

## ***Safe Sane and Consensual Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism***

Darren Langdridge & Meg Barker (eds.) (2013) Houndsmill: Palgrave MacMillan

*Reviewed by Allison Moore*

First published in hardback in 2007 and released in paperback in 2013, this edited collection presents cutting edge empirical research and theoretical perspectives on sadomasochism and includes contributions from academics, activists and SM community members from the UK, US, Canada and Europe. It skilfully and successfully weaves together essays that act as an entry point for those with no or limited knowledge of SM with more challenging essays on SM and existentialism and SM edge play.

The book is divided into five sections, the first of which is 'Introducing Sadomasochism.' Langdridge and Barker provide the context for the essays in the first chapter in this section, 'Sadomasochism, Past, Present, Future' where they outline what might be considered a paradigmatic shift in the conceptualisation and representation of SM. Until relatively recently, what was known about SM was based on research conducted within the 'psy-professions'. They assert that, not only was SM frequently portrayed as pathological but the research also tended to be based on small samples of participants who engaged in the more extreme forms of SM practices even though the research findings were generalised to all consensual SM. However, more recently social scientists, from a range of disciplines, have begun to theorise SM in a non-pathological way, usually taking as their starting point the stories, perspectives and lived experiences of those in SM communities. It is in this emergent academic literature that their edited collection is located. Alongside this growing academic work, Langdridge and Barker recognise that there has been a proliferation of representations of SM in the public sphere from the growth of real life and virtual SM communities to SM imagery and narratives in popular culture, although these frequently continue to fetishize SM or present it in a way that is "watered down, 'mainstreamed' and deeply de-sexualised" (p. 5). The editors identify four key contemporary debates in relation to sadomasochism. First, what they refer to as 'Feminism and Consent' and, specifically, radical feminist claims from the likes of Sheila Jeffreys that SM perpetuates and eroticises the unequal power relations of heteropatriarchy and, consequently, consent is at best ambiguous and, at worst, none existent. They claim, however, that in these debates, "the voice of the radical feminist drowns out the voice of the women SMer." (p. 7). The second debate they

identify concerns SM and abuse, which incorporates perspectives that view SM as a form of abuse and those who see it as a product of an abusive childhood. Third, and, to some extent, related to the debates over SM as abuse is the notion of SM as therapy, the view that SM is, or is potentially, therapeutic. However, for Langdridge and Barker, although this appears to portray SM positively, it can also reproduce pathology and reinforce the implication that SMers are more in need of therapy than non-SMers. The final contemporary debate they identify concerns citizenship and belonging, with SM located in "an important position as a marker of the boundaries of sexual citizenship" (p. 10) in so far as people who engage in consensual SM continue to be excluded from enjoying full citizenship status and rights in a number of ways. In outlining these four debates, Langdridge and Barker provide the wider socio-cultural and political contexts within which the forthcoming essays are situated and well as providing a framework within which to read the essays. Other entries in this section include chapters from Kathy Sisson who adopts a cultural theory approach to analyse the development of contemporary SM communities and cultures, as well as chapters that problematize classifications of SM as pathological (Moser and Kleinplatz) and explore the precarious position of SMers under the law (Weait).

The next section presents some sophisticated and challenging essays which collectively contribute to 'Theorising Pain and Injury' Drawing on Elaine Scarry's work on torture, Langdridge argues that pain is inexpressible in language because of its highly subjective nature. For him, the eroticisation of pain in SM involves "the double experience of agency and disintegration of consciousness" (p. 91) because "pain as experienced becomes an example of certainty whilst pain as observed becomes an example of doubt" (p. 93). Other essays in this section include Beckmann's exploration of how the bodily practices of SM can be understood as spiritual and transcendental and lead to the "development of contextual ethics" (p. 21) and Downing's critique of the rhetoric of 'Safe, Sane and Consensual' which has the consequence of marginalising some practices because they are seen as neither safe nor sane. The example she focuses on is erotic asphyxiation but argues that other forms of edge play are similarly marginalised under the 'Safe, Sane, Consensual' mantra.

The third section focuses on empirical research and includes chapters on the sexual fantasies of SM practitioners in relation to gender and SM role (Yost), a sexual script perspective on gay male SM (Chaline) and the potential for queering of normative gender and sex roles in SM (Bauer). In the fourth section, the chapters move on to therapeutic perspectives starting with Barker, Gupta and Iantaffi's critical consideration of the emergence in recent years of the narrative as SM as healing or therapeutic. These narratives represent a double edged sword in so far as they can be read as "both empowering and problematic, opening up some possibilities whilst shutting down others" (p. 211). The other two essays in this section consider SM as therapeutic. Dossie Easton, for example, is clear that whilst SM is not therapy, it can certainly have a therapeutic effect. She draws on Jung's concept of the Shadow, the part of our mind where we put away things that are too difficult or painful to be conscious of. For her, SM play offers the potential to access the Shadow and "to reclaim parts of ourselves that we have split off" (p. 228). Similarly, Henkin uses the concepts of roles, personas and Jungian archetypes to consider how SM role play can be a mechanism for learning about who we are.

The final section includes essays that bridge the academic/activist divide and include personal testimonies of SM as empowering and liberatory (Sophia, Denkinson, Mlle Alize, Green), a reflection on the development of the Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities (CARAS) in the US (Sprott and Bienvenu) and Barker's essay on the development of tools to train professionals and teach students about SM in order to challenge stereotypes and dispel myths.

Edited collections can run the risk of eclecticism, of including contributions that are too diverse and disparate. This cannot be said about this collection. Despite covering a vast array of topics and disciplines, including contributions from academics, activists and community members and managing to appeal to a new comer to the field of SM as well as those more versed in the contemporary issues and debates (no easy task), this is a coherent collection of work. The only change made since its first publication in 2007 has been an updated and extended introduction by the editors. The other chapters remain unchanged. Despite the passage of almost eight years, the issues raised in the book remain as, if not more, pertinent.