

I don't want you uptoeing around, bringing me any warm milk, either!"

Of course, I don't shout, and it's not because of politeness. It's because innkeepers would only indulge such outbursts, tenderly looking past my churlishness, comforting themselves by remarking to one another how very much I seem to need a holiday.

So I resign myself to their fussy care, grudgingly drinking their damn tea and answering their snoopy questions. "Yes, I just loved the farmer's market; no, we don't have anything like that at home."

Call me a cynical fin de siecle-ite, but for me the ideal traveling experience is much more American than the bed & breakfast. None of this cutesy pie for me.

I prefer my host to know nothing more about me than my American Express card number. I like coming back from a day's traveling or shopping or whatever and dropping onto a big king-size bed and spending an hour channel surfing, trying to luck into a somewhat visible scene from the dirty movie scrambled on the pay-per-view channel. I like having my own phone, my own bathroom, my own little bucket, a nice friendly ice machine rumbling down the hall.

Part of this is American-style me-first individualism, and I accept the antisocial nature of that. And if the coolant of that ice maker is increasing the ozone hole, I apologize. But if I cannot indulge my ugly elitist side on vacation, then what's the point of pretending to be nice the rest of the year?

Much more of my dislike of B&Bs, though, is based on scientific observation.

Innkeepers tend to be neurotic types who, giving up on getting along with their own friends, have opened up hostleries to provide themselves with a captive audience every weekend.

Think about this. It's clear they have told the story about that lovely quilt at least a hundred times before I walked in the door, yet when they launch into it for me and my wife, it's me who gets bored, not them. Is it elitist not to care about the stupid quilt? I just want to rent their rooms, not attend their kids' college graduation.

But worse than the innkeepers are the

THE ECSTASY of AGONY

Psychiatrists aren't sure of the real motivation and meaning behind sadomasochism. But one thing is clear: People who play S&M games are slowly stepping out of the closet, even in the Triangle.

By TRISH WILSON
STAFF WRITER

Most days, "Sue" spends her time doing what most homemakers do. She cooks, she takes care of her child, she cleans her Raleigh home, she walks the dog. Sundays, she goes to her Baptist church.

But every other week, Sue takes time out to play her secret game. She hires a baby-sitter, climbs into her car and meets her lover at his place.

She likes to be tied up and spanked. She gets an erotic kick out of having clamps attached to various parts of her body. It hurts, she says, but "in a good way."

A good way?
"It's something I like," says Sue, who is 27. "I can't help it."

Until recently, the only person Sue could talk to about her sexual tastes was her husband, an engineer who shares her kinky inclinations and penchant for multiple partners.

But one day about eight months ago as Sue was scanning the back page of the weekly Independent newspaper, she spotted a small ad between one for psychic readings by Rebecca and another for massage training. It read: "T.A.P.E. B&D/S&M/D&S Support Group. 571-5680."

Sue recognized most of the initials. Bondage and discipline, sadism and

masochism, dominance and submission. She and her husband went to a meeting. TAPE, they learned, stood for Triangle Area Power Exchange. "It's really scary, doing things that society would not call normal," says Sue. "Being with this group makes me think I'm not the only one who has these fantasies. I'm not sick."

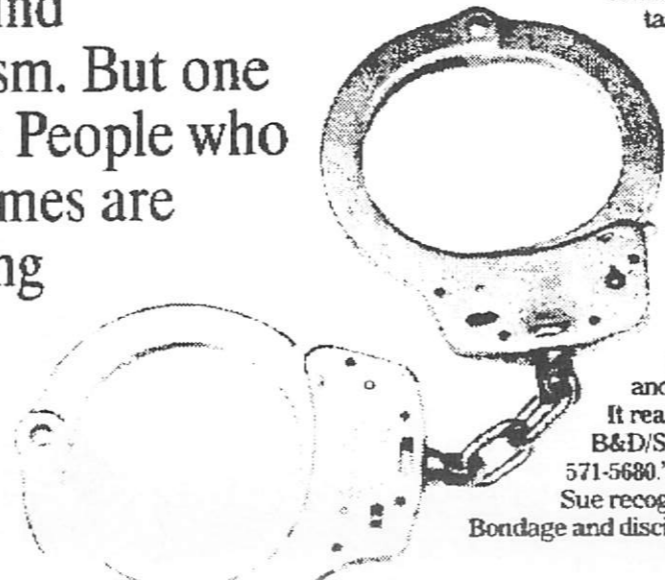
Once a sexual practice shrouded in secrecy and shame, S&M is now assuming a public profile — not only in major cities but in smaller towns, too.

In the Triangle, the S&M community draws on TAPE to meet all kinds of needs. Members — mostly white, mostly male, mostly highly educated — plan workshops on everything from body piercing to good knots. Meetings are held at a local church. A couple of times a month, TAPE throws "play parties" at members' homes, where whips and chains replace the usual party fare of beer and wine.

A local electronic bulletin board called Crystal Winds caters to S&Mers. They also have their own newsletter and their own personals column — Variations — in the Independent. And now, thanks to a custom leather shop that opened on Raleigh's Hillsborough Street six months ago, they have a place to order hard-to-find accessories: custom-made corsets, crotchless leather underwear, cat-o'-nine-tails and masks.

"A year ago, there wasn't squat in this area," says "Ann," an environmental consultant who helped found TAPE in August. Then the S&Mers got organized.

Ann, 24, regularly looks for play partners



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al; we try to censor the mean. That's the distinction we try to draw."

But what looks mean to some is erotic to others. At Innovations, Raleigh's new leather shop, owner Michael Beneckick will make his customers pretty much whatever they want. Right now, he's working on an executioner's mask.

"I do custom leather," says Beneckick, 31. "If the custom leather is a corset, or crotchless shorts, or restraints, I'll make that for you. But I'm not a sex store."

Triangle sex stores peddle a host of toys — including whips and handcuffs. But Beneckick's stuff is strictly leather: heavy biker boots, hats, skirts, trousers, wrist and ankle restraints. A display case filled with jewelry for body piercing sits against a side wall. Beneckick doesn't do piercing, but he can recommend people who do.

Apart from made-to-order sex toys, he also keeps catalogs that sell things like "Swell Nip Clips: Hard black plastic clamps on 12-inch chain. Ridged contact area for a good firm no-nonsense grip."

Beneckick, who runs a similar shop in Boston, dodges questions about his personal preferences. He will say this: "I don't look at it as tools for sadomasochism. I look at it as a way to eroticize safe sex."

He grins. "If you expand your horizons of what you might do, you might be surprised at what you might enjoy."

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Studies show that while many S&Mers enjoy their sex lives, the rest of their lives aren't so satisfactory. The clients who come to Moser's San Francisco office worry that they are abnormal, that they won't find partners, that they must lead double lives.



"This is not something you bring up in front of 'normal people,'" says "Mike," a 26-year-old engineering major at N.C. State University. "They'll tell you to see a psychiatrist, or a lawyer."

In this country, people who practice S&M have been fired, lost custody of their children, been ostracized by their friends. North Carolina laws do not specifically ban S&M, but no one from TAPE is eager to be a test case.

"I could lose my job," says one 40-year-old lawyer, who is so afraid of exposure that he re-

signed from TAPE's board of directors shortly after granting an interview for this story.

Then there's the tricky question of finding a partner.

Mike, who is heterosexual, says it took him more than a year to ask his girlfriend if she would play bondage games.

"I'm what they call a switch," he says. This means he can play either a top or a bottom, and that he doesn't have a preference either way. He's been like this, he says, since he was a little kid. He built his own bondage table when

he was 18.

His girlfriend back then, however, wasn't impressed.

"She wasn't into it, and it was one of the reasons our relationship fell apart," Mike says.

His second girlfriend has been more accommodating.

"She does it occasionally," Mike says. "If she's in the mood, fine. If not, don't ask. She kind of hopes I'll get it out of my system."

He doesn't think he'll change. He hopes to find a lasting relationship with someone who will accept his kinkiness and play along every now and then. He also enjoys vanilla sex, which is what the S&M community calls ordinary intercourse.

Still, he wonders about his emotional health and that of others in his group. He won't forget his first TAPE play party, when he walked into a North Raleigh apartment complex to find a woman shackled to the living room wall. The 15 people there took advantage of the nearby whip at a dollar a whack.

Mike couldn't bring himself to use it.

"She made good money," Mike says. "She must have been there for an hour and a half."

Raleigh clinical psychologist Dianne Occhetti listens to stories like these all the time.

"Lots of people have fantasies of bondage," Occhetti says. "It's not an unusual fantasy. But there's quite a difference between a fantasy and an act. The point at which I have difficulty is when there is physical hurt. If one has been beaten for an hour and a half, there are going to be marks on their body."

But that's the point, says Ann. For her part, she's feeling fine about her sexuality. She has never, she says, had vanilla sex.

She laughs. "I think it's gross," she jokes. "But as long as I don't have to do it, I don't mind if other people do."

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through personal ads. In the two years since she began practicing S&M, she estimates she's had about 20 partners. She's bisexual.

Despite the hassles of operating in secrecy, Ann is an advocate for S&Mers. She wants to set the record straight. Her friends in bondage, she says, do not practice coercive sex.

"Safe, sane and consensual," she says, repeating the S&M motto.

She lives in a sexual subculture with its own rules and its own language. Ann is a dominant, or what people in her community call a "top." Bottoms are those like Sue, people who like to be submissive. It takes both to play S&M games, called "scenes" — elaborate plots players discuss beforehand. Most players usually have an agreed-upon "safeword" to signal that the game has gotten too intense.

Everywhere Ann goes, she carts the tools of her tastes. She keeps them in her car in a large plastic trunk. Inside are a half-dozen leather whips, industrial chains, handcuffs and wide leather restraints, three riding crops and various harnesses for genitalia: a couple of long wooden paddles, including an authentic Carolina fraternity paddle; smaller items, like clamps and clothes pins, neatly packed in a clear plastic organizer; condoms and latex gloves for safe sex; and a first aid kit in case something goes wrong. It hasn't yet, she says. She knows CPR.

Like other S&Mers, Ann is defensive. She knows that to most people, what she practices looks a lot like sexual abuse.

It isn't, she says.

"I've never done anything to anyone that they did not want me to do," Ann says. "S&M is about caring. It's another way to get close to someone. The times I have felt absolutely connected to someone was doing S&M"

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Dr. Charles Moser, a San Francisco psychologist and

sadomasochism expert, says S&M was first described as deviant sexual behavior in 1886. Up until then, psychiatrists saw it as a medical curiosity. Although Freud and others wrote about S&M before World War II, it went virtually unstudied until the 1970s.

"We used to think these people were child molesters, sociopaths, violent people, but none of that has panned out," says Moser, author of academic articles on sadomasochism. His most recent work, "Nipple Piercing," will soon be published in the *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*.

According to Moser, one of fewer than 10 S&M experts in the nation, studies into the practice remain both tentative and scarce. He estimates that about 10 percent of the population practice S&M. And, depending on how and who you count, anywhere between 20 percent and 80 percent of the general population have sexual fantasies about dominance and submission.

The American Psychiatric Association does not classify S&M behavior as an automatic sexual disorder. According to APA's diagnostic manual (the bible for mental health practitioners), it's a problem only under certain circumstances: when it's not consensual, when participants feel distressed, or when it interferes with their jobs, relationships or emotional well-being.

Dr. Chester Schmidt, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center in Baltimore, specializes in sexual disorders and helped write the APA chapter on sexual behavior. By itself, he says, S&M doesn't pose a problem. But he doubts that the S&M lifestyle comes without negative effects. At least, not in this culture.

"I suppose there are people out there who can go through a lifetime of enjoying unusual behaviors without any significant impact on the rest of their life's functions," Schmidt says. "But I would say that person is rare."

Therapists are divided on the behavior, particularly since it straddles a wide continuum — from mild bondage to consensual sexual slavery.

"I wouldn't say it was healthy, and I wouldn't say it was unhealthy," says Raleigh thera-

pist Tom Teague. "I'd have to know a lot more. It all depends on the case."

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a Duke University English professor who writes about sexuality, says the emergence of S&M in popular culture underlines a weird contradiction in our society.

The signs of sex — often with S&M themes — are plastered over billboards, beer commercials, CD covers, MTV videos and so on. In advertisements, women are often painted in submissive or sexually vulnerable positions.

What's interesting about the face of S&M in popular culture is that S&M is marketed for commercial purposes but prohibited by establishment norms.

In the end, S&M points at something most people do not acknowledge: the connection between sex and power.

"Anybody who engages in interpersonal sex is giving up a lot of defenses," Sedgwick says. "They're giving up the adult organization of personality, they're becoming horizontal, they are taking off their clothes, which are badges of profession or protection, and they are even losing control, to some degree, of bodily functions. And those are all things that everything else in our lives tells us are very dangerous to let go of."

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"Stacy" is 29, went to college for a couple of years, and now works in retail as a manager. She is a bottom. She wears her black hair long so it can be pulled. She has a penchant for black, and also for leather. Today, she is wearing both.

"Look," she says, over an omelet and coffee at Big Ed's in downtown Raleigh. "This is not the Marquis De Sade. I'm in a good S&M relationship. I have a good job, I've moved up in the company. And I attribute some of that to my relationship. I think it's healthy."

She is a lesbian. During scenes, she wears a collar, calls her partner "master" and is flogged. When it comes to sex, she doesn't have many complaints, but she wishes she bruised better.

"I like bruises and marks. I want them. I earned them. It's like a badge. And it marks the significance of my relationship. But I don't bruise, or get welts."

And what, exactly, is erotic about pain?

"I think all people like pain. It's addictive," Stacy says. Some

people find their ecstasy in God, she says, some find it in jogging, in watching sports, or in doing drugs. She finds hers in agony.

"Pain makes you high. It's like adrenalin," Stacy says. "And if it's that one thing that gives you ecstasy, you shouldn't be denied it."

A lover introduced Stacy to S&M nine years ago, and now she can't imagine sex without it. She likes the feel of hot wax and sharp whips. She's comfortable in her current relationship with a woman she met through work. She's thinking of intensifying the pain and allowing her partner to hit her hard enough to break the skin.

"I haven't done that yet," Stacy says. "I kind of want to, but I'm scared."

Stacy says some of her lesbian friends have shunned her since she "came out" about S&M. She shrugs.

"Why do we all have to have sex the same?" she asks. "We're all different. Different colors, different cultures. I don't think it's not a normal sex life. It's a different sex life."

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S&M has been around forever, psychologists say. What's different now is its public face. You can see it in the punk culture, in the growth of magazines such as *O and Bound* and *Gagged*. In Madonna's videos and in her book "Sex." In movies like "Rising Sun," or the more recent "Bitter Moon."

The tentative steps out of the S&M closet have been made easier by anonymous communication forums. It's safer for S&Mers and the curious to answer personal ads, or read all sex bondage through the Internet and commercial online servers.

"What's happening is that there are changes in society that allow for more overt advertising and marketing so that these people can find others they're interested in," says Moser, the S&M expert. It wasn't so long ago, he added, where even in San Francisco you couldn't get a publication to print S&M personals.

The Independent has been doing it since 1990, says publisher Steve Schewel.

"We've frequently had to turn down ads, ads that we thought were implying violence, or sounded mean," Schewel says. "We try not to censor the unusu-

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