

Staci Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy*. 2011.

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An important and recent social trend in the study of sexualities has been the shift in how sadomasochism (SM) is perceived, both in popular culture and in academic research. This includes greater integration in mainstream movies, moving from incidental story lines to the central tenet of the primary Valentine's Day movie release of 2015 – *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Indeed, the sex industry has radically shifted and begun mainstreaming soft kink, such as Ann Summers stocking handcuffs and suit ties inspired by the movie (Evans & Riley, 2014).

Academic research has charted this transition. While research from a medical and legal perspective traditionally viewed SM as an unsafe sexual practice, current research from other disciplines, such as sociological and cultural, is seeking to move beyond this, examining SM using non-pathological frameworks with a focus on the benefits of engaging in SM (e.g. see Langdridge & Barker, 2013).

*Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk and Intimacy* is an exciting sociological contribution to academic explorations of SM, providing an empirically rich window into a rarely seen SM community.

Immersing herself within a mostly heterosexual SM community in the heart of San Francisco, that she calls the Caeden community, Staci Newmahr provides insights into the value of being part of such a community. Newmahr carefully explicates the workings of the community to engage with broader theoretically deep questions related to SM and sexuality.

Newmahr manages to solidify her position in the community, firstly as a researcher-observer then as a researcher-participant. Through this immersion, she is able to document experiences which often seem normal or 'uninteresting for community members' (p. 15), yet would appear exotic when situated within a normative community, such as the norms

involved when engaging in conversations with people or the experience of an alternative headspace when engaging in SM. Furthermore, by engaging with the Caeden community through working at community events, participating at committee meetings and helping to introduce new members into the scene, she negotiated a level of acceptance that could not be achieved otherwise.

The book is divided into three parts, focusing on: the *people* of the SM community; the *play* which occurs between these people; and the *edges* of play, examining the complex roles of pain and intimacy within the community. Part one provides a rich background of the individuals at the heart of the Caeden community. Newmahr shows how they were ‘accustomed to defiance [of hegemonic social norms] long before their entrance into the SM scene’ (p.26) through not fitting in when growing up and were familiar ‘to defining themselves as outsiders’ (p. 38). Her arguments about how the effects of stigma and social exclusion helped form the ethos of the Caeden community are traditionally sociological, as she highlights the shared histories of marginality and new-found sense of belonging once having joined the community.

Part two concentrates on the SM activities, focusing on the social benefits of SM, deconstructing the sexual and non-sexual in a SM context, and highlighting the complex role of gender performance. Newmahr explains how the individuals do not see SM as role play but rather ‘the enactment of fantasy’ (p. 61), such as the fantasy of a master/slave relationship. Strategies are used to keep SM as real as possible, shown interchangeably through the use of power exchange, playing with gender roles, and the reliance on reputations.

In highlighting the components of SM play, Newmahr uses the serious leisure framework as a way of ‘shifting the focus away from the ultimately unhelpful questions about whether SM is or is not deviant sex, and allows us to understand SM as... social behaviour’

(p. 102). She views on SM as a leisure activity akin to other serious leisure pursuits, such as rock climbing, and judges SM as both a risky *and* pleasurable activity. Key components of viewing SM as serious leisure include the trust felt amongst the community, the satisfaction felt in achieving desired outcomes and a chance for individuals to become experts at something. Despite difficulty in separating the sexual and non-sexual aspects of SM due to its subjective nature, Newmahr powerfully articulates the panoply of nuanced understandings amongst the community.

In part three, Newmahr discusses broader theoretical issues that arise from SM play. In tackling the common 'feminist' critiques of SM as violence, she highlights how participants generally have an active opposition to this characterization. Newmahr usefully compares SM against alternative examples of violence and pain, such as boxing or child-birth, to demonstrate the importance of consent and context in discussing how some activities/experiences are 'romanticized and glorified even as its pain is recognized as such' (p.141). Newmahr is keen to inform us that while rules, such as minimizing risks when engaging in SM or ensuring all individuals are fully aware of what they are consenting to, play a defining role in the community, those that play on the boundaries of those rules do so through experience, trust, and maintaining a close level of intimacy.

Newmahr's ethnographic approach enables her to understand SM from an alternative viewpoint, contrary to previous studies on SM which either relied on questionnaire data or pathologized. This is most notable when Newmahr demonstrates herself as both an insider and outsider of the community; while being close enough to hear and understand the narratives of the community, she is able to recognise idiosyncratic moments which highlight the differences between her and the community, (p. 33) – she did not join the community from the margins of society like most members, providing no indications that her upbringing was similar to others in the community. While Newmahr may not share this sense of wanting

to belong which brought the community together, she provides poignant backgrounds of the participants to help us ‘get it’ (p. 44).

While other researchers have carried out ethnographies on kink communities (e.g. Weiss, 2011), the ‘researcher as a participant’ approach provides insights that might be impossible to attain without active engagement in the practices and experiences of SM. On the evidence of Newmahr’s book, this approach can help to broaden the research on SM, and perhaps sexualities research more generally – how richer are the stories heard by somebody who ‘plays’ alongside the research subjects.

*Playing on the Edge* is a welcome addition to the literature in showcasing the nuances of an SM community. While Newmahr is clear to stress that she is telling the story of *one* of many existing SM communities, it is clear how her conclusions can be applied more broadly. Indeed, the book is timely given the current interests in kink fuelled by the popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and other contemporary discourses of sexiness drawing on SM fashions and/or sensibilities. The book promotes a positive framing on SM with a focus on the benefits for its practitioners. More generally, Newmahr presents *Playing on the Edge* in a highly accessible manner and is a pleasure to read.

## **References**

- Evans, A., and Riley, S. (2014) *Technologies of Sexiness: Sex, Identity and Consumer Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press (in press)
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- Weiss, M. (2011). *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.