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The Debate on Lesbian Sadomasochism: A Discourse Analysis

Gudbjorg Ottosdottir
Western Michigan University

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THE DEBATE ON LESBIAN SADOMASOCHISM:
A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

by
Gudbjorg Ottosdottir

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Western Michigan University
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THE DEBATE ON LESBIAN SADOMASOCHISM:  
A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Gudbjorg Ottosdottir, M.A.  
Western Michigan University, 1991

This study examines an issue debated within the U.S.  
lesbian community since the mid-1970s, lesbian  
sadomasochism. The issue has been whether sadomasochism is  
consistent with lesbian feminism, a political ideology  
which has much shaped lesbian identity and community. The  
claims and counter-claims made about lesbian sadomasochism  
are analyzed, as are the underlying ideologies and their  
relationship to general lesbian political and cultural  
history. It is argued that the debate is the result of a  
limited subject position offered by lesbian feminism. The  
perspective of lesbian sadomasochists is seen as a call for  
a renewed lesbian feminist discourse. It is proposed that  
lesbian feminism adopt the notion of consciousness  
suggested by this perspective.
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Gudbjorg Ottosdottir
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The debate on lesbian sadomasochism: A discourse analysis

Ottosdottir, Gudbjorg, M.A.
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INTRODUCTION

This study will take as its subject an issue debated within the U.S. lesbian community since the mid-1970s, lesbian sadomasochism (s/m). The issue has been whether sadomasochism is consistent with lesbian feminism, the stated ideology of many lesbians, including lesbian sadomasochists. The debate has been ideological in nature, revolving around the theme of sexuality and the meaning of sex and power in lesbian sadomasochism. It has taken place in the lesbian press and public gatherings, most often in a hostile, accusing way. The discourse has produced polarization within the lesbian community rather than a resolution of the debate.

This study is a historical and ideological analysis of this debate. Using a discourse perspective and the method of discourse analysis, I analyze the claims and counter-claims made about lesbian sadomasochism, the underlying ideologies and the socio-historical context giving rise to these.
Inherent in the two opposing ideologies are definitions of reality that the two sides assert, reject and advocate, definitions directly connected to the claims being made. Scholarly writings are an important source of claims for these competing definitions.

I examine the two contrasting ideologies involved, lesbian feminism and s/m lesbian ideology and their relationships to general lesbian cultural and social history. Important in this respect is the struggle of lesbians toward legitimation of their lifestyle in the larger society, a struggle reflecting the struggle lesbians have with the issue of lesbian sadomasochism.

The method is qualitative. I analyze lesbian press literature in the form of books, journals and newsletters. This includes lesbian feminist, feminist literature and literature supporting lesbian sadomasochism, as well as items from lesbian community journals and newsletters.
PERSPECTIVE AND METHOD

The debate on lesbian sadomasochism in the U.S. lesbian community is ideological in nature, involving conflicting interpretations of lesbian sadomasochism. The viewpoint of those in opposition to lesbian sadomasochism prevails as more legitimate than that offered by s/m lesbians. Their claims are rooted in lesbian feminist theory, currently the predominant ideology of lesbianism in the U.S. lesbian community.

As a sociologist, I am interested in both sides of the debate. I am interested in the claims made regarding the reality of lesbian sadomasochism and the core of knowledge underlying these. I am also interested in how the debate relates to the social and political functions of lesbian feminism in the lesbian community. How is it that sadomasochism has become a topic worthy of debate given the significance it has in relation to oppression in lesbian feminism?

I will examine the debate as it relates to the larger socio-historical context. The history of lesbian
feminism and its functions for lesbians are important matters of study, as is the wider social context in which lesbian feminism emerges. This bears on my overall perspective regarding this debate. I see the debate as a part of the continuing history of the lesbian struggle for social acceptance. Now, however, this struggle is between lesbians themselves rather than merely between society and lesbians. The process is the same. The debate concerns two different truths or ideologies concerning the meaning of lesbianism. It is a struggle between those who have had the power to define that meaning and those resisting this power. The debate involves a dominant discourse of one reality and another attempting to reverse it.

In the definition of Foucault, discourses "are ways to establish and develop knowledge, together with social and cultural practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them" (Weedon, 1987, p. 108). A discourse is thus not merely an ideology or a body of knowledge used to interpret reality; it manifests in one's subjectivity, body, thoughts and emotions.
Scholars of the discourse perspective speak of a discourse as a form of social interaction through which ideas are communicated. A discourse can take many forms. It can be a conversation, written text, a social ritual, an ideology such as religion or political ideology, a social institution such as the family or any other form we can think of through which ideas are expressed.

How effective a discourse is depends on whether the individual identifies with the subject position being offered. For a discourse to be powerful, to be effective, it has to be constituted in the subjectivity of the individuals it seeks to control and govern. It is through individual agency that the power of a discourse is exercised.

The most powerful discourses are clearly those with institutional basis. The social institution of medicine for example, through which women's subjectivity has been the subject of much analysis and meanings, has served to normalize gender inequality in social and political life. Yet, dominant discourses are frequently the sites of conflict over how individual subjectivity must be
governed in relation to social interests.

Although a discourse seeks to embed a certain subject position in individuals, it simultaneously gives rise to other subject positions. The mechanism of controlling the subject is not unified. A discourse is never complete. It operates in different ways, in different institutions and ideologies and social contexts. Different social and cultural contexts as well as the form in which a particular knowledge is communicated mean different interpretations and thus the possibility of "other" subjective positions than that being offered.

When other subject positions are present in the discourse there is the potential for its reversal. A reversal discourse is born out of a process of challenging the power and meaning of the dominant discourse. The first step is resistance at an individual subjective level. The subsequent steps are a political process influenced much by the larger context of social interests and power in which the dominant discourse is challenged.

My perspective in examining the debate on lesbian
sadomasochism is derived from the nature and functions of discourse, which underlie the course of social and historical changes. Lesbian feminism is not merely an ideology of lesbianism but is a subject position on which much of the lesbian community and culture are based.

Lesbian feminism developed in the 1960s as an ideology challenging the power and meanings of the dominant discourse in regard to lesbianism. It offered insight into lesbian oppression and a positive vision of lesbianism. It has by far been the predominant ideology in the way lesbians have developed a sense of self and ways to resist social oppression. Yet the subject position offered by lesbian feminism has left little room for differences among women. The portrayal of lesbians as one homogeneous group politically, sexually and culturally has translated into community standards of membership which essentially require the repression and silencing of those women who deviate from this picture.

Lesbian feminism did not develop as an alternate discourse aiming at "exploring and celebrating diversity
but rather to understand and contain it" claims Phelan (Phelan, 1989, p. 57). The cost has been a community not much different from the dominant culture where political costs run high for being different. The dominant discourse of sexuality has given rise to a resistance from other subject positions, those of lesbians and other sexual minorities. I see lesbian feminism in the lesbian community as having given rise in the same way to conflicting perspectives regarding the meaning of lesbianism. The women representing this resistance against a dominant position have particularly been lesbian sadomasochists, colored and non-western women, and women of working class culture. The common concern among all these women has been the need for politics and community which accept diversity in lesbian lives.

The ideology of lesbian sadomasochists is an attempt to have the lesbian feminist discourse accept not only their subject position, but all others in the lesbian community. Their knowledge and political mobilization aims at radically revising lesbian feminism on the grounds that it is an inadequate challenge to the
societal discourse of sexuality. Whether this will indeed happen, is of course, a matter of how well lesbian sadomasochists manage to put their knowledge into circulation and is dependent on community interests and power.

In studying this debate I utilize the method of discourse analysis. In line with scholars studying public debates from a discourse perspective, I see the debate on lesbian sadomasochism as an expression of conflict and power relations. The method is that of ideological analysis. I seek to reveal the underlying conflict, power relations and the ideologies in relation to the historical and social position of lesbians. In the analysis of ideologies, I focus on presumptions of reality which pertain to how lesbianism is defined: consciousness, liberation and sexuality.
A Historical Discourse on Sexuality

Throughout the history of Western societies, sexuality has been a site of morality politics, regulated and controlled in multifarious ways under the assumption that regulation is necessary for social welfare. According to historians, the scientific discourse on sexuality coincides with the emergence of a bourgeois social class and capitalistic societies in the 19th century. "The bourgeois intended on working out a lifestyle that would avoid the moral corruption they believed had been weakening upper classes and causing violence and promiscuity among the lower" (Kern, 1975, p. 5). They put into practice a restrictive sexual morality based on Christian ethics, ideas and definitions. This morality acquired a life of its own in the scientific discourse.

The replacement of religion with science as the more legitimate perspective of sexuality in many ways represented simply a shift in techniques in the moral
enforcement of procreative sexuality. Ideas established in Christianity, such as that of an essential relationship between sexual behavior and social well-being, became central in the way sexuality acquired so much political and moral significance in Western societies.

Scientific ideas of what constitutes healthy and natural sexuality have been the basis on which the freedom of women and sexual minorities have been controlled and confined in the history of Western societies. Early explorations in anthropology were significant in establishing the idea, central in the way sexuality has been defined and treated, that there is an essential relationship between natural sexuality and kinship and gender patterns. To the explorers in the 18th and 19th centuries, gender and kinship patterns represented necessary adaptations to nature, where the assumption was that culture represented nature.

The idea that prevalent cultural forms have a priori nature has served as the basis of much theorizing on gender and sexuality. These theories in turn have served to legitimize or normalize gender inequality and
the oppression of sexual minorities, such as gays and lesbians. The social stigma attached to those who deviate from established ideas of sexual desire has been an effective tactic in confining and regulating sexuality in Western societies (Peiss & Simmons, 1989).

The most notable changes in the way sexuality was defined and regulated occurred in the late 19th century. For the first time in the sexology tradition, sexual pluralism was recognized in "the increasing definition of sexual normality in terms of relations with the opposite sex, and the consequent categorization of other forms as deviant" (Weeks, 1986, p. 33).

In accordance with the definition by sexologists of a homosexual act as mental illness was the definition of all other deviations, such as sadomasochism, transvestism and paedophilism. Krafft-Ebing's 1886 Psychopathia Sexualis (cited in Kern, 1975) was the dominating work in this era and provided the basis from which later definitions of sexual deviation were derived.

In the definition of Krafft-Ebing, homosexuals and other deviants were "sexual inverted" or individuals
confused in their gender identity. This gender confusion Krafft-Ebing attributed primarily to brain degeneration but noted environmental circumstances as well (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988). Krafft-Ebing saw the sexual relationship between men and women as being one such circumstance, based on his view of men and women as having contradictory sexual needs. Women were, according to Krafft-Ebing, naturally driven towards emotional intimacy in their sexual relations while men sought physical gratification due to a naturally high sex drive in men. This incompatibility put pressure on men to respond to women’s needs yet made them dependent on women for their own needs to be met.

This sexual dependency Krafft-Ebing saw as being a possible cause of sexual inclinations such as homosexuality and sadomasochism. In Krafft-Ebing’s definition, sadomasochism represented the desire to reverse gender identities (Kern, 1975).

Krafft-Ebing based this definition on Sacher-Masoch’s (b. 1836) writings containing erotic power fantasies. Later scholars have similarly based their own theories on these writings as well as on Krafft-
Ebing's definition. In fact, it was Krafft-Ebing who first introduced the concept masochism into scientific scholarship. The term "sadism" developed later and in relation to masochism. The two came to be viewed as necessary counterparts of each other (Lenzer, 1975).

In the analysis of Krafft-Ebing and other sexologists on the nature of sadomasochism as well as other sexual deviations, the sexual act was central in the way they made distinctions regarding what constituted natural and unnatural sexual desire. The presumption of the procreative expression being a natural desire was central in these analyses where the primary presumption was that sexual expressions constituted a sexual desire in itself. Not surprisingly, sexual acts presumed to be symptoms of a diseased desire, such as having sex with same gender or using power in sex, then came to constitute the disease (Lenzer, 1975).

Sexology was thus generally reflective of prevalent social assumptions and values regarding what constituted proper sexuality. It had a political function as it served to promote consciousness in congruence with
prevalent attitudes. However, the ideas from sexologists and the effects these have had on human sexuality in history have been neither uniform nor unilinear. There have been among sexologists those who challenged the link between gender roles and sexual nature. Havelock Ellis (cited in Weeks, 1985) suggested that sexual nature was plural, and Freud (Rieff, 1963) suggested that sexuality resides in the subconscious. More important, the ways in which people's sexual desires have manifested have been varied and different both within and between cultures.

When sexuality was put into "discourse" in Western societies, the result was the incitement of sexuality rather than its repression. Modern scholars of the history of sexuality speak in this respect of sexuality as rooted in social context, not an entity rooted in some distant nature. They see sexual pluralism as first emerging in a complex social context generated by the industrial revolution (D'Emilio, 1983; Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 1985). The changes that occurred in geographical and social relations, such as those involving the family, gender and work, gave rise to a new social
context in which sexuality came to be experienced (Peiss & Simmons, 1989; Ross & Rapp, 1983).

This perspective, most articulated by Foucault (1978), treats the individual as an active agent of her/his sexual desire, within a given social and cultural context. Sexual variations, such as homosexuality, heterosexuality, sadomasochism, transvestism, paedophilism, transsexualism etc., are viewed as products of individual experiences and the way people are conditioned culturally and historically. Sexuality, as it is defined in the treatment of these scholars, is a dynamic process, experienced differently and changing in relation to different historical contexts and fluctuating social relationships (D'Emilio, 1983; Vance, 1984; Weeks, 1985).

According to these scholars, the changes that have occurred in history in regard to the definition of sexuality as plural, have been changes primarily generated by those subjected to discrimination and control on behalf of the social meaning of sexuality. These changes are the product of a struggle between those with power to define and those resisting this
power. They see the expansion of the meaning of sexuality to that of pluralism in the late 19th century as reflecting an attempt by the sexology tradition to give its own pathological meaning to a social existence it did not create nor have control over.

One of the changes generated by the industrial revolution was opportunities for other sexual expressions. Communities of lesbians and gay men formed for the first time in history in this historical period, made possible in a complex urban culture (Vance, 1984; Weeks, 1986). Women similarly gained some measure of sexual freedom with more economic independence as they were no longer confined to marriage and family (Peiss & Simmons, 1989).

The medical tradition was a significant tool in trying to restrain these new freedoms by generating ideologies which served to stigmatize women, homosexuals and other deviants as unstable and fragile individuals. Political and social attacks on women's sexuality, and movements against abortion and birth control were easily justified in the eyes of the public.

Resistance from women and minorities to social and
political measures aimed at restricting their sexual freedom starts as early as the early 1900s. Women mobilized around the issue of prostitution in an attempt to reverse the claim that prostitution represented promiscuous women who had little control over their sexuality. They posed the issue in terms of male sexuality and demanded the same standards of sexual morals for men and women: chastity before marriage and fidelity within (Peiss & Simmons, 1989).

The goal of these women, in addition to gaining freedom from male sexual aggression, was to restore to women who were prostitutes what they claimed to be proper sexual morals. They presumed that these women were victims of male sexuality rather than economic circumstances (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988).

The second wave of women’s effort toward sexual freedom took place through the birth control movement in the early 20th century. These women were more direct in the way they sought to gain control over their sexuality. They sought to gain control over reproduction, demanding alternative birth control methods to that of abstinence. While the focus was clearly one
of gaining protection from male sexuality per se, at the same time it also implied the demand for sexuality outside of reproduction (Snitow, Stansell & Thompson, 1983).

These early women’s movements represent a beginning phase of what later came to be a strong national feminist movement with clearly set goals and an ideology of sexual liberation. The feminist movement that emerged in the 1960s, along with sexual liberationists, aimed at a gender-role-free society where women and men could be free to relate among and to each other without prescriptive models of being. The women of the sixties generated a challenging ideology exposing the underpinnings of biological determinism: power interests of men. Along with gay men and lesbians, feminists aimed at the liberation of sexuality from patriarchal oppression through the destruction of gender specific sexuality.

The results of the sexual liberation in the 1960s forced feminists to refocus their idea of what kind of sexual liberation they demanded. Sexual liberation, advocating the abolition of morals as the solution to
sexual repression exposed women in many ways to more sexual violence than before. The sex debates of the 1980s, within feminist and lesbian feminist circles, are based on an awareness of such outcome. This awareness generated ideas of sexual freedom in which absence of power in sexuality came to be viewed as the solution to oppressive sexual relations.

Within the lesbian community, the debate on lesbian sadomasochism bears much on the historical roots of lesbian feminism and the ways in which this ideology was shaped by the need to justify lesbian sexuality, both within feminist circles and the larger society. This need resulted in an ideology which regards men and women as incompatible by nature, male sexuality as inherently oppressive and women's as inherently equalitarian. In fact, the very biological determinism which feminists opposed was reversed in lesbian feminism, beginning with the initial claim that women's oppression was rooted in male sexuality in itself rather the ways in which males were socialized.

As for the similarity with the dominant discourse on the way sexuality is defined and discussed in the
lesbian community, the sexual act continues to be central, as is the notion that what one does in bed has social and public consequences. The primary premise of both sides in the debate has been that sexuality exists a priori to culture. Lesbian feminists opposed to lesbian sadomasochism use this to enhance their claim that lesbian sadomasochism represents patriarchal sexuality rather than women’s sexuality. Lesbian sadomasochists, on the other hand, must defend their desires in reference to a naturally rooted desire, repressed and distorted by a corrupt society.

For those opposed to lesbian sadomasochism, sexuality is dangerous if not channelled into appropriate ways (gentle and equalitarian sexual expressions) and for those on the defense, the abolition of sexual morality is equated with sexual liberation under the assumption that naturally peaceful sexuality will prevail.
Introduction

The history of the debate on lesbian sadomasochism is rooted in the emergence of feminist consciousness in the lesbian community in the 1960s and 1970s within the framework of lesbian feminism. This ideology of lesbian feminism altered and recovered social images of lesbianism which the dominant culture had distorted to accommodate its oppression of lesbians. While it helped to shape the lesbian sense of self and a vision of a positive future, this ideology also served to alienate many lesbians whose lifestyle came to be identified as male-identified by way of lesbian feminism.

One of the images that lesbian feminism challenged in the 1960s was the social notion of a lesbian as a "mannish" woman or as a woman who identified with the biological man (Newton, 1985). This has been a common image of lesbianism in Western societies. Yet lesbians have, through history, identified in ways that fit this stereotype, whether in regards to their appearances, behavior or erotic identities (Loulan, 1990).
Assuming that this lesbian expression reflected societal demands, lesbian feminism came to interpret the identity of lesbians in the 1950s, "butch and femme", as an indication of how effective society was in oppressing the lesbian self. While heterosexuals saw in butch and femme an attempt by lesbians to live "normal" lives, lesbians of the 1960s saw in these roles replicas of heterosexual roles of dominance and subordination.

This was not at all how these women experienced butch and femme. Butch and femme was a social statement made by lesbians in an era where the cost of political resistance was high, the McCarthy era. Butch and femme symbolized and made women's erotic autonomy vis à vis men socially visible. A butch and femme relationship was a political expression as much as it served as an intimate exploration of women's sexuality (Loulan, 1990; Nestle, 1981).

Lesbians of the 1950s were an embarrassment to the women of the counter-culture precisely because they failed to look beyond the meaning the dominant culture had given to their lives. This embarrassment, along with homophobia among straight feminists, led lesbians
to develop a genealogy and a definition of lesbianism in which the notion of lesbianism as a sexual relationship was thrown out in favor of a concept more capable of satisfying outsiders: lesbianism as an emotional relationship between women.

What this has meant for the lesbian community is an outright denial of class, racial and sexual differences among lesbians, in the form of strict community standards based on conformity and sameness. The debate on lesbian sadomasochism arises out of such identity politics generated by the political strategies adopted by lesbians of the 1960s, political strategies shaped by the larger political and social context.

From the 1960s to the 1990s

The Stonewall riots in 1969 represent the beginning of a radical phase in gay and lesbian resistance. In June 1969, angry and frustrated gays and lesbians rioted against police forces raiding The Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York City. This riot soon spread to other cities in the U.S., generating much political organization among gays and lesbians.
The Stonewall riots formed the beginning of what came to be radical political movements of gays and lesbians in the late sixties and seventies continuing into the eighties and nineties. The late 1960s and 1970s is also the time when a rich lesbian culture of politics, music and literature emerged, a community development which lesbian feminist ideology helped shape in regards to lesbian identity and values.

The lesbians of the 1960s and 1970s were women of the counter-culture, advocating freedom from conventional standards and beliefs and cultural separation. These were ideas of the New Left (Marotta, 1981). For lesbians this meant an increased association with the feminist movement and politics, which eventually led to the formation of a lesbian-only political ideology: lesbian feminism.

Generally, lesbians identified more with the women's movement than the gay liberation movement. Many of the politically active lesbians in that era "came out" while working in the women's movement. Further, for many lesbians in the gay liberation movement, gay men were too preoccupied with their own issues and
unaware of or disinterested in lesbian concerns—the social and cultural oppression of women (Adams, 1987).

During the early 1970s lesbians in the women’s liberation movement were exploring the socio-historical meaning of lesbianism in Western societies and how that meaning was crucial in understanding the complexity of women’s oppression. They claimed that lesbianism defined as women confused, perverted or mentally ill, a by-product of sexuality, were labels possible only in a society promoted by and for men (Radicalesbians, 1973).

Following this exploration lesbian activists in the women’s liberation movement claimed that heterosexuality was the root of women’s oppression. Sexism was the prototype of all other oppressions in patriarchy where the central values were dominance of one person over another.

These claims were met with intense debate and disagreement in the women’s movement. The goal of the women’s liberation movement was to get women’s rights on a legal level, and the identification with lesbian issues was viewed as threatening to the movement’s respectability and credibility in the larger society.
(Abbott, 1978). The media portrayed the women's movement as a lesbian plot, and heterosexual feminists charged lesbians in the movement with trying to undermine the women's movement. They claimed that lesbian concerns were a side issue to feminism.

Lesbians confronted this debate by attacking the bias and prejudice toward lesbianism underlying these views; consequently they often found themselves dismissed from the women's liberation movement. The case of Rita Mae Brown, the editor of the National Organization of Women (NOW) New York chapter newsletter, is one known example. In 1970 Brown wrote on heterosexism in the women's movement and was dismissed from the movement following a claim by Betty Friedan, the national president of NOW, that this writing was a "lavender menace" which threatened the status of feminism (Adams, 1987).

The women's movement eventually adopted lesbian claims into feminist ideology, beginning with the NOW organization in 1971. By then lesbians who had become disillusioned with the movement following the "lavender menace" debate were forming their own groups in hopes of
developing a lesbian feminist movement. The goals of these women were the establishment of a lesbian identity free of the negative influence from the dominant culture and the emergence of a gender-free society. Feminism offered these women a way to explore their lesbianism through consciousness-raising groups and through the claim that anything personal was a matter of political ideology.

Many lesbian feminist groups were formed in the early seventies. Among these, "Radicalesbians" remained by far the most influential with regard to the emergence of a lesbian feminist world-view. These groups were the base of political activity and organization through which a lesbian feminist world-view was developed. Some of them, like the Furies, were instrumental in founding many of the lesbian music and press collectives of the late 1970s such as Olivia Records and Sinister Wisdom (Zimmerman, 1985).

The lesbians in the 1960s and 1970s were radical and enthusiastic women who, along with other minorities, were keen on overthrowing the old social and political system. They envisioned a society without gender roles,
realizing that this entailed the task of uncovering the ways by which patriarchy had conditioned lesbians to adhere to its values and beliefs. This has generally been a difficult process for lesbians. The lesbian community in the seventies and eighties was rife with conflict and debate concerning what constituted a natural and free lifestyle (Marotta, 1981).

This process was especially painful for lesbians who had grown up in the 1950s lesbian community which entailed identifying oneself as a butch or a femme. Lesbians in the 1960s and 1970s saw in butch and femme a mimicking of heterosexual roles of dominance and subordination in patriarchy. This was not the experience of many butches and femmes, who saw themselves as active resistors of patriarchal oppression. They violated gender roles by attributing to themselves traits women were not supposed to have in that time, such as independence and assertiveness.

Butch and femme lesbians saw themselves as politically rebellious in an era of severe political oppression. Nestle explains how she felt this to be the case:
My understanding of why we angered straight spectators so is not that they saw us modeling after them, but just the opposite—that we were a symbol of women's erotic autonomy, a sexual accomplishment that did not include them (Nestle, 1981, p. 29).

Lesbian feminists opposed the roles of butch and femme on the basis of their stated goal, a gender-role free society, yet they themselves did not tolerate women violating gender roles. This can be explained by the failure of lesbian feminism to question the role society had in ascribing gender traits to sexuality, evident in the way this belief system was carried into lesbian feminism.

The change from "natural and free" toward "women's ways" in lesbian feminism is rooted in the growing recognition that lesbianism had gained in feminist theory in the 1970s. By the late 1970s lesbianism was regarded as central in the oppression of women. Lesbian oppression was possible only in a male-dominated and heterosexual society.

The goal of lesbians had by then become not simply the abolition of gender roles but a totally new society, based on women's ways rather than men's. This vision meant a shift in focus away from the structure of
patriarchy and to actual male behavior. Consequently, "liberation became equated with the rejection of behavior assumed male and the embracement of behavior assumed female" in the lesbian community (Marotta, 1981, p. 119).

These changes in lesbian feminism coincided with a conservative trend in American politics which had essentially forced feminists and lesbian feminists to rethink their political strategies. National campaigns against homosexuality and abortion rights were put forward by conservative and religious forces, demanding traditional values of sexuality. Feminists went from a radical stand to a more conservative stand on sexuality, feeling that "progress, as stated by Betty Friedan, could only be made in the 1980s by recognizing the needs of the majority" (quoted in Bohmer, 1988, p. 86).

Fearing that support of lesbianism might endanger the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), feminists also became less supportive of lesbian radical visions. In line with the Moral Majority they campaigned against public sexuality and pornography, although not homosexuality. Interestingly, the two forces had different interests.
The Moral Majority was opposed to any sexual expressions outside of procreative sexuality, including homosexuality and women's autonomy over reproduction.

The feminist movement framed the issue in terms of male sexual violence and claimed pornography as its prime promotor. By attending to public sex as the issue, they intended to shift the focus of regulation away from female sexuality onto male sexuality. In feminist circles this also meant a change from radical feminism to what Echols (1983) refers to as cultural feminism. In contrast to the early radical feminists, who focused on the structural components of oppression, cultural feminists of the late 1970s and 1980s stressed primarily the psychological and emotional components of oppression.

Lesbian feminism in the 1980s became oriented toward heightening women's consciousness in the lesbian community by encouraging women to examine their beliefs and lifestyles in relation to prescriptive standards of woman-identified as opposed to male-identified modes of being. However, this analysis had the disadvantage of denying agency to women classified as living male-
identified lifestyles (Echols, 1983).

The accepted standard of lesbianism endorsed by most lesbian feminists viewed lesbian sexuality as more spiritual/emotional bonding rather than sexual. This vision in many ways resulted from an early struggle between lesbians and heterosexual women in the women's movement of the early and late seventies. The homophobia among heterosexual feminists had essentially forced lesbians in the movement to promote lesbianism as more of an emotional relationship than a sexual one in order to minimize the importance of the sexual act.

It is in the context of these political and theoretical changes that lesbian sadomasochists began to speak out about their desires. Community standards of lesbian sexuality as developed by lesbian feminist ideology left little room for the sexual behavior lesbian sadomasochists were testifying. Its roles of dominance and subordinance appeared violent and oppressive rather than passionate, gentle and equalitarian as portrayed by lesbian feminist ideology (Phelan, 1989).

Political resistance of lesbian sadomasochists to
this community embrace is the beginning of a longstanding debate on lesbian sadomasochism among lesbians. Starting with Barbara Ruth in 1976 in an article entitled "Cathexis," a few lesbians followed with announcements in the lesbian press saying they were both feminists and sadomasochists (Phelan, 1989).

The late-1970s marks the starting point of collective mobilization by lesbian sadomasochists. This happened primarily in response to the anti-pornography campaign in the mid-1970s launched by the movement Women Against Violence and Pornography in the Media. The WAVP movement frequently used sadomasochistic imageries in its analysis of pornography and male sexual violence. Along with gay sadomasochists, lesbian sadomasochists in the San Francisco and Bay area put on a pro-sadomasochism campaign in an attempt to rectify the image of sadomasochism being offered by the anti-pornography campaign and feminists.

Small and informal support groups of lesbians and gay men formed in this period in San Francisco and the Bay area, such as "The Society of Janus," "Cardea" and "Samois." These groups were active in attempting to
promote different ideas of sadomasochism in the lesbian and gay community. Samois has been the main representative for lesbian sadomasochists in defending lesbian sadomasochism and critiquing discriminatory practices against lesbian sadomasochists since the 1970s (Califia, 1987a). One primary goal of Samois has been to expand and develop a feminist ideology of lesbian sadomasochism. In 1981 members of Samois published a book on lesbian sadomasochism, *Coming to Power*, which resulted in much controversy and debate within the lesbian community.

Since the emergence of the debate on lesbian sadomasochism, virtually every lesbian press item, conference, festival and local lesbian group setting has been a place of intense argument and accusation. Each side accuses the other of "bad faith, of dogmatism, of self-serving motives, and of destruction of feminism" (Phelan, 1989, p. 101). The debate has somewhat lessened in the press, yet thrives at community functions which frequently erupt in fights between s/m lesbians and those who oppose them. Lesbian sadomasochist literature is also subjected to censorship in
many lesbian bookstores and publications. Some community functions have a policy of not admitting lesbian sadomasochists. For example, just this last year, the National Women's Music Festival, organized by lesbians and attended mostly by lesbians, decided against the participation of lesbian sadomasochists on the grounds that lesbian sadomasochism represented sexual violence.
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Introduction

The overall question in the debate on lesbian sadomasochism has been whether sadomasochism is compatible with lesbian feminism. At stake here is the political future of lesbian feminism as well as the nature of lesbian identity.

Opponents of lesbian sadomasochism have had the upper hand in this debate insofar as their claims are in terms of lesbian feminist ideology, the discourse through which lesbians have evolved a present sense of identity. The opposing ideology of s/m lesbians, many of whom are lesbian feminists, is an attempt to challenge ideas that lesbian feminism has in this regard.

S/m lesbians want a renewed discourse of lesbian feminism based on their experiences of sadomasochism, which they claim contradict current notions in lesbian feminism. They face a tough challenge, both for political and theoretical reasons. Lesbian feminism is
as much a model of lesbian identity in the lesbian community as it is a political strategy. This theory places much significance on sex and power in explaining patterns of women's oppression. As such, sadomasochism may be viewed as promoting and legitimizing sexual violence against women.

The continued visibility of s/m lesbians through support and information workshops and writings of their own experiences have nevertheless posed a challenge to lesbian feminism. This is largely due to the fact that the lesbian feminist demand for sex legitimated by romance is being questioned by many lesbians, not only lesbian sadomasochists.

For s/m lesbians, challenging lesbian feminism has meant speaking of their experiences as they are. They claim their experiences contain love and intimacy like other lesbian sexual experiences and argue that the only difference is the use of power roles. They claim this use of power roles to be based on full consensus and trust between those involved, and thus that power takes on a different meaning than in patriarchy. They maintain that sadomasochism is a liberating and
relieving experience, often providing catharsis for those involved. S/m lesbians claim that in view of those experiences sadomasochism needs to be explored as a matter of sexuality rather than oppression.

Opponents of lesbian sadomasochism are reluctant to accept the demand that lesbian feminism renew itself on the basis of those experiences. They question the truthfulness of those experiences in regards to both the claims of catharsis and consensus. They question the catharsis hypothesis on research grounds in psychology where it is has been demonstrated that taking feelings out in aggression provides only temporary relief. Some claim rather that s/m more likely leads to a habituation of the roles of dominance and subordinance, and the failure of participants to perceive the extremity of their roles (Linden, 1982).

Opponents question the consensus argument on the grounds that since sexual desires and interests are socially defined and constructed, the capacity of a person to give true consent is inevitably modified by socialization. According to opponents, lesbian sadomasochism is a patriarchical construct, representing
patriarchal sex ideology: that women desire pain and humiliation in their lives. That women might desire love and intimacy through s/m and want that desire to be validated in feminist terms only suggests to opponents that those women have internalized patriarchal oppression in their lives.

If opponents tend to reduce the testimony of s/m lesbians to a matter of inferior consciousness, they are also denying them a legitimate voice in defining lesbianism. This suggests that much is at stake in acknowledging s/m lesbians' claims for a renewed lesbian feminism.

Lesbian Feminist Ideology

Opponents of lesbian sadomasochism question that women's desire for and interest in sadomasochism could be genuine on the grounds that sadomasochism involves power in sex. Sexuality and power are interrelated in patriarchy, where male social, economic and political dominance over women is rationalized in the supposed sexual nature of the genders.

The presumption that heterosexuality is normal and
lesbianism abnormal is a social construct significant in maintaining male dominance over women (Rich, 1980). The idea that male dominance and female subordinance is the only naturally rooted relationship has served to legitimize not only women's private oppressions but has served to strengthen and legitimize other oppressions in patriarchy (Radicalesbians, 1973). As such, the sexual relationship between men and women can be considered the root not only of women's oppression but other oppressions in patriarchy. Lesbian feminist Kathleen Barry claims that:

It is in the private relationship between men and women that fundamental inequality is established. From individual domination, inequality is incorporated into the larger social, political, and economic order (Barry, 1979, p. 165).

Heterosexuality, being defined and promoted as the only human relationship naturally rooted, serves in essence to normalize dominance and subordination in human relationships. In other words, the function of heterosexuality can be seen as political in that it promotes consciousness of oppression (Rich, 1980).

Hoagland explains the function of heterosexuality
as promoting an entire lifestyle, a consciousness she names heterosexualism. Heterosexualism is not simply procreative sex but an "entire way of life promoted and enforced by every formal and informal institution of the father’s society, from religion to pornography to unpaid housework to medicine" (Hoagland, 1988, p. 7). Heterosexualism is a lifestyle that maintains oppression in human relationships with the idea that oppression is normal.

Sexism and misogyny are products of this consciousness. They are values born in it, and reinforced and promoted in everyday life through social and political institutions and ideologies in patriarchy (Rich, 1980). It is through these that consciousness of oppression manifests. Through these values men and women learn their prospective sexual interests and desires, which in turn uphold these institutions.

Patriarchal sexology is a significant tool in promoting patriarchal consciousness, according to lesbian feminism. Its pervasiveness in women’s lives is evident in wide-ranging sexual dominance by men over women across race, class and cultures, where women are
subjected to sexual violence by way of tradition and cultural values (Barry, 1979). Not surprisingly, lesbian feminism, and feminist ideology overall, places much significance on patriarchal sexology in understanding how women's oppression is a matter of a whole consciousness. Two central claims have risen out of this analysis of patriarchal sexology, namely that lesbianism is anti-ethical to patriarchy and that the personal is the political. The opposition to lesbian sadomasochism extends the meaning of these to critique the role-playing of lesbian sadomasochists. Since lesbian sadomasochism involves sex and power roles, the elements by which women are oppressed in patriarchy, lesbian sadomasochism may be treated to some of the same analysis.

The Idea of Consciousness

Lesbian feminism defines patriarchal consciousness as a matter of everyday lifestyle, values and conduct where the need to control and be controlled remains central in human relationships (Hoagland, 1988). It is a lifestyle structured on oppression, and one in which
individual men serve as ontological agents (Radicalesbians, 1973).

Although men are, or might be, oppressed in patriarchy because of their class or race status vis a vis those men in power, their oppression is of a very different nature than women’s. Men are not oppressed as men. Their oppression is not of their bodies, their biology. Women, on the other hand, are oppressed because they are women and this is an experience shared by all women, regardless of their status vis a vis men. This is an experience of living in a bird cage, so to speak. As conceptualized by lesbian feminist Marilyn Frye:

It is a life experience confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction (Frye, 1983, p. 4).

Women in patriarchy live in a closed system of choices and alternatives. They experience their oppression as natural and normal. As such, women’s oppression can easily manifest itself in their self-identities and conceptions. It manifests in women
seeing and defining themselves and their environment from men's point of view (Frye, 1983).

A woman learns very early on that she is here to exist for a man, not for herself. She learns that her happiness depends on how sexually attractive men find her, and that passiveness and subservience to men's needs is a measure of how well she is doing. True consent and agency of women in patriarchy is spurious for these reasons because women's choices and interests have in a very real sense been determined by men.

Understanding the means by which women's oppression manifests itself in consciousness of women in patriarchy, has led those opposed to lesbian sadomasochism to question the validity of a true consent in sadomasochistic sexuality. As a sexuality it not only arises in a cultural context built on the sexual objectification of women, but its content is dominance and subordination, the primary poles of patriarchal oppression (Linden, Pagano, Russel & Star, 1982).

Kathleen Barry has argued in reference to consent in sadomasochism:
Women exist as objects in patriarchy and as such will be taken if they don’t give themselves. While a woman may choose to participate in the practices of cultural sadism, that choice implies neither freedom nor sexual liberation. Personal liberation in a slave state is impossible (Barry, 1979, p. 212).

Many of the erotic components of lesbian sadomasochism are predetermined by cultural conditioning according to this perspective. They are not formed by "free" choice. Lesbian sadomasochism, to many lesbian feminists, is a testimony to the effect that patriarchal sexology has had on women’s consciousness in regards to her sexual self (Linden et al., 1982).

The fact remains that sadomasochism is and has been opposed by Western societies throughout history. Sadomasochists were not only considered at par with homosexuals and lesbians, as madmen and perverts, but were subjected to much of the same oppression. Interestingly, feminists opposed lesbian sadomasochism on exactly the same grounds as the dominant culture: the notion that sadomasochism must be destructive as a sexuality to both the self and society. Although those against lesbian sadomasochism claim to be basing their
claims on reality, this reality represents only a few of
the lesbian sadomasochists and their accounts are put
into use as an after fact or to strengthen a premade
argument.

But lesbian feminists explain such contradictions
well. They refer to the character of patriarchal
consciousness, that it easily includes both
contradictions and inconsistencies. As Barry notes,
"its sole function is to maintain itself, it is not
answerable to evidence or logic which would reveal the
reality that it is obscuring" (Barry, 1979, p. 184).

Hoagland has noted that in promoting patriarchal
consciousness, patriarchy necessarily must oppose that
which exposes it. It must label that which itself
promotes, such as rape or sadomasochism for example, as
evil in order to promote that which it considers good,
procreative and heterosexual sex. By juxtaposing an
extreme form of patriarchal sexuality with another less
revealed, two things rooted in the same value framework,
patriarchy manages to maintain the value framework
necessary for its sustenance (Hoagland, 1988).

In the view of lesbian feminism, and those opposed
to lesbian sadomasochists, lesbian sadomasochists are not rebelling as much as supporting patriarchal values. They can be said to operate in a false consciousness in that respect. Thus Barry notes about the effects of false consciousness:

One pornographer in San Francisco evidenced this when he stated recently that his pornography doesn't promote violence against women: in his pornography he was only into bondage (Barry, 1979, p. 184).

This kind of reasoning in regard to claiming false consciousness is central in the arguments by opponents of lesbian sadomasochism. While theoretically sound, it becomes problematic, precisely because it rests on presumptions regarding what sexuality is rather than the reality of most lesbian sadomasochists. Many of the women involved in sadomasochism are lesbian feminists who have been active for years in the feminist movement on issues including sexual violence against women. The labeling of false consciousness when applied to these women is not only rude given this, but it also denies them a legitimate subjectivity.

The claim of false consciousness is generally applied in violation of a central tenet in lesbian
feminism: that of the superiority of the individual woman in understanding and defining her experiences and interests (Phelan, 1989). Theoretically, lesbian feminism brilliantly explains the nature of false consciousness, yet it is not capable of explaining why some women are granted more privileged consciousness than others.

Recapturing women’s consciousness has meant in feminism the use of consciousness raising methods where the emphasis is placed on the individual woman’s self-understanding as most important. What has happened is that the original commitment to look carefully at women’s lives and construct an ideology which carefully reflects their diversity seems to have given way to mainstream inertia and a small group of women defining what lesbianism is. The ideology produced is then used to distinguish between those who fit and those who don’t fit the concept of a woman as conceptualized by these women. This concept is narrow and one-sided and as such is incapable of allowing for individual differences among women.

What is important to note in this debate on lesbian
sadomasochism and consciousness is that it seems to involve issues of a theoretical and political nature rather than the reality of those who lead a sadomasochistic sex lifestyle. The false consciousness which is supposed to describe the lesbian sadomasochist is the dismissal of her reality, based on the concept of "the" woman put forth by lesbian feminism. This is based on a central tenet of lesbian feminism: that sexuality is the root and the basis of social and political lifestyle.

In lesbian feminism, how one expresses one's personal lifestyle is important because it implies the values one adheres to, either patriarchal or lesbian feminist (Phelan, 1989). The criteria of consciousness when applied to women's lives creates a need for conduct that is consistent with stated values. But the values of lesbian sadomasochistic sex must be examined in the whole of that expression. Lesbian feminism has not been as committed to discovering the truth in which to place sadomasochistic conduct as it has been to dismissing lesbian sadomasochists with the notions of false versus true consciousness, and debates about whether the
expression involves principles it claims "naturally" female.

In the earlier phases of lesbian feminism, lesbian feminists' initial insight on lesbian oppression was that, despite the fact that lesbianism was condemned by patriarchy, some women were nevertheless living these lives. Lesbians who lived homosexual lifestyles came to be viewed by lesbian feminists as actively resisting the suppression of their selves (Radicalesbians, 1973). It was claimed that women who had sexual and emotional relationships with women were more conscious and political than women who had sexual relationships with men. Lesbian relationships came to be viewed as the anti-theses to patriarchy, equalitarian versus power based (Radicalesbians, 1973; Rich, 1980).

Lesbian feminism thus granted true agency to women who were lesbians. It is this sexual relationship that provides the context from which lesbian feminism developed its concept of who a woman is outside of patriarchy, both sexually and emotionally. However, there appears to be only one woman spoken of herein and she appears not so much sexual as spiritual in her
sexuality. We may see this in the writings of various lesbian feminists, Mary Daly, Kathleen Barry and Janice Raymond. In these writings, a woman's true self is said to be embedded in the way she bonds emotionally with another woman. This bond is spoken of as an essential women's bonding, yet it is implied as the essence of lesbian sexuality. Raymond makes this clear when she claims that "the distinction between lesbian existence and Gyn/Affection is often not easy to make, but obviously it has been made in the lives of some women" (Raymond, 1986, p. 15).

What these writers claim to see in women's bonding or lesbianism, is what they call women's energy. It is "energy that connotes the passion women feel for women, that is, the experience of profound attraction for the original self and the movement toward other vital women" (Raymond, 1986, p. 7). Mary Daly speaks of biophilia or women's love as opposed to necrophilia or men's love. Biophilia love is based on embracing life and self versus "love for those victimized (women) into a state of living death" (Daly, 1978, p. 59).

Although in reality not all lesbian feminists would
advocate such a perspective (lesbian feminist Andrea Dworkin has been an active opponent of the biological deterministic analysis, for example) lesbian feminism, from a theoretical perspective, leads to such analysis, with a focus on male behavior rather than the structure of male supremacy, as the root of women's oppression. The issue of what is "true" female nature is central in the debate on lesbian sadomasochism. The fervor that this debate has caused in the lesbian community indicates that much is at stake in altering this conception of womanhood. Those opposed to lesbian sadomasochism have gone so far as to claim these women are not lesbians!

The opposition of female nature to that of males is central in lesbian feminism. Lesbians/women are defined as being by nature holistic beings, naturally flowing with nature and each other, while men appear fragmented, seeking to exploit nature and others. Yet these are interpretations primarily based on the social experiences of those who write them with a bit of behavioral science data to back them up. They do not represent all women, nor can they, given the way they
have been generated.

The call for expression of a true consciousness of a woman is supported by the belief that these principles are innate and can be distinguished from male principles. Therefore if a woman identifies with traits that can be labeled male by lesbian feminist standards, then regardless of her politics or sexual orientation she may be labeled male-identified. The application of these criteria has slacked off since the late 1970s as it became apparent that women were too easily dismissed as subjects. Yet these politics easily emerge in times of threats in the community.

That lesbian feminism interprets female nature as being derived from innate characteristics and in opposition to male nature supports the causal model of patriarchal oppression in lesbian feminism. If sexuality is the root of patriarchal oppression, then the oppression manifested in relationship and the world becomes a matter of men oppressing women by way of their sexuality. In treating sexism as the root of all other oppressions, however, differences among women are minimized and lead to an interpretation of the female
gender in which complexity is completely lost.

The need to be unlike men and for one’s lifestyle to be politically acceptable, has led to the need to interpret lesbian lives as either/or, lesbian feminist or false consciousness. This branch of lesbian feminism rests on reversed biological determinism. Women’s differences to men are now explained in terms of innate superiority to men. Passivity has become reclaimed as an ability to flow with nature, while dominance is defined as just that inability.

Later lesbian feminists attempt to move away from falling into this kind of analysis and propose a perspective instead (see, Allen, 1989; Hoagland, 1988). Frye (1983) argues that in creating a vision of a woman, lesbian feminism must commit itself to a more abstract concept of a woman, a concept based on observable reality and more voices. She does not identify any particular principles of nature when she speaks of the need for women to withdraw from patriarchy in order to fulfill their lives. Yet in hers as in later lesbian feminist perspectives of liberation, the presumption of liberating to something other than patriarchy is often
a given.

While Frye claims no woman principles per se, she often implies that these will be other than the principles of males through her assumption that women must withdraw from men and patriarchy if they are to be liberated (Frye, 1983). The idea of separation is a reasonable one, given that women need to have control over their space if they are to come to terms with themselves. Yet not all women can do this, nor may they want to. The implication that women must start by withdrawing from men is highly utopian and implies that women are naturally allied regardless of their class, race and cultural differences.

The essential question that comes up in this context is whose standards will prevail or is a standard not needed since women are naturally allied? This method of liberation ignores the fact that there are differences among women that will be carried over, and leaves women with nothing to work with into their own liberation precisely because it requires that women’s selves be something other than what men’s selves.
The Idea of Liberation

In lesbian feminism the locus of oppression provides the departure to liberation. Liberation as spoken of in lesbian feminist terms means that social relations which give rise to patriarchal consciousness must be destroyed. Lesbian feminism claims these are based on values and thus women must focus on changing their values. Simply, the logic of this process works like this: if women create new values and live according to them, then patriarchal relations will be challenged since the values needed for its maintenance are not being adhered to (Hoagland, 1988).

The idea that lesbian relationships are in opposition to patriarchal relationships is a recurrent theme in lesbian feminist analyses of liberation. It is an idea upon which concepts of woman have been constructed as we saw earlier in the analysis.

Opponents of lesbian sadomasochism refute s/m lesbians' move to liberation based on their ideals of woman. The principles of power and self-interest have not been changed by the context of lesbianism, according
to opponents, and sadomasochism is only patriarchal sexuality in another context (Linden et al., 1982). According to opponents, s/m lesbians’ claim to liberation represents patriarchal ideas, whereas liberation is equated with the absence of social restrictions over individual desires.

This interpretation of s/m lesbian ideology as patriarchal liberalism is found quite commonly in writings by lesbian feminists and feminists opposed to lesbian sadomasochism. They equate the pro-sadomasochism stand with the sexual revolution in the sixties where liberation was equated with uncritical acceptance of sexual behavior. As Linden states, "the defense of sadomasochism by some feminists bears witness to entrenchment of this liberal view of sexuality in feminist ideology" (Linden, 1982, p. 4).

What occurred during the sixties sexual revolution was an attempt to liberate sexual relations without allowing for the liberation of women from men’s sexual dominance. Women’s status was not addressed as a whole and "sexual freedom" took on the appearance of yet another patriarchal plot to use and oppress women. The
sexual liberation of women was superficially equated with a relief from patriarchical morals, but the power dynamic in heterosexuality remained unacknowledged (Barry, 1982a; Wagner, 1982).

In effect, feminists witnessed an increase of not only male sexual violence but an increase of such images in mainstream media and pornography. Some objections to lesbian sadomasochists' liberation is based on linking this pseudo-liberal sexual revolution to the liberal attitude of s/m lesbian ideology. Opponents of lesbian sadomasochism base this claim on the insight that women can only be truly liberated if issues of sexual violence against women are addressed (Phelan, 1989).

Sexual liberation is the cornerstone of women's liberation within lesbian feminist ideology. The process which lesbian feminism claims necessary for women's liberation is women's withdrawal from a value system which upholds patriarchal oppression in patriarchy (Hoagland, 1988). What is proposed instead is abolition of values such as objectification and power, and upholding of conduct which reflects human respect, intimacy and equality (Barry, 1979; Hoagland, 1988;
The notion implied by this perspective of liberation is that an essential relationship exists between values and sexual conduct. Barry concludes, among others, that the new values are necessary in order for sex to be experienced differently, to be respected and experienced as such (Barry, 1979; Dworkin, 1981; Griffin, 1981; Lederer, 1980; Raymond, 1986). Barry claims that "it follows then that sex cannot be purchased, legally acquired, or seized by force" (Barry, 1979, p. 230).

The goal of lesbian feminist politics is clearly toward ending male sexual violence and toward liberating women's sexual pleasures. The construct of female sexuality is intended to promote these goals, although s/m lesbians have proposed that this construct is at the same time prohibitive and may in fact work against women's sexual liberation.

It is not surprising that lesbian feminism concerns itself with morality when it creates new values of sexuality. Barry claims that sexual values must be based on "what is enhancing to all human beings versus
what is demeaning, and what leads to a positive valuation of life versus what tends toward destruction and dehumanization" (Barry, 1979, p. 226). These sexual values are not only perceived to be opposite of those that presently exist, but are also thought to be part of women's natural sexuality. The sexual liberation of women is in actuality a process of going back to what was before patriarchy, going back to values women always attached to sexuality (Barry, 1979).

Lesbian feminism wants a change from sex being sex to sex being intimacy. It seeks instead of a fragmented pleasure, a pleasure based on a desire for intimacy. It wants a sexuality that dignifies the persons involved and makes the sex industry, including pornography, obsolete.

Sexual liberation means in lesbian feminism a change in values, under the notion that values determine the sexual experience from which other social values emerge. Lesbian sadomasochism seems incompatible with women's liberation at this point. Wagner argues in the following manner against s/m lesbian liberation:
It is human beings that create the social conditions that create our values or lack of them. We can choose whether we want to continue to behave in the same way sexually or whether we want to change the social relations that determine the context in which we experience our sexuality (Wagner, 1982, p. 23).

Opponents of lesbian sadomasochism have claimed that sadomasochism legitimizes and promotes the sexual violence of patriarchy (Linden et al., 1982). This claim, which is made in the context of the lesbian feminist conviction that violent pornography advances the sexual interests and desires in patriarchy, hinges on the unspoken assumption that there is a connection between s/m lesbian conduct and the violence of pornography. It precisely rests on the idea that sadomasochism is generated by patriarchy, by fantasy material such as pornography.

The Idea of Sexuality

Lesbian feminist ideology concurs with the s/m lesbian ideology view insofar as both view sexual desires and interests as being shaped by society. Where the two ideologies disagree is on the subject of whether
or not key desires, such as those involving sadomasochistic fantasies, are innately or socially rooted. S/m lesbians claim their desires are real and thus represent natural desires. They propose that their desires are scorned or accepted according to the way in which society defines them, that is, whether they fit the range of what is considered normal in society.

S/m lesbians offer the explanation that the social construction of sexuality in patriarchy is based on the elite interests of those in social control, where the issues are class and race as well as gender. S/m lesbians perceive themselves as a socially repressed minority along with other sex-based minorities such as homosexuals and lesbians (Samois, 1987).

Lesbian feminists opposed to lesbian sadomasochism diverge from these assertions in fundamental ways. While they agree that it is possible for individuals to be born with a capacity for erotic desire, they assert that the desire does not materialize per se. As Wagner explains,

We are not born with an inherent knowledge of what to do sexually, other than to seek gratification. We learn our sexual behavior
and we learn it from the culture we live in. In order to understand our sexual behavior, then, we must look at the social conditions that structure it (Wagner, 1982, p. 23)

Lesbian feminism does not disagree per se with the claim that men as well as women can be oppressed by patriarchal sexology, but it makes a distinction as to how oppression is manifested. Patriarchy is men oppressing women. Women are oppressed based on their biological makeup while men are oppressed because of class and/or color, not because they are men.

Patriarchal sexology is an ideology of sexual differences between men and women. It is an ideology justifying men's dominance over women in everyday life which places the dynamic in terms of the nature of sexuality (Rich, 1980). The pervasiveness of this ideology in consciousness cannot be minimized. It is built into culture and traditions wherever women are regarded as second class citizens to men. Kathleen Barry has called this "cultural sadism":

Cultural sadism is a distinct social form that consists of practices which encourage and support sexual violence, defining it into normal behavior. These practices are woven into the fabric of the culture and as such they give cultural sadism its own evolution and
history and support it by an ideology that legitimizes and justifies it (Barry, 1979, p. 174).

Patriarchal sexology is believed to rely on pornography as a means of perpetuating sex based oppression. Feminist ideology in general sees pornography as the primary medium through which patriarchy shapes sexual interest and desire in individuals. Not only is it a primary source of erotic fantasies but its content is often limited to oppressive images of women. Male homosexual and lesbian erotica is, as a general rule, subject to more intense censorship. As the most readily obtainable source of fantasy material, male heterosexual pornography is clearly a powerful medium for influencing behavior. It is constructed to arouse its consumer and spur erotic imagination to contemplate pleasure in the context of sexual behaviors promoted by the publication. Generally the content is oppressive and pre-occupied with subjecting women to pain and humiliation.

The content of pornography complies with and reflects both societal norms and the principles which perpetuate them. In fact, what pornography tells women
is that they do like pain and humiliation. As such the function of pornography clearly becomes one of normalizing and promoting sexual violence by defining it as erotic and desirable.

Some lesbian feminists and feminists have claimed that the emergence of lesbian sadomasochism coincides with pornography becoming popular during the sexual revolution of the 1960s. They see lesbian sadomasochism as well as the ideology of lesbian sadomasochists regarding sexual liberation as products of this period (Linden et al., 1982).

Opponents of lesbian sadomasochism are repelled by the apparent similarity of s/m and male fantasies of sexual violence against women. As a sexuality per se, if one would leave behind speculations of its nature, lesbian sadomasochism violates principles of lesbian sexuality as defined in lesbian feminism. The theory of lesbian feminism tends to portray lesbian sexuality as spiritually rather than sexually focused, as based on women's friendship rather than sexual desire in and of itself. Women's sexuality is thus interpreted in opposition to male sexuality. Female sexuality is based
on female principles, on the way a woman relates to another woman (Barry, 1979; Daly, 1978; Raymond, 1986). Female sexuality is a desire for life, not death (Frye, 1983), a desire for intimacy rather than orgasm (Barry, 1979) and equality rather than power (Raymond, 1986). Female sexuality is holistic rather than fragmented (Lorde & Leigh Star, 1982).

The notion that women's sexuality is authentic and male sexuality faulty, so to speak, is frequently implied if not stated directly in lesbian feminist literature. Phelan has noted that these kinds of ideas are rooted in a change in focus on liberation, from a commitment to women's pleasure and autonomy in their sexuality towards one of resisting male sexuality (Phelan, 1989).

Given the effects of the sexual revolution, it was reasonable that the focus shifted toward abolishing patriarchal sexuality with an emphasis on changing sexuality through changing values. Lesbian and feminist activists are working to promote equity in social and sexual relationships by upholding sexual values that can change attitudes toward sex and thus its experiences.
It is not unreasonable that lesbian feminism should equate its values with actual sexual experiences given the common connections made between the sexual personal and the societal political.

One of the values of sexuality which is responsible for the sexual abuse and violation women suffer in their lives is objectification. Women’s sexuality has been constructed so that they are interacted with as objects rather than subjects, and are treated as a means toward an end, rather than ends in and of themselves. When objectification is superceded by more equitable relations, intimacy rather than pleasure becomes central. Some lesbian feminist writers even imply that sexual fantasies and game playing then become irrelevant since they are based on unreal interactions or artificial ways of relating (Barry, 1979; Lorde, 1980).

Lesbian feminism sees the erotic as an extension of oneself from daily life. The erotic expresses the whole being; it is heightened consciousness where body, mind, and spirit come together (Lorde & Leigh Star, 1982). Opponents of lesbian sadomasochism suppose that bedroom dynamics necessarily extend into the daily lifestyle of
the participants (Linden et al., 1982). The supposition that sexuality necessarily involves the same kind of integrity as other social relations is, of course supported by the notion that the personal is political. All forms of expression are taken to be an indicator of what values one adheres to, thus sexual expression is fused with ingrained personal values, patriarchal or lesbian feminist.

The idea that sexuality as an expression of basic values and sexual conduct can be morally assessed on this basis is exactly what Lorde has in mind when she comments on lesbian sadomasochism:

The erotic weaves through our lives, and integrity is a basic condition that we aspire to. If we don't have the lessons of our journeys toward that condition, then we have nothing (Lorde & Leigh Star, 1982, p. 68).

The Ideology of Lesbian Sadomasochists

S/m lesbians have set out to speak about sadomasochism as it is experienced rather than how it pertains to the question of why they have these desires. Their claim is that such inquiry presumes sadomasochism is unnatural. As lesbian sadomasochist spokesperson Lyn
Rosen states: "such questions belong on the same scarred and dusty shelf as 'why are you gay?'" (Rosen, Young, Stoltenberg & Jordan, 1978, p. 88).

The principal concern of s/m lesbians is that their experiences contradict current notions of sadomasochism in lesbian feminist theory. They experience sadomasochism as sexuality rather than a psycho-social identity. The experience is felt to be liberating and the power as flowing between partners rather than in one direction. Consensus to power is perceived as freely chosen rather than socially constructed and partners often switch roles among themselves.

It is the masochist, according to s/m lesbians, who controls the encounter. Her desire and capabilities control and limit proceedings of the sadist (Lucy, 1987). "The sadist can be as aggressive, domineering, or mean as she would like to be but only as long as it turns the masochist on" (Rosen et al., 1978, p. 88).

While these experiences may provide sexual pleasure they are also credited with inducing a state of a heightened consciousness. This state of consciousness is described as a release from the oppressive
experiences of daily life, experiences of having to compete, to succeed, and experiences of fearing vulnerability and weakness in oneself (Califia, 1983).

Sadomasochism intensifies these experiences but makes them sexually satisfying at the same time. Through this sexual expression emotions associated with powerlessness are released and the empowerment of oneself results (Lucy, 1987). The masochist reclaims power by letting herself be vulnerable. She rebels against society’s standards, while the sadist reclaims power by allowing herself to be powerful through her insubordination to societal convention (Califia, 1983).

S/m lesbians express the experience of power in terms that contradict the conventional understanding of power dynamics. The enactment of patriarchal power abuse is in fact an illusion. They maintain that sadomasochism mocks patriarchal power by exposing its erotic underlyings, that, in fact, sadomasochism is a parody of patriarchy (Califia, 1981).

A fundamental concept in s/m lesbian ideology is that lesbian sadomasochism is a rebellion against sexual repression. State opposition to sadomasochism is
interpreted as a reactionary backlash to sexual insubordination. The opposition to lesbian sadomasochism is also thought to be prompted by simplistic moralism which promotes the interpretation of sadomasochism without reference to the way it is understood by those who practice it. The motivation for the repression of sadomasochism, whether by state or feminists, is thought to promote and legitimize puritan values of sexuality wherein sex is equated with heterosexual and procreative sex (Rubin, 1984).

S/m lesbians have come to view themselves as an oppressed minority both within and outside the lesbian community, an oppression similar to other "deviant" sex minorities which don’t conform to community standards dictating sexual expressions. The attempt to repress sexual deviation is equated with the attempt to repress freedom. The analogy is then expanded to equate with the attempt at repressing homosexuality in the 1950s, when homosexuals were stigmatized and persecuted on the grounds that they displayed sexual perversity rather than a valid sexual orientation (Rubin, 1984).

The s/m lesbian perspective on sadomasochism is
constructed in part using a Marxist analysis. The
decisive power regulating sexuality emanates not from
men controlling women sexually but from power holders
who represent the state apparatus of social control.
S/m lesbians reason that the ultimate cause of sexual
oppression is not power, in and of itself, as lesbian
feminism has asserted; rather they and their supporters
dispute the definition of power as non-consensual and
inherently male (Califia, 1983; Hunt, 1987; Rubin,

In contrast to lesbian feminist ideology, s/m
lesbians accept power in sexuality. This inspires a
different analysis of oppression in relation to women's
consciousness and a different sense of liberation than
that found in lesbian feminism.

The Idea of Consciousness

S/m lesbian ideology challenges lesbian feminism in
regards to the definition of women's oppression within
a patriarchal system. It concurs with lesbian feminism
that women's oppression manifests in consciousness. Yet
in distinguishing between patriarchal versus feminist
consciousness, s/m lesbians maintain that women's lives must be viewed in their context rather than in reference to preconceived female principles. Rubin notes that lesbian sadomasochism must acquire its meaning from its relative circumstance:

You can't just decide that something is evil or virtuous, you have to look at what people are doing, what you are doing, what it means to you, what it means to them, and what effects it is having. That is a constant part of life (quoted in Wechsler, 1981, p. 8).

S/m lesbians call for a different interpretation of women's agency in patriarchy that will not render values and desires as being coopted from males (Samois, 1987). Since patriarchal consciousness sustains class and race oppression as well as sexism, then women's oppression manifests in more complex ways than simply sexism (Hollibaugh & Moraga, 1983).

S/m lesbians ask that, to be fair, any interpretation of consciousness should allow that women's lives be interpreted in their relative context rather than through abstract female principles. They reason that the experience of womanhood is a matter of living in social class, race and historical context, not
rooted in some distant female nature.

The meaning of false versus true feminist consciousness thus becomes different in s/m lesbian ideology than in lesbian feminism. S/m lesbian ideology accepts conduct and character in women that can be defined as male, identified by lesbian feminist standards, precisely because this ideology uses criteria which legitimate the influence of life on consciousness.

Some lesbian feminists, on the other hand, regard women who identify with men’s interests as having adopted false consciousness regardless of whether these women perceive themselves to be oppressed by sexism by having these interests. The emphasis on prescriptives rather than context in lesbian feminism hinges, of course, on the conviction that one’s personal expression of self necessarily has political consequences in regard to consciousness.

The qualification of context is an important attempt on the part of s/m lesbians to accommodate women’s differences within the identification of true womanhood. According to the s/m lesbian ideology of consciousness, women’s agency in forming values and
interests is as valid as is men's, regardless of their sexual oppression by men.

The ultimate difference between lesbian feminism and s/m lesbian ideology, then, is the moral temperance of s/m lesbians which recognizes that all forms of oppression and experiences shape consciousness and that there is no site of a superior consciousness in female sexual nature. S/m lesbians are consequently more capable of endorsing a broader spectrum of personal character than lesbian feminism. The acceptance of traits and personality types which are context-related is important because it implies that women whose attitudes lie outside of what lesbian feminism accepts cannot be said to be inherently fated to self-perpetuating cycles of oppression.

Anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1984) has, along with Pat Califia (1979) and Amber Hollibaugh (1978), elaborated on this perspective of sexuality. Rubin believes that lesbian feminism has been theoretically wrong in treating sexuality as a derivative of gender. She describes this treatment in itself as a social construct marred by sexual essentialism.
Rubin argues against viewing sexuality as derivative from gender or viewing gender oppression as rooted in sexuality. She wants these to be treated as analytically separate in an attempt to reflect their different social existences (Rubin, 1984). According to Rubin the history of sexuality has been that of the economically and politically privileged oppressing the less privileged. This has been a history of attempts by the establishment to control sexual expressions and distort the sexual experiences of those who don’t fit the ideas it promotes (Rubin, 1984).

The oppression of sexual conduct which Rubin describes tends to shift the focus away from the generalized notion of men versus women to the state and those resisting rules of sexual expression set and promoted through family, religion and law. The sexology of the establishment has equated sexual expression with sexual experience in an attempt to legitimize heterosexual and procreative sex.

Lesbian feminism starts with the personal, sex-based injustice and concomitant assaults on women's consciousness, then it moves on to an analysis of the
means by which these injustices are promoted and reinforced through social institutions. S/m lesbian ideology on the other hand, with its focus on context and acknowledgement of other kinds of oppressions, starts with an analysis of social and political forces and proposes that their impact on personal consciousness is relative and creates much of the essence of human diversity.

The common ground between these two is the agreement in principle on the ways in which oppression manifests. Like lesbian feminism, s/m lesbian ideology defines oppression as involving human interactions where one person overpowers and dominates another. Power and domination are viewed as central to patriarchal oppression and both perspectives advocate changing these in the larger social context.

But whereas lesbian feminism tends to define those as inherently patriarchal or products of patriarchy in themselves, s/m lesbians define these characteristics as part of what it means to be human. S/m lesbians qualify the idea of "use" or "abuse" as depending on where and how power and domination are used. They claim the
consensual use of those in sexuality is valid, that sexuality can be a healthy outlet for human aggression and submission (Samois, 1987).

The discourse on women's consciousness by s/m lesbians essentially starts with a critique of lesbian feminist ideas of true consciousness seen as incapable of representing women's diversity. S/m lesbians perceive this idea as constructed on white middle class feminist values (Hollibaugh & Moraga, 1983). Hollibaugh thus argues that lesbian feminism may be just another ideology of power: "'the man' has many different faces in patriarchy, some of them female and white, and our alliances are not automatic or clear cut" (Hollibaugh, 1984, p. 404).

The Idea of Liberation

S/m lesbian ideology, like lesbian feminism, advocates that forces of power and domination as means of coercion be eliminated so that women may be liberated from oppression. In principle, both view sexuality as an important area of liberation. They diverge in the realm of defining sexuality. Lesbian feminism requires
that women question power and domination in sexuality based on the analysis of these forces as patriarchal constructs. S/m lesbian ideology views power in sexuality as a normal part of women's as much as men's sexuality. This has resulted in s/m lesbian ideology challenging lesbian feminist ideas about the content of sex and power in reference to sexual violence.

S/m lesbians generally claim that sexuality is overdriven with significance in lesbian feminist theory. Rather than focusing on sexuality per se, liberation politics must focus on everyday behavior—of how women act in daily life in their attempt to dismantle the social conditions generating oppression (Samois, 1987).

S/m lesbians have found lesbian feminist ideology inadequate on sexuality primarily because it cannot account for their own desires. First, they note the fact that the analysis of women's sexuality has been highly influenced by looking at male sexual violence in pornography and the media. From these models lesbian feminism developed a bipolar human sexuality, two opposing sexualities rooted in nature. Hollibaugh (1984) argues that the cost of this focus for women's
sexual liberation has essentially required women to mold their sexual needs to prescriptive ideas rather than exploring with them. This is dangerous according to some s/m lesbians because such politics silence women and take away a woman's ability to act and explore for herself the meaning of her desires.

According to s/m lesbians the oppression of women's sexuality has not only manifested itself in the acceptance of male sexual violence in private relationships but also in the patriarchal definition of women as non-sexual beings, or as objects rather than subjects in sexuality (Califia, 1981; Hollibaugh, 1984). Interestingly, this is also the claim in lesbian feminism. But whereas lesbian feminism concludes that women should abolish power and domination in sexuality which makes them objects, s/m lesbians conclude that women must claim their sexuality as it is, regardless of how they choose to express it.

S/m lesbians have been able to substantiate their support of the liberating aspects of power and dominance despite the fact that male sexual violence has traditionally abused these dynamics to perpetuate
women's oppression. They note their own experiences in this reference: liberating rather than oppressive, and better self-awareness and self-identity (Samois, 1987).

The truly "liberated" woman in these terms is the woman who is attuned to and accepting her desires regardless of prevalent social morals. This understanding is a common theme underlying the politics of sexual liberation as discussed by s/m lesbian feminists. Hollibaugh maintains that,

Looking at the danger and damage done us is only a part of coming to terms with sex. We should also begin to look at sexuality itself and at what we mean by words like desire, passion, craving and need (Hollibaugh, 1984, p. 402).

There is a fundamental difference between lesbian feminist and s/m lesbian ideologies and their approach to women's agency and the capacity to make valid autonomous decisions within a society which is dominated by patriarchal consciousness. Lesbian feminism advocates a form of psychic liberation which is a rationally constructed departure from patriarchy, while s/m lesbian ideology validates the psyche as it is and uses it to complement political liberation. The means
of liberation proposed by s/m lesbian ideology allow women to be true to their desires yet are also committed to working towards liberation through eradicating sexual violence against women. They speak of the need for better and non-judgmental sex education as well as the need for women to address sexual violence.

While s/m lesbian ideology concurs with lesbian feminism that liberation involves the destruction of social institutions perpetuating gender oppression, they resist the implication that sexuality involving power is, by definition, an oppressive force. Gender oppression is believed to be more strongly linked to the social control of sexuality. There is a common understanding in both ideologies that sexual liberation means individual resistance to prevailing sexual values and the ideology that perpetuates them. S/m lesbians envision this liberation as implying an alliance of women with all sexual minorities: transsexuals, sadomasochists, etc. To s/m lesbians the emancipation of sexuality means the emancipation of gender roles since these are linked to sex roles. Califia (1981) has maintained that if people, both men and women, resist
what society defines as proper expressions of love and sexuality then gender categories will undergo transformation.

To most s/m lesbians, liberation means being true to one's desires, regardless of content. Interestingly, the two ideologies, s/m lesbian ideology and lesbian feminism concur that the personal is the basis of liberation, that liberation of the sexual self means striving towards what is perceived to be authentic. The difference is in what is defined or perceived as authentic sexuality by the two ideologies.

The Idea of Sexuality

S/m lesbians maintain that their experiences of sadomasochism are derived from personal sexuality rather than patriarchal oppression. Although there is an acknowledgement that women's ideas about sex have been highly influenced by patriarchal sex ideology, they claim to be no more affected by this influence than others whose forms of desires might differ. Califia says, "I don't believe that sadomasochism is the result of institutionalized injustice to a greater extent than
heterosexual marriage, lesbian bars, or gay male bath houses" (Califia, 1981, p. 32).

The contrast between s/m lesbian and lesbian feminist viewpoints hinges on perceptions of how patriarchal sexology has affected sexual desires and behaviors in reference to how the social construction of sexuality has influenced human desires. Contrary to lesbian feminism, s/m lesbian ideology views humans as capable of innate desires of power. This ideology argues patriarchal sexology as having granted men, not women, the privilege of power, thus promoting inequity and disallowing healthy expressions of empowerment, especially for women (Samois, 1987).

S/m lesbians define power as part of human sexuality rather than exclusively male or constructed by patriarchy. They define sexuality as a continuum of control, of giving and taking (Cordova, 1976; Rubin et al., 1981). Sadomasochism is, according to this perspective, simply a dramatized form of this dynamic, expressed in rituals of humiliation and domination.

S/m lesbians deny the interpretation that power fantasies are, in and of themselves, patriarchal and
anti-feminist, as is implied by the definition of women's sexuality in lesbian feminism. Although they view fantasies as based in reality they do not see a direct relationship between the two but argue that it be reasonable that one draw from sources in reality in constructing erotic fantasies (Wechsler, 1981).

"In a fantasy one is in control" argues Califia in resisting the connection made between power fantasies and sexual violence in lesbian feminism (Califia, 1983, p. 8). Sadomasochism is a consensual activity enjoyed by both partners. Fantasies do not necessarily indicate a repressed desire for a real experience as is commonly interpreted in theories of psychology. Instead, as perceived by s/m lesbians, fantasies of power mean that one wants to be unconditionally desired and acted upon at all costs (Rubin et al., 1981). A fantasy of power, "is the fantasy of being ultimately desireable" explains Rubin (quoted in Wechsler, 1981, p. 8).

S/m lesbians thus tend to perceive the tendency of lesbian feminism to regard power in sexuality, including fantasies as desires for real experience, as representing patriarchal sexology of the erotic
Lesbian feminism is viewed as upholding the patriarchal psychoanalytical approach whereby the erotic is interpreted as a direct extension of reality; thus the claim is that lesbian feminism has based its ideas on false conceptions of the erotic.

In contrast to lesbian feminism, s/m lesbian ideology of sexuality maintains that the erotic does not necessarily extend into daily interpersonal contact; the erotic is not necessarily part of a political statement in everyday life as has been claimed in lesbian feminism. S/m lesbians distinguish between sexual technique and sexual experience in this regard.

Both ideologies view sexual experience as a potential outlet for the expression of the totality of one's being, with the mental, emotional and physical coming together. Yet s/m lesbian ideology does not consider the expression or the mechanics of sexuality as necessarily determining a sexual experience. The idea that the form of expression defines the experience is seen as a product of patriarchy and as perpetuating the idea that how one experiences sexuality depends primarily on a technique (Hollibaugh, 1984; Rubin, 1984;
Samois, 1987). To s/m lesbians, sexuality is varied and different for different people, depending on cultural and social context. Hollibaugh comments on the erotic from this standpoint:

We live out our class, race, and sex preferences within our desire and map out our unique passions through our varied histories. These are the differences that move the skin, that explode the need inside of us and make sex possible (Hollibaugh, 1984, p. 404).

The s/m lesbian discourse on sexuality thus differs in fundamental ways from that of lesbian feminist ideology. It concurs in fundamental ways with modern sexologists whose perspective tends to be that of social construction most articulated by Foucault. According to this perspective, sexuality is neither the product of nature nor society but involves the individual as an active constructor of her/his desire in given social and historical circumstances. Gayle Rubin notes that the history of sexuality has been manifested in attempts by the state to repress sex that is pleasure oriented and promote that which serves procreative purposes. Healthy sexual experience has been equated with whom one has sex with and how one does it. Rubin claims that sexual
hierarchies and values created through such definitions have operated in much the same way as those of race and gender in history; they are values that have served to rationalize oppression by way of defining the sexual expression of the privileged as the only normal sexual desire. They are values used to obscure the reality of power and to normalize inequity. Thus sex disputes in history are interpreted by Rubin as functioning in the same way as those of racial and class issues: they serve to place the issue on the victim rather than the oppressor (Rubin, 1984).

Some s/m lesbians have protested the lesbian feminist condemnation of sadomasochism on the basis that it generally presumes a link to sexual violence, an assumption also held by the state. The establishment's concern with sexual deviations such as sadomasochism is seen as a plot of power rather than genuine concern with sexual freedom of women. S/m lesbians have also pointed out to concerned lesbian feminists that those in the forefront in opposing pornography and sadomasochism tend to be the same folks that oppose abortion rights, homosexuality and premarital sex, that is, right wing
and religious forces (Califia, 1981; Rubin, 1984).

Some S/m lesbians have even alleged that lesbian feminists and feminists opposing pornography and sadomasochism are not so much working against violence as they are contributing to the oppression of sexual minorities, including themselves. The focus on sexuality as the root and basis of women's oppression promotes the idea that power in sexuality remains the issue rather than real inequities between people. S/m lesbian ideology tries to refocus the issue of sexual violence onto that which promotes violence against women, namely social institutions and the ideologies they produce.

S/m lesbians resist the opinion that sadomasochism represents and promotes sexual violence. They conclude this on the grounds that feminist opposition is based on an inaccurate and biased analysis of sexual violence. First, they claim it is based on selective images in pornography used to support preconceived notions of a causation, images that have been taken out of their context in order to prove what has been prethought. Secondly, they claim the link made between pornography
and sexual oppression is too literal and simplistic (Califia, 1981; Hollibaugh, 1984; Rubin, 1984).

S/m lesbians take issue with these links, although they acknowledge that some pornography contains violence. They do this only because they find it simplistic to conclude that power in sexuality is the cause of sexual violence. Rather, they connect the problem of sexual violence to how patriarchy depicts and uses power, power as a biological property of men and of a nonconsensual nature.

S/m lesbians support a solution to sexual oppression that hinges on improving sex education to include issues of equity and consent, rather than abolishing sexuality which includes power. This emphasis on sexology rather than sexuality per se is the focus of s/m lesbian ideology regarding women's sexual liberation. While sexology is also the focus of lesbian feminism, dissolving the power in sex remains an essential criterion for liberation and equity within this ideology.
DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

This study of the debate on lesbian sadomasochism has been a historical and ideological analysis. I have studied this debate in the context of how it relates to the socio-historical position of lesbians from which lesbian feminism arises. I have done this not in the attempt to show that lesbian sadomasochism is right or wrong but to reveal how this debate is the direct consequence of a limited and narrow subject position offered by lesbian feminist discourse.

The debate on lesbian sadomasochism involves a conflict between those supporting a dominant subject position and those resisting it. The goal of lesbian sadomasochists is a call for a new perspective, for an analysis of women’s lives which begins with an attempt to understand power in all its forms.

The totalizing nature of lesbian feminism based on a singular and preestablished cause to which anything is then related, necessarily leads to a limited analysis of power. The dynamics of power are lost in such a
perspective. Everyday problems of power can only be seen as mere effects of patriarchal power.

What s/m lesbian ideology offers to lesbian feminism is a perspective committed to a contextual analysis of the relation between knowledge and power. It rightly sees power in patriarchy as not simply power over powerless, men versus women, but as a relation structured around race, class, and age in particular. Power then takes different forms and functions according to different social and cultural contexts and it is not static but always in flux and modification.

As a dominant discourse, patriarchy has offered a subject position to women that has served to maintain the dominance of men over women. Women have identified with this position, and in turn promoted and affirmed patriarchal power. Yet this is not a one time process, but a dynamic and a repeated one in one's lifetime. One is created by society, yet one also exists as a thinking and feeling being and as such is capable of resistance and innovation.

The resistance to a dominant position is created out of conflicts between different subject positions.
Throughout history minority groups have resisted the position of their subjectivity offered by the dominant culture in numerous ways, whether through direct confrontation or through the manipulation and modification of symbols and meanings offered by the dominant discourse. Women have burned their husbands' dinners in resistance to their control and power, they have politically mobilized and won some legal and political gains, they have adopted gender traits they were not supposed to have, such as lesbians of the 1950s. The possibilities of resistance are various. The point is not that oppression does not exist but that power is diffusive rather than repressive in its effect; that it generates possibilities as well as limitations of opportunities.

We live our lives in a discourse which attempts to control and govern our subjectivity. The ways by which this is done and its effects have neither been uniform or unilinear in history. This very organization of discourse has made it possible for other subject positions to exist along with the one being promoted and enforced. Whether the agents of a discourse innovate
with power in ways that it becomes part of an overall strategy of domination or a true resistance to it must be analyzed and determined by its context.

Lesbian sadomasochists' argument for context and process rather than objects of living as a criterion by which to interpret and value women's lives is grounded in the initial understanding that there is no nature outside culture, no meaning without cultural context. The lesbian feminist discourse is yet to challenge the dominant discourse on the meaning of biological differences. A discourse which does not challenge essentialism, the basis of patriarchal power over subjectivity, only ends up redefining existing values of differences. It does not undermine the power giving rise to their meanings, institutions and their ideas of subjectivity which feed the common sense.

The power of the dominant discourse lies in its ability to give human differences a meaning of fixed truth and nature. The idea of some eternal truth of some fixed "self" is clearly the basis of patriarchal power and consciousness. The failure to challenge these presumptions has led lesbian feminist discourse in a
constant attempt to define women once and for all, to get to some community where truth versus falsehood exists and equality and peace "naturally" flow.

It is in this search for truth that discourses necessarily become conservative and resistant to alternative positions, because in that search they necessarily must invest in a particular vision of that truth. The issue of lesbian sadomasochism has brought to the fore the need to change these political strategies. The lesbian sadomasochist perspective speaks from a need to make room for differences in lesbian identity and politics. It does not speak of a need to accept just anything because nothing is inherently bad. Rather it states distinctions between bad and good cannot be made in the context of a preset meaning of what "is", a fixed meaning of the essence of good.

Underlying the reluctance of lesbian feminist discourse to alter its knowledge of lesbianism in the view of cultural and sexual differences among lesbians is clearly the whole question of lesbian community and survival in a culture which continues to devalue their
existence. How can lesbians resist cooption of themselves into the dominant culture if they do not strive at some separation or withdrawal from its values and a creation of their own?

For many the perspective of lesbian sadomasochists' is understood as an appeal for assimilation into the dominant culture. This has appeared as such primarily because in claiming their right, lesbian sadomasochists have had to speak in the same terms as their opponents, speaking in terms of the superiority of self in knowing the true meaning of reality. As a result they have come across as if they do not understand the social and cultural nature of subjectivity, the ways by which power inheres in knowledge.

I have not come across this understanding in the writings of lesbian sadomasochists. The implication is more of a reformist strategy than the present strategy of withdrawal in lesbian feminist discourse. The reason for this is not because lesbian sadomasochists are so naive as to think that we are all simply beings of virtue and all we need to do is to remove community restrictions in order for that virtue to be free. The
reason is simply that differences among people exist and that they cannot be given a meaning that aims simply at preserving the power of one perspective over another.

Precisely, the perspective of lesbian sadomasochists calls for the absence of bipolarizing differences, of distinguishing between what is truth and what is falsehood. It calls for a disintegration of the patriarchal power base, of the defining of differences as inherently antagonistic to human welfare only because one particular position is being favored over another. Lesbian sadomasochists along with many other lesbians want a community where differences are accepted as part of normal life, where otherness is allowed, where the self can exist along with some common identity. They reject the subject position of the dominant discourse and lesbian feminist discourses, the subject as a unified creature, which as a definition has maintained hierarchical distinctions between differences.

This is a call for a less defined community, for politics which strive at integration into the dominant culture. The point is not to give up differences but to refuse to give them a meaning which serves to promote
one subject position at the expense of repressing another. This vision of a community based on an acceptance of differences, culturally and sexually, is of course a vision which is more difficult to achieve because it is much broader based than the current strategy of withdrawal. It speaks of need to expand politics so as to have them operate beyond the lesbian community. In the long run, however, political gains may be more attainable as such politics are based on goodwill and willingness to accept others rather than hostility and rejection of the outside society.

These are political suggestions which are increasingly being explored by lesbian scholars exploring lesbian politics in relation to the reality of diversity in the lesbian community (see Golden, 1987; Loulan, 1990; Nichols, 1987; Phelan, 1989; Zita 1990). They are claiming that only on the principle of accepting diversity can lesbians truly begin to identify those issues that are relevant for their growth and well-being and those that are not.

The changes that have occurred in the lesbian community indicating there are now among lesbian
feminists those committed to establishing new politics could implicate some influence of the knowledge of lesbian sadomasochists in lesbian feminist circles. Yet, in terms of community attitudes, sadomasochism still carries much emotional and political intensity as is evident in the frequent conflicts between lesbian sadomasochists and those who oppose them at various community gatherings and functions.

Whether present ideas and attitudes toward lesbian sadomasochism will change in favor of lesbian sadomasochists is much a matter of whether lesbian sadomasochists will be allowed to speak and be taken seriously to begin with. The issue of lesbian sadomasochism is a very difficult one in the context of community, precisely because so many lesbians have been sexually abused and victimized by men. They have looked for a safe haven from these experiences in the lesbian community. Knowing about sadomasochism from the perspective of lesbian sadomasochists may help women to understand sadomasochism as lesbian sadomasochists do.

A general community acceptance of lesbian sadomasochism as simply a way of life will be difficult
to come by, given the generality of sexual abuse experiences among lesbians. The presence of academic explorations, where an effort is made to explore sadomasochism without a preset moral agenda, is nevertheless an important change and has significance in regard to how lesbians in the future will evaluate and think about their sexuality in the context of lesbian feminist discourse.
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