

Practitioners' views on submission and dominant sex

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Strong emotional experiences, an opportunity to find your place in the world, a clear set of rules and the knowledge that other people regard it as immoral and shameful. These are just some of the views held by perpetrators of BDSM that Charlotta Carlström examines in her social work thesis.

"There is an aura of sensationalism surrounding BDSM in the media and in the film world," said Charlotta Carlström. "I have chosen to delve more deeply to find out how the perpetrators themselves talk about and describe BDSM."

In the introductory chapter, Carlström presents an historical exposé and looks at how BDSM is viewed from a medical, popular science, research, political and feminist perspective. She also explores how views have shifted in line with changes in society.

"Sadomasochism, for example, was a psychiatric diagnosis in Sweden as late as 2009," said Charlotta Carlström. "In many countries sadomasochism is still regarded as an illness and also criminal."

"Opinions within feminism are divided. A number of feminists view BDSM as patriarchal oppression whilst others regard a woman's sexual pleasure as a private matter, even if it involves pain."

In her thesis Carlström allows the perpetrators to present their views on how BDSM is portrayed from a medical and feminist point of view.

Carlström's thesis is essentially an ethnographic study. Through a website and a series of interviews, home visits and club visits, she made contact with perpetrators of BDSM and got to know them. She interviewed some 30 individuals and made a number of observations during pub and club evenings.

What are the most important results to emerge?

"Perpetrators are highly reflective about what they do. They strive to understand their identity. They defend themselves when faced with an image that is stigmatised and shrouded in shame, and they consider BDSM to be a positive element in their lives. Despite this, several of them state that it would be disastrous if their family and colleagues at work were to find out that they practised BDSM."

Carlström points out that perpetrators of BDSM emphasise trust, a sense of belonging and the importance of finding like-minded individuals. They also say that they take newcomers under their wing in order to teach them the correct forms of BDSM. The perpetrators state that there are clear rules for communicating what you are willing and not willing to be subjected to sexually. "Behaviour which in a different context would be regarded as immoral and wrong could thus become morally justifiable in a BDSM context."

Another important result to emerge is that BDSM challenges taboos and engenders emotional intensity. The interviewees spoke about physical sensations and a change in their level of awareness, comparing it to spirituality and religiousness.

BDSM is frequently associated with violence and the two are often put on a par. Carlström's thesis demonstrates, however, that because BDSM embodies consent and communication, BDSM and violence should be regarded as two different things.

Carlström states that her thesis highlights the ambivalence and paradoxes that perpetrators of BDSM are forced to contend with. Whilst there are firmly rooted opinions regarding BDSM, the perpetrators seek to highlight alternative opinions.

How would you like the thesis be used?

"I would like it to not only reach the perpetrators but also people working in sexology, social services, the care sector and in particular the legal system. There is a whole host of myths surrounding BDSM."

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