

# S/M (Sadomasochistic) Interactions in Semi-Public Settings

Charles Moser, PhD, MD

Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality

**ABSTRACT.** An organized semi-public event for the exhibition of S/M (sadomasochistic) behavior is known as a “party” by the participants. Using a retrospective analysis of the author’s experiences over the last 25 years, a description of these parties is presented. The present paper explores the structure, function, and purpose of these parties. The S/M behavior, sexual interactions, rules of etiquette, and structure of the party are summarized. The lack of genitally focused orgasm-seeking behavior at the party is discussed at length. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com]*

The present paper is a description of the social construct called a “party” among S/M (sadomasochistic) practitioners. These social events allow S/M practitioners to display their personal style of S/M behavior in a semi-public setting. S/M parties also serve a social function, facilitating individuals with similar interests to meet for both S/M and non-S/M interactions. S/M parties are similar to other parties, in that they are a place for socializing, refreshments are usually available, and they are an enjoyable way to spend social time.

The present paper is a retrospective analysis of the author’s experiences while involved in other S/M research projects; no prospective design was used. Collection of the data and observations on which the present paper is

---

Charles Moser is Professor of Sexology, Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, San Francisco, CA 94109 (e-mail: docx2@ix.netcom.com). Correspondence may be addressed: 45 Castro Street, #125, San Francisco, CA 94114.

based, occurred over the last 25 years. Over 200 parties have been observed in five metropolitan areas (Los Angeles, New York City, Portland [Oregon], San Francisco, and Seattle). These parties present a perfect environment for observational research, since voyeurism is common and even encouraged.

#### **SIZE, INVITATIONS, ETIQUETTE, AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Parties can be as small as a few people to over 500 participants. Some parties are limited only by the size of the space available, while others aim for a more intimate atmosphere. A fee is usually charged to cover the cost of food, drinks, and safer sex supplies. Parties may be potluck, catered, or a mix of the two. There are individuals who run parties as a source of income; others do so simply to entertain their friends.

Parties may be openly advertised in alternative periodicals, via the Internet, open only to members of a specific group, or by invitation only. Some parties are restricted by role (female dominant/male submissive), gender (women only), or require participation in a specific fantasy theme (*Story of O*). Membership on selected party lists is coveted within the S/M community, several of which are very exclusive. Acceptance by a segment of the S/M community can be judged by invitations to the appropriate parties. Social crises have been precipitated by failure to receive the appropriate invitation.

Parties are held either at an individual's home or at a commercial space rented for the purpose. In several cities there are dedicated S/M party spaces for rent. The rental and maintenance of these spaces often constitutes a successful business enterprise in the S/M community. Commercial spaces (lofts, warehouses, bathhouses) may also be rented and converted into an S/M party space for an evening. It is not unusual for competing parties to be held on the same night at different locations. Conversely, various party groups may combine to host a joint event.

Some individuals provide S/M interactions for a fee outside these parties. These interactions are devoid of overt sexual interaction, thus avoiding violation of the prostitution laws. These individuals often work in a "house" specifically and elaborately furnished for S/M interactions. "Houses" also may be rented by individuals or groups for private S/M interactions or parties. It is important to note that no one is paid for an S/M interaction at the party itself.

The rules of behavior at a party are quite serious and explicitly stated. Some parties require the guests to sign a written set of rules to signify

understanding. Many parties use monitors, also known as dungeon masters/mistresses, to enforce the rules. Arguments over the rules have caused major rifts in groups, which can result in a new group being formed.

The rules relate to an etiquette that is actually quite varied throughout the S/M community, though the issues are constant. Who may talk to whom, who may play (engage in S/M interactions) with whom, who may have sex with whom, how to interact respectfully with other party participants, issues of confidentiality, prohibited S/M or sexual behaviors, and specific interpretation of what constitutes safer sex are the major points of contention. Rules about smoking, cleanup, confidentiality, etc., can also be included. Certain other courtesies, keeping a respectful distance, not distracting from the activity by talking or other disruption, not blocking use of equipment by sitting on it, etc., are also usual.

It would be inappropriate for an individual (either dominant or submissive) to speak to a person who has assumed a submissive role, without permission (formal or informal). Sometimes, this rule is suspended in certain areas (the kitchen) or at certain times during the party, but it is a major concern. Dress and behavior may indicate that someone is in a submissive role and may not be addressed without permission. A common sign is a leash and collar, especially with another person holding the leash. Other signs include lack of eye contact, clear statements that the individual is "in role," and deferring to the dominant partner for any statement directed to the submissive. Some parties become very stilted, because the roles do not allow any personal interaction. Other parties have no limitations, with the norm being some restrictions as part of the etiquette.

Parties have various mixes of singles, couples, or groups attending. The couples that attend a party vary from committed long-standing relationships to a first date. Some couples are comprised of friends, without any romantic or S/M interest. Individuals attend as couples or groups for camaraderie, as a mechanism to meet others, and to share transportation.

Individuals do go to parties alone, occasionally with hopes of meeting a new partner. The usual way singles connect with each other is via a third party making a clear introduction. Even then, it is not uncommon for the dominant to ask if the submissive needs permission to proceed further. It would be a serious violation of protocol, if one assumed that someone would "fall into role" just by requesting/commanding it. It is acceptable and not uncommon for a submissive to approach a dominant and respectfully request the initiation of S/M play.

Rules about alcohol and other drugs are also very specific. Inebriation is never acceptable. Many parties allow wine or beer, but parties that ban all intoxicating substances are also common. Marijuana is common at

private parties; hard liquor occasionally shows up at private parties that have a BYOB policy. On rare occasions harder drugs are seen, mostly the snorting of cocaine or "speed." At least at one time "poppers" were common, but are rarely seen now.

Other issues of etiquette may be party specific, for example, dress requirements or appropriate ways to address other party participants. Some parties attempt to promote a dominance and submission theme. For example, by dictating that submissives may not sit on the furniture, they either stand or sit on the floor. One party group allows any dominant to fondle any submissive without requesting permission. Another party group requires submissives to stay in a certain area unless escorted by a dominant.

### ***THE GENERIC PARTY***

Guests are told when to arrive, and a cutoff or door closing time is usually stated, though special arrangements can be made in advance for late arrivals. Parties that occur in someone's home usually require that the participants change into costumes there. Drawing attention to the host with a stream of uniquely dressed people converging on a nondescript home in a residential neighborhood would be seen as a problem.

The beginning segment of the party is usually similar to non-S/M parties, people milling about talking and being introduced to one another. Flirting occurs and promises are made for later in the evening. It is not uncommon to arrange to play with a "date" before the party. These individuals would arrive separately, but then quickly reconfirm the "date." It is also common to meet a previous play partner at the beginning of the party and make arrangements to play later in the evening, without any involved courtship. Some individuals plan first dates for a party, where others are around to assure safety.

Newcomers may or may not find it easy to play at first. Attractive people that exude a sense that they have done this before have no problem. Either less attractive or tentative newcomers tend not to play immediately. After a few parties, people become familiar with the newcomer, and most people become active. Obviously, if someone was not "clicking" with a particular group, they would not be asked back or they might decline the invitation if offered.

The most common situation is the established couple who arrive at the party together. They are not interested in S/M interactions with others, but do want to exhibit their own S/M style. While the involvement of others in their S/M interactions is minimal to nonexistent, these couples are open to

friendships and socializing with others. While some people may play with multiple partners at a party, it is unusual. This is distinct from individuals who are involved in multi-partnered relationships, in which some or all partners may engage in S/M interactions.

In the beginning segment of the party, individuals might comment on an aspect of another's costume or ask specific questions about the person's S/M preferences. A participant may see something (a bondage technique, toy, or body adornment) and ask about it, but more commonly the references are to other people each might know. Participants may also ask about one's job or variations of the generic "how's the wife and kids?" There are also parties where the roles are in effect from arrival, without any exchange of pleasantries.

People do make business connections, and professional relationships develop, in part due to the knowing that the business person or professional understands and is sympathetic to the S/M lifestyle. Friendships flourish, in part because this aspect of their life does not need to be hidden.

If individuals know each other and have engaged in S/M interactions before, there may be no preliminary communication other than "Wanna play?" With individuals that have just met, a period of discussion is usual. This usually focuses upon limits ("don't hit me in the face"), the style or fantasy to be the focus of the interaction (pain vs. humiliation), and specific requests. The party rules are also reviewed, as well as safewords (code words that signal that the play must slow or end).

As the party ends, people exchange telephone numbers, make dates and thank people for their interactions ("that was an incredibly hot whipping"). Many individuals say they are returning home to continue the behavior. It is often clear that in privacy the behavior will be more overtly sexual.

### ***COSTUMES***

Common costumes include corsets and lingerie for the women and anything black for the men, regardless of role. Black is so common that different-colored costumes can lead to comments for being unusual. Submissive women are more likely to wear other colors, especially red or white. In general, the submissive is more likely to wear a revealing outfit, but exceptions abound. Leather is common; PVC (polyvinyl chloride) and latex are also popular. At some parties formal attire (tuxedo) is permissible, but frowned upon at others. Some parties specify "fetish attire, no street clothes," but without further elaboration. Other parties have very specific and elaborate dress codes. Several groups dictate that a "slave"

must wear a collar at all times. One group has established a code for colored ribbons attached to the collar, to signify specific liberties that may be taken or restrictions to be observed. Cross-dressing occurs at some parties, but is considered inappropriate at others.

Indications of dominance and submission can vary from being obvious to nonexistent. Sometimes the roles are very changeable and the costumes do not indicate the role or are in conflict with the role. Depending on the party, switching roles is common or discouraged. Some individuals will switch roles to play with a particular partner or even just to play at all.

Costumes are often quite revealing, but total nudity is rare. Even when the genitals and/or breasts are devoid of covering, other aspects of the costume are obvious. One woman commonly seen at parties wears only a collar with ankle and wrist cuffs. Parties may have costume themes, though not always a clearly S/M motif (science fiction, middle ages). Costumes may be changed at various times during a party, indicating new roles or just a fashion statement. A participant may arrive in a demure outfit, become involved in S/M play that involves significant nudity and not bother dressing when that interaction is concluded. It is not uncommon to see someone nude next to a fully clothed person engaging in essentially the same behavior. The dominant partner usually does not undress. Not all party participants wear costumes and casual dress is not uncommon.

### *REASONS FOR ATTENDANCE*

There is something counterintuitive about people voluntarily attending a party to see others or to personally engage in what appears to be painful and humiliating behavior. Nevertheless, individuals often look forward to these parties and complaints can be heard if the play is insufficient in either quantity or quality.

As mentioned earlier, voyeurism is encouraged at these parties. Individuals will often remark that they look forward to watching a specific interaction or that a specific interaction was particularly interesting. Some individuals will admit that watching an S/M interaction was sexually exciting or made them desirous of engaging in their own S/M interaction.

Similarly, there is an obvious exhibitionistic motive to many of the S/M interactions. Participants often receive recognition and compliments for their interactions. Many individuals report that having their interaction watched adds to the excitement. Many people gain status within the S/M community for the apparent success of their S/M interactions and relationships.

Clearly individuals are attracted by an atmosphere that encourages

them to be themselves and validates their behavior. An acceptance of S/M identity and role is clearly part of the reason that individuals attend. It is also an atmosphere where individuals can garner support for their behavior. It can be difficult to be involved in S/M, in a culture that holds subjugation as politically reprehensible for both parties; the dominant for invoking it and the submissive for allowing it to happen.

Education is also a reason some people attend. Some parties have a demonstration or lecture as part of the activity. Safety concerns and correct techniques for other behaviors are commonly discussed informally. Activities that vary from the accepted "safe" technique can lead to interruption by the dungeon master/mistress.

Among the party regulars, people become known for various interests. It is not uncommon to hear someone say "I hope Mary is here tonight, I could really use one of her whippings." Couples may incorporate a new partner into a scene to instruct him/her on how to engage safely in a new behavior. Individuals watching may gain new ideas to incorporate in their own S/M play.

#### ***GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION***

Some parties are segregated by gender. It is common for a woman's only party to be composed of heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian-identified women; though parties exist that are clearly only for lesbian-identified women. Attendance at a women's only party would imply that the woman is open to S/M interactions with other women, even if not interested in female-female sexual interactions. Men's parties are usually more orientation specific, meaning that heterosexual men rarely go to all-male parties.

Parties that specify role according to gender (male dominant/female submissive or female dominant/male submissive parties) are common. It would not be surprising for the same couple to attend both styles of parties, adopting the appropriate roles for each party. Parties that specify female dominants may have both male and female submissives present. Parties that specify male dominants rarely include male submissives; if male submissives are included, they are usually cross-dressed. Of note, this follows the pattern among swingers, where female-female interactions are common, but male-male interactions are rare.

Mixed play was once unheard of, but now occurs with some regularity. This involves individuals engaging in S/M interactions, but whose stated sexual orientation would preclude any interaction (a lesbian playing with a gay man). There is usually no suggestion of overt coitus or other orgasm-seeking behavior among these individuals. Parties that mix male-male, female-female, and female-male interactions are common.

There are parties that are nominally open to everyone, all genders and orientations, but do discriminate against heterosexual males. There are various stated reasons for this, but it appears to be an attempt to make female party participants more comfortable, meaning not being approached by heterosexual men. This phenomenon is seen at a minority of parties and is clearly not supported by the larger S/M community, but may be a new trend.

### *SEXUAL ACTIVITY*

Most parties have no rule against sexual activity, but overt coitus or genitally focused orgasm-seeking behavior is rare. Most party spaces do not have mattresses or beds conducive to sexual activities, though slings are often used for this purpose. Clearly parties that are not structured for comfortable sexual activity are less likely to display the behavior.

A few parties promote sexual activities, and on rare occasions the sexual activity takes precedence over the S/M activity. Some S/M participants reported that traditional swing parties (group sex) led to S/M encounters during those parties, but that discussion is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Much of the overt sexual activity at S/M parties is between established couples. It is rare for people who just met to engage in coitus. While this at first seems reasonable, it is contrary to the atmosphere of these parties. Participants see themselves as sexually adventurous and open, many have experience in group sex settings. Several participants were asked what stops them from engaging in coitus. They suggested that it is too personal an activity for such a public setting. When it is pointed out that being stripped naked and whipped in public seems a more personal activity, the response is usually a variation of "that's different." Many do indicate that coitus with a partner in private is the culmination of the evening. Overt sexual activities were more common before the AIDS epidemic, but even then were not usually the focus of the party. Several respondents did suggest that the "messiness" of sex and safer sex restrictions were considerations in not pursuing coitus at S/M parties.

To be clear, fondling of genitals is relatively common. Oral sex may happen, but usually not to orgasm. Genital to genital contact is rare. Reciprocity is also rare, one person gives and one receives with rare reversals. The active person is usually the dominant partner. The submissive partner is more likely to orgasm than the dominant partner. Safer sex is now an ever-present part of the experience.

Some individuals clearly state that coitus or genitally focused stimula-



tion leading to orgasm is not a regular part of their sex or S/M life. It appears to be especially common between female dominant/male submissive couples, that penile-vaginal coitus never takes place. Nevertheless, orgasm-seeking behavior is still present in those relationships. A common aspect of many scenes is controlling the orgasm of the submissive partner. This involves either forbidding orgasm, requiring the dominant's permission to orgasm, or "training" the submissive to orgasm on command.

### *S/M PLAY*

S/M play is quite varied and different parties often have different foci of activity. In general, people engage in a variety of bondage and whipping exhibitions. Usually music is playing in the background, and it is common that the dominants are whipping the submissives in unison to the beat of the music.

The general style is to start in a soft, caressing manner, slowly increasing the frequency and strength of the strokes. There are short breaks to massage and caress, as well as to add unpredictability to the routine. Sometimes there is more caressing than painful-appearing stimulation. Occasionally, welts or other marks are left. Usually, the only objective sign that the submissive has engaged in an S/M scene is some generalized redness, which typically disappears in a few hours.

These sessions can go on literally for hours. They end due to fatigue or a desire to move on. Orgasm is not necessarily an endpoint. Occasionally they end because the participants are not happy with the scene, too hard or too soft for particular tastes. Some interactions are devoid of physical interactions and only exhibit psychological aspects of S/M (kneeling, bowing, following orders, doing menial tasks).

Sometimes the S/M play appears to culminate in a crescendo. The submissive's body stiffens, then relaxes or actually goes limp; pleasurable screams or moans often accompany the event. The partners then hold each other for a few minutes in an intimate and gentle manner. When asked about this event, respondents deny orgasm; the men do not ejaculate. The submissive partner often states that it was a great experience, but often does not have words to explain the phenomenon. Some individuals in the submissive role do orgasm as a result of direct stimulation from the S/M play (usually genitally directed); that is clearly a different phenomenon.

Most parties have a "play space," which is a large area usually filled with a variety of S/M bondage devices. These include a variety of sturdy structures with appropriate places to tie or otherwise attach someone to the device. Some are tables that allow the person to be restrained horizontally.

Individuals may also be tied to crosses (T- or X-shaped) or to hooks set in walls while standing. Leather slings suspended from the ceiling and posts are also used. Some parties have unique objects (motorcycle, gynecological table) which can also be used.

People usually bring their own "toys" (handcuffs, whips, etc.). Once the negotiation is concluded, the participants go to the play space and find an unused bondage device or just an area to engage in S/M play.

### DISCUSSION

The present paper is limited by the observations of only one investigator. Due to the author being male, observation at women's only events was severely limited. The author's reputation and personality may have facilitated entry to some parties and hindered entry to others. It should also be noted that the present paper is the result of observations while the author was involved in other research projects. No observation protocol was created nor was any attempt made to document the findings at the time of the observation.

Discussions with women who regularly attend women's only parties, report no differences in those parties and the mixed or all-male parties discussed here. One female respondent felt that women's only parties were much more sexual than other parties, but not all women's party respondents agreed.

The lack of coitus is both interesting and curious. Naerssen, Dijk, Hoogeveen, Visser and Zessen (1987) report a similar phenomenon among male homosexual S/M practitioners. They note that "the satisfaction was derived from the non-orgastic aspects of the interaction" (p. 117), but that was contrary to how the pornography depicted the interaction.

There clearly have been parties where most participants engage in coitus with multiple partners, but these are the exceptions. The lack of coitus has been touted by some as a virtue, since a stated goal is adherence to the safer sex guidelines. A common fantasy among S/M participants is being sexually used or being given away by their partner to be sexually used. There are indications that this happens, but outside these S/M parties.

The individuals who attend these parties often have experience as swingers or participate in other alternative sexual lifestyles or behaviors. When discussed outside the party atmosphere, most individuals have no explanation for the lack of orgasm-seeking behavior. These participants agree that it violates neither the mores nor the sensibilities of the participants. They do not deny that the behavior is clearly sexual for most of the

participants. They confirm that dates are made at these parties for a later time to include both S/M and overt sexual activity.

It is much more common to be invited to engage in S/M behavior with a relative stranger (though supervised) than to be asked to join someone for a sexual encounter. One can conclude, participants at these parties find sexual fidelity a more pervasive value than S/M fidelity.

It should also be noted that several groups have formed for those that wish to engage in more overt sexual behavior, but most of these eventually evolve into holding the less sexually active party. The author was present at one party, where several couples left en masse to return to one couple's apartment where the S/M was mixed with more overt sexual behavior. It seems reasonable to conclude that the atmosphere of the party is conducive to the exhibition of overt S/M behavior, but not sexual behavior.

In general, hosts of S/M parties do not make the party space conducive to overt sexual activities. The party participants do not request a change in the space to make it more conducive to sexual activities. The individuals that host S/M parties are not the same individuals that host swing (group sex) parties and vice versa. These observations explain the lack of sexual activity, but the underlying reasons are still not clear.

In summary, why there is a lack of overt genital sex play at S/M parties is another unanswered sexological question. These parties serve to allow participants to display their behavior in a non-stigmatized setting. Rules at these parties work to make the setting safe, avoid harassment, and allow participants to show off their particular S/M style. Friendships and a sense of community generally flow out of the party.

#### REFERENCE

- van Naerssen, A.X., van Dijk, M., Hoogeveen, G., Visser, D., & van Zessen, G. (1987) Gay SM in pornography and reality. *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol.13 (2-3), Winter-Spring, 1986-7, 111-9.