

Does BDSM Power Exchange Among Women Reflect Casual Leisure? An Exploratory Qualitative Study

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Introduction and Background

Various practices involving consensual bondage and discipline-dominance and submission-sadomasochism (BDSM) are typically interpreted from discourses pertaining to sexuality, which has historically been understood and regulated by science, medicine and psychiatry (Foucault, 1978). However, despite that normalizing discourses have relegated BDSM practices to the “outer limits” (bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned) of human sexual behavior—in contrast to the “charmed circle” (good, normal, natural, blessed), which includes heterosexual, monogamous, married, and “vanilla” forms of sex (Rubin, 1993)—scholarly reviews show that BDSM cannot be explained by psychopathology (i.e., Pows & Davies, 2012; Weinberg, 2006; Williams, 2006). Research further shows that BDSM participation is not motivated by underlying antifeminist attitudes (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Prior, 2013) or being abused as children (Sandnabba, Santilla, Alison, & Nordling, 2002).

While research shows that BDSM participation is not associated with psychopathology, a few recent studies have suggested that there may be psychological benefits for some people who regularly participate. A national study in Australia ($N=19,307$) found that males who regularly

participated in BDSM scored significantly lower than other men regarding psychological distress (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008). A recent study in the Netherlands found that BDSM participants ($n=902$) scored significantly higher than matched controls ($n=434$) on several measures associated with psychological health (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). The psychological benefits reported in these large studies are consistent with benefits associated with leisure experience.

Scholars have recently suggested that BDSM may be understood as leisure experience (Newmahr, 2011; Williams, 2006, 2009; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Leisure is difficult to precisely define, and may be understood as activity, time, or setting, but scholars agree that it is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, and is associated with psychological benefits, such as producing pleasure or enjoyment, positive emotions, reduced stress, sense of adventure, and expressing important parts of the self (Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011). Leisure studies, as a unique field, is rooted in sociology and social psychology, and addresses the “who, what, how, and why” of meaningful, enjoyable leisure experiences. Although western culture seems to be predicated on work and career, leisure experience is essential to a healthy and fulfilling lifestyle.

Although more research is needed, it appears that understanding BDSM as legitimate leisure experience may account for a wider range of BDSM experiences, motivations, benefits, and possibilities. While sexuality discourses are certainly relevant to understanding BDSM, there are some BDSM activities (among some participants) that are not necessarily experienced as, or motivated by, sexuality or

eroticism. A leisure perspective can account for these phenomena, while at the same time, scholars recognize that sex practices (and erotic BDSM) may also be understood as leisure (Attwood & Smith, 2013). In other words, a leisure perspective seems capable of explaining a wide range of BDSM experiences that may or may not be sexually motivated.

Leisure activities can be classified along a continuum from casual to serious (Stebbins, 1997, 1999). Casual leisure has been described as being an “immediately rewarding, relatively short-lived, pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it,” (Stebbins, 1997, p. 18). Casual leisure is often playful and spontaneous, and involves “doing what comes naturally” (p. 18). In contrast, serious leisure includes the need to persevere; is career-like (having stages and turning points); requires significant personal effort based on acquired knowledge, training or skill; provides durable benefits and rewards; is associated with identifying with the activity; and has a unique ethos and social world (Stebbins, 1999).

While scholars have explained that a BDSM lifestyle fits criteria for serious leisure (Newmahr, 2011, Williams, 2006, 2009), the possibility that such practices may reflect elements of casual leisure has not been explored. However, Taylor and Ussher (2001) found that BDSM participants in their study used words such as “playful,” “fun,” and “an escape from the ordinariness of life” in describing their experiences, which is consistent with casual leisure. Therefore the purpose of this pilot study was to explore, qualitatively, whether BDSM experiences were associated with a common aspect of casual leisure, play.

Methods

Both authors are scholars and members of the BDSM community. The first author utilized a form of snowball sampling to interview nine adult women who were highly involved in the BDSM community in Los Angeles County. The first author is also an active member of the Los Angeles BDSM community, thus authenticity, trust and respect were established among participants. Participants were White and ranged in age from 22 to over 60 years. Regarding sexual orientation, six participants identified as bisexual, bicurious or queer; one identified as lesbian; one identified as straight; and another identified as unsure about her sexual orientation at the time of the interview. The sample, although small, included dominants, switches, submissives and slaves and reflected a wide range of BDSM interests. The sample for this pilot study came from a separate ethnographic study originally conducted by the first author (Prior, 2013).

Participants were asked, “Is playfulness and fun interconnected with SM power exchange?” If participants responded affirmatively, they were then asked, “How so?” The interviewer also asked follow-up questions to gain clarification as needed. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The authors then analyzed transcripts using line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2000) to explore relationships among codes and to identify key themes from findings.

Findings

Participants reported that play and fun are important, if not essential, aspects of BDSM participation. Several participants frequently used words such as “silly,” “laughing,” “giggles,” “fun,” and “playful” to describe many of their scenes. Furthermore, some

descriptions reflected other attributes of casual leisure, such as spontaneity in engaging in specific behaviors during a scene and doing what seems natural.

A major theme from the data centered on how attributes of casual leisure in BDSM seems to connect participants' adult identities with the playfulness, silliness, fun, and creativity commonly experienced during childhood. One participant explained that, "there's been aspects of Disneyland brought up in a scene (and) some of my paddles have Disney characters on them." She added that she "had actual (children's) toys for (BDSM) toys." A participant who enjoys frequent pet play, which for her is often "fun and silly," stated that such play is "a huge aspect of my relationship (with her life partner) and my identity." One of the older participants reported that over time there has been "an increasing childlikeness in my walking through life." For participants in this study, BDSM as casual leisure seems to connect adult identities with healthy characteristics and experiences of childhood.

Another theme that emerged from the data, perhaps not surprisingly, involved how playful, fun, and enjoyable attributes of BDSM are directly linked to specific BDSM identities (i.e., dominant, switch, slave). Although this study utilized a small sample, there were variations in how casual leisure attributes were experienced according to BDSM contexts and roles. For example, switches described experiencing important casual leisure attributes, in different ways, across both dominant and submissive aspects of their participation. In contrast, a participant who is strictly dominant explained that although sometimes humor, silliness, and spontaneity are present in her scenes, she must still "focus and pay attention because I have to read somebody's body language and what they're (sic)

feeling." A participant who identifies as a 24/7 slave reported that while she is "extraordinarily playful," and her playfulness is often "irreverent" both inside and outside the BDSM community, she does not "do" play as something separate from her identity. She added, "I am always slave." For her, her 24/7 slavery and her playfulness are understood as complex natural expressions of her unique self.

A third theme from our findings involved physical and psychosocial health benefits that participants derive from BDSM. One participant reported that, "...for me a lot of BDSM is lighthearted and enjoyable and it provides a sort of outlet for all of the stress that I have to deal with." Another participant stated that for her, BDSM is a form of preferred play, and that play is "essential to being a balanced person." She further added that it keeps her "youthful" and "being in the moment." A participant who identifies as dominant believes that adding play and fun to BDSM power exchange sometimes may be necessary "in order for those that are involved to grow from the experience."

Summary and Conclusion

Despite that participation in BDSM activities is termed "play" by the BDSM community, scholars have conceptualized it primarily as serious leisure without yet exploring how it may, at times, also be casual leisure. Although this exploratory study utilized qualitative data provided by a small sample of participants, our findings suggest that BDSM participation may sometimes reflect qualities of casual leisure, such as playfulness, spontaneity, doing what comes natural, and childlike fun (Stebbins, 1997). Our findings suggest that (a) attributes of casual leisure seem to provide specific benefits to participants that are consistent with leisure generally; (b)

attributes are linked to specific BDSM identities (i.e., dominant, switch, submissive slave, etc.) in how they emerge within BDSM contexts; and (c) casual leisure attributes connect participants' adult identities to their positive childhood experiences that involved casual leisure.

It appears that BDSM may reflect qualities of both serious and casual leisure, though the extent of each likely depends on specific roles and purposes of BDSM participation. Currently, a large quantitative study is in progress to help determine the extent that BDSM fits a leisure perspective, generally, and also potential differences in BDSM as serious or casual leisure between BDSM identities, specifically. While much more research on BDSM as potential leisure is needed, it appears that a leisure framework may explain a wide range of BDSM activities. At the same time, utilizing a leisure perspective may eventually help decrease stigma that many BDSM participants, unfortunately, continue to face.

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