

**“He can cane me to orgasm, or he can cane me to hysterical tears”:**

**The Co-Construction of BDSM Experience**

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He asks how it can be possible to actually punish me if I can take and enjoy pain at the level they've just given me [...] and no other question could show me so clearly that he just doesn't get it. Look, it's punishment if Master wants it to punish me. And it's pleasure if he wants me to enjoy it. He can cane me to an orgasm, or he can cane me - with the same cane mind you - to hysterical tears - goodBadgirl.

The description above contains an insight that many kinksters - including both people who participated in my research and people with whom I have simply had personal conversations - would share. Namely, that the reactions and intentions of another person can have a profound impact on your own experience of something. I think it likely that this is true far beyond the sphere of kink activity, but the emphasis of most discourse about experience seems to be on it as individualised, essentially separated from that of others, even as wholly un-shareable. The accounts of kink experience shared by my research participants challenge these assumptions, and the nature of the activities which lead to those accounts offer a unique site of deliberately created, complementary and relational encounters through which the co-construction of experience can be examined.

'Kink' is an umbrella term that is linguistically similar to 'religion' in that it is a multivalent term which potentially denotes a diverse range of concepts, phenomena, artefacts, communities and behaviours. It also shares with religion the difficulty of identifying which of these elements might be considered most important by any given individual using the term, along with the regrettably common assumption that everyone using it means exactly what the listener considers it to mean. Jonathan Z. Smith recommends that, in the case of religion, scholars should avoid attempts to seek “‘that without which' religion would not be religion” (1982, p. 5) and should consider instead a polythetic taxonomy of different possible configurations of characteristics. This seems a useful approach to many of the complex and fluid concepts with which the various disciplines of the humanities deal, and certainly it works well for the concept of kink. My research and experience give me the beginning of a list of characteristics which might

contribute to a taxonomy of kink and enables me to offer this brief description of kink practice in the context of my research. Kink is:

a collection of activities that involve the conscious and consensual use of pain, perceptions about pain, sensation, emotion, restraint, power, perceptions about power or any combination of these, for psychological, emotional and/or sensory pleasure.

The focus on sensation and power exchange in this list reflects the fact that most among my research participants were engaging in practices that might be labelled BDSM (Bondage, Domination, Submission and Masochism). However, the broader term 'kink' was the preference of most of my participants, both as a general category label and name for the subculture they were members of, and as a description of their personal areas of interest within the vast array of possible kink activity - their portfolio of personal kinks. My intention is to focus largely on the creation of physical sensation by one person for another, as the type of experience most amenable to the unpicking of (some of) its component parts, but this should not be taken as an indicator that all kink involves sado-masochistic activity.

Kink activities which may create pain include beating, electrical shocks, cutting, piercing with needles, restricting movement and putting clamps on various sensitive body parts. The terms 'top' and 'bottom' are not generally considered to incorporate a presumption of power exchange and so are preferable for general description than the more widely known terms Dominant and submissive,<sup>1</sup> although these latter are more likely to be used to indicate personal kink identity. In most types of physical kink a sensation of some kind is deliberately created by the top applying their attention, and tools, to the body of the bottom. Through this process of sensation creation - commonly called play - a situation is created in which there is of necessity a crossing - or touching of - "boundaries of the self that one does not allow to be crossed mundanely" (Bauer, 2014, p. 111). In other words, it is a situation of deep intimacy that requires the palpable presence of another person. Many descriptions of such situations were shared with me during the course of my research. They were shared primarily through verbal conversation, although some participants also offered me access to material they had written. These kinds of linguistic materials are at the heart of most research into experience which leads me to the following observation: experience is not language and language is not experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Common convention within the kink community is to indicate the power exchange in relationships described by these terms by capitalizing Dominant and not submissive.

I make this statement in the full realisation that language plays a significant part in what we understand about our own experiences, how we explain them to ourselves and share our understanding with others. But, that notwithstanding, language remains the interpretation of the experience, not the experience itself. Awareness of this is common, with most people likely to have had occasion to recognise the inadequacy of available words to do justice to what they wish to share. But a tendency to forget about those difficulties, or at least to leave them out of the discourse surrounding experience, is also common. For scholars studying experience, language is the primary tool in the box for finding out about experiences had by another person: in order to find out what can be shared about what that experience was like for that person the starting point is to ask them about it. If, as is often the case, responses to such questioning include references to not being able to do justice to the reality, that may well be taken as a claim to fundamental ineffability. In turn this, for some, is understood as an attempt to place that particular category of experience beyond critique or discussion. But many people who offer such caveats do then go on to do their best to describe their experience as fully as they can; the warning that language does not do justice to the reality is thus part of the description, rather than a way to avoid further discussion.

The process of experiencing is a “quasi-chaos” (James, 2003, p. 33), incorporating many various and constantly changing elements. To identify something that may be labelled ‘An Experience’ of a particular kind is therefore a process of picking through the complex mesh of these elements to arrive at a perception of the whole which satisfies. A request to share this ‘Experience’ with a researcher only adds to that complication, particularly if the researcher has already labelled the particular category of experience in which they are interested - a label of ‘religious experience,’ or even ‘religious-type’ experience’ - in the discussions I sought to have would have prevented many of my research participants considering their own experiences relevant, because of their assumptions about what I must mean by such a term. The final descriptive account shared with the researcher is only the last point in “a train of sensations, emotions, decisions, movements, expectations, etc., ending in the present, and the first term of a series of ‘inner’ operations, extending into the future” (James, 2003, p. 7). Any coherent linguistic account is constructed later than the events it describes, and will struggle to do justice to the “non-rational and vaguer aspects” (Blum, 2012, p. 209) present in that initial quasi-chaos. This is so because both the world and the self within the world are experienced “in wordless ways before we come to language our experience” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p. 364). The challenge for the researcher is thus to recognise the complex whole of experience, including any non-rational elements, in a way which is both intelligible and which contributes to the research process. The challenge inherent in

'linguaging' experience is in finding adequate words to achieve a "descriptive rendering of the dynamic phenomenon" (p. 363), which creates a sense of having done justice to the phenomenon itself, and also to the experiencers knowledge of it. What is experientially felt and known is challenging to render into words because "language is not experience in the first place" (p. 364).

None of this is intended as a claim for an essential ineffability of experience. Language may be incomplete (or even fundamentally inadequate) to describe some elements of experience, but still experiences are described, and the descriptions are not wholly unintelligible. Listeners draw upon personal experiential knowledge of things which seem comparable, on other accounts of similar experiences and the ways they were described, on different experiences that have created what the listener judges a comparable internal state to that created by the experience being shared with them. The whole person, embedded in a context which includes all of their experiences to date in all their fluidity and complexity, is involved in interpreting what is communicated to them in the partial, linguistic description of another person's experience.

The way in which the tool of language functions in such contexts creates a tendency to focus on the single person speaking and what they have to tell us about their experience; the complexity of the task means this is not surprising but that does not mean it is not noteworthy. The words offered are collected by the researcher who then uses different words to drill into the speakers account of their experience according to a preferred methodology that has been chosen (hopefully reflexively) for the purpose of focussing on and interpreting the linguistic choices made by the speaker in pursuit of adequately expressing their experience. Specific components which contributed to the whole can be identified and explored in this way; researchers may be concerned with looking for common elements across a range of accounts or may focus in depth on one specific factor depending on the specific research concerns. But the interweaving of disparate strands to make the original account will always be unique to the individual giving it because it is created by the entire person, embodied and embedded in their complex, personal contexts. The linguistic interpretations applied by researchers and the readers of their research are equally subject to such contextual idiosyncrasies.

Overall then, talking about experience in a careful analytic way tends to feed the impression that experience is in large part private and interior to the individual and so essentially inaccessible and un-shareable. This may not be the intention, but it is commonly the effect. The imperfections of language as a tool are often explicitly recognised but, once that is done there is an understandable temptation to shift the focus to what it can do without worrying about what might be overlooked as a result of its imperfections and the assumptions which underpin its use. And, since language is not

experience and experience is not language, it seems likely that eliding such considerations means there will be real and important elements of experience missing.

In what follows I am seeking to apply the approach set out by Blum as a challenge to the “dominant epistemological perspective” (Blum, 2012, p. 202) of experience being wholly defined and bounded by cognitive function and expectation. He argues that understanding experience as created from received sensory input, together with the mental filtering of this input, has led to a form of linguistic empiricism, with the corresponding view that reality can only be encountered via the mediation of language. This creates a “double-reduction” (p. 204), in which experience is characterised as an essentially cognitive process, and concepts are defined and bounded by language – a position which renders an experience that is beyond articulation a logical impossibility and leads to the assumption that to describe something as ineffable can only be an attempt to prevent its discussion. Blum correctly argues that this ascription of a protective function to the term ineffability makes no sense. The term has been used across many and diverse contexts, and in times and places with no need for such apologetic protection. It is therefore more reasonable to accept that the term functions as a signal of experiential aspects that are not linguistic in nature. This possibility is evident in situations where people report an awareness of the gap between the experience they had and their ability to describe it in a way that seems adequate and meaningful; a common observation in accounts of intense kink experience. Recognising this does not make assumptions about the existence of the supernatural; it does not make “ontological claims about the nature of existence or the metaphysical status of the self” (p. 217) and it does not reject or avoid naturalistic explanations for qualitatively ineffable experiences. Instead, it allows that experience consists of both linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions.

This is an application of James' radical empiricism: “to be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, not exclude from them any element that is directly experienced” (2003, p. 22). Many of the things which are directly experienced may be intangible, but they must be included if the most complete understanding of the experience is to be achieved. These “non-rational and vaguer aspects” (Blum, 2012, p. 209) in general terms include things like emotion, physical sensation and intuition. When describing kink experiences specific references to non-rational or intangible things include: the exchange or sharing of energy; the presence or personhood of other participants in the scene; exchange, transfer or transformation of power; psychological ‘edges’; paradoxical emotion and/or contradictory sensations like “beautiful, agonising pain” or feeling both “totally vulnerable and absolutely protected” (goodBadgirl).

One such dimension, and the one on which I intend to focus here is the presence and involvement of others in the shaping of the experiences themselves. What follows is a consideration of the nature of profound, transformative experience created through shared interactions in the context of kink. The intention is to reject the assumption that a given individual's unique experience is fundamentally isolated from that of everyone else. I argue that it is possible to have an experience that is non-ordinary, overwhelming and beyond the descriptive power of language to adequately capture and for that experience to be simultaneously mutual, reciprocal and complementary. I am concerned with experiences which are not only not solitary, but which cannot be solitary. To present them as contained within a single individual would be to misunderstand a foundational element of the experience. These are experiences in which apparently different, even contradictory, components of the whole - sensation, emotion, motivation - mesh together and feed each other to co-construct an utterly shared experience of other-where, an as-if reality within which particular and (perhaps) paradoxical qualities of experience and relationship can be explored before a safe return to the quotidian world. I want to start examining this with the common experience of pain.

Elaine Scarry, in her influential book *The Body in Pain* (1985), presents pain as uniquely destructive of language. It is, she says, inexpressible and thus must be wholly contained within the individual. This inexpressibility is so complete that, in Scarry's view, to have pain is to have certainty, while to hear about it is to have doubt. She argues that pain actually destroys language, reducing human communication to pre-lingual noises such as screams. If the pain is prolonged sufficiently (itself a relative requirement) then it 'unmakes' our world, stripping away everything we previously knew about the world beyond our own skin and replacing it with itself. This is a profoundly isolating concept. Anyone who has attempted to describe the precise nature of their pain to a doctor seems likely to agree that pain does defy precise description. This is as true of the grinding ache of chronic pain as it is of the sharp immediacy of torture. But that difficulty is not a quality unique to the sensation of pain; pleasure is equally nebulous when one tries to capture it. It is also less likely to carry the same acutely felt need to capture in words, which perhaps results in its ambiguity being overlooked in common discourse. However, an inability to adequately capture in words is in no way synonymous with an inability to share. The pre-lingual screams to which Scarry refers communicate pain quite effectively, and a sadistic top, creating pain consensually for a willing bottom, is aware of a potentially vast difference between one scream and another. Such empathetic knowledge is essential for a mutually pleasurable sado-masochistic encounter. When necessary, the kink community uses its own shorthand, such as 'good/bad pain' to discuss the nature of different forms of pain outside the play space. Such language carries an implicit recognition of much that

cannot be captured in words and so, within the play-space itself, much communication is done in non-verbal, somatic ways. Ultimately pain related kink relies on one party being able to recognise and respond to the sensations they create in another to be successful; the nature and experience of those sensations must therefore be communicable.

People who seek out desired pain engage in an intense experience that is consensually crafted for them, in relationship with another person seeking to satisfy their distinct but complementary desire to give such pain; the experiences which result are deeply intimate and thus the very opposite of isolated. Not least because, in order to successfully engage in a mutually satisfying scene, a great deal of self-knowledge must be shared in advance, but also because through their practice the participants are exploring both themselves and each other. Put simply, the recipient of any deliberately created pain is also the focal point of a concentrated, specialised attention of which neither party can help but be aware. Building on Newmahr's observation that rape "which many of us would shudder to consider 'intimacy' is so heinous precisely because it is intimate" (Newmahr, 2011, p. 176), I suggest that one of the things that makes non-consensual torture so terrible is precisely that it is not isolating. That when the world is unmade, and language stripped away from the torture victim it is not replaced by a void, but by another person. The intimate and unescapable connection they forge is made without consent and without care for the new shapes being carved into the torture victim's sense of self in their world. One of those shapes is that of the torturer - forcing a place in the elements from which the subject of their attention constructs their self. Intimacy is not inherently desirable, or constitutive of pleasant experiences: a forced intimacy is still an intimacy, one which turns the pleasures to be found in consensual connection into trauma. At the heart of the horror in such experience is the presence of an unwanted intruder - I imagine a victim of torture wants nothing so much as to be left alone, which would be an odd sentiment if the deliberate creation of pain were indeed inherently isolating for its recipient. Such an experience cannot be wholly isolating, because it is not created in isolation from another human being, but rather it is deliberately co-constructed. In the case of torture that co-construction is forced, but in other situations all parties are actively and consensually involved in the process.

Achieving intimacy is a process of creating access to what would be inaccessible to most people in most circumstances (Newmahr, 2011). It is an opening up of the self to an other and it is therefore impossible to experience without the real, active presence of that other. Whether the intimacy is terrible or wonderful, or both, is the result of the relationship that is being performed by and inscribed on the bodies of those people, in that relationship, in that moment. Each party to that relationship brings to the co-construction of the shared moment their own package of somatic, cognitive, affective and

contextual elements which contribute both to the moment itself and its interpretation afterwards. These things, and the ways in which they combine are unique to the individual as they arrive in the shared moment and they form an integral part of the single shared experience - that may sound contradictory, but that contradiction is a product of the tendency of language to isolate experience in the individual. It is important to hold both sides of that apparent contradiction to be true in order to understand the kinds of experience I am discussing here. That is one experience which is crafted through the interweaving of separate individual experiences to create a shared whole. To examine in more depth how this kind of experience can occur I would like to stay with deliberately created pain, which may destroy language while also forging connections, but I would like to shift from non-consensual torture to consensual kink.

Past experience suggests that, unless someone already knows something about both kink and contemporary approaches to religious studies, my connecting of kink with religious practice and experience may cause confusion. Even people familiar with forms of asceticism and the connection between such physical practices and particular forms of religious experience are often surprised by the knowledge that kink practice is not only capable of creating profound, transformational and/or transcendent experiences, but that such experiences of altered consciousness are not really that unusual. What is unusual, in comparison to most of what seems to be said about this kind of experience in other contexts, is that people achieving altered consciousness through kink consider their experience shared by the person (or people) with whom they created it. Indeed, they are more than shared - they are mutual, relational and complementary. In sum they are co-constructed. Kink play, whether with one partner or several at a time, cannot be an isolated and wholly interior experience because it relies upon a continual and reciprocal loop of action, response to action and response to the response, which build up and merge together to alter consciousness. Successfully created play-space is commonly described with terms like a bubble, or a magic circle, denoting a space distinct from the everyday - an alternative as-if reality within which different qualities of experience, relationship, self and other can be explored. Within this other-where different levels of alteration and immersion can be achieved but, at least among my research participants, wherever one person involved in shaping the space goes the other goes too. Participant Ben succinctly captured the intimacy and reciprocity of what occurs within play-space by characterising it as “a giving and receiving of joy.”

Giving and receiving is a vital aspect to understanding what happens in kink, as it is the way in which the experience is co-constructed and shared. That players do not have identical physical experiences of the shared scene is probably obvious, but for clarity I would like to propose the imaginary scenario that you, my reader, are about to



engage in a flogging scene with me and to then consider some of the elements that would contribute to our individual experiences: I don't top so you would be the one swinging the flogger, meaning that you would have the weight of it in your hand, you would feel the shifts in weight as you lift and swing it, and the brief catch of weightlessness as the falls strike my flesh; you would also have whatever feelings are created in you by knowing you are about to make violent contact with another human being, you are going to mark my skin and, possibly, make me cry out in pain and shock. Those feelings may well be made more complex by the knowledge of my consent and that I have an active wish to feel the sensations that you are going to create for me. I, on the other hand, would have the exposure and anticipation of waiting for the first blow to fall, the thud of the main impact and the flicking sting of any falls which strike beyond the main bundle, the shock of breath when the falls connect and a momentary regathering before the next blow falls. I would also have a complex intermingling of physical sensation that I cannot easily categorise as either pain or pleasure. Looked at individually these are very different experiences. But, remembering the effect of language and linguistic description on something that is not in itself linguistic allows the recognition that breaking an experience into its different components is almost inevitably going to isolate your experience from mine, even in a situation created by one of us doing something to the other one. Moving beyond identifying these disparate components to consider their place in the whole, shared experience allows for the recognition that my experience will feed yours and yours will feed mine as the scene unfolds. It reveals the fundamental point that you cannot feel whatever it is throwing multiple strands of leather at my unprotected flesh makes you feel if I am not there to receive it. Practicing your aim on a cushion might be a useful way to develop your skills as a wielder of floggers, but it is not a satisfying experience in the way that play with another person can be; my research participant Piers explained that if he just wants to practice his technique "I'll use an inanimate object," because playing with the focus solely on himself (as he would be if simply practicing) is a waste that "makes the person being struck completely meaningless, and they're not."

In other words, the lack of response to an action performed in order to create a response robs that action of an important, if unmeasurable, quality; this is a useful absence when practicing a skill but it would remove a vital element of play for most kinksters. It is interesting to note that the mere presence of another person, whether as a top or as a bottom, is not sufficient to create a successful, relational scene. Damien described the essential pleasure of play as being in both "the sense that I enjoy giving somebody something else [and] enjoy[ing] what they give in return." This means that if the bottom is "literally laid there like a plank," giving him no reactions to which he can respond, he is not only unsure about whether or not they are getting what they need from

the scene but his own satisfaction in it is impaired. All participants need to understand this to make the connection that the play-space draws on because this space is made “absolutely together, unequivocally. Regardless of the roles being taken” (Griff). Mistress Marina agrees that “the two of you need to make it together. I think if you've got someone with you that's not reading off the same page you can't go there” - the space is not created, and the scene is ultimately unsuccessful. For pussikin the top and bottom form two parts of a whole “like a hook and eye, I've got one part, and it either fits with a partner or it doesn't.” She further suggests that without both parts “you can have kinky sex but you can't have BDSM”; goodBadgirl goes further, implying a lack of the right reciprocal awareness can tip the experience into abuse rather than kink. In describing a session she “endured,” in which her Master had given her to another top to play with, goodBadgirl explained that it matters to her Master “what I feel and how I feel it,” because he wants to “hear, feel and see my experiences of the pain [he] chooses to give me [...] he is in that place of pain with me.” By contrast the top to whom he had temporarily given her:

had no interest in my reactions or my experience of what he was doing, he didn't want anything from me other than a living body to do unpleasant things to, with none of the awareness or interaction that might render those unpleasant things eventually pleasurable and without either skill or awareness of the lack of skill in doing any of those things [...] my reactions were a matter of indifference to him [...] he didn't care whether he was causing me pleasure, distress or total indifference. I was no part of the equation.

She used terms like “brutal” and “abusive” to describe this scene, even though she also observed that in terms of the level and intensity of pain created by this “psycho-man” top “it was nothing compared to what [my Master] does. Nothing at all.”

A play-space is a bubble of alternate, as-if reality, marked out from the usual constant flow of experiencing by alterations in perception of space, time, sensation, self, other and the inter-relations of all of these. It is thus, even at its least immersive level, a space in which consciousness is altered. The potential for kink activity to create the kind of “white hot” (Taylor, 2003, p. 29) experiences of altered consciousness which stand out from ordinary play in much the same way a mystical encounter with divinity might be said to stand out from ordinary prayer is well recognised within the kink Scene. It is often referred to as ‘spacing’ or achieving sub- or Dom-space and experiences of it are variously described in terms of transcending the constraints of the quotidian world (Beckmann, 2013; Kraemer, 2014), as a loss of self or aspects of self (Kaldera, 2006;

MacKendrick, 1999), or as a sense of more holistic, fully integrated self (Easton & Hardy, 2004; Pita, 2004). Spacing is usually considered a peak experience, rather than a routine or guaranteed aspect of any session, neither is it usually an intended or sought after outcome of any given scene. Nonetheless it is this kind of kink experience which has formed the core of the limited body of work that exists on kink in relation to religion. For example, Taylor and Ussher's (2001) study, identified "transcendence" as one of the categories through which some practitioners might understand their practice. They defined this category as practice which creates experiences of a "heightened state of consciousness, or as in some way making [practitioners] more astute, more enlightened or more alive" (p. 305). These are effects which seem, according to my own research, to be a significant motivating factor for all kink practice.

Beckmann (2009) used broadly Christian concepts of mysticism to identify common characteristics of "transcendental states" which she then used to construct a questionnaire for kink practitioners, investigating experiences she had predetermined to be unusual. Her list of characteristic features includes difficulty explaining an experience in words, changes in the way the body is perceived or reacts to stimuli, a loss or change of the sense of time, and a different quality of memory. Her results are interesting in that firstly the identified characteristics are elements of any successful play-space, and thus not in themselves evidence of the peak states of transcendence she appeared to want to investigate. It is also worth noting that she concluded "transcendental states" to be available only to the bottom, the recipient of sensation, because of the different nature of the roles taken in play. This understanding isolates the players from one another in her perspective on their play, without recognition of the ways the different but complementary performances of players mesh together to create both play-space and the potential for further spacing within it. If I were to space during the hypothetical flogging scene considered earlier then my sensory perception would shift, my interpretation of what is pain and what is pleasure would alter and my understanding of what and where I am would change. I might lose my ability to speak or to move easily or precisely and cognition of the kind I might translate clearly into language useful for a researcher will not be any part of my experience.

For poppy sub-space is "like the world isn't there anymore, it's like this big cloud, and I'm in the middle of it"; Kaz said that "when I'm in that state [...] I don't really feel anything, to be truthful. I've got no thoughts at that point" and Twisted described it as "like being drunk, but just drunk on happiness." Rocks, who as a switch can access both sides of sub-space, concludes that "actually drunk is probably the wrong thing, slightly stoned is closer. It's that feeling that things are happening around you but not really comprehending why or what they are." These things wouldn't happen to you during our

flogging scene, because they must not if you as a top are taking your responsibility for my state seriously. But there is a comparable, and usually complementary, state to sub-space for tops. For Damien this is “not out of body. It's not me looking down upon it, or me travelling beside myself and seeing it. I'm still in charge but it's just effortless. I'm not having to put any effort into it, it's just happening.” Stoney-face called this “that definite top-space extension of myself thing” in which what starts out as a tool he is using, such as a cane, becomes “just part of your arm.” He agrees with Damien that in such moments “you don't have to think any more, it just seems to occur.” Javelin says that this state is “so totally in the here and now [that] I'm achieving what Buddhist monks spent years trying to achieve. I'm in the here and now, I'm focused, time tends to be gone [...] I'm just in the moment.”

Clearly each person chooses their own terms to describe the specific qualities of their spacing experiences although there is a shared vocabulary within the kink scene - like the term ‘spacing’ itself - which relies on some overlap of experience to inform a listener’s understanding. There is also a recognition of elements which may be assumed to be present - such as the assumption that ‘spacing’ includes feeling out of one’s body - and these are often explicitly challenged or rejected as part of arriving at an acceptable description. All these elements vary from person to person, and even from scene to scene, but what does appear to be generally agreed upon is that these altered states can only happen because different, complementary shifts have occurred in the consciousness of both parties. Using our hypothetical flogging scene as an illustration we could say that I can only achieve the altered state of sub-space if you have achieved the altered state of top-space. As my senses have altered and my knowledge of my self and the world around me diminished or diffused yours have grown more acute; you have taken hold of whatever I have released so that your consciousness has altered in a different key to mine, but they harmonise perfectly and we both hear that harmony. As Aey put it, we may not be in precisely the same state but “we danced the same dance together.” This same complementarity is true of other characteristics on Beckmann’s list; changes in the way the body is perceived for a top may take the form of a sense of union with the implement they wield, of being able to create a reaction in the bottom without conscious effort, of the senses being extended into the space and the objects within it. For the bottom the body may be lost entirely, or it might become all that exists. But for both knowledge of the other, their presence in that space and the connection between them, remains constant.

The space in which BDSM play happens is obviously a physical area chosen for play, but it is also a different space, distinct from everyday reality. That space is created by the play itself and the relationships constructed through that play. Play-space does not spring into being from the moment people decide to play together, it is not simply

summoned into existence by entering a room designated and equipped for play and it incorporates more elements than physical sensations such as pain. Context also contributes: first play is discussed and anticipated. Negotiation of activities of mutual interest and discussion of limits may be required (if players are new to one another) and such conversation helps to signal the start of a shift from one kind of space to another. For established or lifestyle players that might be more directly signalled with a form of words, or an activity like putting a play-collar onto the person who will be bottoming. There are also the contributions of anticipation, expectation, social attitudes to such play and personal feelings about them. All of this is relational, shared and responsive and contributes to the processes through which the space is ultimately “practiced into existence” (Lindquist, 2005, p. 158). The top acts in a way that impacts upon the bottom (the recipient of the top’s attentions) - by, for example swinging that flogger we discussed earlier. The bottom reacts to that action, and their response feeds the next actions of the top creating a continual loop. It is not a mechanical process, where the simple act itself creates a new space, but a constant process of communication and adjustment. As Mistress Marina said, “you build it up. It's almost like a vortex. You're building it up as you're going along.” Aey says that this “doesn't consciously happen [...] because you're so deeply focussed it tends to happen naturally” while Cee suggests that it begins as a conscious process but changes as the feedback loop is formed so that “to start off, yes, I'm very conscious of what I am, what I'm doing. But as it goes on, if you're getting really good feedback with that person and you're connecting you are actually completely oblivious to what you're wearing, what you're doing. Everything just seems to naturally flow... what we started off last night doing, and what we ended up doing were two completely different things, because I feed on that person.” This is not a mechanical process; it is not simply the act of flogging or spanking or bondage which creates it, as goodBadgirl’s account of an unsuccessful scene demonstrated. Michael described play with people who are not his sub, Molly, as being a “stunt arm” for that person, rather than a Dom because “that loop doesn't exist [...] It's far more technical. I'm still aware, I'm still connected, and I'm still paying attention. I'm still doing those things but I am removed. I am not in that moment of that situation in the same way [pause] that I am when we do our thing.”

Play both creates and requires a bond between the players, so that as people play together more often they can also play more intensely and enter into their shared world more completely. The contract of trust, in which a bottom trusts a top not to violate their agreed limits and to stop if a stop signal is given, and the top trusts the bottom to communicate their experience as it unfolds, enables both parties to enter safely into a world where one has real, tangible power over the other and to create together the

experience of exploring what it means to have, to use and to feel such power. The shift from the mechanical “stunt-arm” kind of play to what is available when the power-exchange is felt to be real was explained by goodBadgirl in these terms: “I have always thought [pause] that one of the unique things about kink [...] is that you need another person who fits you for it to really work. I mean, you have to click with someone for it to work at all - but that’s true even for vanilla sex really - but kink can go beyond that click point. To use a bit of a stereotyped analogy if finding a person you click with is like finding a key that fits a lock then [with kink] there is a possibility to turn the key and to enter and explore whatever space was being kept secure by the lock.” The process of passing that “click point” and forming the play-space which allows that exploration of what lies beyond is initiated by the actions of the top performed upon the bottom meaning the bottom is the heart of the space, but it is the connection and interactions of the players that forms and maintains it, and once it is created top and bottom are there together. Ben describes it as being like a good paella: “the prawn, the chicken, the saffron, the cloves... each have to lose a little bit of themselves and absorb a little bit of the others and so it makes a fantastic dish. [It’s] not only mixing ingredients together, each ingredient willingly loses a bit of themselves and gains the other.”

Such a merging does not - I would go so far as to say it cannot - result in isolated individuals floating alone in their separate, impermeable bubbles of personal interior experience. To focus only on the separate elements is to miss one of the things that makes this kind of experience so powerful and potentially transformative. It is vital to remember that, as I began by observing, experience is not language. If a researcher were to ask me about the hypothetical flogging scene we have considered throughout this paper and they did so in terms which focus solely on the individual experiences of my body then they deny me the opportunity to say, or perhaps to be heard saying, that part of whatever it was I experienced was you. The lacuna created by this remains even if the incompleteness of description, the subjectivity and idiosyncrasy of memory and the inadequacy of language to capture the nuance and complexity of the pleasure-pain I felt, fought and enjoyed in the other-where of sub-space is explicitly acknowledged. My research participants referred again and again, in different ways, to the deep connection and intimacy forged and explored through their play. They did so without my asking them specifically about it and it was important enough for them to include it as they attempted to describe such things as a personal understanding of pleasure and pain. It seems to me then quite likely that many other pre-analysis accounts of kink experience make such references, but they have not been heard or understood because of the ways in which experience has been conceived as an academic concept. Further, I do not believe that kink experiences are unique in this vital component of the real, active presence of

other(s); recognising this and exploring the different possible forms and processes of co-construction could add a great deal to understanding profound, transformative experiences. The challenge is to find ways to engage with it and it is my hope that, because co-construction is so overt and conscious in the context of kink, my work and the reflections of my research participants on their experiences can offer a starting point for other explorations of experience as mutual, shared and co-constructed.

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