done to avoid a sample population composed solely of individuals who were motivated enough to place ads seeking contact with others. Only one publishing company agreed to aid in this research. The questionnaire was published in two of their publications in 1982: *Letters*, a monthly digest-type magazine, and *Sugar and Spikes*, an annual digest-type magazine. To increase the sample size, approximately 300 advertisers whose ads appeared in *Latent Image*, (1982), a sadomasochistic contact magazine, were sent questionnaires. *Latent Image* was chosen because of its relatively low number of ads placed by prostitutes and its high number of ads placed by single females and couples. Additionally, a small number of questionnaires were made available by shops and one club catering to sadomasochists.

Materials and Procedure

The questionnaire consisted of 40 questions that sought to elicit information regarding demographic factors and actual participation in sadomasochistic sexual activity. The questions were phrased in the terminology of the subculture. For example, the terms *dominant* and *submissive* were used in place of the terms *sadist* and *masochist* (these latter terms rarely appear in sadomasochistic ads). Additionally, although the term *sadomasochism* (S and M) was occasionally used in the questionnaire, it was usually replaced by the euphemism *unusual sex*, which is frequently used in advertisements appearing in sadomasochistic contact magazines. Other jargon was also used, and when such terms appear in this report, they will be briefly defined.

In addition to the 40 questions, the respondents were asked to participate in a follow-up questionnaire, which contained 21 in-depth structured questions and a number of unstructured questions based on the answers to the original questionnaire. Approximately 50% requested to be included in the follow-up group, but only about half of these actually returned the second questionnaire. The responses to the in-depth questionnaire ranged from short, somewhat abbreviated answers to 10,000-15,000 word essays.

RESULTS

Sample Population

There were 182 individuals who responded to the questionnaire. The majority of the respondents were from the United States; only 12 were not (6 were from Canada, 2 each from England and Italy, and 1 each from Sweden and Germany). Males numbered 130 (72%), and females numbered

52 (28%). In response to the question, "Are you a professional dominant or submissive [sadosomochistic prostitute]?", 12 females (23% of females) and 10 males (7.7% of males) responded affirmatively.

Although the bulk of the literature would predict otherwise, a 1×2 chi square comparing the number of nonprostitute females to female prostitutes showed that nonprostitute females were represented in significantly larger numbers than female prostitutes ($df = 1, \chi^2 = 15.07, p < .001$). Because of the relatively small sample of prostitutes, only the responses from the nonprostitute males and females are reported below.

Table I contains general demographic data. No significant differences were found for the age distribution between the two groups of respondents. Significant results were found for levels of education, with males having reached a higher level of education than females ($df = 4, \chi^2 = 11.25, p < 0.05$). A comparison with the 1981 Bureau of the Census figures shows that both groups are better educated than the population as a whole. These findings that individuals involved in the sadosomochistic subculture generally have

Table I. General Demographic Data

	Male (%)	Female (%)
Age ^a		
25 and under	15.4	19.5
26-30	14.6	26.8
31-40	42.7	39
41-50	20.5	17
51 and over	6.8	0
<i>n</i>	117	40
\bar{X}	36.2	33.4
<i>S</i>	9.96	7.73
Education		
Some high school or less	5.9	8.9
High school graduate	10.2	26.7
Some college	30.5	35.5
College graduate	31.4	20
Post-graduate	22	8.8
<i>n</i>	118	45
\bar{X}	3.5	2.93
<i>S</i>	1.12	1.09
Monthly income		
\$1000 or less	24	50
\$1001-2000	38.5	13.3
\$3001-4000	8.6	6.7
\$4001 or over	3.8	3.3
<i>n</i>	104	30
\bar{X}	2031	1560
<i>S</i>	1426	1142

^aThese frequencies are the same as those used by Spengler (1977).

Table II. Marital Status of Sample

Status	Male (%)	Female (%)
Never married	34.1	20
Married ^a	52.5	57.5
Divorced or separated	13.3	22.5
<i>n</i>	120	40

^aCombined scores of individuals answering affirmatively as being either married or divorced but remarried.

reached a higher level of education than would be expected from the census figures are in keeping with the data reported by Spengler (1977).

Table II shows the marital status of the respondents. No significant differences in marital status were found between the two groups of respondents. However, when compared with the 1981 Bureau of the Census figures, this sample population was found to have different rates of marriage and divorce: they tended to marry less often or remain single longer, and those who did marry had higher divorce rates than the general population (males: $df = 2$, $\chi^2 = 20.88$, $p < 0.001$; females: $df = 2$, $\chi^2 = 10.08$, $p < 0.01$). One interpretation of this finding (Hunt, 1974) is that individuals engaged in sadomasochism are personality disordered and unable to engage in meaningful relationships. An alternate hypothesis is that individuals engaged in sadomasochistic lifestyles do not do well in relationships where the other partner does not share his or her sexual interests. A number of respondents reported that this was the case. Other divorced but remarried respondents reported that their current spouses introduced them to sadomasochism and that they now find both their sexual relationship and marriage more enjoyable.

Visibility

Respondents were asked whether their spouses or current boy or girl friends were aware of their sexual interests. Of the four choices—"No," "Yes," "I'm not sure," and "I do not have a spouse or current boy or girl friend"—the two categories *no* and *I'm not sure* were combined, since each indicated that the respondent was being less than open about his or her sexual interests (Table III). The category indicating no present significant other was not included in this statistical analysis. These data reveal that the subjects are very open about their sexual interests with their significant others. Separate chi squares for each group of respondents revealed that both groups were significantly open (males: $df = 1$, $\chi^2 = 26$, $p < 0.001$; females: $df = 1$, χ^2

Table III. Marital Status of Sample

Knowledge	Male (%)	Female (%)
No ^a	25	2.6
Yes	75	97.4
<i>n</i>	104	38

^aCombined data of those responding "No" and "I don't know."

= 34.1, $p < 0.001$). A comparison between the results of this question and that of Spengler (1977) cannot be made because he uses the two categories *knows or suspects* and *does not know*. *Knows or suspects* does not differentiate between those who are open about their interests and those who are not.

Age of First Interest

The respondents were asked to give the age when they first realized that they had sadomasochistic interests (Table IV). Males recognized their interests significantly earlier than females, as revealed by a 2×8 chi square ($df = 7$, $\chi^2 = 22.40$, $p < 0.01$). Of the males, 53.2% realized they had sadomasochistic interests by the age of 14, compared to only 21.6% of females who realized their interests by that age.

Means of First Exposure to Sadomasochism

Respondents were asked to indicate how they became interested in sadomasochism (Table V). A belief exists within the subculture that

Table IV. Age of First Interest

Age	Male (%)	Female (%)
6 years or younger	9.2	2.7
7-10	12.8	2.7
11-14	31.2	16.2
15-18	24.8	21.6
19-22	9.2	16.2
23-26	6.4	8.1
27-30	3.7	18.9
over 30	2.8	13.5
<i>n</i>	109	37
\bar{X}	14.99	21.58
S	6.79	8.17

Table V. Means of First Exposure

First exposure	Male (%)	Female (%)
Through reading pornography	21.3	17.6
From legitimate movies, TV, etc.	3.7	0
Introduced by another person	8.3	61.8
Natural interest from childhood	63.9	20.6
Other ^a	2.8	0
<i>n</i>	108	34

^aThis category has been deleted from the statistical analysis.

sadomasochistic interests are “natural ones” from childhood, that is, that they are the earliest sexual thoughts that can be remembered.

The data from Table V and those from Table IV show that this may be true for some individuals but certainly not for all. Males did tend to feel that their interests were “natural from childhood” ($df = 3$, $\chi^2 = 139.24$, $p < 0.001$). For computational purposes, the category *other* in Table V was deleted from the analysis. Although the males did feel that their interests were natural ones, the issue becomes clouded by the manner in which different men defined *childhood*. Older men (those in their 50s and beyond) tended to extend childhood to include their mid-20s, while younger men tended to restrict childhood to the teenage years or younger. The females were seemingly introduced to sadomasochism by another person, although no significant results were found. Pornography, although a factor, is not a significant issue.

Participation in Sadomasochistic Subculture

Sadomasochists have difficulties meeting others who share their interests. Meeting places tend to be either nonexistent or difficult to locate. Moreover, sadomasochists do not necessarily appear, by dress or other means, different from the general population. How, then, do sadomasochists make contact with others who share their interests?

The respondents were asked to indicate all the means they used to meet others interested in sadomasochism (Table VI). Placing or answering ads in sadomasochistic contact magazines rated the highest for both groups of respondents. The second most frequent method was to introduce a sexual partner to sadomasochistic sex. Although about 17% of both respondent groups stated that they had not tried to meet others, this statistic is somewhat misleading. A number of respondents stated that they were introduced to sadomasochism by their present sexual partner and have no need to find other contacts. Others (usually females) stated that their current sexual partner

Table VI. Methods of Making Contact

Method	Male (%)	Female (%)
Through ads	40.6	41.7
At S and M bars	5.3	4.2
At S and M clubs	5.3	6.2
Seducing others	26.5	20.8
Have not tried	16.5	16.7
Other ^a	5.9	10.4
<i>n</i>	170	48

^aThis category has been deleted from the statistical analysis.

found additional sexual partners (for group sex) and so replied that *they* had not tried to find others.

Number of Partners

Table VII shows the frequency distributions of the number of different sadomasochistic partners during the year preceding the survey. The highest number of different partners was reported by females (mean = 8.6); heterosexual males reported the fewest number of different partners (mean = 2.9). This may be explained by an imbalance of the number of females to males in the subculture.

Frequency of Sadomasochistic Sexual Activity during the Previous Year

Because of low expected values, no chi square test between the two groups is possible. From the means, however, we see that females engage in sadomasochistic activity at a rate about twice that of males (Table VIII). The relatively low number of individuals who have not engaged in

Table VII. Number of Different Sadomasochistic Contacts during Previous 12 Months

Partners	Male (%)	Female (%)
None	15.4	7.1
1-5	73	57.1
6-10	6.8	7.1
11-15	1.7	14.2
16-20	.85	3.6
More than 20	2.6	10.7
<i>n</i>	117	28
\bar{X}	3.47	8.6
S	6.63	13.8

Table VIII. Number of Different Sadomasochistic Sexual Encounters during the Previous 12 Months

Encounters	Male (%)	Female (%)
None	12	9.7
1-10	43.5	25.8
11-20	16.6	19.4
21-30	11.1	3.2
31-40	0	3.2
41-50	4.6	12.9
More than 50	12	22.6
<i>n</i>	108	31
\bar{X}	25	53
<i>S</i>	44.1	79.92

sadomasochistic sexual activity indicates that those interested in finding others are capable of doing so. While Spengler (1977) found that 85% of his heterosexual male sample did not have sadomasochistic relations during the preceding 12 months of his survey, only 13.3% of the male heterosexual respondents in this survey reported no encounters.

Sadomasochistic Role Preference

The respondents were asked to indicate their preferences for sadomasochistic roles (Table IX). For computational purposes, the categories *dominant* and *usually dominant* were combined, since usually dominant implies a preference for dominance. Similarly, the categories *usually submissive* and *submissive* were combined. *Versatile* denotes an individual who enjoys equally the dominant and submissive roles. A 2×3 chi square comparing males and females revealed no significant differences in role preferences between the sexes; nor did 1×3 chi squares reveal any preferences within each group. These data indicate that both male and female sadomasochists are equally distributed among the possible roles within the

Table IX. Sex Role Preference

Preference	Male (%)	Female (%)
Dominant	21	15
Usually dominant	12	12.5
Versatile	26	32.5
Usually submissive	14	18
Submissive	27	22
<i>n</i>	117	40
\bar{X}	2.07	2.12
<i>S</i>	.86	.82

Table X. Sexual Orientation

Orientation	Male (%)	Female (%)
Heterosexual	61.1	42.1
Usually heterosexual	18.6	15.8
Bisexual	13.6	31.6
"Forced" bisexual	5.1	7.9
Usually homosexual	1.7	0
Homosexual	0	2.6
<i>n</i>	118	38
\bar{X}	1.22	1.45
<i>S</i>	.46	.55

subculture. A small majority of both groups (males, 52%; females, 63%) either habitually or occasionally switch roles, while a large minority (males, 48%; females, 37%) state that they are inflexible.

The respondents were asked to indicate their sex role preference (Table X). For computational purposes, the categories of *heterosexual* and *usually heterosexual* were combined, since usually heterosexual implies a preference. Similarly, the categories *usually homosexual* and *homosexual* were combined, as were the categories *bisexual* and *forced bisexual*. (A forced bisexual is an individual who enjoys homosexual sex only when bound or "ordered" to participate by a dominant/sadist.)

Both males and females in this sample showed a preference toward heterosexuality (males: $df = 2$, $\chi^2 = 70$, $p < 0.001$; females $df = 2$, $\chi^2 = 21.5$, $p < 0.001$). Males tended to be predominantly heterosexual, while females tended to lean toward bisexuality.

Level of Commitment to Sadomasochistic Subculture

The respondents were asked to report the importance of sadomasochism in their lives: foreplay, lifestyle, fluctuating, or other (Table XI). For com-

Table XI. Level of Commitment to Sadomasochistic Lifestyle

Commitment	Male (%)	Female (%)
Foreplay	26.5	41
Fluctuating	58.1	43.6
Lifestyle	7.7	12.8
Other ^a	7.7	2.6
<i>n</i>	108	38
\bar{X}	1.79	1.71
<i>S</i>	.58	.69

^aThis category has been deleted from the statistical analysis.

Table XII. Self-acceptance

Self-acceptance	Male (%)	Female (%)
Always	1.7	0
Often	2.6	15.4
Sometimes	23.1	15.4
Rarely	30.7	28.2
Never	41.9	48.7
<i>n</i>	117	39
\bar{X}	2.68	2.69
<i>S</i>	.55	.61

putational purposes, the category *other* was deleted from this analysis. Significant results were revealed for both groups, who viewed sadomasochism as vacillating between foreplay and a lifestyle (males: $df = 2$, $\chi^2 = 40.5$, $p < 0.001$; females: $df = 2$, $\chi^2 = 9.88$, $p < 0.01$).

Self-Acceptance

The respondents were asked to estimate how frequently they felt "dirty" or "perverted" because of their sexual interests: 1×3 chi squares for both groups revealed a high level of self-acceptance on the part of the respondents (Table XII). The most frequent response from both groups was *never*, which indicates a high level of acceptance of sexual orientation (males: $df = 2$, $\chi^2 = 108.5$, $p < 0.001$; females, $df = 2$, $\chi^2 = 44.5$, $p < 0.001$). This attitude of self-acceptance was also found by Spengler (1977) in his sample of males. For computational purposes, the categories *always* and *often* were combined, as were the categories *rarely* and *never* in this analysis.

Preferences of Sadomasochistic Sexual Practices

Table XIII shows the preferences of sexual activities of the respondents. The more extreme forms of sexual activity usually associated with sadomasochism, such as torture and activities involving excrement, are relatively rare. It is of interest that many of the sexual practices are enjoyed to approximately the same degree by both men and women (e.g., humiliation: males 65%, females 61%; spanking: males 79%, females 80%; masturbation: males 70%, females 73%; master-slave relationships: males 79%, females 76%). Females gave higher ratings to bondage, stringent (extreme) bondage, and restraint (mild bondage) than did males. Moreover, such "fetishes" as erotic lingerie and boots and shoes, always associated with males (regardless of the presence of a sadomasochistic orientation), were also rated

Table XIII. Preferences of Sadomasochistic Sexual Interests (Sexual Interests of Females Compared to Males, in Descending Order)

Interest	Male (%)	Female (%)
Spanking	79	80
Master-slave relationships	79	76
Oral sex	77	90
Masturbation	70	73
Bondage	67	88
Humiliation	65	61
Erotic lingerie	63	88
Restraint	60	83
Anal sex	58	51
Pain	51	34
Whipping	47	39
Rubber/leather	42	42
Boots/shoes	40	49
Verbal abuse	40	51
Stringent bondage	39	54
Enemas	33	22
Torture	32	32
Golden showers	30	37
Transvestism	28	20
Petticoat punishment	25	20
Toilet activities	19	12

higher by females as a sexual interest. Only the “fetishistic” interests in rubber/leather were shared equally by both sexes. Although much attention in the fantasies submitted by respondents was given to the feminization of males, only a few respondents indicated an interest in either transvestism or “petticoat punishment” (a form of transvestism in which the male is made to look ridiculous instead of feminine).

DISCUSSION

The preponderance of the literature denies the existence of nonprostitute females in the sadomasochistic subculture. Accordingly, the subculture is viewed as predominantly homosexual, with the few heterosexual males relegated to the use of female prostitutes to realize their sexual interests. The data generated by this research contradicts this previous characterization of the sadomasochistic subculture. Nonprostitute females do participate in sadomasochistic sex, and heterosexual males are capable of making contact with them. This research revealed several similarities and differences between nonprostitute males and nonprostitute females.

Similarities of Nonprostitute Males and Females

Both groups have large heterosexual and bisexual components. They fall within similar age ranges; males and females tended to be better educated and either to remain unmarried or to have a higher divorce rate than the population as a whole. While females made less money than males, the differences are similar to those of the population as a whole. Both are open about their sexual interests with their significant others; placing or answering ads and introducing sexual partners to sadomasochistic sex are the means by which both groups most often try to find partners. Both groups tended to be slightly submissive, although not significantly so. Both view sadomasochism as sexual foreplay, with interim periods of more intense involvement; both appear to think positively of themselves in relation to their interests in sadomasochism. Both males and females show approximately the same degree of interest in a large number of specific sexual acts.

Differences in Nonprostitute Males and Females

Males realized their sexual interests in sadomasochism considerably earlier in life than females. Males seemed to discover sadomasochism on their own, whereas females tended to be introduced to it by a sexual partner. Females engaged in sadomasochistic sex more often and tended to have a slightly larger number of different partners than males.

CONCLUSIONS

Having found that nonprostitute females do exist in the sadomasochistic subculture, although possibly in fewer numbers than nonprostitute males, further research in this area is indicated. Additionally, although the number of prostitutes in this sample was too small for meaningful analysis, an investigation into the similarities and differences between prostitute and nonprostitute sadomasochists is felt to be essential to an understanding of the subculture.

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