

ASPECTS OF HEALTHY SEXUALITY WITHIN THE BDSM LIFESTYLE

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ABSTRACT: *Participants in the Bondage and Discipline (BD), Dominance and Submission (DS), and Sado-Masochism (SM) subculture refer to themselves as the BDSM community. The public perception of this community is typically pejorative, largely based on distorted presentations of BDSM in the media, and a lack of knowledge of what the lifestyle entails. These distortions and misunderstandings apply to some mental health practitioners as well, who may also assume that BDSM is abusive and pathological. The BDSM population contends that although their activities are outside normative cultural expectations, they are practicing "Safe, Sane, and Consensual" behavior that is both healthy and more satisfying than the more traditional forms of sexual expression. Our aim is to assist others, including those providing health services to clients who may be BDSM-identified, to be less likely to stereotype and label individuals involved in the lifestyle known as BDSM as pathological, abusive, and sexually unhealthy due simply to their involvement in a lifestyle that is not normative. What we present are aspects of BDSM activity that represent healthy sexuality. Some of the crucial characteristics that signify quality relationships and sexual health for those in the BDSM lifestyle are the same as for those not in this lifestyle.*

Keywords: *BDSM, healthy, sexuality.*

Introduction

Currently, the stigma attached to the sexual practices of sexual minorities or subcultures, especially those involved in the BDSM lifestyle, is tremendous and the myths and negative press associated with it are rampant (Moser & Madson 2002). While the academic community may be increasingly accepting of BDSM (Bondage and Discipline (BD), Dominance and Submission (DS), and Sado-Masochism (SM)), as an alternative lifestyle choice, or subculture, others including not only the general public, but also many practitioners such as psychologists, counselors, and social workers are not as accepting or knowledgeable. Thus, according to Moser (1988), few people admit to BDSM interests, and the lack of understanding of BDSM has led to many misconceptions as well as fear, which may further alienate those who are BDSM-identified.

Those in the helping professions may be in a position to provide mental health services to sexual minorities such as those who are BDSM-identified. This is especially

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true considering that prevalence estimates indicate that perhaps 11% of women and 14% of men have engaged in some form of SM sexual behavior (Janus & Janus 1993). However, there is evidence that the majority of practitioners receive little or no formal training as to the particular needs of sexual minorities, and BDSM-identified individuals in particular. Many only have a very superficial notion of BDSM (Kolmes, Stock, Moser 2006). As a result, they tend to become distracted by the activities, play, and clothing associated with BDSM and believe that it can be nothing but unhealthy sexuality. Practitioners may go even further to assume that it is not just unhealthy, but that it is either abusive or pathological (Nichols 2006; Weinberg 2006), attitudes which may be influenced by sensationalist television portrayals. Of course, these attitudes are further encouraged by the inclusion of paraphilias of sexual sadism and sexual masochism in the DSM-IV-TR (APA 2000).

The BDSM population often contends that although their sexual practices are not normative in society, they are always “safe, sane, and consensual,” enrich their lives, and do not condone violence or harm. Safety and enrichment are the ideals or goals of consensual BDSM. However, it should make sense that BDSM sexual expression “can” be unhealthy, abusive, and pathological, but so can the sexual expression of those who do not practice BDSM activities (“vanillas”). Our aim is to assist others, including those providing health services to clients who may be BDSM-identified, to be less likely to stereotype and label individuals involved in the “kinky” lifestyle known as BDSM as pathological, abusive, and sexually unhealthy due simply to their involvement in a lifestyle that is not normative. What we wish to present are aspects of BDSM activity that represent healthy sexuality.

Those involved in the BDSM lifestyle have not previously been examined in terms of qualities that support healthy sexuality. In fact, many, not recognizing the complexity of human sexuality, would assume it an oxymoron to propose to connect healthy sexuality to BDSM in any form. Historically, the concept *healthy sexuality* focused on STDs and reproductive functioning (Giami 2002; Edwards & Coleman 2004). The concept has evolved since it first came into use at the 1975 conference of the World Health Organization. According to the Pan American Health Organization, the World Association of Sexology of 2001, as well as a 2002 meeting of the World Health Organization, the current definition of healthy sexuality includes, but is not limited to, such aspects as an awareness of responsibility, sexual rights (Edwards & Coleman 2004) as well as respect for self, but also respect for differences and diversity (Robinson, Bockting, Rosser, Miner & Coleman 2002), freedom from discrimination and violence, and includes the enhancement of one’s quality of life through personal relationships, communication, and as a means of identity expression (Lottes 2000).

Methods

Data Collection

Although we utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to conduct our research of those who are members of the BDSM lifestyle, this component of the study is based

on a subset of the qualitative data gathered. The goal of the present research is to examine the practices of those involved in BDSM to discern aspects supportive of healthy sexuality. These research findings represent one component of a much more comprehensive, ongoing research project. Interviews and observational data were gathered over a two year period. We conducted e-interviews as well as gathered data face-to-face. An active participant in the BDSM lifestyle, known to the first-named author, agreed to act as gatekeeper to grant us access. He posted a notice of our research interests and intentions on a regional BDSM listserv. Many on this listserv posted it to other listservs to which they belonged. This resulted in a sample that was not only national in scope, but international as well. The notice contained an email address for participants to contact if they wished to participate.

Once participants contacted us by private messages through the email address set up specifically for this research, they were briefed on the nature of the study, and guaranteed anonymity through the selection of codenames. Next, they were sent a short 27-item questionnaire to complete. This instrument was an adaptation of an earlier questionnaire created by Charles Moser, a researcher who has conducted much research on BDSM-lifestyle participants. The final questionnaire created for the current research project was shown to an active participant in the lifestyle, and changes were made to his specification. After the questionnaire was returned, an on-line e-interview began. This exploratory study employed semi-structured, open-ended interview questions. While pre-established sets of questions and lists of topics were used, additional interview questions emerged from the responses of participants. This permitted a mixture of structure, but also a conversational style of data collection. Data collection from each respondent took anywhere from a week to several months, depending on the speed and length of the responses. Some respondents have remained in touch over the entire two year time frame. Many of these have become highly valued informants. In addition, many of the respondents have been met in-person at various BDSM conventions to further discuss issues as well as to permit a first-hand understanding of practices and norms within the BDSM subculture.

Qualitative methodology has been able to take advantage of many of the advancements in computer technology, and this research is no exception. Use of the internet as a research tool for conducting in-depth interviews, known as e-interviews (Bampton and Cowton 2002), either through synchronous (real-time) or asynchronous (not real-time) time is now recognized as beneficial. Use of email is very common and many feel comfortable using it. E-interviews eliminate the problems with setting meeting times and interviewing someone who lives far away (e.g. in another state, another country, or worldwide). Participants can answer as time permits. This is also beneficial when interviews are lengthy in nature as ours was, since this reduces fatigue in responding (Lindlof and Taylor 2002). Moreover, since this research involves the discussion of sensitive issues, we benefit from the use of the e-interview as a means of reducing participant embarrassment. The internet provides for a certain amount of anonymity, thus promoting the likelihood that participants will feel more comfortable revealing undesirable or stigmatized behavior (Bampton and Cowtown 2002).

We employed an asynchronous format for conducting our e-interviews. Bampton and Cowton (as cited in Berg 2007, 113) describe the benefits of conducting asynchronous qualitative interviews over email:

The asynchronicity of the e-interview has several consequences. There can be pauses in face-to-face interviews, of course, but in an e-interview the delay in interaction between researcher and subject can range from seconds (virtually real time) to hours or days. In our own research some of the replies came back surprisingly quickly, but the important thing is that the interviewee was not committed to replying promptly. In this lies one of the major benefits of the e-interview, in that busy subjects – and busy researchers, for that matter...do not have to identify a mutually convenient time to talk to each other. Nor do they each need to find a single chunk of time in which to complete the full interview...

Sample

The participants in this study consisted of 42 women and 31 men who self-identified to be in the BDSM lifestyle. The majority of males (20) identified as predominantly or exclusively “dominant,” 10 identified as predominantly or exclusively “submissive,” only 1 identified as a “switch.” The majority of females (33) identified as predominantly or exclusively “submissive,” 7 identified as predominantly or exclusively “dominant”, only 2 identified as a “switch.” The age range of participants was 23 to 75 years with a mean age of 43 years. A large percentage (40%) of the participants have been practicing BDSM for more than 10 years.

Analysis

We utilized a grounded theory methodology to assess the experiences of BDSM-identified individuals. Grounded theory is a descriptive qualitative methodology (Glaser 1976; Glaser & Strauss 1967) that focuses on the meanings of social phenomena based on the perspective of symbolic interactionist theory (Blumer 1967). Symbolic interactionism proposes that people construct meanings of phenomena based on their interpretations of interactions they have with others. Grounded theorists base their research on the assumption that individuals and groups experience shared social circumstances, and that meanings are generated from those shared circumstances. It is the role of the grounded theorist to explore and attempt to see the world from the perspective of one’s respondents, to articulate their meanings, thus making sense of their social experience. When possible the grounded theorist develops a theoretical understanding of the processes involved in those experiences. This is accomplished through use of the constant comparative method in which differences and similarities among the data are observed and a theoretical scheme is developed (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The scientific rigor of grounded theory research is assessed through the application of procedures for establishing the credibility (trustworthiness), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability (objectivity) of the study findings (Guba & Lincoln 1994). Therefore, consistent with methodological and

epistemological assumptions of symbolic interactionism and grounded theory, study samples are purposive, and are chosen to reflect the fullness of experience from the perspective of the individual. Hence, our findings are offered as an in-depth, rich description of experiences of those in the BDSM subculture so that different insights and theoretical ideas can be generated.

Credibility was established by having the results carefully reviewed and approved by several informants. There were a total of eight informants. Moreover, utilization of both qualitative and observational data gathering techniques enhances credibility; prolonged time in the field, two years thus far; persistent observation; talking to those in the field; and peer debriefing (Guba & Lincoln 1994). This rich, in-depth articulation of experiences will provide the data base enabling the reader to make transferability of findings possible. Transferability refers to whether findings are applicable to different groups or situations (Glaser 1976). Dependability refers to the reliability and consistency of the findings (Guba & Lincoln 1994). We interviewed a large number of individuals to enhance the dependability of findings. As previously stated we have spent a prolonged period of time in the field, and the lead researcher now has a confirmed, accepted, and trusted presence in the BDSM community not only nationally, but internationally as well. Confirmability is assessed by gauging whether the findings of the study are reflective of the subjects' experiences or result from one's own biases. Confirmability is enhanced through triangulation of methods and frequently assessing one's subjectivity (Guba & Lincoln 1994).

Findings

Findings indicate that the BDSM lifestyle contains many of the characteristics of a broad, inclusive concept of healthy sexuality. Many involved in the BDSM subculture advocate for sexuality and play that should be "Safe, Sane, and Consensual." Implicit in this creed is that there should be responsibility for self and others, including safety from sexually transmitted diseases, that enjoyment should be mutual, and should involve communication and concern. They advocate for sexual emancipation within a lifestyle that is highly stigmatized. Yet within this limitation they manage to overcome shame and guilt among their "sub" culture and are accepting of diversity or variation in sexual abilities, weight, body shape, and sexual proclivities. We discuss these various themes in terms of the norms of dominance, power, punishment, and submission within the BDSM subculture, how healthy sexuality is perceived and promoted, and how participants deal with threats to their rights to engage in sexual expression that enhances their life quality and personal relationships, and that is also a prominent expression of their identity.

Communication

Communication is recognized as the key to maintaining quality relationships of all types. Each of our respondents mentioned communication as central to pleasuring one's partner. Communication is central to negotiating among other things, desires, roles, fantasies, as well as establishing limitations. Being able to communicate these

issues to one's partner is perceived to be one of the key features that separates BDSM relationships from vanilla relationships. These tend to be very explicit, with the understanding that nothing is hidden, there is no shame or embarrassment in revealing likes and desires, regardless of how eccentric they may seem. Respondents say that their openness is more immediate, more complete, and more frequent than either they perceive the vanilla relationships of others or than their own previous vanilla relationships. Below are representative comments regarding the importance placed on open communication:

For my wife and I, it [BDSM] enhances the loving experience by providing another level of interaction. It also requires good communication and observation skills ("MasterofDelight," male dominant, age 49).

Positive aspects would probably be the fact that open communication and honesty between the parties involved is essential, encouraged and practiced by all in the lifestyle. Honest and open communication tends to make relationships better, in my opinion ("Sin City bobbi," female submissive, age 49).

Emotionally, I've found a depth of intimacy I've never had with any other woman including my 2 ex-wives. Mentally, I find the relationship I'm in now much more satisfying because no topic is 'off-limits' and I can be my 'self' completely ("Kinked Rope," male dominant, age 44).

Trust

Self-disclosure is the aspect of communication that promotes trust. Those in the BDSM lifestyle promote trust as another factor important to their relationships. Usually, this is discussed in terms of the trust one must have for one's partner when engaging in activities that have the potential to result in harm rather than pleasure. Trust is also discussed in terms of trusting that one's partner will not only care for him/her physically, but also emotionally. This trust assures that one's partner will not abuse his/her power over them. One respondent made the following comment:

I think also, it is a bonding experience, because you are either opening up yourself to someone's care or they to you. It is a big deal...trust earns trust ("Lady Maya," female dominant, age 36).

Another noted:

Values like openness, truthfulness, and honesty are held high. It is mandatory for trust to be deeply established for the submissive to consensually turn over her power to the Dominant. To catch a Dominant in a lie or being dishonest is one of the worst things that can happen in the lifestyle because he is no longer worthy of trust ("Dom Master," male dominant, age 53).

Taking the trust issue a bit further, one informant commented:

I see BDSM as an avenue to open discussions of sexual and other desires/interests which can lead to a greater level of trust and honesty which will lead to a greater bond between partners ("Kinked Rope," male dominant, age 44).

Norms Within The BdsM Lifestyle

Close examination of informant responses yielded the following set of behavioral norms governing participation in the BDSM lifestyle. Though not exhaustive, they do offer great insight into the rules structuring BDSM behavior.

1. An overt/explicit desire and attempt to fulfill and engage one's partner's fantasies.
2. Very sexually open and willing to experiment.
3. The consensual nature of BDSM behavior is valued and recognized as essential. Thus the norm is that play should be "Safe, Sane, and Consensual." Some adhere to "RACK" (Risk Aware Consensual Kink). Still, the norm is that play should be consensual.
4. Implicit, in the motto that play should be "Safe, Sane, and Consensual" is that there should be responsibility for self and others. In dungeons (clubs) there is also much discussion and teaching about safety measures to prevent physical harm as well as safety from sexually transmitted diseases.
5. BDSM play should be mutually fulfilling for all participants.
6. There is ample time spent focusing on the pleasure of one's partner. The first author has observed anywhere from one to two hours dedicated solely to the pleasure of one's partner.
7. Related to the previous statement: There is less of a focus on penile-vaginal penetration and more often full-body contact and pleasuring.
8. An element of safety is provided by the use of "safe words." Safe words allow for the receiver (bottom or submissive) to communicate safely with the dominant who is providing the stimuli. Safe words allow for one to communicate when the stimuli should be stopped if desired.
9. Within their subculture, there is a sense of community, a sense that there are others who share their sexual proclivities. This helps in having a sense pride for who they are among others who are likeminded and who provide support for such identities.
10. There is tremendous acceptance of diversity or variation of all sorts, including sexual abilities, sexual orientations, as well as one's variation of "kink" or fetish. There is less emphasis on ideal weight and body shape. There is understanding and acceptance for the complexity and variability that the acronym "BDSM" encapsulates.

Freedom from Discrimination and Violence

These criteria or aspects of healthy sexuality require elaboration. First, many of those in the BDSM lifestyle/subculture have either experienced discrimination from those not in the lifestyle, or fear it. Thus, many conceal their lifestyle to most others who are

not participants. While openness is a comforting thing among others who are in the subculture, it is not always perceived as an option in relating to those not a part of the subculture. The secrecy surrounding BDSM activity and those involved in this subculture is a result of the stigma attached to this alternative lifestyle. Deliberate concealment of a portion of one's identity, perceived to be central to the self, entails the withholding or concealment of information that could be damaging to oneself if others discovered what they work hard to keep private. The fear is that one would experience the loss or disapproval of loved ones, lose his/her job, or perhaps be a victim of violence (Stiles & Clark 2006).

Regarding her highly responsible position, a respondent noted:

In terms of my career, being a teacher puts me in a very vulnerable position. I work in a very conservative community. That coupled with me being a teacher would probably make me a target for dismissal ("Gossamer," female submissive, age 40).

Commenting on the hyper masculine environment in which he works, a male respondent stated:

In the workplace, it could be disastrous, I work in a 'macho-male' environment, and knowledge of my lifestyle would just invite ridicule. They already think of me as more-than-a-bit strange; that would just be too much ("Clay Mosby," male submissive, age 46).

Speaking directly about her position in the medical field, a nurse commented:

Well, my employer does not know, and I would probably be fired if they did know. I am a pediatric RN. I don't think people would let me take care of their kids if they knew ("Tawni," female submissive, age 35).

Second, "violence" is an issue in another, entirely separate, manner. A common misperception is that those in this lifestyle legitimate violence. This is false—They may legitimate "pain," but not violence. Violence in terms of brutality is not the goal. For those who are interested in SM, the goal is to provide or receive pain. Furthermore, this is pain of an erotic nature not pain for pain's sake. As one informant noted:

Most people hear this term [BDSM] and associate it with whips and chains and what most people might consider abusive things. But BDSM is about two or more people caring enough about another to set their own desires aside to help fulfill the others ("Cagedsgt," male dominant, age 51).

Another male respondent noted with unusual clarity and insight:

Men are brought up in our culture to not hit women. Men that hit women and leave bruises and welts are considered abusive and go to jail. We had talked about this beforehand and she worked very hard to let me know it was okay and that she wanted to be beaten and used. It wasn't until I sat quietly in the backyard one morning watching the sun rise with a cup of coffee and thought it all through logically that I came to peace with my feelings of guilt. I wanted to beat her. She wanted me to beat her. We both got sexually charged from my use of her. The nights we would play, the sex

would only stop from exhaustion. After this I saw it more as a unique form of sexual expression that not everyone would like or understand. But, that as long as the parties involved agreed and consented, there was nothing to be guilty about. Enjoy! (“Jim,” male dominant, age 49).

Below are questions asked of those in the course of our study, followed by representative responses. The responses reveal not only the importance that BDSM holds for these individuals, but also reveal many aspects of a broader, more inclusive definition of healthy sexuality.

Quotes from Participants

Hey, I’m 57, my wife is 58, and we have mind-bending passing-out screaming sex. Sometimes involving genital contact. What’s not to like (“Garnish,” male dominant, age 57).

Question: “What do you feel are the positive and/or negative aspects of BDSM?”:

- Better than drugs. Endorphins are free and can get you higher than anything you can buy on the street (“SubToy,” male submissive, age 39).
- Positive: Improved communication, deeper relationships, major trust building experiences, openness with our partners about who we really are, a realization that everyone is different and an openness to accepting those who are (within legal bounds and SSC).

Negative: sex becomes more involved and difficult to have a “quickie” when life gets busy (“Phaedra,” female submissive, age 24).

- The main things are the freedom to truly be and experience who we are, without the shame, guilt and judgments of a society loaded with inhibitions and hangups about human sexuality and intimate expressions at the core. In the lifestyle we can find validation and acceptance. We can embrace our deepest desires and feel okay in doing so and that we are normal and not misfits....The pleasure that many derive from the endorphin rush of pain, bondage, a different way of sexual intimate expression and loving, and where it can take us. The unexplored places. The trust lessons, both in ourselves as well as in the other that we give ourselves to (“Liz,” female submissive, age 45).
- For me it is a release, a way of letting anger and pain and emotion go. This is a biggy for me. It is also a part of who I am neither, good or bad. It is just there and BDSM is a way of letting it out without hurting myself or others. And for people just playing in the bedroom it can really give a sense of trust and responsibility to each partner.

Negatives: for me the fact it is not accepted and if the wrong people find out it could be my future as a teacher (“Sally,” female submissive, age 27).

- So much acute awareness of power dynamics in relationships, in life, in oneself...developing skills for good stewardship of power in all those arenas-

even when power comes unasked for. Deep, deep intimacy...dancing with shadows and validating each other in those places...being seen, taking risks in safe ways. Permission to surrender and to take up power ("Dimitra," female submissive, age 31).

- One of the things I like about BDSM is that there are so many different kinds of things to do, in contrast with vanilla sex ("Jay," male submissive, age 59).

Question: "What type of impact has BDSM interests had on your relationships or how has it affected your sexual and or emotional/psychological life?":

- I think the single biggest impact has been that my relationships are far more honest than they used to be and it has forced me to become more aware of who and what I am and how I relate to potential partners. Well, it has forced me to confront my thoughts and beliefs and change some of them and ask myself a lot of hard deep questions about my motives. I feel as if I am pretty emotionally balanced in my approach to my bdsm/sex life. BDSM is just the way in which I express my sexuality ("Maddmonk," male dominant, age 60).
- Again having to speak mostly from the standpoint of a married person, I think it has helped grow our relationship in some ways. The entire subject has caused us to both open up to one another and really get good at talking about stuff. Hey, if you can talk to someone about how hard you like them to tie you down then I think you can pretty much feel comfortable about talking about anything. Definitely made it more fun I think. More exciting and adventurous. Like I said before it keeps the lines of sexual communications open and that is always a good thing ("SubToy," male submissive, age 39).
- I think it has made it much better and more interesting. Within the BDSM community, you can freely and openly discuss sex to a degree that is generally not possible in the vanilla world. Playing with multiple partners is far more acceptable than in vanilla life. Nothing is off limits, as long as it is Safe, Sane and Consensual. I love the sex role reversal involved in activities such as forced bi and strapon sex and would likely not be able to do those things in the context of a vanilla relationship...I love heavy erotic pain, and BDSM provides the outlet for it...I think it has enhanced it. It has made me a far less inhibited person ("Jay," male submissive, age 59).
- The question appears to presuppose a distinction between BDSM as affective, and my sexual life as affected. There is none, much the same way a top is not a top without a bottom in the picture (and vice versa). While I have and enjoy conventional, gentle intercourse as an extension of my affections, it is precisely that; affectionate in the way that walking hand in hand or a delicate peck on the cheek speaks my feelings for another person. The fugue of my high sexual arousal is inseparable from BDSM ("Mac Heath" male dominate, age 42).
- BDSM allows release of all inhibitions, all secrets, all prejudices. As a submissive I receive my pleasure in seeing my partner's use of her power; how she employs

it, how she enjoys it and how she benefits from it. Her power is my aphrodisiac, and how I respond to Her [Sic – Being a submissive means that one's dom or master's name, and any reference to him/her, is always capitalized and those of the submissive is always in lower case letters. These norms come into play because of communication that takes place online] is my mission. There is nothing like this in vanilla-world. I am more sexual and focused in my 60's than I was 40 years ago. And, I expect to keep this up for some time, especially since my partner is 23 years younger and most certainly 'expects' me to! Each day brings a challenge, perhaps an uncertainty, but this has to be faced and resolved, not only to my personal satisfaction, but more importantly, to hers. What a nice way to start each day. ("Tony," male submissive, 65).

Conclusions

Some of the crucial characteristics that signify quality relationships and sexual health for those in the BDSM lifestyle are the same as those that signify quality "vanilla" relationships that are sexually healthy. Although, those in the BDSM lifestyle often talk about how they find the context of their relationships more fulfilling than when they were involved in "vanilla" relationships (Stiles & Clark 2006).

The important issue here is that as researchers we are focusing on "context" rather than behavior. The problem occurs when individuals, including mental health practitioners, not fully knowledgeable of BDSM relationships, focus on behaviors (flogging, whipping, the wearing of collars as symbols of ownership, humiliation tactics, etc.) rather than focusing on the enjoyment and subjective meaning that BDSM play holds for the participants. This focus on behaviors, rather than contextual meanings, often produces an outsider's view of abuse and/or pathology. Previous research suggests that BDSM-identified individuals recognize these biases and are concerned about the ability to find quality mental health care (Weinberg 2006).

Practitioners who interact with clients who may be BDSM-identified would benefit from increased understanding and knowledge of not only what BDSM entails, but would also benefit by keeping in mind the positive meaning it holds for the participants. Finally, when practitioners benefit from incorporating an understanding of a broader, more inclusive definition of healthy sexuality, their BDSM-identified clients benefit as well.

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