1997

**Thursdays at the Torch: The Negotiation of Non-Monogamous Relationships Among Members of a Lesbian S/M Community**

Lori Harmon  
*Loyola University Chicago*

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THURSDAYS AT THE TORCH: THE NEGOTIATION OF NON-MONOGAMOUS RELATIONSHIPS AMONG MEMBERS OF A LESBIAN S/M COMMUNITY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

BY
LORI HARMON

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
JANUARY 1997
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Sarah and all of the women at the Torch who put up with an endless barrage of questions and still let me hang around. I also wish to thank my advisor, Judith Wittner and Anne Figert for their insight, encouragement and support.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Lesbian sadomasochism (s/m) has been hotly debated among feminists since the early 1980s. With the 1981 publication of *Coming to Power* by *Samois*, the first organized group of lesbian sadomasochists, lesbian s/m quickly became a primary battlefield in what have since been dubbed the feminist 'sex wars.' In these often acrimonious debates, lesbian s/m has been portrayed as everything from a tool of the patriarchy to a powerful weapon in subverting the dominant sex/gender system, depending on which camp was attempting to forward its definition of lesbian s/m.

The competing camps in these debates have often been termed pro-sex and anti-sex feminists. This terminology obscures the underlying interests and power relations which have been engendered feminist debates over lesbian s/m. By looking at the social positions from which supporters of each camp have been drawn, the differing interests which have fueled the debates becomes clear. While the pro-sex camp has been made up primarily of feminist practitioners of lesbian s/m, the anti-sex camp has drawn much of its support from among the ranks of feminist academics. Between these two camps, the central point of contest has been whose definition of lesbian s/m would prevail within feminism.

In the debates over the meaning of lesbian s/m, the definitions which have been forwarded by academics and practitioners have often been based on very different kinds of
"evidence." While feminist academics have tended to indict lesbian s/m based on their analyses of cultural representations, feminist practitioners have attempted to vindicate it by theorizing its radical potential. Both sides have made claims about the ultimate meaning of s/m. Neither side has analyzed actual s/m practices. A brief look at the analytic strategies of camp will make this point more clear.

In their analyses of lesbian s/m, feminist academics have tended to conflate representations with practices. Cultural representations provide useful information about such things as the systems of meaning which structure the particular subject positions within which individuals authorize themselves and the world around them. But representations, when analyzed in isolation from the contexts in which they are interpreted, cannot tell us about the specific meanings which individuals attach to those representations, how those meanings are used in day-to-day practice, or how practice is used to reinvest cultural representations with new meaning. In many feminist analyses of s/m, the crucial junctures between representation and interpretation, interpretation and action, action and the creation of new meaning have been overlooked.

For instance, in her essay, "Master and Slave: the Fantasy of Erotic Domination," Jessica Benjamin (1984) analyzes the dominant and submissive relationships depicted in the controversial Story of O. Using a mixture of Hegelian philosophy and Freudian theory, Benjamin views the conflicting desires for differentiation and recognition as fundamental principles which organize desire in dominant/submissive relationships. Within this framework, Benjamin concludes from her reading of the text that "the master-slave relationship actually perpetuates the problem it is designed to resolve. The rigid division
into master and slave, sadist and masochist, ultimately exhausts its potential for transcendence."

While Benjamin states that she is not studying s/m practices, "but a single, powerful study of the erotic imagination...", the conclusions she draws are about s/m relationships, not s/m erotica. In this, and many other feminist analyses of s/m, erotic fantasy is used as the basis to make claims about the outcome of erotic practices.

More recently, Reina Lewis and Karen Adler have used discourse theory to analyze a number of lesbian erotic short stories which contain various s/m themes (1994). Looking at the contexts within which the casual sex encounters contained in these stories occur, the authors conclude that the s/m practice of casual sex is antithetical to the feminist goal of creating a more relational form of sexuality. While the theoretical framework Lewis and Adler use is different from Benjamin's, the assumption upon which the authors base their conclusions is essentially the same. In both cases, representations of s/m are taken as see-through indicators of what lesbian sadomasochists are actually doing.

Pat Califia writes, "S/M is scary. That's at least half its significance. We select the most frightening, disgusting, or unacceptable activities and transmute them into pleasure. We make use of all the forbidden symbols and all the disowned emotions. S/M is deliberate, premeditated, erotic blasphemy. It is a form of sexual extremism and sexual dissent." (1994, pg. 158) If we believe Califia, at least insofar as s/m utilizes activities considered by most to be frightening, disgusting and unacceptable, then the reason so many feminists analyzing representations of s/m have concluded that it is dangerous seems clear. When drawing on the dominant system of meanings signified by representations of
such s/m practices as master/slave role playing, s/m indeed appears to be very dangerous.

What these accounts fail to consider is the possibility of a counterhegemonic interpretation of the symbols and practices employed within s/m. In the above quote, Califia claims that these symbols and practices, which so many feminists interpret as dangerous, are actually being transmuted into pleasure. This is a dominant theme among feminist practitioners of s/m. On this side of the debate, while s/m practices (rather than cultural representations) have been taken into account, the effects of those practices have been theorized, rather than analyzed. Moreover, the effects of s/m practices have been assumed to be seamlessly related to the intentions of the social actors involved in them, and those intentions have been portrayed in rather monolithic terms. For example, Califia writes, "Our political system cannot digest the concept of power unconnected to privilege. S/M recognizes the erotic underpinnings of our system and seeks to reclaim them.... In an S/M context, the uniforms and roles and dialogue become a parody of authority, a challenge to it, a recognition of its secret sexual nature" (1994, 163). In this quote, the recognition of the "erotic underpinnings of our system" is invested in s/m itself, postulating a universally accepted, counterhegemonic understanding of s/m among practitioners. Califia also posits a direct link between this understanding and the outcome of the creation of parody through the use of uniform, roles, and dialogue.

Susie Bright illustrates a similar logic in her introduction to a recently published collection of lesbian erotic imagery. Bright states, "Lesbian erotic photography that accentuates power and differences is provocative because it disputes the notion that women are nurturing and deferential. It also shows that women, little lambs that we are,
can have sex that is not thought of as 'natural' or wholesome" (1996, 9). Like Califia, Bright assumes that the desired outcome - in this case, the disruption of the dominant gender ideology - follows naturally from the creation of images portraying power and differences. Like Califia, Bright assumes that her audience will read those images precisely as she intends them to.

As Henrietta Moore argues, to understand the relationship between social representations and subjective meanings, we must take practices and their effects into account (1994). In the debates over lesbian s/m, the role of practice in the construction of meaning has not been considered. This thesis departs from earlier feminist analyses of lesbian s/m by presenting an ethnographic account of one particular practice - the negotiation of non-monogamous relationships - among members of the lesbian s/m community in Chicago. How do these women construct the concept and the practice of non-monogamy? How do they negotiate non-monogamous relationships? How does their identification as lesbian shape a vision of non-monogamy which is distinct from that of the larger and more established gay male s/m community? Finally, what does this particular form of non-monogamy tell us about the ways in which social-sexual actors pull together seemingly disparate values and practices to create new sexual possibilities and, in the process, new meanings?

To address these questions, in chapter one I outline my methodology and describe the lesbian s/m community in Chicago, as well as the s/m bar which serves as the primary setting for the study. In chapter two, I look at the social organization of the community and its influence on participants' methods of entrance into the community, as well as the
types of relationships they subsequently developed. I then present a detailed account of some of the practices participants have created for cultivating and maintaining those relationships. Finally, I look at the implications these findings hold for the development of theories which can help to explain the processes through which practice and meaning are created within diverse sexual arenas.
CHAPTER TWO

THE METHODS AND SETTING

Methodology

My introduction to the research setting came through Sarah, a long-time friend who identifies as a lesbian sadomasochist. Prior to beginning the fieldwork for this study, I met Sarah nearly every Thursday night at the Torch, a gay male leather bar on Chicago's north side. On Thursdays the Torch hosts a weekly women's night. During my first semester in graduate school I attended this event as a sort of end-of-the-week ritual, during which Sarah and I would get together, talk and drink dollar drafts. Slowly, I got to know some of the other women who hung out there. This initial period, which lasted from August, 1994 until January 1995, helped lay the foundation for later fieldwork by allowing me to make contacts with other study participants and to develop a basic understanding of lesbian s/m culture.

The primary data for the study were gathered through field observations conducted over a period of eight months. From January, 1995 to May, 1995, I visited the Torch weekly, and from February, 1995 to August, 1995, I attended a weekly "all fetish evening" organized by study participants and held at the Quest, a local lesbian bar. During

1 I have used pseudonyms throughout the paper to protect the confidentiality of study participants.
this stage of the research I wrote field notes after each visit to both settings, as well as phone conversations and visits with participants which occurred outside the boundaries of the two bars. Since May, 1995, I have attended a number of community events, including two leather contests (the 1995 International Mr. Leather Contest held in Chicago in May, and the 1995 International Ms. Leather Contest held in Chicago in July), five play³ parties, and a week-long, annual women's music festival held in the Midwest which draws leatherwomen⁴ from all over the country. During the festival I conducted interviews with three s/m participants from other large, Midwestern cities. The interviews, along with field notes from two parties and one public lecture given by a community member in Chicago serve as supplementary data.

My research process has been guided by the feminist standpoint theories (FST) of Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and Dorothy Smith (1987). Smith's version of FST serves as the theoretical impetus for my focus on the issues which arise out of the everyday lives of community members. Her notion of the everyday as the location where problems which are structured by larger, social institutions surface and are dealt with has informed my bottom-up approach to the study.

²Throughout the paper I have attempted to incorporate the lexicon of community members as a means of portraying the community, as closely as possible, from the perspective of study participants. The designation "all fetish evening" was used in an attempt attract women who were interested in alternative sexualities other than s/m.

³The term play is used by community members to refer to engaging in s/m activities. Community members (and s/m organizations) host play parties to facilitate semi-public play.

⁴ The terms leatherwoman and leatherdyke are frequently used by participants to describe themselves and other members of the community.
Collins' outsider-within concept has helped shape my understanding of my position within the lesbian s/m community. A number of factors have influenced this position. First, as a lesbian I have an insider view of same-sex relationships. This serves as an important underpinning to the common ground I share with study participants. Ultimately more important, however, have been my feminist-informed, non-traditional views of such things as gender and non-monogamy. These have helped me cultivate an insider's view of the practices in which participants engage which are, at times, quite removed from those of mainstream lesbian culture. At the same time, however, my role as a researcher and my failure to develop a leather identity have served to keep my position within the community marginal. Despite the bonds of friendship that have developed with many community members, the fact that I am not immersed in the ongoing identity work that serves to delineate the boundaries of the community means that I am not, in their eyes, a "sistah."

Sharing common ground yet not being fully accepted into the community's fold is a difficult but analytically useful position to inhabit. Most importantly, it has helped to highlight a number of identity constructing and boundary keeping processes which may have otherwise remained hidden to me.

The Community

The community in Chicago is quite fragmented and consists of a number of small friendship networks throughout the city and surrounding areas. Some of these networks

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5 I use the term community not to conjure notions of group cohesiveness or similarities among community members based on extensive face-to-face interaction, but, rather, to convey the political implications of s/m identity. The participants in the study see
have formed around community gathering places, such as bars and tattoo and body piercing parlors. Many are independent of physical location. Some of the networks are loosely connected through common acquaintances, forming a web which reaches across the metro area and beyond.

Within the Chicago community, class divisions are noticeable. Because my introduction to the community came through Sarah, who identifies as a working-class lesbian, many of the participants in this study are also working-class. Of the 17 participants who attended women's night at the Torch on a regular basis, 11 are working-class, four are middle-class and two, upper-middle class. Many of the middle- and upper-middle class women I have met during the course of the study do not attend women's night at the Torch regularly, although a few drop in occasionally. According to a few of the participants in this study, many lesbians who identify themselves as sadomasochists do not attend women's night at the Torch because of the reputation of the lesbian s/m "club" which initiated the event. These women believe that conflicts among members of the club, which will be described in more detail later, led many to stop coming women's night and discouraged others from attending in the first place. While this may explain why the event was not better attended in general, it does not account for the relative absence of middle-

themselves as belonging to a community of individuals who share a common oppression and similar political aims. Based on that understanding, some of the participants engaged in a number of community building activities, some of which will be described later. In a very real sense, then, their understanding of themselves as members of a community becomes the basis upon which community is constructed.

6 Class membership was ascertained through personal communication about participants' educational backgrounds, family histories, and current occupations.
class lesbians. The fact that lesbian bars have historically been supported by working-class lesbians more so than their middle- or upper-class counterparts (Kennedy and Davis, 1994; Faderman, 1991) seems to be a more likely factor.

Through its effect on patterns of interaction and the development of friendship networks, access to resources also seems to play a part in attendance at the bar. Middle-class women frequently cultivated long-distance play relationships and often traveled out of town for conferences and other national events. Women with access to expendable resources thus are able to participate in a broader, more nationally oriented lesbian s/m arena. Working-class women's options for community interaction are more limited, and, at least for some, revolve more around the local bars. Since the setting for this study is a local bar, the experiences I have documented are primarily those of working-class women.

In Chicago, like many other major cities, there is a lesbian s/m "club." At the time the data for this study were collected, the club was approximately three years old. While club members initiated women's night at the Torch, by the time I began collecting data for the study, the presence of the club at women's night was hardly noticeable. Only four of the women who attended women's night had ever been members of the club. Moreover, conflicts between club members had left only one woman actively engaged in promoting the organization. Other than the efforts of this one woman, the club was inactive at the time the fieldwork for this study was conducted, although its weekly organizational

7 Not all working class women who would consider themselves part of the lesbian s/m community attended the bar. For many lesbian sadomasochists, membership in "the community" is as a matter of identity, not how frequently one attends s/m events or establishments.
meetings continued to be advertised in the calendar of community events of one of the local gay and lesbian newspapers.

A group of eighteen women attended the weekly women's night at the Torch on a fairly regularly basis. Approximately ten more attended sporadically. A core group of five women who attended women's night regularly also engaged in short-lived, community-building activities which extended outside the boundaries of the Torch. This group organized the all fetish evening held at the Quest. The event was intended by the women as a means of attracting new members to the community. The women located a bar to host their event, used friendship networks to draw in new customers, and provided bartending service free of charge to the bar's owner. During this time they also organized and promoted a Chicago-area leather contest which they held at the Quest. The purpose of the contest was to choose a contestant to represent the Chicago community at the 1995 International Ms. Leather Contest.

Overall, support for the all fetish evening was low. After six months, the bar's owner canceled the weekly gathering. The women located another lesbian bar to host a bi-weekly "leather night." In an attempt to draw a larger crowd, this event was advertised in one of the gay and lesbian newspapers as a pan-sexual gathering. However, it was soon

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8Community members believed that an event held at a local lesbian bar would appeal to newcomers by providing an environment less intimidating than the dungeon-like atmosphere of the Torch. The "all fetish" designation was meant to downplay the centrality of s/m, allowing those who might be interested in other alternative sexualities to feel welcome at the event.

9The term "pan-sexual" is used to mean that all genders and sexual orientations are welcome at an event.
abandoned by community members due to lack of attendance. The cancellation of these two events underscores the fact that the community is organized around friendship networks, rather than physical locations. The small group of women who organized these events was unable to generate a broader interest in them, even when they used the local gay and lesbian press to advertise them.

In spite of the lack of success of "leather nights," through the women at the Torch I have been able to make contact with lesbian sadomasochists from across the country. Annual events, such as the International Ms. Leather Contest and the Midwestern women's music festival, facilitate lines of communication which extend across the country. An extensive on-line network of s/m mailing lists and Internet chat rooms also facilitate national and international lines of communication, allowing new networks to be formed and ideas and experiences to be shared between communities. Within this context, the lesbian s/m community in Chicago can be seen as one point on the map of the national lesbian s/m scene.

However, the community in Chicago is different from those in other major cities in important ways. Because of its fragmented nature, some of the sexual practices the women engaged may be less institutionalized here than in other major cities\(^{10}\). While this may allow for more flexibility in the practices the women adopt, it also poses problems.

\(^{10}\)This point was illustrated to me at the 1995 Midwestern Women's Music Festival, where a group of leatherwomen from a large, west-coast city organized a contingent to attend the festival and give workshops to demonstrate the s/m techniques popular in their community. Leatherwomen from Chicago, the closest, large metropolitan area to the site of the festival, did not sponsor any of their own community activities. And while the Chicago women did organize a meeting to discuss community-building strategies, none of them have been implemented.
Well-established guidelines for sexual and romantic interaction facilitate integration into local communities and help to provide an environment supportive of locally established practices. Lacking that kind of environment, the women in Chicago are often left to deal on a more individual basis with the difficulties associated with recreating their sexual identities and trying out new practices. Consequently, some of the conflicts associated with the development of non-monogamous relationships which I describe may be somewhat more exaggerated among community members in Chicago than in other major cities. The Chicago community therefore cannot be seen as representative of lesbian s/m communities in large metropolitan areas.

The Torch

The Torch is located in one of Chicago's low-income, north side neighborhoods. The main entrance to the bar is accessible through a walkway between two buildings that face a busy north-south street. The building that houses the bar is also home to one of the city's gay male bathhouses. The door to the bathhouse is located at the front of the building, the door to the Torch on the side. The wide breezeway through which visitors to the Torch must pass has been staged to look like an alley. The decor and ambiance of the breezeway helps bar patrons transition between their normal sense of self anchored in their everyday lives to the sadomasochist's dungeon which awaits inside. Halfway down the

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11I am using the term transition as it has been developed by Nippert-Eng (1996). Objects which belong exclusively to one realm of life help individuals to transition not only from one location to another, but from one realm-specific self to another. The objects in the "alley" (as well as the alley-like ambiance itself), help individuals transition to an s/m-specific sense of self.
little passage is a folding, orange and white construction barrier. A sign which reads, "Caution: Men at Play," has been pasted to the front of the barrier, a campy, self-reflexive commentary on the sexualization of blue collar men in gay male culture. Just beyond the construction barrier, an old, black, Honda motorcycle sits at an angle across from the large, black, wooden door. The motorcycle is a symbol of the 1940s and 50s motorcycle clubs out of which, according to community lore, contemporary gay male s/m developed. The last bit of transitional symbolism visitors see before they enter the bar is the sign on the door. In a tone reminiscent of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, it reads, "Entrance: Chicago Torch."

Inside the bar, images of s/m players and their implements decorate the all black, wooden-floored space. Life-sized paintings of large, muscular men outfitted in leather dominate the right wall. On the left, a boot-shining chair sits in a small alcove at the front of the room. A large, glass-covered wooden case displaying a set of iron shackles has been mounted prominently on the wall at the back of the room. The visual centerpiece of the room is the huge projection screen which covers the center wall. The screen is used to play gay male porn films, most of which contain s/m themes. The octagon shape of the service area which sits in the center of the wide open space facilities viewing of the screen from seven of its eight sides.

Toward the middle of the right wall a set of double-wide, wooden stairs descend sharply. A neon sign hangs above the staircase, pointing downward with a large red arrow encasing the word "Pit," the name which has been given to the downstairs area. On the door of the pit is a painted piece of plywood bearing a large, red, stop sign. Underneath
the sign is posted the following warning: "Dress Code Enforced: Uniform, Leather, Levis or Western.\textsuperscript{12}"

The pit is where most of the s/m scenes\textsuperscript{13} that take place in the bar are played out. The lighting in the pit is even dimmer than the upstairs area. It takes several seconds to adjust to the darkness before the room, and the people in it, can be seen clearly. Like the upstairs, the entire area is black. Entering the pit, visitors are immediately confronted by a huge, steel-mesh cage which sits in the middle of the wide, shallow room. To the far left of the entrance the wall cuts back a few feet, creating a small alcove approximately eight feet wide and five feet deep. This area houses the "Saint Andrew's Cross;" a set of thick, criss-crossed wooden beams which have wrist and ankle restraints attached to each corner. In front of the cross is a sawhorse-like structure with a wide, soft, leather pad. It is frequently used as a seat when scenes are enacted on the cross. Sometimes, too, scenes are played out on the horse, which has steel eyelets at the bottom of each leg to facilitate restraint.

The decor of the bar creates an atmosphere conducive to s/m fantasy and play, reinforcing its function as a place where people meet, learn about, and practice s/m. On Friday and Saturday nights, men stage s/m scenes in the pit and frequently engage in casual sex in the bathrooms and other out of the way spaces in the bar. During the weekly

\textsuperscript{12}While dress code is more strictly enforced on Friday and Saturday nights, on the Thursdays which have been designated as women's night, dress code is very rarely enforced. During the period I observed in the setting, women frequently entered the pit in typical street clothing. No one was ever ejected for not being properly attired. The particularities of dress code (uniform, leather, levis or western) reflect the fetishized status of masculinity in gay male culture (recall that the Torch is a gay male s/m club).

\textsuperscript{13}The term "scene" refers to a negotiated, s/m encounter which involves role playing and is often loosely scripted.
women's at the Torch, the equipment is rarely used, and sexual encounters in the bar are a rare occurrence. As I will argue, this is because the types of relationships developed by the women at the Torch differ in important ways from those of their gay male counterparts.
Krafft-Ebbing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* was one of the first scholarly works to deal with the topic of sadomasochism (1965[1886]). Both Krafft-Ebbing and his contemporary, Freud, saw sadism and masochism as sexual abnormalities which originated with the individual and which required specialized treatment by medical professionals. By framing s/m as the manifestation of psychological disorders which characterized a particular type of person, rather than as a set of activities in which some individuals periodically engaged, these early sexologists set in motion the medicalization of sadomasochism (c.f., Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 1985). This process gave rise to the dominant discourse on s/m within which people who engage in s/m are defined as pathological.

At the same time that groups of sadomasochists began to organize more openly during the late 1970s, studies which focused on the social aspects of s/m also began to appear. While none of the existing studies have focused on lesbian s/m, they do provide a basis for contrasting the practices found within lesbian-, gay male- and heterosexual s/m communities. By analyzing these differences, it is possible to begin to understand the ways in which social context influences the development of sexual practices.

One of the earliest sociological studies of s/m was conducted by John Lee (1979). Lee's primary concern was to explain how physical risk was minimized in gay male s/m
scenes. Among the participants in Lee's study, s/m scenes were frequently enacted by individuals who had met just prior to negotiating the encounter, and often involved restraining one partner. Because of these characteristics, as well interconnections between the s/m community and the larger gay male community which Lee identifies, Lee viewed the s/m subculture as an "extreme case" of the gay male culture of casual sex.

Lee found individual reputation to be a primary mechanism through which the men minimized the risk of physical danger during s/m encounters. According to Lee, participants frequently relied on face-to-face networks within the community to gain information about the kinds of activities in which a potential partner was known to engage. Participants who developed a reputation for not respecting the limits of their partners found it difficult to attract new ones. In this way the community not only monitored the activities of individual players, but encouraged self-monitoring by enticing men to build trustworthy reputations.

The "protected territories" of the s/m community - the leather bars and bath houses - also played a role in minimizing the risk of physical danger, according to Lee. The back rooms and cubicles inside protected territories provided a space within which casual sexual encounters could take place privately, but in a safe environment where help could be called on quickly and easily if necessary. Negotiations between partners prior to s/m scenes and a well-established etiquette of casual sex were also found to be important factors in minimizing risk.

Consistent with Lee's findings, the participants in the current study also relied on face-to-face networks to gain information about potential partners. However, the type of
casual sexual encounters described by Lee was a rare occurrence among the participants in this study. This would suggest that the exchange of information and the role of reputation serve somewhat different functions within the different contexts of the two communities.

In his study of gay male s/m, Kamel focused on the social-psychological stages men go through as they seek out, and become active participants in, the leathersex scene (1980). According to Kame, disenchantment with the larger gay male community and a period of depression usually precede entrance into the leather scene. Curiosity and attraction are intermediary stages wherein men may question friends about leathersex, peruse pornographic periodicals and s/m literature, and visit (frequently out of town) leather establishments. The final two stages of the process, drifting (or learning about and trying out s/m practices), and limiting, (or defining an s/m niche), occur within the s/m community.

Entrance into the community, which will be described in more detail later, also differed from the process outlined by Kame. In large, gay male communities, the existence of s/m establishments provides a key point of entrance into the community. The gay male culture of casual sex provides a context within which s/m establishments can be seen as a sort of specialized sex club. For gay men who are curious about s/m and have experience cruising in other types of sex clubs, s/m establishments present a viable opportunity for exploration. Among the participants in this study, initial contact with the community was facilitated through friendship networks. The lesbian s/m community in Chicago not only lacks its own establishments, but, unlike gay men, the women who come to the community have not been previously immersed in a culture of casual sex. As I will argue, both the
organization of the community around friendship networks and the lesbian culture of monogamy influence participants' initial entrance into the community, as well as the types of relationships they subsequently develop.

Thomas Weinberg has conducted a number of studies which focus on various aspects of the heterosexual s/m. In one study, Weinberg and Falk found that contacts among s/m players were usually facilitated through personal ads placed in contact magazines (1980). Among the participants in that study, the authors found a predominance of professional, dominatrixes and submissive, male clients. From this, they conclude 1) that prostitution is more important in heterosexual than gay male s/m subcultures, and 2) that fantasy and theatricality are important aspects of s/m role playing, allowing men to be submissive within the context of an s/m scene without their behavior reflecting on their "real" selves outside the scene.

Weinberg and Falk's study was based on a sample of men who were clients of professional dominatrixes. As they explain, non-professional, female sadomasochists were difficult to locate and hesitant to be studied. Because of the population sampled (as well as the early date of the study), the predominance of sex workers in heterosexual communities may be overestimated. However, it is still probable that sex worker/client relationships are more common among heterosexuals than gay men or lesbians.\(^{14}\)

Comparing the social organization and types of relationships which have been

\(^{14}\)The well-established culture of casual sex among gay male s/m participants makes paid s/m scenes less necessary than may be the case for heterosexual men. And, among lesbians, there has historically been little market for sex workers. In fact, it is not uncommon for professional dominatrixes (pro doms) to work in heterosexual communities and participate in lesbian communities on a recreational basis.
found in these studies of gay male and heterosexual communities to the findings of this study, an important pattern emerges. In the studies conducted by Kame and Lee, the s/m establishment is the basis of social organization and the types of relationships which predominate are brief, sexual encounters. In Weinberg and Falk's study, advertisements placed in s/m contact magazines were found to be the most common method of locating s/m partners. Among the participants in that study, sex worker/client relationships were the most common. Among the participants in this study, friendship networks are the organizational basis of the community, and, as I describe below, participants developed a wide range of relationship types. Thus, the social organization of s/m communities appears to be an important factor which influences the types of relationships s/m participants develop.

It is also important to recognize, however, that the social organization of s/m communities are a reflection of the sexual cultures out of which they emerge. Lee implicitly recognizes this in his treatment of the s/m community which he studied as an "extreme case" of the gay male culture of casual sex. The lesbian s/m community in Chicago is at this point in time organized around friendship networks because the more monogamous orientation of the larger lesbian community has not supported the development of lesbian sex clubs. If the culture of radical sex which the participants in this study draw upon continues to develop, one could reasonably expect separate s/m establishments and sex clubs for lesbians to develop as well. Once established, those institutions would fertilize the further development of a culture of radical sex among lesbians. The existence of such institutions should also influence the patterns of interaction
among s/m participants, as well as the types of relationships they develop with other community members. This is one of the primary reasons the findings of this study should not be generalized to the lesbian s/m communities in other, large metropolitan areas, where the culture of radical sex and the organizational structures of that culture may be more or less developed than in Chicago.
CHAPTER 4
GETTING IN AND LEARNING THE RULES OF PLAY

Initial Access and Patterns of Physical Interaction

One of the first things I noticed while observing at the Torch were the different patterns of attendance and interaction between male and female bar patrons. The women consistently arrived at the bar in pairs or small groups. As I later discovered, many also made phone calls each week to find out who was planning to go to the bar before deciding whether they would also attend. In contrast, men often arrived alone, frequently cruising while at the bar. For example, in the downstairs area known as the "pit," the end seat at the bar was often taken by single, male patrons. As one participant explained, this is the only seat at the J-shaped bar which facilitates easy and inconspicuous viewing of people entering and exiting the room. In contrast, the women consistently filled up the middle seats first, utilizing the end seat only when the other seats were taken, or when two or more women wanted the privacy afforded at the end of the bar. In the upstairs area, male patrons frequently leaned against a wall or supporting beam, alone and away from other bar patrons. This placement allows an unobstructed view of single, male patrons. Women were never observed in this posture. Single male patrons also frequently sat with at least

15Cruising is the term used to describe the often silent negotiations between gay men seeking casual sex in public places.
one bar stool between themselves and the next patron, emphasizing availability. While upstairs, the women usually played pool and sat at the end of the bar near the pool table, conversing in pairs or small groups.

These distinctly different patterns of physical placement and interaction emphasize the different role the bar plays for male and female patrons. For the men, the functions to facilitate casual sex encounters. For the women, it functions primarily as a community gathering place.16

This observation led me to wonder if there were also distinct patterns of entrance into the s/m community among the women. Asking women about their initial introductions to the community confirmed my suspicion. Unlike Kame's description of the individual gay man who, disenchanted with the larger gay male community, decides to explore the s/m scene, the participants in this study did not seek out the s/m community without first having established contact with another woman who identified as sadomasochist.17 The typical pattern of entrance among the women included meeting another woman who was involved in s/m and who subsequently introduced the newcomer to the community, usually by suggesting popular literature, answering questions, and putting the newcomer into contact with other community members. Friendship networks thus play an important role

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16 The bar is housed in the same building as one of Chicago's gay-male bath houses, which undoubtedly influences the pattern of attendance and the cruising rituals observed among the men. However, as Lee suggests (1977), there are important connections between the gay male culture of casual sex and gay male s/m communities. This connection may explain why the two clubs are housed together in the first place.

17 See Kamel (1977) for a description of the ways in which gay men typically enter s/m communities.
in integrating women into the community.

Michael is a 23-year-old, biological woman who lives in a large, Midwestern city.

Michael described his introduction to the s/m scene in an interview conducted at the annual, outdoor women's music festival where we met.\textsuperscript{18}

I had a lover for three years who had friends in the s/m community. They were leatherdyke, s/m women. And through her, I met them. She was not s/m while we were together, so we never played. It wasn't until we were breaking up that [I remembered] saying to these people - six months to a year before we broke up - "hey tell me about this. What is it about tying people up? What is it about whipping people?" ...[M]y friends were very obliging. If I wanted to know something, they said, "Michael, come here."

Not all of the participants had access to what Michael describes as an "obliging" group of women. However, they did all follow the same pattern of establishing contact with someone who identified as a sadomasochist and who subsequently introduced the newcomer to the local s/m scene, usually through suggesting reading material, answering questions, and putting the newcomer into contact with other community members.

Once contact is established, newcomers begin to learn about s/m though their interactions with other community members. A central part of this process is learning to "play."

\textbf{Play}

Engaging in s/m, which can include a wide variety of activities, is referred to as

\textsuperscript{18}My use of pronouns throughout the study reflects the common practice of community members, wherein a person who identifies themselves as male or female will usually be described in those terms, regardless of the current biological sex of the subject. My choice to use participants' self-definitions is an attempt to both convey the spirit of the community, and to maintain as much self-determination as possible for the participants in the study.
"playing" among community members. Play is not officially bound by expectations of monogamy. The absence of a monogamous norm allows people to play with multiple partners. In turn, playing with more than one partner helps to reinforce the casual nature of the relationship.

I spent a lot of time trying to find out exactly what the term play means to the women at the Torch. I asked a lot of questions like, "how is play different from sex?" only to have my friend and key informant, Sarah, laugh and say things like, "well... it's kinda hard to explain." At first I took the ambiguous responses I got from her and other participants in the study to mean that I was asking questions which were considered too personal. Through watching the women negotiate play relationships, and listening to the stories they told about them, I began to realize that, among the women at the Torch, play often blends into "vanilla sex," and also frequently leads to the development of relationships quite different from those described in sociological studies of gay male and heterosexual s/m.

Two things contribute to this process. First, the women rarely play in public. In the words of one participant, "it seems like there's a taboo against women playing at the bar." As I described earlier, the decor of the bar creates an atmosphere conducive to s/m fantasy and play. Both the ambiance and the physical boundaries of the bar help to define the activities which take place within it as play. For the men who play at the Torch, the physical boundaries of the bar help to segment their s/m activities from other realms of their lives. (Nippert-Eng; 1995) For the women, however, the segmenting influence of play within s/m establishments is largely absent.
The boundaries of the bar may influence the development of relationships in another way. Play scenes which are enacted inside the bar are often public performances with clear beginnings and endings. When a scene ends the participants may interact with other bar patrons, some of whom have participated in the scene as spectators. In this setting, the scene becomes more than a private exchange between two people; through the presence of others, the nature of the scene as public performance is reinforced.

This dynamic is not often present in the relationships developed by the women at the Torch. Although they do sometimes stage semi-public play parties, and some occasionally participate in three- or four-way scenes, most of the women's play takes place in private between two partners. The front stage nature of public scene is replaced with more intimate, backstage nature of a private sexual exchange (Goffman, 1956). This, in turn, influences the types of relationships the women develop.

For instance, Janis and Chris met at the Torch. Within a few months, the two began to negotiate a play relationship. At the same time, they also began to develop a friendship which extended outside the bar's boundaries. The two women went to movies together, talked regularly on the phone and did other things that are usually associated the beginning of romantic relationships. The development of a play relationship created the basis for intimate interaction between the two women. Without the physical confines of a bar or bathhouse to limit their interaction, it extended into other areas of their lives.

Prior to engaging in an s/m scene, it is common for participants to discuss their desires, preferences and personal limits. Through discussion, partners agree upon the general content of their play. This process is know as negotiating. It widely practiced and is discussed in many s/m how-to manuals, such as The Bottoming Book or Learning the Ropes.
The relationship between the two women which was developing outside the boundaries of the bar also affected their interactions within it. The two came to the Torch together, left together and interacted with others as a couple. The ex-roommate of one of the women described this development by saying, rather sardonically, "they're nesting."

While the relationship was defined by both women as a non-monogamous, their public actions probably prohibited the development of additional play relationships. A potential partner interested in playing with one of the women would have to contend with the constant presence of the other, as well as the publicly intimate interaction between the two women which provoked the "nesting" comment.

While playing in public versus private spaces influences the types of relationships s/m players develop, the physical structures of s/m communities are related in a dialectical fashion to the sexual cultures out of which they develop. Bath houses and sex clubs for gay men exist because gay men own, operate and frequent them. The existence of such establishments is both reflective of, and serves to reinforce, a culture of casual sex. In places like San Francisco and New York there are lesbian s/m clubs, organizations and establishments which have a relatively long and established history. In these cities, a more extensive organizational infrastructure nurtures the lesbian culture of radical sex. In Chicago, where there are no lesbian s/m establishments or sex clubs, that culture is less developed. Here, the women are weaving together the threads of the new culture of radical sex with the older, more established lesbian culture of monogamy. The lesbian culture of monogamy, then, is a also influences the types of relationships the women develop.
Negotiating between Monogamy and Play

While the women at the Torch wanted to participate in casual play, they also wanted more long-term, primary relationships. As was the case for Janis and Chris, the couple described above, play relationships which developed between women who did not already have primary partners when the play was negotiated often led to romantic attachments. Exclusivity frequently resulted. Of the women whose play relationships did not develop into romantic attachments, most already had primary partners when the play was negotiated. The absence or presence of primary partners influences whether play relationships remained casual and strictly non-monogamous, or tended toward romance and greater exclusivity. It also introduces a potential point of conflict in relationships, particularly when one woman has a primary partner and the other does not. To manage the conceptual and practical gap between casual sex and complete monogamy, the women have constructed a loose hierarchy of relationship types. Through categorizing each relationship, the women establish guidelines for their sexual and romantic interactions. Allocations of time, energy and other material and non-material resources are guided by the categorizing and ordering of intimate relationships within this hierarchy. At the top of the hierarchy are long-term relationships which involve a serious commitment, such as lover relationships and marriages. Next is long-term relationships which connote a lesser degree of commitment, such as girlfriends. Dating relationships are third in the hierarchy. Finally, play relationships occupied the bottom stratum of the hierarchy and carried with them the least amount of rights and reciprocal responsibilities.

The differences between the types of relationships the women develop involve a
number of factors, including frequency of interaction, the level of intimacy and the degree of commitment between partners. The categorization of each type of relationship helps to define the terms of the relationship not only for each of the partners involved in it, but for others who are part of each of those two women's larger constellation of relationships. For example, Sandra and Sarah use the term girlfriend to define their relationship with one another. The category of girlfriend occupies a lower tier than that of a marriage partner, but a higher one than a play partner. Thus, in Sandra's hierarchy of relationships, Sarah has more rights than Sandra's play partners, but less than Sandra's husband. Meryl and Gayle have a large constellation of intimate relationships which the various categorizations they employ help them to manage. The two women define their relationship with each other as a marriage. They play with other partners only as a couple and have negotiated what they view as an acceptable degree of monogamy in their marriage by excluding genital contact from their play with others. While each woman refers the other as their "wife," both refer to play partners in terms of the role-centered play which they have negotiated with the third parties. For instance, the women refer to two individuals with whom they have negotiated on-going, role-centered play as their "houseboy" and "little girl."

The way in which these categories organize intimate interactions is illustrated in the following example. During the course of my fieldwork, Sandra, her husband, and their two children were planning an extended, out of state vacation. Sandra and her husband were also in the process of moving, making time a valuable commodity not only for Sandra, but for each of her intimate partners, whose share of Sandra's time and attention was being consumed with packing, moving and making vacation arrangements. Sandra
usually allotted Thursdays to Sarah. On the Thursday before Sandra was to leave on
vacation, the two women arranged to meet at the Torch. While Sarah had planned an
extended evening together, Sandra's husband had given her a "curfew." She was to home
by 1:00 a.m. When Sandra informed Sarah that their evening would be cut short (Sarah
often worked until 11:00 p.m. She usually arrived at the bar just before midnight). Sarah
laughed and said "One o'clock!?! Try Five!" Sandra retorted, "Five o'clock!?! How about
two?" After a few such volleys back and forth, the two women finally agreed that their
date would end at 3:00 a.m.

In this situation, Sandra had to negotiate between the competing demands of her
husband and her girlfriend, both of whom had legitimate claims on her time. While Sarah
did not get to spend as much time with Sandra as she had hoped, her status as Sandra's
girlfriend gave her leverage to bargain for two hours more than she originally was allotted.

The various labels that the women attach to their relationships helps them to define
the rights and responsibilities associated with each. However, there is still a lot of room
for individual interpretation, especially when the boundaries of play are not well defined
and often leads to other activities which blur the distinctions between different types of
relationships. In the absence of a well-established and clearly defined set of expectations,
the women have developed a set of practices for dealing with some of the problems that
crop up in the course of their intimate interactions. Posturing is one such practice which is
designed to prohibit or constrain the development of new relationships; third-party
arrangements and humor are used to facilitate them.
CHAPTER 5

PRACTICES

Posturing

The women at the Torch tended to develop play relationships slowly, taking weeks or months to move through the processes of getting to know a potential partner, developing an interest in that person, exploring issues of compatibility and, finally, conducting "negotiations" about the type of play each partner is interested in pursuing. This is a time consuming and intricate process which could easily be derailed by the constant interruptions of an another intimate partner. In fact, constant interruptions, which I have termed posturing, is a tactic frequently employed to achieve just that end.

Many of the women at the Torch found ways to get between their partner and a threatening third party, or between someone with whom they wished to develop a relationship and a third party. The methods of posturing have in common the purpose of either keeping one person from playing with another or, failing that, attempting to gain some measure of control over the developing relationship by becoming involved in it. For example, one evening Sarah's girlfriend Sandra (a primary relationship for Sarah, but not Sandra) was talking to a newcomer to the bar named Linda. Sandra and Linda appeared to be attracted to one another; they stood closely, spoke softly and laughed and smiled a lot. Shortly after Linda's arrival, Sarah came over to the bar to join me, complaining that
Sandra was ignoring her. During our conversation, Sarah suggested that I meet Linda. She escorted me over to where Sandra and Linda were leaning against the bar, facing each other. Sarah positioned herself next to Sandra and motioned for me to stand next to Linda. Sandra and Linda politely noted our presence and continued their conversation. Wishing to end the interaction between the two (which Sarah had hoped my presence would help to achieve), Sarah leaned over and began to kiss Sandra's neck. The move prompted a reaction, but not the one Sarah had intended. Linda glanced at her with a somewhat annoyed, somewhat puzzled look on her face; Sandra ignored the interruption and continued talking with Linda. I later discovered that Sarah, having failed in her attempts to derail interaction between the two, finally suggested that the three women play together.

Sarah's suggestion was a last ditch effort to stop Sandra from developing a play relationship with Linda. Had Sandra and Linda begun to negotiate a two-way play relationship, Sarah would have to compete with Linda for Sandra's time and attention. If, on the other hand, both Sarah and Sandra began to play with Linda at the same time, their status as a couple would be reinforced. Linda would then be relegated to a position subordinate to Sarah's in Sandra's existing hierarchy of relationships.

Sandra did not pursue Sarah's suggestion to negotiate a three-way play scenes. For the next few weeks, Linda periodically showed up at the bar to talk with Sandra. She also attended the first of a series of three play parties organized primarily by Sandra and Lydia, a woman who rarely frequents the Torch, but is well known within the community. At the play party, Linda sat directly across from where Sandra and Sarah staged a play scene,
watching Sandra intently the entire time. After the scene ended, Sandra went over and sat next to Linda. They talked briefly and Linda left immediately thereafter. The two women seemed to be on the verge of negotiating a play relationship until Linda met Susan, one of the single women who regularly attended the all fetish evening. Susan and Linda began dating and shortly thereafter, both stopped attending the weekly gatherings at the Torch and the Quest. It is hard to estimate the relative influence of Sarah's posturing tactics on the development of a play relationship between the Sandra and Linda. It may be that Sarah stalled the negotiations between the other two women long enough for Linda to meet someone else in whom she was interested. On the other hand, negotiations between Sandra and Linda may have proceeded at the same slow pace regardless of Sarah's interventions. What is clear, is that Sarah's posturing was aimed at the outcome which eventually materialized: Linda and Sandra did not play.

A rather blatant example of posturing occurred one night at the Torch while Ann was talking with Gwen. Gwen's lover, Bobbie, was playing pool when she noticed Ann was standing very close to the barstool on which Gwen was seated. Bobbie walked over to the bar, positioned her leg between Ann's leg and Gwen's body and jokingly - but effectively - pushed Ann back about a foot. Bobbie smiled at Ann, lightly kissed Gwen, and went back to her game of pool. In this instance, Bobbie unequivocally announced her exclusive claim on Gwen's sexuality.

Not all posturing techniques are so blatant, or so physical. Sheila is an outgoing woman who likes to tell funny stories. She often utilized that skill in her posturing techniques, which were almost exclusively aimed at keeping Sam, the woman she was
dating, from spending too much time with any of the other women at the Torch. Sam had been frequenting the Torch for about eight months and was in the process of redefining her sexual identity to incorporate elements of s/m. One night Sam informed me that she planned to initiate play negotiations with Alexandria. When Alexandria arrived, Sam asked to speak with her in one of the unpopulated corners of the basement area known as the pit. Sheila, who arrived during the conversation between Sam and Alexandria, positioned herself near where the two were talking. When their conversation ended, Sam began to walk toward the crowd of women which had gathered in the middle of the bar. Before Sam reached the edge of the crowd, Sheila intercepted her. The two began to engage in what looked like a very animated conversation. After approximately ten minutes, Sam glanced over toward the crowd of women and began to walk in that direction, continuing to talk with Sheila while she walked. Sheila walked three of the four remaining steps toward the outer edge of the crowd, stopped, and continued to talking with Sam. A few minutes later, a mischievous grin came over Sam's face and in mid-sentence she took a giant step backward, closing the gap between herself and the crowd of women. Sheila, who refused to acknowledge Sam's repeated efforts to rejoin the other women, continued to engage her in exclusive conversation.

While the particularities of each woman's posturing techniques varied, the goal of each was to protect an established or developing relationship from being threatened by a third-party. Posturing is a relatively common occurrence among the women at the Torch which stems from the potentially destabilizing effects of play. Since play is generally considered to be an acceptable activity for community members, regardless of the
presence or absence of other relationships, the development of new play relationships is a continual possibility. Because the women rarely play at the bar, their play is not bounded by the physical confines of an s/m establishment. Without such confines, play introduces the possibility non-s/m areas of the women's lives to become intermingled (through such things as movie-going and "vanilla" sex). This intermingling can lead to the development of other types of relationships, as was the case with Chris and Janis. This makes play an arena wherein more serious, and, for the other partners of the women involved, potentially threatening relationships may develop. Posturing is one response to that threat.

Some of the women, like Meryl and Gayle, reduce the number of conflicts involved in non-monogamous relationships by negotiating additional rules of conduct within their various relationships. For example, these two women have negotiated what they define as 'monogamy' by excluding genital contact from their s/m play with others. The two have also agreed to play with others only as a couple. This type of rule setting serves as a means of placing boundaries around play as do the physical structures of gay male communities, or the paid arrangements of some heterosexuals.

These kinds of agreements are not well-established norms of behavior, but rather, are usually developed on an individual basis and are often the result of insights gained through past experiences. For most of the women in this study (with the exception of one, who previously lived in Los Angeles and participated in the heterosexual s/m community there), negotiating non-monogamous relationships is a relatively new phenomenon. The process of developing strategies to deal with new problems which arise was illustrated to me in a conversation with Sarah. After Colleen and Sarah had been dating for a few
weeks, Sarah complained to me that the relationship was not working out. When I asked why, Sarah said "she's got too many." "Too many?," I asked, puzzled. At the time, Sarah had a girlfriend (Sandra), and was playing with Julie. Including Colleen, Sarah was involved with three women. Colleen also had a girlfriend, and occasionally had sex with another woman who rarely attended women's night. Including Sarah, Colleen was also involved with three women. I quizzed Sarah on the seeming inequity of the charge (thinking I had stumbled onto to some really interesting norm governing the distribution of sex partners, such as tops are allowed "x" number more than bottoms\textsuperscript{20}. The answer I got was rather more mundane). She explained that Colleen's girlfriend, Emily, frequently interrupted their dates, claiming Colleen's attention for the rest of the evening. Sarah said they were supposed to be on a date that night, but Colleen had been talking to Emily for over an hour. Sarah explained that the problem in the relationship was not actually that Colleen had too many partners, but that Emily always seemed to interfere with their dates (posturing!). That night Sarah talked to Colleen and the two agreed that in the future dates would be reserved for spending time together. They also decided the best way to ensure that happened would be to go someplace other than the Torch, where the two women's other partners would not be able to infringe upon their time together.

A primary point of difficulty for these women is how to integrate lasting, committed relationships with more casual sex and s/m play. As these women's experiences illustrate, negotiating non-monogamous relationships can be a difficult and time-

\textsuperscript{20}The terms "top" and "bottom" are used to refer, respectively to the sadist and masochist roles. The former terms are used much more frequently among community members than the latter, although those are occasionally employed as well.
consuming prospect. The categorization of relationships helps to establish some guidelines for interaction. However, the ever-present possibility that play may develop into something more serious threatens established relationships. Posturing is a practice employed to safeguard those existing ties.

**Third-Party Arrangements**

It was quite common for a third party to become involved in facilitating a relationship or sexual encounter between two other women. So common, in fact, that most of the relationships I witnessed at the developmental stage involved some form of intervention by a third party. The following is my favorite (and the most exaggerated) example of this practice taken from my field notes:

When Colleen went to the washroom, Sarah leaned over to tell me that Susan had told Mary, who told Leo, who pulled Sarah aside to tell her that Colleen liked her. We looked at each other and laughed at how silly the whole thing seemed.

This example illustrates how a number of people can get involved in arranging a relationship between two others. At the same time that Susan and Colleen were involved in brokering the relationship Sarah and Colleen, Sarah was playing an instrumental role in facilitating a relationship between Susan and Mary. The following excerpt from my field notes describes an interaction which occurred the first night the two new couples attended the all fetish evening at the Quest:

Lorraine was rummaging through the refrigerator when she pulled out a jar of olives and a box of rock candy sticks. She passed out the rock candy, which Colleen fed to Sarah. Susan and Mary had been playing pool for about an hour and Lorraine walked over to offer them some olives. Lorraine came back and fed an olive to Sarah, saying that it was from the two women at the end of the bar.
Mary and Susan smiled at Sarah from the other end of the bar as the olive was fed to her. Colleen and Sarah glanced at each other, looked at Susan and Mary, and laughed. Susan put her arm up in a Marilyn Monroe kind of wave as she disappeared around the corner with Mary. It seemed to be a mutual celebration of the two newly formed couples.

Sometimes a third party takes a more active role in facilitating interaction between two people. For example, Sandra has told me that when she notices a person she finds attractive, but is hesitant to talk to the person, Sarah will often do it for her. Gift-giving is another more active, though less common, form of third party arrangements wherein one person plans an s/m scene between two others. For example, Chris and Bobbie met when a group of Chris' friends negotiated an s/m scene in which Bobbie was "given" to Chris as a "birthday present." Sarah planned a scene between Debbie and Sandra in the same fashion.

Gift giving and other forms of third party arrangements are not unique to lesbian s/m communities. However, the frequency with which third parties helped to facilitate sexual and romantic interactions, ranging from s/m scenes to dating relationships, highlights the central role friendship networks play in the development of relationships among the participants in this study. The women use these networks both to gain entrance into the community, and to develop relationships with other community members once they begin to identify as sadomasochists. Thus, the social organization of the community affects the types of relationships which develop.

**Storytelling and Humor**

While at the Torch, the women spent most of their time telling humorous stories
and joking with one another. Through the telling of stories and the use of humorous banter, the women narrate themselves and the community of which they are a part.

Through this process, they create meaning for both their individual and their collective identities (Meyerhoff; 1978). The following example illustrates the role which storytelling can play in the formation of common understandings and shared meanings. In it, Sheila, who was in the process of formulating her opinion about casual sex, told Ann and I about an interaction between herself and Colleen and Susan:

Sheila told us that as she was leaving the Quest, Susan and Colleen offered to give her a ride. She said the two of them discussed the possibility of taking turns with her in the back seat of the car. She said one of them told the other that they should probably get her consent, but the other said they didn't need it. Sheila told us that she asked them to call her a cab instead. She said that at some point, they asked her if they could "do" her. She told us that as they put her in the cab, Susan said, "you're still going to do us, aren't you?" Ann laughed and said "I've dreamed of hearing those words."

In this example, Sheila used her story as a means of eliciting her audience's opinion about casual sex. Through her response, Ann cooperated with the unspoken request. Thus, the story became a vehicle through which the commonly agreed upon meaning of casual sex was passed from one community member to another.

Like storytelling, the women often used humorous exchanges to assert and affirm their sexuality, as in the following example:

When I arrived at the all fetish evening, I was informed by a small group of women that the following Saturday was the Valentine's Day celebration at the bar, and that they were all planning to attend. Someone said, "they're giving away free Candy." Two or three others chimed in "yeah, free Candy." Candy, the bar manager, looked at me impishly and grinned.
An exchange such as this one, wherein a small group of women collectively and jokingly flirt with another, allows each of the parties involved to assert and affirm their own sexuality, as well as that of the target of the sexually oriented humor. Many of the women expressed their belief that the s/m scene (and, by virtue of their participation in it, themselves) is "sex-positive." The exchange described above illustrates the way in which they actively create, and place themselves within, such an environment.

Outside the context of storytelling, humor served two primary functions. First, it provided a safe way to communicate sexual attraction and direct requests for sex. By couching such statements and requests in humor, the advancing party can distance themselves from it. If the statement or request is not received well, the advancing party can pretend that it was not intended seriously and therefore should not be held against them in the future. (Emerson, 1973) For example, in the story related by Sheila, Colleen and Susan couched their requests for sex with her in joking banter about taking turns with her in the back seat or the car and asking her if she was going to "do" them.

Secondly, humor was used to circumvent the social tension which often surrounds public discussion and displays of sex. For instance, Sam came to the Torch one night wearing a black leather bola which had "nipple clamps" attached at each end. When one of the women at the bar commented on the bola, Sam quipped, "Well, if it's not an accessory, what good is it!"? With this retort, Sam effectively defused any tension which could have surrounded the public comment about her choice of accessories.

On another occasion, Sarah was displaying her new birthday present to a few of the other women at the Torch. The present was a thick wooden paddle with three rows of
holes bored through it. As she held the paddle out for the group to look at, one of the women said, "yeah, but she probably doesn't know what to use it for. She'll probably use it to drain her spaghetti." Joking comments like this keep social interactions which involve the public display of sexuality clear of the tension which often surround more serious discussions of the topic.

Through their interaction, the women at the Torch have devised a number of practices with which they develop non-monogamous relationships. Some of these, such as posturing and third party arrangements, deal with the mechanics of developing and negotiating those relationships. Others, such as the use of humor and storytelling, help to weave together the cultural context within which the women envision and enact their unique version of non-monogamy.

The women's practices have been molded out of the cultural and material resources available to them. We can see the ways in which they utilize material resources by looking their use of friendship networks to facilitate entrance into the community and to develop intimate relationships with other community members. We can also see how the women draw together the seemingly disparate values and practices of the more monogamous culture of the larger lesbian community and the nascent culture of radical sex by looking at their development of extended systems of relationships. We can also see how pulling together these two cultural influences leads to the creation of new practices for negotiating those relationships, such as categorizing each new relationship and utilizing posturing techniques to protect existing relationships. Finally, we can see how the women recreate the cultural context within which they assign meaning to their practices through
their use of storytelling and humor.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Members of the lesbian s/m community in Chicago are engaged in the process of creating new possibilities for their intimate interactions through the development of non-monogamous systems of sexual and romantic relationships. To facilitate the development of these relationships, they draw on the material resources available to them, primarily friendship networks, but also the gay male s/m bar which housed the weekly women's night at the Torch and the lesbian bar which, for a short time, allowed the women to hold their "all fetish evening." In the process of envisioning and enacting their non-monogamous lifestyles, they also weave together the threads of the nascent culture of radical sex and the culture of monogamy prevalent in the larger lesbian community. The outcome is the development of a spectrum of relationship types - ranging from casual play to long-term, committed relationships - and an s/m community and culture which is distinctively lesbian.

Feminist criticism of lesbian s/m which is based on the analysis of cultural representations has not considered the ways in which participants in particular s/m communities pull together the cultural and material resources at their disposal in their practice of s/m. Consequently, these analyses have ignored the meanings which s/m participants develop within the context of their local communities. Furthermore, analyses
of cultural representations which do not consider the contexts within which those images are interpreted are likely to miss the counterhegemonic understandings which members of local s/m communities develop through interaction with others who share an s/m identity.

Feminist practitioners who have theorized the radical potential of lesbian s/m have also tended to overlook the importance of context in the development of shared meanings and practices. These writers have tended to assume that the practices and meanings which are dominant in New York or San Francisco can be generalized to other lesbian sadomasochists who learn and develop s/m practices under very different sets of circumstances. This tendency to overgeneralize has led to a theoretical blindness to the challenges faced by members of particular communities as they work to create new practices and new meanings out of the material and cultural resources available to them.

In the debate over the meaning of lesbian s/m, we need to ask whose meanings we are attempting to comprehend and to explain. If the answer is that of the individuals who practice lesbian s/m, then analysis must begin from within the concrete realm of those women's experiences. To develop an understanding the practices in which members of s/m communities participate and the meanings they attribute to those practices we must look at the cultural and material contexts within which practice is developed.
REFERENCES


VITA

Lori Harmon received a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Sociology from Indiana University South Bend in 1994. The following year she began graduate study at Loyola University, where she is currently working toward a Doctorate degree.
The thesis submitted by Lori Harmon has been read and approved by the following committee:
Judith Wittner, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Sociology
Loyola University Chicago

Anne Figert, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Sociology
Loyola University Chicago

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the thesis is now given final approval by the committee with reference to content and form.

The thesis is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts.

12/2/76  Judith Wittner
Date  Director's Signature