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Masochism as Escape from Self

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Recent theoretical advances from social psychology, especially self-awareness theory and action identification theory, are here applied to masochism. It is possible to consider mashochism as neither a form of self-destruction nor a derivative of sadism. Instead, masochism may be a means of escaping from high-level awareness of self as a symbolically mediated, temporally extended identity. Such awareness is replaced by focus on the immediate present and on bodily sensations, and sometimes by a low-level awareness of self as an object. Evidence is reviewed indicating that the principal features of masochism (pain, bondage, and humiliation) help accomplish this hypothesized escape from high-level self-awareness. Historical evidence suggests that sexual masochism proliferated when Western culture became highly individualistic. This could mean that cultural emphasis on the autonomous, individual self increased the burdensome pressure of selfhood, leading to greater desires to escape from self masochistically.

KEY WORDS: masochism, self-awareness, sadomasochism, paraphilias

The purpose of this manuscript is to articulate a new theory about masochism based on recent theoretical advances in social psychology, especially action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1986), levels of thinking (Pennebaker, 1985; Pennebaker, Hughes & O'Heeron, 1987; Pennebaker et al., 1986) and self-awareness theory (Carver, 1979; Carver & Sheier, 1981; Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Hull & Levy, 1979; Wicklund, 1975a). Weinberg's (1987) recent excellent review of the sociological literature on masochism cites the need for new theoretical work on the topic, and this paper is one response to that call. Strictly speaking, the present theory is offered as a companion rather than a rival to past views. Past theories have used models and concepts of psychopathology to account for masochistic activity among clinically deviant individuals, whereas the present paper attempts to use models and concepts of social psychology to explain masochism among normal, nonclinical people.

The central idea is that masochism is essentially an attempt to

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escape from self, in the sense of achieving a loss of high-level self-awareness. More precisely, awareness of self as a symbolic, schematic, choosing entity is removed and replaced with a low-level awareness of self as a physical body and locus of immediate sensations, or with a new identity with transformed symbolic meaning. Masochism may therefore be classed with physical exercise, intoxication, meditative techniques, and perhaps even being a fan or spectator, all of which facilitate escape from normal self-awareness. Masochism may differ from these in being an unusually powerful form of escape and in its link to sexual pleasure.

Why would anyone in today's self-seeking society want to escape from self? It is plausible that high-level self-awareness can lead to anxiety and discomfort under some circumstances. The requirements of making decisions under pressure or uncertainty, of taking responsibility for actions that may disappoint or harm others, of maintaining a favorable public and private image of self despite all threats and challenges, and of asserting control over a recalcitrant social environment can become oppressive and stressful and can foster desires to escape. This burden of selfhood can be used to explain and predict the selective appeal of masochism. Additionally, masochism can serve as an effective deterrent to unwanted thoughts and feelings, perhaps especially feelings of guilt, anxiety, or insecurity.

Although the term "masochism" was coined to refer to a pattern of sexual behavior, it has been commonly used in a more generalized sense to describe nonsexual activities as well (e.g., Freud, 1938; see also Cowan, 1982; Franklin, 1987; Panken, 1983; Shainess, 1984). Such generalizations, however, will necessarily be inaccurate if they are based on a false understanding of the sexual behavior, which constitutes the original and prototypical masochism. Discussion of nonsexual masochism must be postponed until a proper understanding of purely sexual masochism is available.

Evidence

At present, *all* sources of empirical evidence concerning masochism have serious flaws. Probably the best approach currently viable is to look for converging patterns among the different sources of evidences, with clear awareness of the limitations and qualifications inherent in each type. The present work draws on survey data (e.g., Spengler, 1977), participant observation studies (e.g., Scott, 1983; Lee, 1983), firsthand reports by nonscientists (e.g., Greene & Greene, 1974), and historical patterns (e.g., Bullough, 1976a; Tannahill, 1980). In addition, I assembled a sample of anonymous letters to a sex-oriented

magazine (*Variations*) reporting masochistic experiences.[1] These letters include some outright fantasies, presumably many real experiences embellished by fantasy, and perhaps some accurate reports of actual experiences. They cannot be regarded as behavioral self-reports, but they probably do embody the scripts and schemas that shape the masochistic imagination. Sampling biases include an editorial policy of deleting references to illegal activities and presumably a tendency for authors to report favorite experiences rather than disappointing or unpleasant ones (thus yielding a bias opposite to that in clinical observations, which overrepresent troubled and unhappy masochists; cf. Reik, 1941).

Once again, there is no source of empirical evidence about masochism that is free of flaws. Confirmation through converging evidence is necessary in order to obtain a reliable picture. Still, it will become apparent that the conclusions suggested by these letters are consistent with the implications of other empirical observations, so one may be cautiously confident that they are valid.

Psychopathology

Masochistic sexual practices have long been regarded as pathological. Freud (1938) described masochism as a perversion. Stekel (1953) linked masochism to cannibalism, criminality, vampirism, mass murder, necrophilia, epilepsy, pederasty, and the like. He actually said that all sadists (and therefore all masochists, who are all sadists in his view) are murderers, and in a temporary lapse of therapeutic fervor he described their company as the "kingdom of Hell" (Vol. II, p. 409). Reik said that all neurotics are masochists (1941, pp. 368-372). In DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), masochism is listed as a psychosexual disorder. In short, clinical perspectives have regarded masochists as seriously disturbed.

Recent empirical studies furnish a surprisingly different picture. Empirical observers describe practicing masochists as remarkably normal, at least with respect to their nonsexual activities. Scott (1983) describes participants in the female-domination subculture groups on the West Coast as "better educated and from higher income and occupational brackets than the average American" (p. 6). Spengler's (1977) sample of German sadomasochists likewise portrays them as upper-class, successful individuals. Janus, Bess & Saltus' (1977) well-

[1]Interrater agreement was .933, based on a subsample of letters. Discrepancies were caused by simple oversights, differential interpretation of scoring rules, and ambiguity of some letters. Brief discussion raised agreement to 100%.

known "sexual profile of men in power" found, to the researchers' extreme surprise, a high quantity of masochistic sexual activity among successful politicians and other powerful figures. Prostitutes catering to such clients administered more sexual domination than any other sexual service or act.

As argued earlier, clinical samples are likely to be the least well adjusted of masochists. Even so, some clinical observers have found masochists to be relatively normal. Cowan (1982) describes her masochistic therapy patients as "successful by social standards: professionally, sexually, emotionally, culturally, in marriage or out. They are frequently individuals of admirable inner strength of character, possessed of strong 'coping egos' and with an ethical sense of individual responsibility" (p. 31). Even Stekel (1953) says that "masochists represent often ideal whole men" (p. 51).

Thus, whether sexual masochism is pathological depends on whether one accepts the sexual practices per se as symptoms. If one defines the fact of masochistic sex as sufficient evidence of pathology, then (obviously) these people are sick. If one does not judge the sexual patterns alone, then the majority of these people appear normal and healthy. It appears that participating in sadomasochistic sex practices is compatible with an otherwise normal, sane, and even successful life.

If masochism does occur among nonclinical populations, then it is an appropriate topic for study by social psychologists. Theories based on clinical populations, although presumably quite valid for clinical populations, may not apply to nonclinical populations, for the appeal of these deviant sexual activities could well differ between normal and mentally ill individuals. The purpose of this paper is to use models and findings of social psychology to delineate a way of understanding masochism without invoking psychopathology or irrationality.

Primacy of Masochism

The prevailing theoretical position since Freud (1938) has been that masochism is derived from sadism. In clinical samples, sadism may perhaps be the main attraction, for it is plausible that the mentally ill are drawn to inflicting cruelty more than to receiving it. Most theorists (e.g., Stekel, 1953) have assumed a strong link between sadism and masochism and have emphasized sadism, because it is presumably the more important and fundamental pattern.

Abundant evidence contradicts this view, at least among normals. In the first place, masochism is apparently far more common than sadism. In the present sample of letters, there were far more written

by submissives (158) than by dominants (64). (An additional few described episodes in which the partners exchanged roles.) An independent sample of writings on lesbian sadomasochism likewise included a predominance of writings from the submissive perspective: 3 dominant and 11 submissive (also 2 in third person and 5 with role exchange) (Samois, 1982). Friday (1980) has devoted much of her journalistic career to collecting sexual fantasies, and she notes that masochistic fantasies outnumber sadistic ones by about four to one (p. 485). Xaviera Hollander, media spokesperson for prostitutes, claims that roughly 90% of the clients who purchase sadomasochistic services preferred the submissive role (Greene & Greene, 1974). Janus, Bess and Saltus (1977) reported that among prostitutes catering to rich and powerful clients in Washington, D.C., requests to be beaten outnumbered requests to inflict beatings about eight to one. Scott (1983) reports that membership in West Coast S&M clubs showed a preponderance of submissives, ranging from double to quadruple. She also records that a common pattern in couples occurs when one partner wants to submit masochistically but the other partner is reluctant to take the dominant role. The reverse pattern, in which one partner wants to dominate but the other is reluctant to submit, apparently is quite rare. The only study that failed to find a hefty majority of submissives was one done by mail in Germany, which found about equal numbers (Spengler, 1977).

Further evidence for the primacy of masochism comes from Kamel's (1983) study of participation in the sadomasochistic subculture among male homosexuals. He found that nearly all participants began as submissives, and some later took on the dominant role. This pattern is confirmed by Lee (1983) for male homosexuals, by Scott (1983) for heterosexuals, and by Califia (1983) for lesbians. Thus, behavioral evidence suggests that masochism comes first, and sadistic or dominant role-taking comes only later if at all. If masochism always precedes sadism, it is implausible to argue that masochism is derived from sadism. Rather, sadism must be the secondary, derivative pattern.

In short, the weight of empirical evidence does not support the argument that masochism is derived from sadism. It seems possible that masochism often occurs without any clear sadistic aspect or motivation. When sadism and masochism are both in evidence, masochism appears to come first. Thus, masochism is more common and more fundamental than sadism, and it deserves primary emphasis in theoretical treatments.

Masochism as Self-Destructiveness

Many attempts to generalize masochism to nonsexual behavior have taken self-destructive intentions as the defining feature of masochism (e.g., Franklin, 1987; Lewin, 1980; Shainess, 1984; Stekel, 1953). In that view, masochism is fundamentally the desire for harm to self. It is quite apparent that masochists seek pain, and pain serves as a biological warning of harm or injury. In experience, pain and injury are highly correlated, so one may ask whether it is the pain or the injury that is the masochist's primary desire.

Recent evidence suggests that masochists do not seek failure, harm, or injury. It appears that masochists persistently seek pain but carefully avoid injury. Rubin (1982) reports that dominant partners in sadomasochistic subcultures compete to be the safest. Other observers report that any person who injures a partner during sadomasochistic sex is avoided by other potential lovers (e.g., Kamel, 1980; Scott, 1983). Scott's (1983) account of West Coast sadomasochists emphasizes that their pursuit of pain was accompanied by extreme care to avoid any sort of harm. Manuals and workshops explaining how to perform sadomasochistic sex have as their main theme instruction in how to inflict pain without causing injury (e.g., Bellwether, 1982; also see Greene & Greene, 1974).

It appears plausible, therefore, that masochism does not involve seeking harm to self.[2] Pain is often sought, but injury is widely and carefully avoided. The evidence of the frequently successful and competent nature of masochists' daily lives suggests that masochistic sexuality has no correlate of self-defeating conduct in everyday life, although evidence on this is not conclusive. Another reason to doubt that explanation of masochism as self-destructiveness is the fact that decades of behavioral research with normal individuals have failed to yield any clear evidence of deliberate self-destructive tendencies or motivations (Baumeister & Scher, in press).

Important consequences follow from recognizing that masochism is not normally self-destructive. The masochist's quest for pain must be understood as arising from motives other than the desire for harm

[2]It must be acknowledged that some psychodynamic approaches emphasize symbolic self-destruction rather than actual physical harm. Evidence reported here denies that masochists seek actual harm to self, but it is difficult or impossible to evaluate the hypothesis that they unconsciously desire subtle, vague, possible disadvantages. As far as I can ascertain, the evidence that masochists (or others) desire subtle self-destruction consists of questionable interpretations of highly ambiguous actions. Research has failed to show harm to self as a primary goal or motive among nonclinical samples (Baumeister & Scher, in press).

and injury. Moreover, the recent controversy over whether perennial victims or abused wives are masochistic (e.g., Caplan, 1984; Franklin, 1987) can easily be resolved in the negative, for as soon as there is evidence of injury then it is no longer appropriate to speak of masochism. Battered wives should not be mistaken for sexual masochists.

Self and the Paradox of Masochism

Although at present no single, unified theory of self is available, several generalizations can be made based on a substantial body of research. Most psychological theorists would probably agree that the self develops originally to facilitate the organism's quest for happiness and avoidance of suffering. In order to accomplish these goals, the self is oriented toward controlling the environment. Indeed, the self seeks both to control the environment and to perceive itself as having control. Lastly, the self desires to maintain a positive evaluation, both in its view of self and in others' perception. People desire to avoid loss of esteem and they desire to increase esteem, both publicly and privately.

In the context of current theory about the self, then, masochism presents a challenging paradox. Whereas the self seeks to avoid pain, masochists seek pain. Whereas the self strives for control, masochists relinquish control. Whereas the self seeks to maintain and increase esteem, masochists seek humiliation.

My central argument is that this paradox is not misleading; rather, it indicates the essential nature of masochism. Masochism represents a systematic attempt to eradicate (temporarily) the main features of the self. The self as active agent who makes choices and takes initiative, and the self as evaluatively toned concept, are eliminated in masochism.

Burden of Selfhood

Why would people want to escape from self or remove awareness of self? It is plausible that the self can become burdensome and that self-awareness can therefore become aversive.

Aversiveness was one feature of the original theory of objective self-awareness (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Subsequent research has suggested that sometimes people enjoy self-awareness, but there is ample evidence that people wish to escape and avoid self-awareness under some circumstances, such as after receiving an unfavorable evaluation (Duval & Wicklund, 1972), after finding out that they will probably be unable to improve or succeed on an important matter (Steenbarger & Aderman, 1979), after experiencing an interpersonal rejection or put-

down (Gibbons & Wicklund, 1976), and after performing actions that contradict their personal attitudes (Greenberg & Musham, 1981). Wicklund (1975a) argued that people are generally unable to live up to their ideals and goals, so the desire to escape from self-awareness may be very common.

Desire to escape from self-awareness has been linked to alcohol use (e.g., Hull, 1981; Hull & Young, 1983; Hull, Young & Jouriles, 1986), as well as cigarette smoking (Wicklund, 1975b; see also Liebling, Seiler & Shaver, 1974). It is plausible that escape from self-awareness is an underlying goal in other recreational activities, including spectator sports, watching movies, and taking drugs.

Requirements for many choices and decisions entail a demand for autonomy and initiative that can be burdensome. Part of the impact of Brady's (1958) executive monkey experiment was the intuitive appeal that having to make many decisions was stressful. Although later studies suggested that Brady's results were confounded, Weiss (1971a) showed that having to make many responses was indeed a cause of stress. Other studies showed that exerting control becomes especially stressful under various conditions (Weiss, 1971b, 1971c). In short, subjects may generally prefer control, but exerting control has its psychological costs.

The potentially burdensome nature of pressures and responsibilities has been documented in a very different context by Spence and Sawin (1984). These researchers found that men's greatest complaint about the male role was occupational demands, particularly the pressures to be successful and the weight of responsibility. Pennebaker et al. (1986) showed that people who had control over a noise stressor thought at higher levels and experienced more negative affect than people who had no control. Thus, having control prevented people from escaping negative affect by shifting to lower levels of thinking.

A successful self in particular becomes the focus of others' high expectations, which can also be burdensome. Others' expectations for continued success can cause aversive, performance-inhibiting pressure (e.g., Baumeister, Hamilton & Tice, 1985), leading to strategic and even potentially self-harmful behaviors to escape such pressures (Jones & Berglas, 1978). Trying to maintain a high level of personal esteem in the face of all challenges and threats can be difficult and wearisome. Indeed, aversive states of high self-awareness have been shown to cause individuals to desire relief so strongly that they ignore or accept risks, costs, and even harm to the self (Baumeister & Scher, in press).

In short, there is ample empirical and theoretical precedent for the suggestion that some people may want to escape from self-awareness on occasion. Exerting responsibility and maintaining esteem may become emotionally draining, yet the self that is identified with agency and esteem cannot easily relinquish them. There may even be a cyclic escalation, in which the more responsibility and esteem the individual accumulates, the more difficult and exhausting it is to sustain them. Such a suggestion would explain why masochism was so popular among the most esteemed and powerful men studied by Janus et al. (1977). High levels of esteem and agency (or responsibility) produce the most complex and elaborate selves, which may also be the most burdensome selves. As a result, such individuals may seek the strongest modes of escape—such as masochism.

Levels of Selfhood

The central argument of this article is that masochism provides a powerful method of removing high-level, abstract self-awareness. An appreciation of different levels of selfhood is crucial to understanding the present view of masochism. Masochistic practices appear to thwart and conceal the higher levels of selfhood, while focusing attention on the lowest possible levels. This fits well with the preceding argument, for it is principally the high levels of selfhood that become burdensome.

Masochism seeks to escape the normal, familiar self, as defined in a symbolic, high-level, long-term manner. Two important ways of accomplishing this are to re-focus awareness on the self in a physical, low-level immediate manner, and to create a new, fantasized identity that is fundamentally different from the self that is escaped. To explain this point, it will be necessary to summarize some recent theoretical developments.

Action identification and self-awareness. Vallacher and Wegner (1985, 1986) have proposed a theory of action identification which emphasizes that the same action can be understood at different levels of abstraction and meaning. High levels involve symbolism, abstraction, and temporal extension (e.g., pursuing career ambitions); in contrast, low levels emphasize temporal and physical immediacy (e.g., muscle movements). These authors argue that people in general prefer to be aware of their acts in high-level terms. However, stress or failure motivates people to shift to lower levels in order to escape negative affect. Moreover, change of meaning is accomplished by dropping to a low level and then moving up to a new, different high-level identification.

Carver and Scheier (1981) have proposed a hierarchical model of self-awareness (also see Powers, 1973). One can be aware of oneself at various levels, again ranging from the long-term, abstract manner characteristic of high levels down to the immediate, concrete nature of low levels. Carver and Scheier suggest that failure or blockage at a high level causes self-awareness to shift to lower levels.

Combining these two views, one may suggest that one's ordinary identity involves a high-level awareness of self, using a broad perspective on one's activities. The person is aware of self as involved in various projects and relationships, with multiple ambitions, goals, responsibilities, and so forth. This definition extends far into the past and future, and it is highly symbolic and interpretive.

In contrast, it is possible to be aware of oneself at a low level, as a mere body experiencing sensations and movements. Symbolic interpretation is largely irrelevant to awareness of movement and sensation, and the temporal focus is on the immediate present, without clear connection to the past and future. The low-level emphasis on movement and sensation makes it an attractive escape from aversive emotion and from awareness of undesirable features of oneself (or of one's actions).

At this point, it will be useful to examine the principal masochistic practices to show how they deny or remove high-level self-awareness while promoting low-level self-awareness. The principal features of masochism can be covered under the headings of pain, loss of control, and humiliation.

Pain

Pain is not universal in masochistic experiences (e.g., Reik, 1941; Weinberg, 1987), but it is common. Among the letters in the present sample, pain was administered chiefly by spanking, paddling, or (typically mild) whipping, usually on the buttocks. A few letters referred to using clothespins or clamps to pinch the skin, and to slapping the face. Any other methods of inflicting pain (e.g., dripping hot wax from a candle onto the submissive's skin; Kamel, 1980) are apparently uncommon.

It is important to recognize that the doses of pain in masochistic sex seem to be carefully limited. There is a theoretical rumor, implicit in some masochistic fantasies, that intense pain becomes indistinguishable from pleasure. Even if true, this may be quite irrelevant to masochism, because masochists apparently take their pain in small doses. Masochistic pain is genuine pain, if generally not severe pain.

How much does the pain hurt? Reik (1941) noted that the pain is ex-

perienced as aversive by the masochist even during the experience. Moreover, masochists apparently dislike headaches and dental work as much as anyone else (e.g., Scott, 1983; Weinberg, Williams & Moser, 1984). If the sensation of pain never becomes pleasant, then masochists presumably seek pain for something other than the sensation itself: either the *meaning* of the sensation or the *effects* of the sensation. The present focus is on the effects of the sensation on meaning.

Pain can facilitate escape from high-level self-awareness. Scarry's (1985) recent analysis proposes that the sensation of pain removes broader awareness of self and world. Using a sample of accounts of torture, Scarry argues that bodily pain supersedes the awareness of self as a symbolic being with interpersonal and ideological commitments. She notes that pain gradually obliterates psychological content, eventually leaving only the awareness of pain. One's knowledge of the world is temporarily forgotten, and attention is narrowed to the immediate present, both spatially and temporally. She says that pain destroys meaning, in the sense that pain banishes abstract meanings and symbols from awareness. A similar conclusion is reached from quite different sources by Goleman (1985), who uses clinical observations and physiological research to argue that pain effects a "dimming of attention."

One implication of Scarry's argument is that pain has great potential as a narcotic, in that it blots out higher-order thought and complex or symbolic self-awareness. She emphasizes that pain shrinks the world to the immediate temporal and spatial present; other places, other ideas, and other meanings of self cease to seem real. The main drawbacks to using pain as narcotic are that pain is inherently unpleasant and that pain usually comes with injury (which has practical consequences). But as argued earlier, masochists obtain pain without injury, and they seek carefully controlled doses of pain administered by an intimate partner, so the aversiveness is kept within acceptable bounds. There is also some evidence that many masochists emphasize the anticipation and suspense rather than the actual pain (Reik, 1941; Weinberg & Kamel, 1983). Either way, pain may be an effective means of removing unwanted thoughts and self-images from awareness. Califia (1983) expresses the effectiveness of the mere sight of a whip on a masochist: "A whip is a great way to get someone to be here now. They can't look away from it, and they can't think about anything else" (p. 134). Thus, masochists circumvent the drawbacks of pain, presumably enabling them to benefit from pain's narcotic effects.

On the other hand, pain undeniably focuses attention on the physical self, at least the body part where the pain is located (Scarry, 1985).

Moreover, a standard philosophical argument emphasizes the incorrigibility of pain (i.e., it is impossible to be mistaken about being in pain), from which it may follow psychologically that pain furnishes the self with minimal proof of its existence (cf. Sartre, 1949). Thus, although pain obliterates broader, long-term, and symbolic aspects of self, it may contribute to a low-level awareness of oneself existing as a physical body.

To sum up: Masochistic pain may function as a technique for removing higher-level self-awareness, while promoting a low-level awareness of self as physical object.[3] Pain brings self-awareness down from symbolic identity to physical body.

Bondage

Many masochists report experiences of being bound or restrained in an impressive variety of ways. Many letters in the present sample went into extensive detail about each rope and knot used to restrain the masochist. Masochists described being restrained with ropes, scarves, neckties, stockings, handcuffs, blindfolds, gags, and more elaborate devices.

There is little mystery about the effects of bondage. Freedom of action and initiative are eliminated. The masochist is left completely helpless and is thereby required to be a fully passive participant in whatever activities the dominant partner chooses. Apparently, this situation of utter helplessness and vulnerability is tremendously appealing to many otherwise normal people.

It is reasonable to infer that the appeal of restraint is that the individual is freed from initiative and choice. One consequence is that the person is freed from responsibility for sex acts that might otherwise involve conflict. Thus, one masochistic lesbian suggested that being tied up removed guilt: " . . . it gives you a chance to be sexual without any responsibility for your sexy feelings . . . 'it's not my fault, Mommy.' " (Zoftig, 1982, pp. 88-89). More broadly, it is plausible that when people come to regard efficacy, control, and responsibility as burdensome, they may enjoy masochistic interludes of escape. Some findings are consistent with this speculation. Scott (1983) reports that among couples who exchange dominant and submissive roles, individuals prefer not to take the dominant role sexually if they have had a demanding day at work. Janus et al. (1977) report that powerful, suc-

[3]This is not to deny the symbolic functions of pain, as evidence of submission and possible love (e.g., Weinberg, 1987). The purely symbolic uses of pain are irrelevant to the present argument, but are not contradicted by it.

cessful men are especially drawn to masochistic sex. Still, this evidence is more suggestive than conclusive. Further research is needed to establish whether prolonged experiences of power, responsibility, or choice can lead generally to an aversive self-awareness or to a desire to be passive—and, specifically, to masochism.

Thus, the responsible, decision-making aspect of the self is prevented by bondage and blindfolding. An important feature of the self is denied at high levels. Is there any reason to think that this loss of control would foster *low* levels of awareness? Being tied up may conceivably promote low-level, immediate self-awareness by focusing attention on one's helplessness and vulnerability, although direct evidence for this point is lacking. Theoretical and empirical precedents exist for this argument. Carver and Scheier (1981) proposed that loss of high-level efficacy promotes low-level self-awareness, so bondage may foster low-level awareness in the masochist. Pennebaker et al. (1986) provide evidence that people move to lower levels of thinking when deprived of control; the low levels reduce both self-awareness and negative affect, which may explain the appeal of bondage as escape.

One sign of low-level agency comes from data on oral sex. Submissives typically perform oral sex on their dominant partners. Performance of oral sex by the submissive was modal in all categories of letters; the frequency of this activity reached 84% among letters written by female dominants. Indeed, submissives in this sample were three times as likely as dominants to perform oral sex, $chi^2(1)=91.23$, $p < .001$. During oral sex, the (submissive) performer is active, while the dominant is passive. Although performing oral sex does not require high-level choice or abstract, complex thought, there is some degree of initiative involved in moving one's mouth and so forth. Thus, personal agency, while denied at high levels by masochistic bondage and obedience, is retained and even promoted at low levels of action identification. The focus is on pleasing and satisfying the partner, usually at the dominant partner's initiative, in a specific, immediate, limited fashion. The submissive ceases to be a responsible planner or decision-maker, becoming instead an active mouth.

Humiliation

The pursuit of humiliation is a major theme in masochism. Considerable effort and imagination go into devising humiliations to undergo. And, again, much of this effort and imagination is on the part of the masochist. Indeed, prostitutes report that many clients come

with detailed, precise scripts for the prostitute to use in humiliating them (e.g., Juliette, 1983). Thus, it would be wrong to view the humiliation in sadomasochism as purely a product of the dominants' efforts to enforce their superior status, for masochists seem to desire these humiliating activities at least as much as their partners.

It seems likely that these humiliations temporarily render the maintenance of dignity and even identity impossible. Being dressed up in brassiere and panties, handcuffed to a bed, and spanked, afterwards licking a prostitute's feet or genitals, is simply incompatible with one's identity as a male U.S. Senator, for example (Janus et al., 1977). This may indeed form part of the appeal of such activities: Participating in them temporarily removes that identity. Likewise, the feminine fantasy of being displayed naked is probably contrary to normal practices. As Reik (1941) noted, women are brought up to be sexually modest, to prevent others from seeing their genitals or underwear. Lying naked on a table with one's legs spread, in a roomful of strangers, would thus be incompatible with the woman's normal self. Moreover, it emphasizes her bodily self as a sex object, instead of her symbolic and interpersonal self.

Perhaps the clearest evidence that humiliation denies identity is the standard assimilation of masochist to slave. Masochists frequently define themselves as slaves during their sex games; indeed, "slave" was the most common designation for the masochists in this sample, and nearly all sources report similar patterns. The inherent, fundamental meaning of slavery is loss of personhood. Slavery originated as a substitute for being killed in war, and it has always involved some form of *social death* symbolizing physical death (Patterson, 1982). The slave's identity is nullified, and slaves are treated as if they lack social rank or status, family ties, ideology, opinions, rights, ancestors, and so forth. In short, the predominant model of masochism is a condition (slavery) in which one's social identity is removed.

Yet masochistic humiliation may also promote self-awareness at a low level of action identification. Humiliation provides embarrassment and is thus linked to self-awareness (Modigliani, 1968, 1971; Baumeister, 1982). Pain promotes awareness of one's body by forcing attention to sensations. Similarly, for a woman to display her nude genitals to others would focus attention on herself as a body, as an immediate object of sexual desire. As noted earlier, such display may run contrary to her normal self and behavior patterns. Thus, masochistic display replaces her ordinary identity with that of a set of genitals to be viewed and desired.

Use of mirrors or even audiences in S&M probably also intensifies the immediate, low-level awareness of self. Through the mirror or audience, the masochist's attention is drawn to his or her immediate condition and predicament. Mirrors and audiences are used to intensify embarrassment and humiliation. Such feelings can be regarded as an immediate focus on the present self. In an important sense, having a witness to one's degradation may facilitate the feeling that the normal identity has been removed and destroyed. One is seen as a slave, pet, or sex object; the witness confirms the loss of self by conferring social reality (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). If the male Senator in the above example were to desire an audience, it would not be for the sake of restoring his Senatorial identity, but rather for the sake of confirming the *negation* of that identity.

Summary of Escape Theory

To summarize the preceding discussion of masochistic practices: First, pain (including even the fantasy or threat of pain) blots out broader self-awareness, focusing the person narrowly on the here and now. Bondage makes it impossible for the self to exert initiative or control or to take responsibility for actions and decisions. Humiliation makes it impossible to sustain one's dignity and self-esteem and even one's social identity. (Emotional humiliation may, like pain, prevent certain types of higher cognitive activity, focusing the mind instead on the immediate circumstances.) Masochistic activity, in other words, is a concerted and multifaceted attack on the high-level aspects of the self. The self as a symbolic entity, extended in time, capable of planning and executing high-level action, and sustaining a certain level of self-worth and dignity, is systematically denied.

At the same time, awareness of self is focused on the lowest possible levels. Attention is drawn to the self as a body, as a locus of sensation, as a helpless and vulnerable being deprived of dignity and esteem, as a mere sex object or subhuman creature. Initiative is reduced to the level of moving one's mouth or limbs in response to external commands, and pride is reduced to the satisfaction of being a good slave. Self is reduced to the here-and-now bare minimum.

The present argument is that the movement to low levels is motivated by a desire to escape from the high levels of self-awareness. It is at high levels that selves become burdensome. (Indeed, if the low-level self is burdensome—for example, if the person is physically tired—he or she is not likely to be inclined toward masochistic indulgence; Scott, 1983.) Masochism is an escape *from* identity *to* body.

The shift to low levels of awareness has one further important consequence, however. Low levels facilitate transformation, fantasy, and the elaboration of new high-level identities (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985).

Transformation of Identity: The Ultimate Escape

Once the self is brought down to a low level, it is capable of being transformed (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1986). Scarry (1985) likewise emphasizes the power of bodily pain for facilitating fictional, transforming interpretations. Pain makes reality malleable, in her view, and she supports her thesis with a compelling account of the fictionalization common to torture practices (e.g., pretext of interrogation, perversion of medical and legal functions). Insofar as masochistic practices involve pain and low levels of action identification, masochism may facilitate the acquisition (at least temporarily, or in fantasy) of new identities.

Becoming someone different is a further step in escape from self. Indeed, one could argue that changing one's identity is the ultimate fulfillment of masochistic desires to be rid of one's ordinary self: One *becomes someone else.* Becoming a full-time slave was a reasonably common ending among the present sample of letters (44%). In contrast, empirical observations of actual behavior show full-time slavery to be relatively uncommon, although it is frequently desired (e.g., Scott, 1983). The implication is that permanent transformation of one's normal identity is an important part of masochistic fantasy, although it is impractical in real life. People do not actually change their identities through sex games, but the masochistic desire to escape from self can fantasize identity change as a form of fulfillment.

The interest in display humiliation and in having audiences may be understood as connected with the transformation of self. Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982; also Gollwitzer, 1986) have argued that the acquisition of identity requires *social reality*, that is, acknowledgement by others. The other people are apparently interchangeable to a large extent; in other words, it does not seem to matter who sees the person as having this identity, as long as someone does.

Evidence from the present sample is consistent with the hypothesis that masochists desire audiences to confer social reality on their identity transformations. First, it is obvious that the presence of an audience enhances humiliation. Secret humiliations are not effective, and embarrassments require audiences (e.g., Modigliani, 1971). Letters by submissives were twice as likely as letters by dominants to report the

presence of additional people, constituting audiences, $chi^2(1, N = 219) = 6.50$, $p < .02$. It appears that audiences are of greater interest to submissives than to dominants; it is the masochists who want audiences.

On the other hand, as reported in the letters, it was generally the dominant partner who was acquainted with the audience. Dominant partners were reasonably well acquainted with the third parties in 79 (89%) of the 89 letters that reported audiences, whereas submissives were acquainted with the audience in only 19 (21%). The difference is significant, $chi^2(1, N = 178) = 81.73$, $p < .001$. Thus, although it may be the masochists who desire the audiences, they desire audiences who are unknown to them. Neighbors, relatives, family, colleagues at work were only rarely mentioned as witnesses. To be sure, the stigma of masochistic sex would create practical drawbacks to having one's submission witnessed by acquaintances. Still, the data seem to suggest not only a lack of desire for acquaintances to witness one's humiliation, but even an actual (and substantial) preference for strangers. Fantasies also could involve acquaintances, but the majority of fantasies with audiences also seem to emphasize audiences of strangers (although data are insufficient for statistical analysis). Friends, colleagues, and neighbors appear in fantasies as co-participants, but not as audiences.

In short, it appears that many masochists desire to be watched by strangers. Audiences can promote self-awareness, but they only promote the person's awareness or his or her normal identity if they know who the person is. The desire to be watched by strangers suggests instead that masochists seek to be aware of a transformed self with the new identity as sexual slave.

Scott's (1983) observations, although impressionistic on this matter, are consistent with the present findings. She reports that masochists carefully avoid letting their acquaintances find out about their activities, but they do enjoy the company of others, including spectators. Again, practical concerns explain the avoidance of acquaintances but not the positive desire to be seen by strangers.

The implication is that masochists desire to exclude the normal social world. The adoption of a new identity is reinforced and affirmed by the presence of witnesses (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), but witnesses who would remind one of one's normal, everyday identity would probably hamper the transformation. As in brainwashing, identity change is facilitated by the removal of all social support for the to-be-discarded identity and replacement of them with witnesses who

know only the new, transformed identity (cf. Baumeister, 1986).

Relation to everyday power dynamics. The argument that masochism is escape from normal self and everyday social reality has important implications for the recent debates about the politics of masochism. In particular, feminist (and other) critiques of sadomasochistic practices (e.g., Linden, 1982) are based on viewing these sexual activities as endorsement of oppression and violence, including Nazi brutality, genocide, medieval tortures, rape, wife-battering, and more. If the present thesis is correct, these critiques are unfounded. Sadomasochistic sex does not re-enact or endorse genuine oppression; it simply uses obsolete symbols to enact escape and fantasy. People who have really suffered victimization or cruelty would not want to re-enact such things in sexual games.

Moreover, masochists sometimes defend their practices by claiming that their games permit insights into the nature of power relationships in normal life (Califia, 1982, 1983; see also Weeks, 1985). If the present theory is correct, these defenses of masochistic activity are no more valid than the critiques, for masochistic sexuality bears no viable relationship to genuine political dynamics.

One way to asssemble data on the relationship of masochism to political structures is to examine the sociopolitical distribution of masochism. If masochists are indeed re-enacting oppression and suffering from their experiences, then people who have experienced the most oppression should be the most masochistic. In contrast, if masochism is an *escape* from reality, then it should appeal mainly to those who have not been exploited or oppressed. Evidence supports the latter hypothesis. Masochism appears to be more common among whites than blacks, more common among men than women, and (most important) more common among the upper socioeconomic classes than among the lower ones (Scott, 1983; also Spengler, 1977; Symanski, 1981). Although these data are not fully conclusive, they are corroborated by comparison with studies of prostitutes. Working-class users of prostitutes purchase mainly fellatio and normal intercourse (e.g., Diana, 1985), whereas upper-class clients frequently request to be sexually dominated (e.g., Janus et al., 1977; also Symanski, 1981). Thus, the weight of the evidence suggests that society's real victims are underrepresented among masochists. That supports the escape hypothesis. Sexual masochism does not reproduce familiar or actual experiences; rather, it apparently enacts fantasies that are radically divorced from normal reality.

Self and Opponent Processes

Solomon and Corbit (1974) proposed that many psychological phenomena can be explained on the basis of opponent processes. That is, each response is accompanied by a second, opposite response that is slower to take effect. They suggested that masochistic phenomena might involve opponent processes.

Although direct evidence is lacking, opponent processes could plausibly explain the appeal of the masochistic escape from self. Each of the three essential features of masochism might be associated with an opponent process, and their combination might produce a very appealing subjective state. The masochist experiences pain; an opponent process might produce a feeling of euphoria and well-being after the cessation of pain. The masochist experiences helplessness and loss of control; an opponent process might produce a feeling of self-efficacy, power, responsibility, and capability. The masochist experiences humiliation and degradation; and opponent process might produce a feeling of self-worth, pride, and self-respect.

Some observers have suggested that masochistic episodes produce subsequent feelings of energy, fulfillment, and willingness to take on major challenges (e.g., Smith & Cox, 1983, p. 82; Scott, 1983, p. 4). These observations are far from conclusive, however, and clinical observers tend to report the opposite result, namely that masochists feel wretched and guilty afterwards (e.g., Cowan, 1982; Stekel, 1953). (The difference may be one of sampling bias, for masochists who feel wretched are more likely to seek therapy than masochists who feel euphoric.)

Thus, opponent process theory augments the idea that masochism provides an escape from high-level self-awareness, for it suggests that after the masochistic escape would follow a period of highly positive, euphoric self-awareness. This might substantially enhance the appeal of the escape. Although the arguments are plausible and appealing, however, they are best considered very tentative until some form of direct evidence becomes available.

Relation to Sexual Arousal

The argument thus far has been that masochism is an attempt to escape from high-level, symbolic, temporally extended self-awareness. It is reasonable to ask how this might contribute to sexual excitement. Although the appeal of masochism may extend beyond sex, it must include sexual pleasure.

The causes of sexual excitement are not fully understood, but there is sufficient evidence to justify some speculative hypotheses about masochism. For present purposes, the most important notion is that self-awareness can be detrimental to sexual excitement and pleasure. Some evidence suggests that full sexual pleasure can be experienced only when one has set aside one's awareness of self as a separate, autonomous, esteem-maintaining being. Self-oriented approaches to sex, such as viewing sex as a performance or a conquest, may detract from sexual enjoyment and impair sexual functioning (LoPiccolo, 1978).

Masters and Johnson's (1970) work preceded social psychology's study of self-attention, but many of their findings appear to involve self-awareness. They propose that "fear of sexual inadequacy is the greatest known deterrent to effective sexual functioning" (p. 12). They describe these fears in terms reminiscent of self-awareness theory, especially comparison of self with socially approved standards of masculinity and femininity. They say that sexual dysfunction often results when the individual becomes a demanding, evaluative "spectator" of his or her own sexual response. Thus, self-evaluation during sex is "the all-important factor in both onset of and reversal of sexual inadequacy" (p. 197). If evaluative self-attention impairs sexual functioning, then it is plausible that masochism may enhance sexual arousal by removing such self-awareness.

Indeed, the techniques of sex therapy proposed by Masters and Johnson (1970) have important parallels in masochistic activities. First, the emphasis on socially isolating the sexual partners from the demands of their everyday worlds (e.g., having them stay at a motel during the therapy, even if they live nearby) is reminiscent of the masochistic attempt to remove the everyday world from awareness through pain and fantasy. Second, what Masters and Johnson call the "sensate focus" involves directing attention to immediate sensations, which appears to be the same focus brought on by masochistic submission (including pain). Third, the therapeutic emphasis on the couple rather than the individual parallels the masochistic emphasis on the relationship context for sexuality. Fourth, the therapeutic use of permission (i.e., couples are told to refrain from sex, and their sexual activities are restricted and directed by the therapist) resembles the restrictions and commands that characterize masochistic sex games. Indeed, a substantial number of letters in the present sample referred to commands that restricted sexual activity, including requiring the masochist to request permission to have an orgasm (and punishment

for violations). Fifth, in order to teach the male therapy patient that he cannot will himself to have an erection, Masters and Johnson advocate teaching him an enforcedly passive role in sex, similar to the enforced passivity of the masochist.

Although parallels between sex therapy and masochism should not be overstated, it is apparent that masochism does resemble many practices that therapists use to treat sexual dysfunction. It is therefore plausible that masochism can enhance sexual response. Masochism may consequently appeal to individuals who desire such enhancement, presumably including both sexually insecure individuals and people who desire unusually intense sensations and experiences.

It is plausible that masochism enhances sexual arousal in other ways. Spanking allegedly produces a temporary warmth and redness on the skin of the buttocks, called reactive hyperemia. Given the proximity of the buttocks to the genitals, this hyperemia may contribute to sexual warmth (Reik, 1941). Also, the typical brevity of normal foreplay may prevent full sexual enjoyment in many cases, perhaps especially among women (e.g., Gebhart, 1978). Sadomasochistic sex games typically last much longer than conventional foreplay, however, and the period of nudity and bodily contact may allow sexual arousal to reach higher levels. One theorist has proposed that sadomasochism be regarded simply as prolonged foreplay (Lee, 1983; see also Reik, 1941, p. 60). Although these arguments are plausible, it seems likely that a principal contribution of masochistic activity to sexual enjoyment is the escape from self-awareness.

Historical Pattern

Researchers have difficulty knowing for certain what the sexual habits of modern couples are. These difficulties are compounded when one desires to know the sexual practices of long-dead individuals, for one does not even have self-report or survey data. Still, much has been written about sex through the ages, and modern scholars have found it possible to make reasonably educated guesses about the sex lives of our ancestors. A handful of important works have surveyed sexual practices across cultural and historical boundaries.

Such evidence provides a possibility for testing the present hypothesis about masochism. If masochistic desires arose from the wish to escape the burdens of self, then masochistic sex should have been most common when these burdens were greatest and most oppressive.

In previous work, I have argued that individuality became a domi-

nant value and pattern in Western culture during the early modern period, from 1500-1800 (Baumeister, 1986, 1987, also see Trilling, 1971, and Weintraub, 1978). In other words, it was during that period that the culture began to require each person to maintain a unique, separate, autonomous, positively valued self, with its own distinct goals and potentiality. The increased emphasis on individuality would presumably increase the burden of selfhood, and so one may predict that sexual masochism would have increased greatly during the early modern period.

The evidence supports the hypothesis. It appears that most sexual practices have been known and enjoyed throughout history, but masochism is a rare exception. Masochism appears to be mainly a modern pattern, which spread through Western society during the early modern period.

The most comprehensive histories of sex are provided by Bullough (1976a) and Tannahill (1980). Tannahill records extensive varieties of sexual practices, including many atypical or deviant activities, occurring throughout the ancient and medieval world (as well as in other cultures). In her account, however, masochism does not appear until the 18th century, when it suddenly became widely evident in Europe. She notes that the sex manuals of some ancient civilizations were remarkably complete by modern standards, covering all the variations known today—except masochism, which she says is conspicuous by its absence. Likewise, masochism does not appear in Bullough's (1976a) history until the early modern period, with one exception: He suggests briefly that masochism is evident in the self-mutilation that occurred during some ancient Greek religious ceremonies. Probably it is a mistake to regard those activities as masochistic. In the first place, sex and religion provide radically different contexts, and it seems unwarranted to assume that activities have the same meaning in religious ritual as they have in sexual play. In the second place, as noted earlier, masochists do not engage in self-mutilation anyway. Probably Bullough was misled by the Freudian suggestion that masochism is aggression directed toward the self. In any case, his account shows no signs of explicitly sexual masochism until the early modern period.

Other historians confirm these patterns.[4] Licht (1934) documents

[4]Bullough (1976b) found one piece of evidence that ancient Egyptian mythology regarded anal sex as a symbolic expression of domination, but it appears that interest in that symbolism arose only out of the desire to dominate, not to submit. Thus, there is a weak suggestion of sadism, but no indication of masochism. If sadism is historically older than masochism, as I suspect, this casts further doubt on the link postulated by past theories between masochism and sadism.

the extensive sex scenes in ancient Greek literature, but there was apparently no sadomasochistic sexual activity depicted. Ellis (1936) reports their absence in ancient Latin (Roman) literature. Taylor (1970) again describes some religious activities as masochistic, but he reports no evidence of masochistic sex until the eighteenth century.

The Middle Ages left extensive writings about sex, especially in the Christian Church's theological discussions about the relative immorality of various practices (Bullough & Brundage, 1982). Homosexuality, bestiality, masturbation, abortion, contraception, adultery, coprophilia, prostitution, anal sex, transvestism, and a variety of other practices were discussed and debated, but apparently there was no mention of masochism. Given Christianity's profound negativity toward sexual activities (Bullough, 1976a; Tannahill, 1980), it is extremely implausible that the Church theologians had simply decided to tolerate masochistic sex without comment. Rather, it seems most likely that the lack of reference to masochism indicates a lack of masochistic sexual activity. Possibly masochism was completely unheard of.

Ellis (1936) conducted a thorough search for historical references to explicitly sexual masochism. He concluded that the earliest mention of it—a secondhand rumor about a man who supposedly enjoyed flagellation—occurred just before the start of the sixteenth century, and that such evidence did not become common until the 18th century.

Written and literary discussions of masochism first appeared in the 17th century (Bullough, 1976a; Taylor, 1970). Two fictional works of that century included flogging scenes. Pornography devoted to flogging appeared in the eighteenth century and soon became widespread (Bullough, 1976a; Tannahill, 1980). By the end of the eighteenth century, there were many such writings, as well as private clubs apparently devoted to masochistic practices (Falk & Weinberg, 1983). The abundant evidence of masochistic activity beginning in the eighteenth century contrasts sharply with the lack of any record of such activities prior to the Renaissance.

Another source of evidence is provided by histories of prostitution. It appears that prostitutes have long catered to various sexual tastes, but the earliest evidence of masochistic clients comes around the 18th century. Thus, in the ancient Middle East, there were heterosexual and homosexual prostitutes, as well as "animal prostitutes" catering to clients with a desire for bestiality, but there is no sign of professional dominatrices (Benjamin & Masters, 1965). Ancient Greece and Rome likewise had both heterosexual and homosexual prostitutes, and it ap-

pears that there were Roman prostitutes catered to special tastes for pederasty and fellatio, but again there is no reference to sadomasochism.

Medieval prostitution was vaguely tolerated by the Church as a necessary evil, although gradually the Church became intolerant of sexual practices it regarded as unnatural—including homosexuality, bestiality, concubinage, and adultery (Otis, 1985). But there was apparently no discussion of prostitutes providing sadomasochistic services.

In the historical evidence from the 18th century, there are numerous references to prostitutes specializing in flagellation (Benjamin & Masters, 1965; Tannahill, 1980). By the nineteenth century, most major brothels had such a specialist, and in large cities there were entire brothels devoted solely to flagellation (Tannahill, 1980). Bullough & Bullough (1964) provide a detailed anecdotal history of prostitution, in which the first references to flogging come in the early 19th century.

Thus, the evidence from histories of prostitution confirms the impression that sexual masochism appeared in our culture roughly around 1700. It would be incautious to conclude from the lack of indications that masochism was completely unknown before then. But there is no disputing the contrast between the abundant evidence of masochism after 1700 and the paucity of such evidence before 1600. It seems safe to conclude that sexual masochism underwent a dramatic increase in Western culture late in the early modern period.

Thus, in Western history, the spread of sexual masochism coincided with the increased emphasis on individuality. Just when the individual self took on a vastly augmented scope and importance, evidence of masochistic sexuality proliferated. It seems quite plausible that the new emphasis on individuality increased the burden of selfhood, and that not everyone would be fully comfortable with the new demands for autonomy, uniqueness, and self-promotion. As a result, people may have been increasingly drawn to a form of sexual play based on a powerful (if temporary) way of escaping the self.

There are valid reasons for caution in drawing conclusions from historical evidence about sexuality. Not only are there questions about the validity and exhaustiveness of the available evidence, but the innate complexity of social change makes it difficult to make simple causal inferences. Western society changed in numerous ways from 1500 to 1800, and it is quite conceivable that factors other than the increasing individuality could have contributed to promoting masochistic sex. Still, the evidence is at least entirely consistent with the

hypothesis that masochism arises from the desire to escape from high-level self-awareness. As noted earlier, the best approach to masochism that is currently viable is to look for converging patterns among different sources of evidence, each with its own flaws. The historical evidence provides a welcome corroboration of the empirical sources cited earlier. This convergence strengthens the case for the hypothesis that masochism is escape from self.

Escape or Therapy?

Before concluding, it is useful to consider the related hypothesis that masochism is therapeutic. Cowan (1982) argues that masochism improves self-knowledge. She is not specific about what is learned or about how masochism improves self-knowledge. At several points she seems to argue that self-knowledge often hurts, so hurting may promote self-knowledge (a non sequitur). More important, she says masochistic suffering can be beneficial in that it involves letting go of "old, worn-out self-images and attitudes" and promotes "loss of old ego-constructs" (p. 50). She also suggests that masochism is based on punishment and retribution for the sin of pride, basing her discussion on the Jungian equation of religious spirituality with psychotherapy.

The alleged therapeutic benefits of masochism have been touted by masochists themselves, possibly as a means of justifying their sexual activities (cf. Weeks, 1985, pp. 238-239). Califia (1983) characterizes masochistic submission as "a healing process" (p. 134), arguing vaguely that it remedies "old wounds" and leads beyond orgasm to catharsis. Several masochists interviewed by Janus et al. (1977, p. 102) likewise used the term "cathartic" to describe the effects of being whipped. Lucy (1982) claims she learned about herself "emotionally and physically" (p. 35) from participating in masochistic sex. She too describes it as cathartic and healing, and she claims it reduced her chronic anxiety levels and improved her ability to communicate with others.

Thus, improved self-knowledge and catharsis are the principal claims made by the proponents of the therapeutic hypothesis. It is troubling that no specific insights into self are cited (except for the insight that one enjoys masochistic sex), and that insight and catharsis are not generally considered sufficient for therapeutic improvement. The present sample of epistolary self-reports was generally devoid of therapeutic claims and even of claims of improved self-knowledge, except for the realization that the person was a masochist.

Healing the self and escaping the self are not completely different, so

some of the claims for therapeutic efficacy are compatible with the view espoused here. Both escape and therapy remove bothersome aspects of the self, and both may be sought when one feels guilty, overburdened, or dissatisfied with the self. The main difference is presumably that a therapeutic effect is a lasting transformation, whereas an escape is a temporary distraction. Therapy and escape thus differ in their aftereffects. A useful analogy contrasts medicine with narcotic. With medicine, one takes it, one gets better, and one stops taking it. With a narcotic, one takes it, one feels better, and when it wears off one soon wants to take it again.

The weight of evidence about patterns of masochistic sexual behavior appears more consistent with the escape hypothesis than with the therapy hypothesis. There is almost no evidence that masochistic experiences bring about some healing transformation that ends the need for such "therapy." Instead, the predominant pattern appears to be that masochists increase their interest and participation in sexual submission. Spengler (1977) found that the most common reaction to one's first masochistic experience was a desire to have more such experiences. The accounts of people's encounters with masochism (Califia, 1983; Kamel, 1983; Lee, 1983; Scott, 1983) all portray the general pattern as one of escalating involvement. In the present sample, 88% of the letters indicated that there would be future contacts involving sadomasochistic activities, in contrast with the 3% who projected a relationship with that partner continuing without such activities. The standard pattern of increasing, escalating involvements has led some theorists to characterize masochism as an addiction (e.g., Mass, 1983).

In short, where the escape and therapy hypotheses differ, the evidence appears to favor the escape hypothesis. Evidence for the therapeutic value of masochism is lacking, and patterns of masochistic activity appear to resemble patterns of narcotic use more than of medicine use. Masochism does not effect a permanent transformation of the self that cures its problems. Rather, masochism effects a temporary transformation or concealment of the self that enables the individual to forget his or her problems.

Conclusion

To summarize: Masochism should not automatically be regarded as a symptom of mental illness, for it appears to occur most commonly among normal and successful persons. It should not be regarded as derived from sadism, for it is more common than sadism, and where

both patterns are found the masochism generally comes first. It should not be confused with self-destructive behavior, for masochists apparently are quite careful to avoid harm to themselves.

Rather, masochism can be understood as a way of providing a temporary and powerful escape from high-level awareness of self as an abstract, temporally extended, symbolically constructed identity. Masochistic practices replace this self-awareness with a low-level, temporally constricted awareness of self as a physical body, focusing on immediate sensations (both painful and pleasant) and on being a sexual object. In particular, masochism removes two fundamental aspects of the self, namely the orientation toward control and the motive to maximize esteem. Some masochists carry the escape one step further and in fantasy adopt a totally new identity, such as that of a slave. The escape from high-level self-awareness may appeal to individuals burdened with the demands of autonomous selfhood, and it may facilitate sexual response.

Further study with masochists is warranted (cf. Weinberg, 1987). If the present theory is correct, masochistic activity may often be precipitated by events that make the self burdensome. Masochistic desires should increase after severe external demands for autonomy, responsibility, decisions, self-assertion, and esteem maintenance. The resemblance (and relation) of masochism to narcotic use and other addictive patterns deserves investigation. Personality traits such as locus of control and self-consciousness should predict involvement in masochism.

If the present theory is correct, then masochism can be understood as a means of escaping high-level self-awareness and can be grouped together with other such escapes, presumably including skydiving, mountain climbing, alcohol intoxication, and so forth. Future investigations may examine the question of why some people choose masochism over alternative escapes. The question of why someone comes to prefer masochism over mountain climbing may be comparable to the question of why someone comes to prefer skydiving over mountain climbing; accidents of habit, opportunity, and association may play key causal roles. Possibly the link to sexual pleasure makes masochism stand out above other forms of escape. That is, sexual desire (as a biological need) may arise on a regular basis, and if it arises simultaneously with desires for escape, the two may become linked—or, more likely, if a link is established fortuitously, the co-occurrence may strengthen that link. Further, if escape from self-awareness increases sexual pleasure, some people may find masochism

a reliable way of enhancing sex. Possibly some important experience enables the individual to discover the appeal of masochism, so that later desires for escape take the form of masochistic desires. (For example, a few experiences that associate mild pain or humiliation with intimacy or sexual pleasure may create a readiness to formulate desires for escape in masochistic terms.)

If masochism centers around escape from one's normal identity, then attempts to establish a full-time identity as a masochist may ultimately be self-defeating. Sociological studies of identification with masochistic subcultures (see Weinberg, 1987) may explore what happens when the individual comes to identify him or herself so strongly with these groups and activities that this identity comes to predominate, indicated perhaps by a desire to come out of the closet and be generally recognized as a masochist. At this point, obviously, masochism would cease to be an escape from self. If the present theory is correct, one of two consequences should occur: Either the person should shift his or her main involvement from the submissive to the dominant role, or the person should gradually lose interest and enjoyment, because masochism can no longer function as an effective escape. This may explain why masochists, unlike homosexuals, have not developed into public figures and activists. Califia (1983), one of the few who has come out of the closet to campaign for S&M liberation, shifted her main sexual role preference from submissive to dominant.

I do not mean to stigmatize or condemn masochism by treating it as an escape or comparing it to a narcotic. Many individuals seem to make use of some form of escape from their everyday, high-level awareness of who they are. As escapes go, masochism appears to be relatively harmless, and if the self-reports are to be believed, the yield of pleasure is often substantial. Masochism seems to form one of the more extreme forms of escape, providing more powerful experiences than a game of checkers or a movie. Thus, it may appeal to people who desire or require especially powerful means to achieve a successful escape from self.

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