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Girlfags and Guydykes: “Too Queer for Straights and too Straight for Queers”

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to highlight the experiences of those who call themselves “girlfags” and “guydykes” and to interpret the identity labels associated with these terms. Online, the communities that refer to themselves by these terms all define the labels and what they signify in terms of identity differently. These include descriptions of people who consider themselves gay but “in the wrong body”, for example, when a woman is sexually oriented toward gay men or when a man is sexually oriented toward lesbian women, most often with a gender or queer element to the definitions. Little to no previous research can be found on these identities, and what is known is mainly found on internet blogs and forums. The participants were sought through a Facebook forum, resulting in a total of 11 interviews with two guydykes and nine girlfags. The results were analyzed within the framework of social constructionism and applied with Butler’s (1990) concept of the heterosexual matrix and van Anders’ (2015) Sexual Configurations Theory (SCT), involving concepts of gender/sex sexuality, nurturance, and eroticism. The results show that those who identify as girlfags and guydykes are proud of their identity, but the complexity of the identity nevertheless affects many aspects of their lives. The respondents reveal how the labels involve one’s sense of self and gender identity. In addition, they touch upon transgender issues, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and other relational aspects. These identities break gender norms, sexual practices, and even sexual orientations within the LGBT context. The results indicate the need for further research on transgender issues; in particular, the relational and social aspects of the girlfag and guydyke identities.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to highlight how girlfags and guydykes¹ describe their identity and experience and interpret the identity labels of “girlfags” and “guydykes”. Discussing sexual minorities often triggers strong feelings and debate, and minority identities are often treated as subjects to be presented and explained through the opinions and prejudice of others. In light of this, this study aims to center the words of the girlfags and guydykes themselves. “Girlfags” and “guydykes” are terms of self-identification used by sexual minorities, where, in short, “girlfags” is a label pertaining to women and “guydykes” pertains to men. These communities and related information about them are found mainly online in the form of forums, chat boards, websites,

¹ “Girlfags” and “guydykes” self-identify with these complex terms and use the former slurs as reclaimed words, with no negative association to their sexual identity. The complexity of the use of these terms is further discussed in the results.

and blogs. The most active forums and websites started around 2010, with one forum having 428 members as of March 2019 (Girlfags and gurdykes, n.d.). Most forums and sites are international and in English, with the exception of a few German blogs and forums. The definitions found online on the significations of the identities vary. Some are wiki-based, meaning anyone can change them, but this can lead to people writing derogatory definitions of the identity (Girlfag, 2014; Gurdyke, 2014).

The definitions tend to be complex, adding exceptions in multiple steps. In the brief version, the identity describes people who feel that they are gay or “homosexual”² but “in the wrong body”, for example, when a woman is sexually oriented toward gay men or when a man is sexually oriented toward lesbian women, and this usually includes a gender or queer element to the definitions of both gender and sexualities. A queer identity label can be described as a person’s choice to place themselves outside the heteronormative system or define themselves beyond the gender binaries (i.e., a man or a woman). Examples of identity labels within queer are “genderqueer”, “genderfluid”, and simply, “queer”. A queer identity can, in certain contexts, refer to any norm-breaking person within the LGBTQ+ umbrella. This can be liberating for the individual, as it increases control over their identity and makes it possible for them to personalize the identity rather than to adopt an established identity label (Schei Jessen, 2017). However, the basic principles behind the girlfag or gurdyke identity labels are contradictory and confusing in themselves, which further creates the need to look into every aspect of the identity to further understand the phenomena.

Girlfag and gurdyke identities have had an increase in activity in social media as well as other media in the past 10–15 years. Although these identities are mainly discussed on the internet, where there are clips of people discussing the identities, some mentions have also occurred on TV. In 2006, the American TV talk show, “The Tyra Banks Show”, interviewed two women who identify as girlfags on the theme, “Women Who Love Gay Men”. While censoring the actual name of the identity, the show describes it in detail (Banks, 2006). Also, in a 2016 episode of the TV series, *Shameless*, the LGBTQ+ character, Ian, says the word aloud when describing his friend (Wells, Abbot & Rossum, 2016). In addition to TV, in 2012, the author and sex educator Janet Hardy wrote an autobiography called *Girlfag – A Life Told in Sex and Musicals*. Hardy, who self-identifies as a girlfag, describes her life story and attraction to gay men (Hardy, 2012).

In this article, based on interviews with eleven self-defined girlfags and gurdykes, we take our departure point in the questions: How do the interviewees describe their experiences as girlfags and gurdykes and how do they interpret these identity labels?

Literature Review

To our knowledge, no scientific studies about girlfags and gurdykes currently exist. Therefore, this literature review describes phenomena that relate to the area in different ways.

² The terms “homosexual” and “transsexual” are often used by the participants when describing themselves in this study as well as in online forums and in descriptions of the identity. The authors are aware and apologetic about the potential pathological context the words might create but want to reflect the language of the participants. Outside of quotes, we have chosen to use different terminology, limiting these terms to within quotes.

According to Queen and Schimel (1997), the term “girlfag” appeared in the late 1990s, although American sex educator and writer Janet Hardy claims it was coined later in a 2003 article (Hardy, 2015). Several texts mention what is now known as the girlfag and guydyke identities. In 1987, the American psychologist Brian Gilmartin wrote a book called *Shyness & Love: Causes, Consequences, and Treatment*, which explores what the author refers to as a type of heterosexuality where men feel they do not fit in with their gender role, for example, regarding courtship. He uses the term “male lesbian” to describe men who are envious of the prerogatives of the female gender but do not wish to change their male bodies (Gilmartin, 1987). In the 1990s, Sedgwick (1993), a queer and critical theorist, wrote about her self-identification as a gay male and Nagle (1997), a bisexual activist and author, similarly depicted feelings of attraction towards gay men by imagining herself as a gay man (Nagle, 1997). Looking to history, a German essay with a queer theoretical perspective found similar phenomena described in prose as early as 40–104 A.D. and presents cultural and pop-culture phenomena connected to the identity of girlfags (Meyer, 2007).

Important for the understanding of girlfags and guydykes is sexual orientation. The concept is split between the essentialist view of sexual orientation as an unchangeable inborn part of oneself and the social constructionist fluid approach to sexual orientation. Researchers have not been able to conciliate to one definition, but those of both views often refer to four dimensions that encompass a sexual orientation. The first is the inner perception of one’s sexual identity (e.g., straight or gay). The second involves one’s erotic and sexual fantasies, while the third refers to with whom or toward whom one’s sexual activity is enacted. And last is to whom one feels emotionally attracted (Nilsson Schönnesson, 2012).

In the book, *Girls Who Like Boys Who Like Boys*, Neville (2018) mentions the girlfag phenomena, mainly relating it to women with fantasies that involve being a gay man in sexual situations with other men and identifying as a gay man while simultaneously identifying as a woman. However, she only touches upon gender and does not delve any deeper. Neville (2018) further discusses the male gaze as it has previously been discussed in feminist studies on social constructionism, pornography, and the making of pornography from a man’s perspective, but here, it is discussed even further. Neville (2018, p. 64) refers to Marks (1996, p. 130) when presenting the citation of a woman who says, “To look sexually at men I must masquerade as a gay man, i.e. provisionally borrow a male gaze.” According to Neville, it is widely known that men sometimes choose to watch pornography involving two or more women having sex. Less accepted and less known is when people who identify as women often enjoy porn and erotica including men having sex. Research from Chivers et al. (2004) focuses on how sexual arousal relates to sexual identity. For example, the researchers found women to be more open than men, with regard to gender, in what sexual stimuli makes them aroused (Chivers et al., 2004).

Zsila et al. (2018) investigate the modern phenomenon of Japanese *hentai* (i.e., animated or manga pornography) called “yaoi” or “Boy’s Love” (BL), which resonates with the girlfag phenomenon. Yaoi is a homoerotic anime genre mainly written by women for women about gay men or boys with a varying degree of sex, from romantic to hardcore BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism). The yaoi/Boy’s Love phenomenon allows girls, women, and queer-identified people to fantasize and be sexually aroused by both feelings of love and lust between gay men (Zsila et al., 2018). Meyer (2010)

presents this as a world where there are no boundaries of gender and sexual orientation, and girlfags are included as a part of this culture (Meyer, 2010).

Also related to girlfags and gudykes is the term “crossdreaming” (or “crossdreamers”) that was coined to describe “the phenomenon that some people get aroused by the idea of being the ‘other sex’ (relative to their assigned sex at birth)” (Molay, 2014). The term is used on a website about crossdreamers along with scientific articles and reviews relating to fantasies, attraction and identification with trans identities. Crossdreaming is used in a wide sense, as it includes all aspects of gender identities, although not explicitly expressing the binary-coded aspect of same-sex attraction. The concept thereby may include girlfags and gudykes, and articles and stories about these identities are shared on a crossdreamers website (crossdreamers.com, n.d.). Sexual fantasies generally play an important role in people’s sex lives, as they have “a significant role in forming and exerting influence over us as sexual beings” (Brander, 2015, p. 206.). Some of the existing descriptions of the crossdreamer and girlfag and gudykes identities are similar to a disputed term presented in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) published by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) known as “transvestic fetishism 302.3”, further described as “autogynephilia” in male-to-female transsexualism. Transvestic fetishism describes a heterosexual male finding sexual arousal in cross-dressing (Lawrence, 2017). Autogynephilia is a term coined by Blanchard which refers to a male’s propensity to be sexually aroused by the thought of himself as a female (Blanchard, 1985). Autoandrophilia is the female equivalent. The terms are criticized by the trans community because the phenomenon would imply a fetishism or paraphilia rather than a transgender identity and could be used to explain dysphoric feelings as fetishism and thereby denying transgender people their identity and/or rights to sex-confirming surgery (Lawrence, 2017). Criticism of autogynephilia is also expressed within academia (Moser, 2010; Serano, 2010). The crossdreamer and gudyke and girlfag identities reject the concepts, considering them pathologizing and transphobic, which is discussed on community discussion boards. However, the terms are sometimes discussed more neutrally by self-identified girlfags and gudykes in their search for similarities with their identity labels and feelings of same-sex attraction (Crossdreamers n.d., Girlfags and gudykes, n.d.).

Theoretical Framework

The following section presents concepts that will be used in analyzing the narratives of the respondents. Firstly, Judith Butler’s theory of the heterosexual matrix (1990) will be presented. Thereafter, the concepts of Gender/Sex Sexuality and Eroticism and Nurturance from Sari van Anders’ Sexual Configurations Theory (2015) are highlighted to complement and extend the heterosexual matrix to capture the meaning of girlfags and gudykes’ sexual identity.

The Gender Aspect and the Heterosexual Matrix

The gender aspect of the results will be analyzed with Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of *the heterosexual matrix*. Butler explains how the heterosexual norm is compulsory and used as a lens through which we categorize people we meet in terms of gender, sex, and sexuality. Butler proposes that even sex is performatively constructed, creating a distinction between individuals which is held up through language and normative acts. This distinction has created the norm for

sexual orientation and desire deriving from this invented connection between gender and biological sex, thus creating a binary referred to by Butler as *the law of heterosexual coherence*. This law is part of the system of the heterosexual matrix. It can be further described as a strict binary used to place people in the matrix. When looking at a person, we assume that, for example, people of the biological sex, men, are expected to have masculine gender traits and be sexually attracted towards women. Biological women are, vice versa, expected to be feminine and be attracted to men. Our only dealt options in the matrix are therefore male/female, masculine/feminine, and attracted to women/men. Butler further describes this as “that grid of intelligibility through which bodies, gender, and desires are naturalized” (Butler, 1999, p. 194). It is possible to break the binary, although to do so is to view this as exactly that — breaking it — and also usually within the binary options. Regarding this, Butler discusses drag, when an individual performs the so-called other gender, as a *potentially* subversive act. Butler questions the socially constructed matrix and that it does not allow identities outside of or in between the matrix to be accepted or seen as natural. Butler claims that hegemonic heteronormativity is artificial, and therefore, has no claim of essentialism and can be challenged through alternative performative acts (Butler, 1990). Butler’s theory covers gender aspects and more, but ever since it was developed, the use of sexual orientation in a queerer setting calls for a complementary theory on sexual orientation for this study.

The Sexual Configurations Theory (SCT)

After studying the existing research, analyzing the identities of girlfags and guydykes from the traditional concept of sexual orientation seems impossible as the question of sexual orientation appears to be a confusing component of the identities. The concept of sexual orientation is simply inadequate when describing the identities. With feminist and queer science as a backdrop in her studies, Sari van Anders (2015) suggests that the concept of sexual orientation is lacking in the study of the complexity of sexual identities and proposes the use of what is discussed as the Sexual Configurations Theory. In this theory, concepts such as gender/sex sexuality, nurturance, and eroticism are used. van Anders developed the Sexual Configurations Theory to describe the complexities of people’s sexualities and their multiple sexual dimensions. It uses a 3D model to depict multiple sexual dimensions that relate to gender, sex, and number of partners. One’s orientation, behavior, and identity are seen as both related and distinct. The concept does not replace the term “sexual orientation” but rather enriches it, making it a broader, more comprehensive base to understand and describe diverse sexualities. Therefore, van Anders’ Sexual Configurations Theory is applied in a wider sense in this study, taking into account the complexity of sexual configurations in individuals.

The primary way to describe a person’s sexuality tends to be a description of their sexual orientation. van Anders (2015) argues that we understand sexual orientation from the perspective of gender, thus making gender a foundation for categorizing sexuality. Two genders are required for this: The gender of the individual and the gender(s) to whom the individual is attracted. But, van Anders (2015) asks, is it gender or sex? Extending thoughts on Butler’s (1990) concept of the heterosexual matrix, van Anders argues that sex seems to be what both laymen and academics alike refer to in discussions of sexual orientation; for example, the biological and physical features related to maleness and femaleness, although this is not usually made explicit. Does this place gender as irrelevant to sexual orientation? Gender refers to traits relating to

masculinity and femininity and gender diversity as socially and culturally learned. The confusion of gender and sex in regard to sexual orientation leads to many questions, for example, “If one is sexually attracted to men, is one attracted to penises? Social identities? Body frames? Interactions? And, how is sexual orientation defined if one is attracted to masculinity regardless of the sex of the person presenting or embodying it? What about attractions to feminine men?” (van Anders, 2015, p. 1177). By asking these questions, van Anders shows that the current use of sexual orientation in scientific research is insufficient and does not reflect the lived experience of many individuals (van Anders, 2015). The Sexual Configurations Theory (SCT) derives from an interdisciplinary mixture of social constructionism, feminist studies, and the bioscientific theory of a Sexual Diversity Lens and more (van Anders, 2015, p 1178). SCT extends the theory of the heterosexual matrix by Butler (1990), who presents the heterosexual norm as compulsory and used as a lens to categorize people we meet in ways of gender, sex, and sexuality. Butler proposes that even sex is performatively constructed, creating a distinction between individuals that is held up through language and normative acts. This distinction has created a norm for sexual orientation and desire deriving from this invented connection between gender and biological sex, creating a strict binary used to place people in the matrix (Butler, 1990).

Core Concepts in the SCT: Gender/Sex Sexuality & Nurturance and Eroticism

van Anders (2015) presents the concept of gender/sex by first giving examples of what the concept of sexual orientation excludes. According to van Anders, sexual orientation based on sex is unclear as to whether the attraction lies in being attracted to vulvas, breasts, and penises or the perceived female or male body. The focus on sex also makes it difficult to sidestep binaries. Gender generally gives more options as a base for orientation, although the concept of sexual orientation fails to make sense of these options. It fails to describe a person who is attracted to women regardless of sex in contrast to people who are aroused by vaginas and breasts regardless of gender. A sole focus on sex within sexual orientation excludes the sexualities of some genderqueer and transgender people and their partners, thereby demanding a new perspective on sexual orientation. van Anders employs the term “gender/sex sexuality” in place of “sexual orientation” to include the gender aspect, which is often lost when talking about sexual orientation. van Anders (2015) promotes the need to see gender/sex sexuality as the key organizer of all sexuality. The theory claims that sexuality must be understood as reflecting aspects of gender/sex even when it is not explicitly named in that context (van Anders, 2015).

In van Anders’ (2015) model and Sexual Configurations Theory, love and lust are replaced by the concepts of nurturance and eroticism. In van Anders (2015, p. 1183), drawing from Diamond’s (2003) compelling question, “What does sexual orientation orient?”, van Anders describes how it explicitly orients lust and attraction but implicitly also love. Love is a loaded word that carries implications of an important, deep emotional connection. Nurturance is not synonymous with love but nevertheless connotes a potentially committed connection, although foremost a loving, warm, and supportive feeling or relationship. Nurturance differs from love in that it does not describe an intensity or infatuation. Neither love nor nurturance is exclusive to romantic or sexual relationships and can be used to describe a number of relationships, for example, those between family and friends. Instead of “lust”, van Anders (2015) chooses to use the term “eroticism”. This term describes sexuality that applies to bodily experiences such as arousal, tantalization, orgasms, pleasure, and more. van Anders explains that

while lust describes sexual desire, motivation, or wanting, eroticism describes “phenomena that are sexually tantalizing, evokes one’s sexual interests or thoughts, are sexually arousing in that they elicit psychological or physiological responses (whether desired or not), or are related to features tied to sexuality. Eroticism is useful because it does not necessitate the same kind of need/desire for release that lust does, even while it can invoke it” (van Anders, 2015, p. 1181). Eroticism and nurturance can be clearly differentiated from one another. A person may feel one without the other, although sometimes in partnered sexuality, they both occur simultaneously (van Anders, 2015). Nurturance and eroticism are used as exploratory concepts in the analysis in this study in order to further comprehend the result and thoughts on attraction, sexuality, and orientation.

Method

Sample of Participants

To recruit respondents for this study, a strategic sample was sought. Respondents were sought in the international Facebook forum called “Girlfags and Guydykes”, seeking members that identify fully or partly as girlfags and guydykes. At the time (September 2018), the group consisted of 431 members, which was the largest member base of any forum of its kind. The group was closed, and one was required to apply for permission to gain access. The group information explained “This is a group for those who identify as girlfags or guydykes, or who think they might – and for their lovers”, although no active lovers were found in the forum. The inclusion criteria stipulated that the group is for people who fully or partly identify as girlfags or guydykes. The exclusion criterion pertained to age, as there should be no underage participants (18 years or older, according to Swedish legislation). The letter with information about the study was posted once and never withdrawn. It was met with exclusively positive and encouraging comments and likes. It stated that the interviews would be in English or Swedish, but no language skill level was stipulated. Nine self-identified girlfags and two self-identified guydykes aged from 26 to 69 years took part. Most respondents originate from Central Europe and North America, thus reflecting a mainly western perspective.

Recruitment and Interviews

In accordance with the internet-based methods of Cheng (2017), a letter of information was posted in the Facebook group, “Girlfags and guydykes”. The letter of information was written in English. The interviews were conducted by the first author (Lindqvist) and various interview methods were used: video call (2), phone call (1), in person (1), email (6), and email with sound files (1), with a total of eleven interviews out of thirteen people who expressed interest. Two simply never answered their email again after initial contact. The same interview guide was used as a base for all the interviews, and the participants were given the same types of questions. The main reason for choosing different media was, in terms of language skills, to make it as comfortable as possible for the participants to describe themselves. The duration of the verbal interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes. The interviews were immediately transcribed verbatim after the interview. The written answers (email) were collected in one document per interview before analysis. The answers in most interviews were similar in content and length regardless of chosen media, although those in writing tended to be more

concise. During the transcription or collection of data, the data were anonymized and nothing apart from age and identity (girlfag or guydyke) was attached to the data (e.g., GF29 or GD52). All data were transcribed in English.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, Elo and Kyngäs' (2008) method was chosen. As a first step of the analysis, an overall view of the data was formed to gain a sense of "what it is all about". In this phase, the material was read through repeatedly and extensively. In the next step, the construction of categories and abstraction was carried according to Elo and Kyngäs' description of the method. The data were read through, and units of meaning were identified. The units of meaning were condensed to codes and transferred on paper notes which were marked with an identification label to be traceable (i.e., GF42 or GD67). The following step in the content analysis is that of open coding. Categories were formed freely without any category being valued as more or less significant than the other (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The categories were placed under main categories, where similar categories were merged or reduced. The material was then analyzed in relation to theoretical perspectives and previous research in the field.

Ethical Considerations

To maintain a high ethical standard, this paper has as its starting point the guidelines from the Swedish Research Council regarding the four fundamental ethical principles for higher research involving humans: the information requirement, the claim of consent, the confidentiality requirement, and the usefulness requirement (Codex (2012)). In this study, the information requirement has been met through the letter of information and the verbal or written reminder of the letter of information at the start of each interview. A consideration of the claim of consent was made through the emailed form of consent and the written or verbal reminder at the start of each interview, which again informed the participant of their ability to stop, pause, or withdraw their participation at any time without having to explain or justify such actions and without consequence. Lastly, the confidentiality requirement was met by not documenting any personal data apart from age and girlfag or guydyke identity and by anonymizing the data before analysis. The data have only been used for the purpose and aim of the study in accordance with the usefulness requirement. The study was ethically approved by Malmö University's ethical board.

Results and Analysis

In this section, the results from the interviews will be analyzed according to the themes that emerged during analysis (as described in the method section). The results will be further analyzed within the theoretical framework of this study.

A Play on Gender

After listening to the participants or reading their words, one can find consistency in terms of them not fitting in to the heterosexual norms that are generally expected of them. They describe seeing the world differently and have a hard time understanding what is expected of them as a woman or man in society and also regarding sex and intimate relationships. Several describe acting and reacting as another gender and in their narratives, the respondents often

stereotype and express a highly normative view on gender and identity expression. They say that they are aware of the stereotyping, but it would be difficult to explain their feelings and experiences in any other way. Some examples are when the participating girlfags say that they understand the minds of men (or gay men) better in general and also have a sexuality closer to that of men (which the respondents exemplify with enjoying the chase, being a top, and less interest in foreplay). The participating gudykes on the other hand, claim to understand the minds of women (or lesbians) better in general and to have a sexuality closer to that which is stereotypically perceived as lesbian (the respondents exemplify this with meeting on equal terms, giving pleasure, and respecting bodies).

Not Getting Things Straight

All 11 of the participants expressed feelings of not belonging in the context of heteronormative behavior. After assessing their bodies, several described not fitting in with the femininities or masculinities that were expected by others, and thereby do not experience the expected feelings of gender belonging. Most participants describe their experiences in a way that can be read as being judged through the lens of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). They feel conflicted when others place them within this matrix when they themselves feel they do not belong, or that they belong in two options at the same time (e.g., man and woman, or woman and masculine). These aspects of gender, femininities, and masculinities are perceived as socialized, cultural, and learned gender roles — a social constructionist setting in line with Butler (1990) and van Anders (2015) — but in this case, the gender aspects do not match the participants' assigned gender and thereby break social norms. Several respondents explicitly expressed viewing sexuality and gender in a social constructionist setting. The following gudyke exemplifies this:

I've never considered the feminized or the feminine as less. In me, it's the opposite really. In me, men or straight men is a lesser, inferior version of humans. I'm not saying that they have to be biologically. That doesn't make a difference probably. But in the way things are, in the way we've been raising each other, if you think about emotional range and if you think about social skills and so on. (GD42)

The participants have early memories of not fitting in with their expected gender roles. Participant GF43 describes both her own socialized behaviors (i.e., masculine behavior) and also letting what attracts her involve a norm-breaking gender performance with men presenting feminine behavior: "...but [I] always noticed I didn't relate to boys/men in the same way other women/girls did, and I also noticed I preferred feminine men." Another girlfag further emphasizes crossing these lines on social gender roles both regarding her own behavior as well as what attracts her in a partner:

I did not know how to flirt in a female role. I also loathed to behave like a typical woman. I wanted the guy to react like a girl, also to look like a girl, yet to be male, not transvestite/transgender. I wanted him to be shy. (GF69)

The above statements, together with other stories from both girlfags and gudykes, show similar patterns in, for example, women adopting more masculine behavior in combination with being attracted to men who adopt more feminine behavior. There are also examples of gudykes,

men, adopting more feminine behavior while they are attracted to women performing more masculine behavior. These performances are, in respect to Butler's (1990) heterosexual matrix, a possible norm-breaking act, a play on gender, and a subversive act. All the respondents described not fitting in with the gender binary regarding gender traits; for example, the girlfags often refer to themselves as tomboys in their early years, and many still apply this label to their identity as grown-ups. The participating girlfags have mostly male or gay male friends and gudykes describe mostly relating to their female friends, as they describe having a hard time understanding the minds and interests of men. The following girlfag describes these feelings of not understanding, not liking, and not identifying with your own assigned gender role:

I know that sounds very sexist, but I often feel like women are communicating in a language I don't understand. It's just like.... okay, I see them talking, I see them acting, but I don't have a clue what's going on. And it's always easier for me with guys, and a lot of women who don't like women too, like yes... to say, "I don't like women", it's so difficult. Because it's not like I don't like their gender, [but] more the social thing is what I mean. So, I was always more of a guy's girl, I think. (GF26)

Aligning with what the girlfag above relates, most participants underscore their gender norm-breaking as social, sexual, and relational behaviors and not about their looks and hobbies, which, in the interviews, generally appeared more conventional or seen as traits they would have regardless of gender. The social, sexual, and relational aspects of non-normative gender behaviors are what the participants describe they are attracted to in partners as well, often ascribing this to the preferred partners' gay identity, which is often explained in a simplified way by the participants.

Subversion of Gender Roles and Expectations

Most of the respondents describe feeling comfortable in their assigned bodies and enjoying certain aspects of the masculine and feminine behaviors or traits that are culturally and socially expected of them from their perceived gender roles. A few respondents discuss this, and remarked that, for instance, they would still perform feminine behaviors even as a man, as these traits are not dependent on their sex. This supported by Butler's (1990) theory on sex also being a social construct. A gudyke describes masculine expressions as the practical choice, not as representing his true self: "The male clothes feel more like a uniform, more practical, but not the one who will express myself. If I want to show who I am, I have to wear women clothes" (GD45). It is not clear what the respondent means by female clothes, but it is interesting how this respondent's stereotypical image of women's clothing has a bearing on how gender is expressed by the respondent. Some of the respondents identifying as girlfags described feeling like drag queens when they enjoy their feminine expression, like a show they put on with attention they might enjoy, but it nevertheless feels like a facade:

I had troubles to identify as something other than cis-female because I thought I had to be masculine, but yeah, I discovered that my femininity is not necessarily, um... a female thing. It's also kind of, yeah... Sometimes I feel like a drag queen when I dress up, so it's not necessarily a cis-female thing. So, this is why I identify as bi-gender and present [as] feminine. (GF28)

The girlfag above describes the feeling of being in drag as a subversive act, as described by Butler (1990), by recognizing it not as a cis-female performance but rather by recognizing the feeling of drag in what would be perceived as a feminine woman through the lens of the heterosexual matrix. Butler (1990) describes drag as a potentially subversive act but indicates that it nevertheless conforms to the existing matrix and reinforces the binary. This could, even if presenting a queer gender label, be seconded by the bi-gender concept. Another girlfag explains the feeling of drag by further emphasizing that her femininity is not related to her sex: “I knew that my femme wasn’t about cis-femininity — before I found [the girlfag] community and language, I would compare myself to a drag queen” (GF43). In the same way, this could be seen as a subversive act but expressed within the framework of the heterosexual matrix described by Butler (1990), thus reinforcing it. These feelings of dragshowing involve complex feelings toward femininities and masculinities and also a high awareness of gender roles by some of the respondents. This may represent a conscious disregard of the importance of gender manifestations in relation to their inner gender identity, or in other words, knowing their true identity is more important than how others perceive it. The sense of drag when presenting one’s body could be seen as a coping strategy, a mental persuasion, where the positive act of drag hides the true identity of the respondents. To be seen in drag and to be perceived as, for example, a woman when you identify as a girlfag, but at the same time actively thinking of it as drag, could be seen as an act of coping when one’s body does not align with one’s identity.

Sexual (Gender) Roleplaying

All of the participants expressed thoughts about sex, sexual fantasies, or sexual activities that align with the stereotypical role of the so-called other gender. Girlfags mostly express a need to dominate, to top and be in control, and in some ways, to objectify the male body they are engaging with. For some, these needs are not in line with their partner’s wishes, but for others these roles suit the partner. Very few actually have experiences of being in relationships with gay-identified people of another gender. A dominant girlfag gives an example of her life with her gay-identified husband: “Along with my partner being a bottom and me being a top. So with a little imagination, some prosthetics, and creativity, we are still together” (GF55). Some respondents play on gender by their partners referring to them as, for example, male or wanting them to call their body parts something else. This help them feel connected with their identity, another girlfag expressed, “Yes, well, I kind of like it when my girlfriend calls me a boy during sexual situations. It doesn’t happen often, but I like it. And yeah, it does something with me” (GF28). Contrary to girlfags’ wish to dominate, among other things, the participating guydykes emphasize the importance of sex on equal terms – where no one dominates, but instead everyone shows care and respect for each other.

As stated, when performing a gender or having an identity like, for example, being lesbian, certain traits are connected to this identity by the respondents. Sexually, the identity is described as open-minded in terms of aspects like sexual practice, which leaves room for diversity in actions and bodies. When speaking of dysphoric feelings, or more specifically, sexual feelings, for girlfags in particular there is a focus on “dicks” (the word most participants use to refer to penises). As stated, when discussing gender sexual roleplaying and sexual practices, the participating girlfags had more issues regarding their physical body than the

participating gudykes. They describe the explicit desire to have a male body and specifically a penis in sexual situations, both in partnered and non-partnered sex. Some girlfags express their wishes and fantasies of having a penis with a focus on the physical sexual sensations they want to experience. One girlfag gives an example:

I don't want to be a man, but I do sometimes wish I had a penis so I could have tactile feedback during anal sex with my partner. But I don't hate my breasts or my vulva; they give me a lot of pleasure, and I'm very grateful for them. But sexual and kink dominance is often associated with the male, especially with respect to gay sex. (GF55)

Many also describe imagining the tactile sensations they would experience if they had a penis while masturbating, some also imagine getting an erection when sexually aroused. Girlfags recurrently share stories and fantasies about particular sexual actions they want to experience with a penis, for example, the exact moment of entering someone anally or so-called deep throating, which is the action of receiving oral sex while pushing one's penis deep into the back of the partner's throat. For some respondents, the wish for a penis seems to be a significant part of their girlfag identity and sexuality. In other areas of life and also sometimes sexually, the respondents describe themselves as mostly comfortable with their female bodies, but the common yearning for a penis seems to connect the girlfags in their identity.

Being Gay, but...

Most participants directly referred to themselves as being gay, as in, girlfags are gay men and gudykes are lesbians. Both identify with the gay and lesbian identity. Several of the participants express this in a very clear way often without problematizing the identity at that moment but saying it self-evidently with pride. One girlfag exemplifies this, "I have known for a long time that I'm a gay man. I felt at ease in the company of gay men more than in any other social gathering" (GF69). A few briefly discuss how they interpret the meaning of being gay, but most respondents spoke of it as an indisputable fact:

I remember that, once, I asked my parents when I was ten or something like that what they would do when I was gay. Looking back, it's interesting that I didn't ask my parents, "What would you do if I would be lesbian?" [in German, there's a clearer distinction than in English language]. My mother said that she wouldn't like it because we would face discrimination. But she had to accept that. My father said he wouldn't accept it. So I knew I could never tell them that their daughter is a gay guy. (GF27)

This girlfag highlights both how being gay can be stated clearly, much like the major part of the participants in this study and shows how the identity has been felt from a young age by many. A few participants describe themselves as partly a gay man or lesbian woman. Fluidity and the ability to change in one's sexual identity over time and context is an element to sexual orientation that the SCT adds to previous theories on explaining sexual orientation. It allows and recognizes these sexual minorities which may change in orientation and behavior (van Anders, 2015).

Orientation

Most of the respondents describe their sexual orientation as gay but “in the wrong body”, or simply lesbian or gay (male). In the following, the two participating gudykes try to clarify their orientation. One does this by explaining that the heteronormative games and positioning between men and women are what differentiates his orientation toward women from that of other men. The other gudyke endeavors to describe the orientation further, trying to portray a lesbian mindset of sorts:

My sexual orientation is lesbian. Nothing else is my interest. There's games between male and female, the cis-games between them are not in my interest. So, I'm full lesbian in my head, I think (GD45).

I once read a thing where it said... you're attracted to girls in the same way “girls that are attracted to girls” are attracted to girls. That explanation really works for me. Like, yes, then I GET it. (GD42)

A couple of respondents describe disappointment in not being able to be bisexual in their orientation. Both gudykes and three girlfags express these feelings, having tried to explore their attraction to another gender, but failing. The monosexual labels (gay or lesbian) described by these participants are in line with Galupo, Mitchell, and Davies' (2015) research on sexual labels within sexual minorities, meaning the participants who identify as simply gay or lesbian use fewer identity labels than those who identify as queer and transgender. Furthermore, other participants clearly describe queer identities and plurisexual labels. The same participants also describe a BDSM interest which would further imply a link between plurisexual identity and personality types. This is described by Stief, Rieger, and Savin-Williams (2014) as a higher tendency for individuals with plurisexual identity labels to seek sexual sensations. Six of the participating girlfags identify as bisexual or pansexual, although none of the gudykes identify with anything other than monosexual labels, such as ‘man’ and ‘lesbian’. Similarly, a small generational difference showed in the results, where older participants were more inclined to use monosexual labels than the younger participants, who mainly use plurisexual labels. This could signify a more essentialist view of sexual orientation for the older generation. This aligns with research by Schei Jessen (2017) showing that other LGBTQ+ people have changed towards a more social constructionist view of sexual orientation over the past generations.

Delving deeper into orientation, one can draw from van Anders' (2015) theory of what constitutes the basis of sexual orientation. Here, androsexuality could be seen as an orientation based on sex, with “sex” referring to maleness and sex-related bodily features guiding what orients a person, supported by respondents describing attraction toward gay trans men. Here, “men” refers to the gender/sex category, meaning aspects of men “that relate to identity and/or cannot really be sourced specifically to gender or sex” (van Anders, 2015, p. 1181). When describing their orientation, the respondents in this study state they are gay. By this, they seem to be in consensus in referring to their inner gender identity and behavior, not their appearance and body, often highlighting gender traits that concern the social, sexual, and romantic aspects of gender identity. Therefore, the participating girlfags and gudykes suggest that same-sex orientation, or any orientation, issues from the gender identity and also that the same-sex

attraction lies between gender and the gender/sex they are attracted to, with no regard to gender expression in themselves or biological sex. Girlfags and gudykes could, from this perspective, be described as an orientation based on gender/sex sexuality.

Attracted to Gay People

All respondents describe being attracted to either gay men or lesbians as a major part of their girlfag and gudyke identities. Most focus on the more romantic aspects of attraction, for example, seeing gay men kiss each other is a major part of the attraction for the participating girlfags toward gay men, and simply seeing a lesbian couple is described as attractive and heart-warming for the participating gudykes. These feelings of nurturance are described by the majority of the respondents. Nurturance, as described by van Anders (2015), refers to the supportive, warm and loving emotions one feels toward others. Most of the participants describe experiencing these feelings or this attraction around the time, or just before, they entered puberty. However, a few differ: two stated they have felt this way since the age of five or six, and one said it started around age 16. Some participants also describe more stereotypical characteristics of gay men and women as attractive, for instance, men being feminine and women being butch, although many of the participating girlfags, as gay men, seem to be indifferent to stereotypical characteristics and can feel attracted to all gay men or all men.

I LOVE watching guys making out in movies. I think it's not always that far from guys who like to watch women together. But different from the depiction of "lesbians" in porn, I like the idea of the romantic attraction between the two guys. (GF34)

The girlfag above underscores the importance of the romantic connection in line with the rest of the participants. Even while using the word "love", the girlfags and gudykes do not describe intense feelings and infatuations, but much like how van Anders (2015) contrasts love from nurturance, they describe instead a deep emotional connection.

Many of the respondents' statements indicate an eroticism toward men, as described by van Anders (2015), implying arousal and pleasure from, for example, the male body. Simultaneously, the attraction portrayed by the participants is the same-sex practice (i.e., a stereotypical idea of what gay sex means). All the participants describe a desire toward the gay attraction – a yearning more in line with how van Anders (2015) describes lust. On the theme of this need and longing (lust) for a gay attraction, some of the participants shared their actual fantasies with longer storylines. Most were themed with either changing bodies or gender in order to live out their desires. Most girlfag fantasies include aspects of dominance toward gay men. Several of the participants also romanticize the first gay experience or turning straight men gay. One recurrent theme is opening up straight people's eyes and introducing them to gay attraction.

It is all in my Head

Some of the participants describe seldom or never having experienced much other than a heteronormative sex routine with a partner of the so-called opposite sex. Some of the participants have been in long, straight relationships and some in more open and queer relationships, and

therefore mainly use the power of their mind in experiencing the sex with their partner as gay. The idea of having sex in a way that enhances their identity as gay person in a gay relationship often makes the respondents use stereotypes in describing gay sex. Some use their mind and fantasies to increase their arousal with their partner, fantasizing about others partaking or their bodies' experiencing different sensations. Butler discusses how transgender individuals claim a discontinuity between their body parts and sexual pleasures: "Very often what is wanted in terms of pleasure requires an imaginary participation in body parts, either appendages or orifices, that one might not actually possess, or, similarly, pleasure may require an exaggerated or diminished set of parts" (Butler, 1990, p. 96). Some girlfags in relationships with men stated that it's all in one's head: "It does feel like it's part of our kink play, though even during our regular PIV sex (referring to penis in vagina sex), I am imagining that I am penetrating him" (GF55).

The Trans Aspect

Most of the participants have experienced a decline in health that they connect with their identity as a girlfag or guydyke and the transgender aspects of the identity. A few describe having problems with anxiety, depression, self-hate, and body issues. One girlfag explains the sexual limitations that are part of the identity, and as a consequence, the dysphoria: "But mental health, yeah ... I think when I have sex with a straight guy, it always makes me feel kind of depressed, and it makes me dysphoric" (GF26). There are similar experiences in the group, in the form of minority stress as described by other LGBTQ+ people according to Wurm and Hanner (2017). Another girlfag explains how these experiences affect her:

As in, like, I get stressed out when people speak in negative ways about gay or trans people. I feel hit by their comments even if the people don't look at me and I pass as straight. Which also feels sad. That people don't see where I belong. And my community doesn't always either. (GF30)

The participant clearly explains the frustrating feelings of being made invisible in one's identity. The loss of a community and a clear identity label is described as painful and agonizing.

Being something, which is neither here nor there, with many things, like being bisexual, then you always have, assuming you're not straight enough, or too straight for queers, and too queer for straights. You're kind of queer, but many people don't see you as that, so yeah ... I think it does something with myself ... my ... confidence. I feel insecure about this ... the feeling that you're not enough, not cis enough to just feel good about it and not trans enough to say, "Hello! I'm getting a transition, and this is why I am this." (GF28)

The girlfag above describes many participants' feelings of being on the trans spectrum, but not trans enough to find a community or be understood in their identity. Neither queer enough for the queer community, which Ambjörnsson (2016) describes as a sometimes surprisingly excluding minority community. Most of the respondents had little or no experiences of body dysphoria, but some were more pronounced. Many describe having no difficulty with the fact their body is female (girlfags) or male (guydykes), and some even express being thankful for their body, for

example, to have been able to give birth, but at the same time, a longing for something else. One girlfag ties her past dysphoric feelings and experiences to her self-identification as a gay man:

I've had dysphoric feeling. Mostly before I found my girlfag identity and then genderqueer identity. I've worn packers, male underwear, done chest-binding a few times. It's like I was lost because all in me that was connected to love and sex felt gay, but I was confused about my body, because I really also liked it somehow, [there's] nothing wrong with my boobs and my vagina, really. (GF30)

A few of participants' body dysphoria and transgender feelings were more profound, which is a known ill-health risk factor for LGBTQ+ people (Lundberg et al., 2017; Mohr & Kendra, 2011).

Belonging to the LGBTQ+ Community

All the participants clearly state that they feel they are LGBTQ+-identified people, making references to orientation and gender identity or their plurisexual identity labels. Many respondents express defensive comments and excuse themselves for sometimes being able to pass as straight but are also upset by the fact they are made invisible in social settings. In this way, the identities further fall in line with Wurm and Hanner's (2017) description of risk-exposed LGBTQ+ by being made invisible in their pride.

Of course, we're LGBT+. We're breaking both gender and orientation norms. I know we can pass as straight, but the idea of us not suffering enough to be part of the LGBT community is ridiculous, and I'm very disappointed in people expressing this. One would think more of LGBT people, where openness, respect, and friendliness should rule. (GF30)

Almost all the respondents had experiences where their identities as girlfags and gudykes were criticized, first and foremost, online. The participants describe different forums, social media and wikis where people from the LGBTQ+ community have written derogatory things about the identities. Comments along the lines of calling them straight and fetishizing or accusing them of being transgender but in the closet. A so-called inner identity seems to provoke some LGBTQ+ people whose own appearance and choice of partner is socially norm-breaking and who also risk abuse because of their sexual identity, unlike girlfags and gudykes who can often pass as straight. One girlfag extends her thoughts on why there is judgment and where it comes from:

I think it's a mixture between LGBTIQ gatekeeping, like, "Oh, there's straight people who want to keep our space and can't leave us alone, and they are invading our space," and yeah, that's part of the problem. (GF26)

The first quotation partly indicates an older generation of LGBTQ+ individuals that may judge. This falls in line with Schei Jessen (2017), who explains that queer identities may seem threatening to, for example, the lesbian identity, with the thinking that all labels may end up as "queer" and then communities may be lost. Some of the participants express having been hurt by being personally attacked after revealing their girlfag or gudyke identity online in LGBTQ+

communities. Some have cried, self-harmed, and questioned their own identity. To be met by these reactions in the community they feel they belong to possibly leads to additional exposure, and some respondents express feeling wary about where they can be safe and safely express their identity: “I never felt comfortable with the idea to ask for help in an LGBT space because I thought that they would laugh about me or that they don’t take me serious [sic]” (GF27). This is alarming because it describes an LGBTQ+ person’s exclusion from a sexual minority community, which only leads to the risk of more vulnerability. Despite this, several of the respondents brought up positive personal experiences after having explained the identities to gay and queer people without being judged. This led to feelings of relief and acceptance, with hope for the future.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to highlight how girlfags and guydykes describe their experiences and interpret their identity labels of “girlfags” and “guydykes”. The respondents describe having complex identities that pervade many aspects of their lives. It involves their feeling of self, gender identity, and transgender issues in addition to sexual identity, orientation, and relational aspects. The identities include not only pride but also vulnerability, and there are difficulties presented within each aspect of the identities. The participants often stereotype regarding the girlfags’ perceptions of gay men and the guydykes’ perceptions of lesbians which can be interpreted as an internalized essentialist way to view identity. In this concluding part of the article, we discuss these findings further.

Describing Sexuality and Orientation

The meaning of the identity has its own individual interpretation in each participant’s life. For most, it is experienced as a whole identity, entailing both gender identity and sexual orientation. For a very few, it is seen mainly as a sexual orientation. Despite these differences, patterns recur in the stories shared by the respondents. All of the participants describe the identity as being connected to their sexuality and sexual preferences, either in partnered sexuality, fantasies, or non-partnered sexuality. A pronounced desire to same-sex attraction is shared by all the respondents, but it is lived and experienced in different ways. The theme of being in between gay and straight is visible throughout the empirical data and analyzed with the help of the Sexual Configurations Theory by van Anders (2015). One of these problematic areas is the consensus of the desire for gay relationships. All the participants desire and romanticize gay men (girlfags) or lesbian women (guydykes). Some emphasized that they wanted their partner to be gay (of another sex), and this also involves the characteristics, identity, and community surrounding being gay. This is an example of potential unintentional exoticizing, where many participants refer to certain ideas and stereotypes of what gay identities entail. Some highlight being attracted to the connection, often sexual and romantic, in same-sex relationships. This can be viewed from the outside or experienced with the help of self-identification, for example, for girlfags as a gay man with a male partner. In most cases, girlfags have partners who are straight men. As described by van Anders (2015), this indicates an eroticism for the male which can be interpreted as androsexuality. This in itself could be seen as a coping strategy for the difficulties the respondents meet in living their identity, such as having actual relations with gay men.

Experiencing Gender and Identity

It is interesting how identities that, at first glance, seem mainly to involve sexuality but also focus on gender in different ways. What the respondents describe and what parts of the identity they emphasize varies, but questioning gender performance is a common thread. It is clear that gender issues pervade the identity, and it could be argued that sexual activities and sexual orientation could even be seen as a result of gender identity issues. The self-identified theme of existing in between cis and trans creates an ever-present complexity to the identities of girlfags and guydykes and the participants often describe having feelings that reflect a trans identity. The focus on gender aspects in the empirical data may lead to a change in further research on sexual orientation, with perhaps a further exploration of the identities analyzed from the perspective of queer theory instead of an analysis that applies van Anders' (2015) Sexual Configurations Theory (SCT).

Contradictions and Community

Although the girlfag and guydyke identity can be confusing, many describe a great sense of relief after finding the identity that matches their feelings. The theme of feeling pride but meeting or fearing prejudice is recurrent. Also, the complexity in feeling both included and excluded simultaneously in identity and community seems psychologically agonizing for the respondents, and thus, coping strategies are central to girlfags and guydykes. The identities present many obstacles that make it seem almost impossible to experience the relationships and the sexuality they want. The foremost strategy is to use fantasies as a way of coping, which many are aware of using to experience, for example, sex with men as a gay act. Other strategies are more subtle and may be subconscious. These include drag showing, which is a strategy one can use to handle not being seen as one's inner gender identity yet still be able to feel pride.

Perhaps the most difficult and contradictory part of the identity is the claim to have the gay identity of "another" gender. When looking at the four basic principles of sexual orientation described by Nilsson Schönnesson (2012), we can determine if the identities either meet two or all four of the requirements. Firstly, girlfags' and guydykes' self-identification is that of a gay (man) or a lesbian. Secondly, they have erotic and sexual fantasies involving gay men and women. Third, with or towards whom their sexual activity is enacted is difficult to pinpoint. Looking at the results, it is clear that even if the wanted partner is, for example, a gay man, a straight man is also a possible sexual partner. The last requirement is to whom they feel emotionally attracted, which falls in line with van Anders' (2015) concept of nurturance, and, as shown in the results, this is aimed towards gay men and lesbian women. The last two of these four principles demonstrate the complexity of the identities regarding sexual orientation. From the perspective of having an inner gender identity as male (girlfags) and female (guydykes), it is possible to see a so-called straight relationship as gay in both nurturance and in sexual relations. This gender perspective gives an understanding of men identifying as lesbian and women identifying as gay men. On the question of sexual orientation, the use of the Sexual Configurations Theory in full could provide further interesting perspectives, as the theory also includes an openness to future components of sexuality (van Anders, 2015). This may be necessary in order to accurately describe the girlfag and guydyke identities because, although the

concepts of eroticism and nurturance are helpful in learning more about the identities, they are not enough to fully understand the complexities of the empirical data.

Thoughts and Implications for Further Studies

In modern western society, the need for individualism comes with conflict: one wants to be seen and heard, yet at the same time, there is an increasing view of gender and sexuality as queer and non-definable. This particular identity within sexual minorities almost seems too queer for queer. The identities of girlfags and gurdykes may even upset people who would be considered liberal within the LGBTQ+ community. The identity labels can be considered norm-breaking when expressed as a binary in an increasingly fluid LGBTQ+ context (in terms of labeling). In terms of experiences and identity, the identities provocatively appear somehow in between both — moving between trans and cis, though definitionally trans, and from gay to straight, thus experiencing pride and prejudice, as well as rejection and belonging.

Highlighting the experiences of a sexual minority that is relatively unknown in academia is challenging. The study has provided an overview, but the material implies a need to delve deeper and wider. The small number of respondents is a limitation of the study. The pervading subtheme is the duality of feeling proud of, and finding comfort in, their identities, while at the same time, rejected by the LGBTQ+ community and potential partners. This ambiguity seems to be a risk factor for negative health outcomes and should be explored further. It is apparent that gender identity issues exist within the group, and it is well known such issues can have a negative effect on mental health in terms of minority stress (Wurm and Hanner, 2017), which also indicates the need for further studies. The phenomena interestingly relates to — though the respondents reject — the autoandrophilia concept by Blanchard (1985), which could be further discussed. The difficulties with relational aspects for the respondents — finding a partner, living their sexuality, and being accepted in their identity — was touched upon in the interviews but requires further qualitative studies for a deeper understanding.

Based on the narratives of eleven respondents, the identities of girlfags and gurdykes seem to fall in between categories. They could be considered a queer identity but are seemingly too straight for queer. At the same time, they provoke by using a binary concept when describing gender/sex identity. From these few voices and ample descriptions from the community, we can draw that girlfags and gurdykes identify with each other, as the same phenomena. It is claimed to be a mainly romantic and sexual identity, although evidently existing on the trans spectrum, judging from the stories told. Few identities can claim to unify a (trans)gender identity with a sexual orientation; however, the identity labels of girlfags and gurdykes are contradictory and confusing yet also strikingly clear, resulting in an arena for people where none existed before.

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Beyond Safe, Sane, and Consensual: Navigating Risk and Consent Online for Kinky Gay and Bisexual Men

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Abstract

Kink practitioners have adopted phrases, like “safe, sane and consensual” (SSC), to describe a non-pathological approach in considering risk and harm in kink practices. However, little is known about how risk and consent are negotiated online, particularly when the kink activities occur in private rather than the public or semi-public spaces of kink community venues or events. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews with self-identified kinky gay and bisexual men, this article examines how risk and consent are discussed when organizing kink sessions through online platforms. Most participants were unaware of SSC or alternatives. Instead, participants employed diverse methods of negotiating consent and risk which predominantly involved in-depth communication online. Interestingly, participants were more concerned with the risks associated with meeting others online, such as catfishing, than the risks involved with kink. Finally, some participants described a *laissez-faire* approach to their kink sessions through not planning or discussing risk and consent beforehand

Introduction

Kink is a spectrum of sexual or erotic activities outside normative versions of sex, undertaken for sensory, emotional, or intellectual pleasure. It tends to include a combination of the exchange of power, or perception of this, the infliction/receiving of pain, the wearing of gear, or the fetishization of body parts or objects. Kink can be practiced individually or in groups and can be organized into communities and subcultures. It is *consensual*, with a shared understanding that the activities are kinky. This definition of kink, alongside multiple alternatives (e.g. Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007; Newmahr, 2011; Sprott & Williams, 2019; Weinberg et al., 1984), place significant emphasis on consent.

The need for the centrality of consent is partly explained as resistance to early conceptualizations of kink as pathological (Shindel & Moser, 2011), the placement of kink in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (see Kreuger 2010a; b), and the cultural misconception of kink being a form of abuse (Bezreh, Weinberg & Edgar, 2012). Activities such as the infliction of pain or role-playing with power may appear abusive (Pitagora, 2013), yet the consensual nature of the activities and emphasis on trust in these dynamics differentiate kink from abuse. While there are some activities which play on the edge of consent and risk (Newmahr, 2011), and this power dynamic can be abused (e.g. Dunkley & Brotto, 2019; Kieran & Sheff, 2016), as it can be in non-kink settings (e.g. Beres, 2007), kink can be a healthy expression of sexuality or leisure pursuit (Prior & Williams, 2015; Sprott & Williams, 2019).

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Communicating the importance of consent in kink, alongside the navigation of risk, to kinky and non-kinky audiences was popularized initially through the language of *safe, sane, and consensual*, abbreviated to SSC (Williams et al., 2014). SSC was quickly adopted as a mantra for kink practitioners, activists, and the academic community (Langdridge & Barker, 2007) as a simple and accessible way of countering the pathological framing of kink in broader culture. However, it was not intended to be a *slogan* for how kink should be practiced. As the creator of the term SSC stated: “Once an idea is reduced to a slogan that can fit on a button or T-shirt, no one can control its meaning” (Stein, 2002, p. 3).

SSC became used as a way of distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable forms of kink practices (Downing, 2007), leading to the policing and delegitimization of *extreme* kink activities which played on the boundary of safety and consent (Newmahr, 2011). Some critics argued that SSC, and similar phrases like Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK), led to the “vanillafication” of kink, making kink align more with non-kink practices (e.g. Williams et al., 2014). The word “sane” is also problematic in this context (Downing, 2007). Yet research on kink still frames SSC as the most popular way that practitioners negotiate kink (Langdridge & Barker, 2007).

More recently, Williams et al. (2014) proposed “Consent, Communication, Caring and Caution” (4Cs) as a framework for negotiating kink participation. The central tenets of consent and caution (safety/risk-awareness) are still present, but the 4Cs highlight the importance of communication within BDSM (Kaak, 2016), and the necessity of caring about partners both emotionally (Lindemann, 2011) and socially (Wignall & McCormack, 2017). While the 4Cs is still relatively new, it provides a more open space to negotiate the complexities involved in kink. Yet, there is a need to move beyond discourses which distinguish between good/bad kink (Downing, 2007) to instead focus on *how* risk and consent are negotiated by kink practitioners. Some research has highlighted how this is done for kink organizations and clubs (e.g. Sagarin et al., 2019; Weiss, 2011), but less is known about how individuals who engage in more casual forms of kink navigate risk and consent (Coppens et al., 2020; Zambelli, 2017).

While kink venues maintain an important status within kink communities (Steinmetz & Maginn, 2014), changing queer landscapes and the flourishing of technology has provided alternative pathways for individuals to engage in kink (Simula, 2019; Wignall, 2017). Contrary to older narratives of needing to be invited into a community or having to *earn one’s leathers* (Rubin, 1991), individuals can permeate the boundaries of kink subcultures more easily by engaging with kink-oriented socio-sexual networking sites (SSNS), creating online profiles to explore these online kink spaces and interact with others (Graham et al., 2015; Wignall, 2019). Indeed, individuals can utilize the internet to research and learn about kink at their own pace, find others to engage in kink with, and explore kink communities (Döring, 2009; Wignall, 2019). In this article, I examine how kinky individuals negotiate risk and consent when arranging kink scenes online in private, rather than in kink venue settings.

Method

Data come from a larger study exploring the experiences of kinky gay and bisexual men (n=30). Participants’ ages ranged from 21 to 62 ($M = 27.63$), all participants were UK residents at

the point of data collection. 27 participants were Caucasian, and 3 participants identified as bisexual. Participants identified with various kinky roles, including Leatherman, pup, and rigger. Most participants ($n=25$) identified with a switch role, with 5 participants identifying with more dominant roles and 7 identifying with more submissive roles.

To recruit participants, the author created a profile on geolocation hook-up apps and SSNS aimed at gay and bisexual kinky men. A message template providing details of the research was sent to prospective participants. For those who displayed interest, further information, including an information sheet and consent form, were given. Participants were also recruited through snowball sampling of established individuals within various kink communities.

Participants identified as kinky but differed in levels of immersion into kink communities. As such, participants were labelled as either a community member or non-community participant. A holistic approach was undertaken to identify these two groups of participants, drawing on participants' understandings of kink; their SSNS profiles; and self-identification. Community members framed kink as a socio-sexual activity, invested in their online profiles (multiple profile pictures; friends linked to their profiles; profiles containing demographic information; interaction with online forums), described how they had multiple kinky friends and attended kink events, and identified as part of a kink community. Non-community participants described kink as primarily a sexual activity, did not provide as much detail in their SSNS profiles, did not describe connections to kink communities, and actively distanced themselves from a community label. Participants were evenly split across the two groups.

Participants differed with their levels of real-world kink experience, ranging from the smallest of two years' experience to the most experienced participant with 20 years of experience ($M = 5.9$ years).

Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and covered a plethora of topics related to kink identities, communities, and activities, as well as participants' interactions with kink online platforms. Interviews were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with initial codes identified, grouped together through focused coding, and finally arranged into potential sub-themes and themes. The coding team consisted of a researcher who is familiar with kink practices and is established within kink communities, and a researcher with some knowledge of kink practices. The results were also discussed with five of the participants in the study who agreed with the findings. Ethical approval was granted from the University of Sunderland.

There are limitations of this study. Recruiting participants for research on kink is notoriously difficult (Weinberg, 2006). The sample consisted of gay and bisexual cisgendered white men from the UK primarily due to the author's existing contacts in these networks. As such, research is needed on the experiences of consent for other kink demographics.

Results

Despite the popularity of SSC and similar frameworks, 25 of the 30 participants had never heard the phrase SSC before, or alternatives including RACK or the 4Cs. Epitomizing responses to questions about the terms, David said, “No idea what those terms are”, while Thomas said, “I’ve not heard of them.”

The remaining five participants could only offer vague descriptions of the terms and did not use them. For example, Mark said, “I’m aware of the concepts of SSC and RACK, but I’ve never heard much about them... I know kink has a long and varied history, but I don’t really know anything about it.” Luke said, “I’m aware of the concepts, but I wouldn’t use the terms.” While not knowing what it was, Sam said, “I’ve heard of safe, sane and consensual, but don’t really know what it is. You can sort of work it out though.” Ryan knew about the terms in context, saying, “I’ve heard of SSC, as opposed to BDSM being abuse? I don’t know RACK though.” Oscar had a negative association of SSC, saying, “I usually find people who use SSC are the people to avoid. I’ve heard people use the language, but it’s not something I use myself. It reminds me of D&D [drug and disease free] on profiles.” While a lack of knowledge on terminology is understandable for non-community participants, it is noteworthy for community participants, given how SSC is somewhat labelled as the cornerstone of kink (Langdridge & Barker, 2013). This speaks to a potential disconnect between dominant framings of kink and how some practitioners negotiate their play outside of community venues.

With these scripts absent, I now focus on how participants understood risk in terms of their kink practice. Three themes were identified from transcripts: *navigating online safety*; *the importance of sustained communication*; and *unstructured approaches*.

Navigating Online Safety: Evaluating Kink and Non-Kink-Related Risk Factors

When asked about negotiating kink on SSNS, participants predominantly focused on the risks associated with hooking up online generally, such as “catfishing” or sexual coercion (Lauckner et al., 2019), rather than negotiating risks involved in kink. Participants identified tactics used to ensure people were being truthful in these online environments. For example, George said, “You need to chat to people online for a bit. I normally ask for multiple pictures or very difficult pictures to forge, like their name on their foot. I’ve always been careful about who I talk to.” Drawing on previous experiences, Stephen said, “I ask people to take a picture with the date on it. The first person I messaged online was a catfish. I drove to meet him, and they were a fake, so I learned quickly to check people out.” Trevor described the techniques he used:

I check they're real by asking them to write the date on a piece of paper and take a picture, or draw a picture on a piece of paper with the date, to work out they are the person they say they are.

Participants identified how continued communication helped decipher the realness of the person. For example, Lloyd said, “I don’t play with anyone until I’ve spoken to them for a while, to make sure they’re not crazy, going to abuse me, rob me or harm me in anyway.” Similarly,

Harry said, “I speak to people for ages online first. You can work out if they’re real, and a bit about their personality... it makes me feel safer.”

Sam and Fred were the only participants who mentioned using social media when chatting to potential kink hook ups online. Sam said, “I might add them on Facebook at some point because that adds another level of realness. If they have a profile with friends and pictures, you will think they're more real.” Fred described feeling more relaxed seeing others’ social media, saying, “I don't normally let people stay over the first time I've met them. Unless I've had lots of conversations with them, or you have them on Facebook or something and you can see their jobs and friends.”

Finally, some participants described precautions taken when meeting for kink hook ups – again, these focused on the risks associated with meeting people online more generally rather than meeting for kinky sex. For example, Neville said, “If I am going somewhere new, I would scribble a note of my location and call the police if I don't get back in time.” Similarly, Mark said, “I meet people in public, so if you say no, you’re not jumping straight into their car. I don't have *rules*, but I’d like to feel safe, not too dark or lonely, somewhere I could tell the police about.” Fred described how his somatotype was important when meeting others, saying, “Rightly or wrongly, most guys I meet I think I can physically take them on - I'm quite muscular.” Fred felt more secure thinking if he ended up in a risky situation, he would be able to get out of it through brute force.

The Importance of Sustained Communication

Good communication was deemed the most important factor when arranging kink sessions through SSNS. Communication beforehand helped navigate the risks involved in kink activities, identify mutual kink interests, negotiate consent, limits and create safe words, and establish trust. However, this occurred in a more conversational way and developed organically from participants’ thinking about the potential risks involved.

Most participants described sustained communication with potential kink hook-ups. For example, Thomas said, “I normally have a lot of chat beforehand. I wouldn't put myself in a vulnerable position at first.” Similarly, Harry said, “I make sure I talk to people a lot beforehand – what our kinks are, different levels of experience, and some limits.” While participants did not want “endless chat”, they recognized the importance of clear communication beforehand. However, for some participants, there was a balance between just enough communication and too much, with Kyle saying he did not “want to plan the scenes, because then they would feel too contrived.” Here, communication should be used to arrange kinky sex, but not plan *exactly* what would happen. As Oscar highlighted, kink can be “spontaneous.”

This type of communication - discussing interests and things they will not do beforehand - is how participants navigated consent. However, when describing the context or the purpose of these conversations, no participant explicitly used the word consent. Instead, these conversations were described as making participants feel comfortable about meeting up and a way of agreeing which activities, they would engage in. Terms like “limits” were used instead as a way of indicating where consent would end.

While communication was used to arrange and plan kink sessions, it was also a way of getting to know the person, relating to the previous theme. For example, Caleb said, “There’s a high degree of trust involved in any sort of sexual relationship, especially one that involves gear that can go quite badly wrong - I want to know someone at least a bit before I do something like that.” Fred also emphasized the importance of establishing trust beforehand, especially if he intended to engage in more “heavy play” (e.g. edge play), so he can discuss “safe words, limits [and] ask how far they can be pushed.” He added, “Kink meets can be safer than hook ups – the conversations are longer, and you tend to know more about a person because you chat longer.” While most participants were unaware of SSC, they were negotiating safety and consent in their own ways. These extended discussions as a way of developing trust can be understood as indirect discussions of consent, as there is likely an implicit understanding that people would mention what they are interested in doing alongside hard limits. This highlights how the SSC label has fallen out of fashion, because the conversational tone is an implicit way of developing trust and implied consent.

Not all participants used safe words, or indicated they knew about them, and instead preferred open consistent communication beforehand and during kink sessions, with Kyle saying, “I don’t bother with safe words because I don’t go for anything where I feel my safety will be compromised, or I could just say “it’s hurting” etc. I would much rather people openly communicate than bothering with code words.”

Laissez-faire and Unstructured Negotiation Approaches

While most participants described how they implemented some sort of rules, a minority described how they avoided in-depth communication beforehand or discussions of limits. While they may indicate their main kink interests on the SSNS, they would generally meet up and “see what happens” during a kink session. For example, Seamus said, “I just go with the flow really... see what happens.” Similarly, when asked about building trust before a scene, David said, “It’s common sense I suppose. You can get a gauge on it.” The ability to “gauge” a person, was also mentioned by Thomas, who said, “I feel like I’m a fairly good judge of character.” Neville described a similar approach to Thomas, but acknowledged the danger of judging people, saying, “If they seem fairly normal, which is a bad measure, it will make me feel more comfortable. I’m not stupid - I know the risks and I tend to ignore them, which is bad.”

However, alongside a *laissez-faire* approach, participants still had some rules, with Dean saying:

I sort of wing it really. I wouldn't let somebody tie me up... You'd also have to be insane to let somebody tie you up in your own house - but that's common sense. I don't do drunk sex and I definitely don't do drunk kink. I avoid drugs as well. I don't hook up with people from a night out... Most of my knowledge has come from meets though - finding out in the moment how to do it.

These participants tended to engage in kinks which could be deemed as less risky, such as power exchange without physical restrictions, or more fetishistic type behaviors, suggesting that

participants had already considered the risks and deemed them low enough to not explicitly discuss them. However, research into sexual consent more generally highlights how verbal and behavioral cues can often be misinterpreted (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013).

Conclusion

This study explored how kinky gay and bisexual men negotiate consent and the risks associated with kink activities when planning kink hook ups through SSNS. While academics and activists stress the importance of SSC and RACK, particularly in kink venues, most participants reported not having heard of these terms before. Furthermore, some participants stated they were more laidback when engaging in kink. Therefore, there is a potential disconnect between popular kink discourses on safety and consent, and how kink is conducted, particularly when exploring how risk and consent are explored in home venues compared to public kink venues. While at one level this is a disconnect in terminology, it also speaks to deeper differences in conceptualizing and communicating safety, consent, and trust. There is also more emphasis on spontaneity and indirect discussion which serves to distance further from organized kink community sessions where SSC and RACK are emphasized.

Participants avoided using the term *consent* in their online discussions when planning kink hook ups. Instead, participants described activities they were interested in and limits, or things they will not do. These conversations were less formal than previous research into how kinky individuals negotiated planned activities and consent (e.g. Rubin, 1991; Sagarin et al., 2019), but still a way of establishing trust. While participants did not use SSC or RACK, their engagement in kink more closely reflected the 4Cs framework (Williams et al., 2014). Participants emphasized the importance of *communication* in kink; negotiated *consent* through describing their interests and limits; and were *cautious* in who they engaged in kink with. Further research could apply the 4Cs framework to kink settings, particularly expanding on the role of *caring*.

The results of this study may be partly due to the sample consisting of gay and bisexual men, and the experiences of straight kink practitioners may be different. This can be explained somewhat through comparing two popular kink SSNS aimed at the two populations: *FetLife* predominantly caters to straight kink communities and emphasizes the importance of interactions through forums and organizing *munches* (regularly non-sexual events for members to meet offline and socialize); while *Recon*, a kink SSNS for gay and bisexual men, tends to focus more on the individual interactions between its members. For gay and bisexual men, kink may predominantly be about the sex and the activities (Wignall & McCormack, 2017, while for straight kink practitioners, kink could be framed as a ritual which encompasses the pre-activity discussions as part of the kink session (see Sagarin et al., 2015).

Interestingly, this study identified another layer of risk navigated by participants when planning kink activities through SSNS – the risks associated with chatting and meeting others online. Participants placed great importance in verifying the genuineness of their potential kink partner. Indeed, participants created tasks to verify someone's identity and took safety precautions when meeting others. Future research should acknowledge the importance of the internet for kinky individuals and how the use of SSNS creates new challenges and risks.

Specifically, research could explore how communication of interests and limits on SSNS prior to engaging in kink is executed in person, focusing on the concept of ongoing consent (see Beres, 2007).

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The Structure of Kink Identity: Four Key Themes Within a World of Complexity

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Abstract:

What is the structure of kink identity? Using a thematic analysis design, our study explored this question through 70 in-person interviews with adults 18 years and older living in Northern California who identified as kinky. Four key themes of kink identity emerged from our analysis: sex, power, headspace, and community. Although there were great variety and diversity in how these four themes were characterized -- both as separate and overlapping themes, we were able to conceptually group these themes into seven discrete subthemes based on how our 70 participants narrativized their kink experiences during interviews: (1) intertwining of kink and sex; (2) intense physical sensations (SM); (3) sensual experiences (fetish); (4) eroticizing power differentials; (5) fluidity vs stability of power role in kink activities and relationships; (6) community connections; and (7) headspace or altered states of consciousness. That our thematic analysis developed into these seven subthemes suggests that kink identity is a multidimensional structure of complex and diverse aspects.

Introduction

“Kink”¹ is used as an umbrella term to address a wide range of atypical erotic interests, identities, behaviors, practices, and relationships. Aspects of kink include eroticizing intense sensations, including but not limited to “pain,” eroticizing power dynamics, enduring fascination and erotic arousal with sensorial stimuli like specific body parts or inanimate objects, e.g. “fetishes,” role playing or dramatizing erotic scenarios, and other activities that induce heightened states of consciousness, i.e. “headspaces,” which is how positive, altered states of consciousness are referred to in kink subcultures. Approximately 45-60% of people in the general population of some Western nations report having fantasies that involve dominance and submission in some fashion (Joyal et al., 2014 Jozifkova, 2018), and in terms of behavior, approximately 10% of the general population of some Western nations have engaged in kink

¹ The compound acronym “BDSM” is also often used in the literature, denoting bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and sadism and masochism. However, “kink” is a term that comes from the community and has been used for over 90 years (Bienvenu, 1998), whereas BDSM is a more recent term created by scholars and researchers that was adopted by kink communities in the early 1990s. This paper uses “kink” to respect the community’s culture.

behaviors at some point in their life (Joyal & Carpentier, 2016; Janus & Janus, 1993; Masters et al., 1995).

A recent study examining the Belgian population found that 46.8% of the representative sample engaged in kink-related activities at least once in their lifetime, with 12.5% engaged in at least one ‘BDSM-related activity’ on a regular basis (Holvoet et al., 2017, p. 1155). This study of the Belgian population also found that while nearly half of the study’s participants reportedly engaged in kink-related activities, just 7.6% self-identified as “BDSM practitioners,” with the data in this specific quantitative study coded into four categories: dominance, submission, visual play, and attributes (Holvoet et al., 2017, p. 1154). Qualitative research on kink has also addressed a range of kink activities and roles that people adopt, indicating a notable complexity in kink identity (Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011).

While it seems as though kink occurs at an appreciable rate in the population, we know very little about what it actually means to have a kink identity. When one considers the number of people who are members of kink-related clubs and advocacy organizations, the number of attendees at kink community events, and the number of people active on kink-focused social media platforms, it may be that 1-2% of the general population have a kink-centered identity (Sprott & Berkey, 2015). Our purpose in conducting this study is to locate the key dimensions of kink identity to better understand these complexities and the sex-positive discourse they provide.

Methods

The design of our qualitative, cross-sectional study used a thematic analysis approach to interview data. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the California State University, East Bay.

We first gathered our qualitative data through 70 in-person interviews, using open coding to identify themes that were relevant to how people discussed their kink identities, and then through comparative methods that refined the themes into seven subthemes.

Participants

The selection criteria for the initial round of interviews consisted of adults 18 years and older who self-identified as kinky with primary residence in Northern California. The sampling method involved snowball sampling, as well as community outreach requests posted on the social media platforms of Facebook and Fetlife. The outreach and recruitment of participants had several distinct rounds to recruit as diverse a sample as possible in terms of race, gender identity, sexual orientations, ethnicity, experience in kink, and levels of community involvement. Interviews were gathered from July 2014 through November 2015. A total of 111 volunteers contacted the research team, and out of that, 71 of these participants completed interviews. Because one of the audio recordings failed, the final sample was 70. The 40 people who did not complete an interview after expressing initial interest did not respond to follow-up contacts to schedule an interview time. Three follow-up contacts were attempted by the research team before marking the volunteer as unavailable.

Procedures

The study involved semi-structured interviews, which were conducted in a private, quiet space that was convenient for the participant, e.g. coffee shop or participant's home. Participants first filled out an informed consent form. Interviews were audiotaped and interviewers took notes during the interview. Interviews lasted from roughly 40 minutes to 120 minutes, with the average length of interviews being 70 minutes. Participants were asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire at the end of the interview. Interviewers were members of the community-based research team, which included graduate students in counseling psychology or sociology programs and kink-identified community members.

The planned interview questions covered areas such as descriptions of the person's "kink identity," coming out issues, their personal journey in terms of kink-related turning points, peak experiences and low points, and whether their kink sexuality was experienced in a manner similar to their sexual orientation. Questions were also asked about community involvement and one's understanding of several community-related values often discussed in kink forums, community events, and literature.

Analysis began with an open coding phase. The research team examined several interviews together, coding aspects of kink identity to locate different meaningful dimensions across interviews. Several rounds of analysis followed, with individual team members coding an interview on their own and then discussing modifications to the codes at team meetings for the next round of analysis. When coding saturation was reached, theoretical coding between the identified core themes was conducted by a subgroup of the research team.

Results

The 70 participants interviewed had an average age of 44.76 years, the youngest age 21 years and the oldest age 83 years. In terms of "years in kink," the average number of years actively engaged in kink behaviors was 18.8 years, with a range from 1.5 years of experience to 65 years of experience. There was a significant difference in years in kink between different racial/ethnic identity groups, with People of Color participants having fewer years of kink experience than White participants. See Table 1 for numerical and percentage breakdown of gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

What emerged from our analysis of interviews were four core themes of kink identity: sex, power, community and headspace, which were further categorized into seven subthemes: (1) intertwining of kink and sex; (2) intense physical sensations (SM); (3) sensual experiences (fetish); (4) eroticizing power differentials; (5) fluidity vs stability of power role in kink activities and relationships; (6) community connections; and (7) headspace or altered states of consciousness. Below is a description of each core theme and its respective subtheme as it relates to our participants' experiences. The direct quotes from participants are representative of our themes and are a cross section of how these themes differed within our sample.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Characteristic	N	%
Gender		
Cisgender women	28	39
Cisgender men	32	45
Gender diverse group (transgender men and women; genderfluid, ambigender, and genderqueer people)	11	15.5
Race/Ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	53	75
Black, non-Hispanic	6	8.5
Hispanic/Latinx	3	4
Asian American	2	2.8
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	20	28
Pansexual, Queer	19	26.8
Gay	18	25
Lesbian	8	11
Bisexual	6	8.5

Dimension: Sex

Categories: (1) *Intertwining of kink and sex*, (2) *intense physical sensations (SM)*, and (3) *sensual experiences (fetish)*.

64% of our participants discussed a strong *intertwining of kink and sex* when discussing their kink identities. Some mentioned the interaction of kink and sex having started from the very beginning of their sexual history, while others discovered kink far after early sexual experiences. For many participants, the type of kink practice that was coupled with a sexual activity involved some element of power: “[Kink and sex] are part of the same for me. There is usually some part of the power exchange that happens with sex” – 41-year-old Latina lesbian cisgender female. “The very first time I ever masturbated I realized I was thinking about being dominated and abused by another kid in my class. And that developed into a very elaborate fantasy that included raunch, at 11 years old” – 48-year-old White gay cisgender male. Many of our participants were unable to consider kink and sex as separate since they were “part of the same,” as this participant mentioned, whereas for others, as seen with the second participant's statement, their earliest sexual experience was embedded in a kink fantasy centered on *intense physical sensations (SM)*. That the merging of kink and sex also involved power in these narratives suggests the complexity of how the themes of sex, power, and headspace overlapped for many participants.

Other participants specifically mentioned *intense physical sensations (SM)* and *sensual experiences (fetish)* to underscore their kink practice and identity. As one participant mentioned, “. . . the painful things . . . sometimes I would start doing them to turn myself on or start getting wet. So, it just progressed. I would do things like take straight pins and put them in my boob or my butt. Spank myself, just crazy shit” – 47-year-old White bisexual cisgender female. This participant discussed how self-directed pain was sexually activating. In hurting herself, whether through the means of self-spanking or pricking herself with a pin, she was able to use the kink practice of *physical sensations (SM)* to turn herself on.

Another participant commented on the power of leather: “Fetish wear of the kinky style always caught my eye. Leather. Smells -- I like the smell of leather” – 59-year-old White heterosexual cisgender male. In contrast, the kink practice of this participant was centered on the *sensual experience*, or fetish, of leather. The sensory experience of leather -- seeing it, wearing it, and smelling it, was an important dimension of this participant’s kink identity.

When I was a teenager, tight pants, tight belts, boots of any sort. Leather, clearly leather was the attraction. I had found some leather gloves and I kept those hidden. We had a barn that I could go out to. And so, I would, with leather gloves on, bind my hands with rope and suspend myself by wrists quite often to masturbate. Never touching myself – just from the tightness of the rope and the leather gloves. I would hold myself up off the floor so I could smell the leather on my hands and then I would cum. So, I did that as often as I could get away as a teenager. – 50-year-old White bisexual cisgender male

Here, the sensual experience of leather was spoken of as being connected to sexual activities. Several of our participants not only found the *sensual experience (fetish)* of leather to be central to their kink identity and experience, but they also considered it intertwined with their sexual practices. As this participant mentioned, they reached a sexual climax from the smell of leather because there was something unique in the qualities and associations of leather that activated this participant in a sexual way. The *intertwining of kink and sex* for those participants whom leather is a meaningful signifier suggest fetishes as a powerful conduit for connecting kink and sex.

Although many of our participants found kink and sex strongly overlapping, others discussed kink as distinctly separate from sex, with these participants describing themselves as having very little interest in sex. Instead, the kink identity and experiences of these people had more to do with *intense physical sensations (SM)* or power exchange. “Kink is more important than sex to me — kink is more erotic to me than anything else” – 32-year-old White pansexual transgender female. In this case, this participant prioritized kink over sex and considered kink to be more erotic than anything else, including sex. This suggests that it is not that this participant finds no interest in sex, but if one were to classify the degree of significance kink and sex hold for them, kink would be higher in erotic importance.

“I am not one of the folks for whom kink itself is sex,” said a 29-year-old White queer cisgender female participant. This participant’s statement reflects that they need not equate kink with sex as others did, and that physical sex or sexual practices were not necessary for this participant to still fully participate in kink activities and experiences of headspace, community, and/or power.

Another participant mentioned how “the whole kink play doesn’t necessarily have to include sexual activity, although it normally does,” said a 55-year-old White bi-curious transgender female participant. While this participant’s kink play could do without a sexual dimension, it often still included some type of sexual activity because of the more fluid approach this participant had with kink and sex. There was no categorical boundary with kink play for many of our participants; they reported feeling free to mix in sex with kink as they like. This aptly captures the fluid and complex nature of what our sample demonstrated about kink and the

structure of kink identity -- sometimes kink will mesh with sexual activity, and sometimes it won't.

Dimension: Power

Categories: (4) *Eroticizing power differentials*; (5) *fluidity vs stability of power role in kink activities and relationships*.

Eroticizing power differentials was a common theme of our participants' kink experiences, with 66% discussing power while describing their kink identities. Some participants' interests in eroticized power exchange developed in childhood.

A specific episode of Star Trek – the women were all in charge and the men were all slaves. I thought that was really hot and I jerked off thinking about how I could be a slave to these women, being kept naked and made to do stuff. I love that. I was more turned on by the subservience of it. Same with Westerns or Pirate movies. As far back as I can remember – maybe 10. – 46-year-old White gay cisgender male

A 48-year-old Black queer transgender male participant also mentioned loving Westerns “. . . which is great for people to get tied up. Then I remember I was inappropriately watching some documentary and there was a rape scene; I was about 12. And I was horny about that.” These participants recalled early experiences of being turned on sexually by the power differences seen in film and television. *Eroticizing power differentials*, specifically through the context of subservience and submission, e.g. being “made to do stuff,” as the first participant mentioned, or being turned on by having someone dominate you against your will, as the second participant stated, were how many participants discussed the ways power dynamics show up in their kink practices.

While eroticizing power was a common element of many of our participants' narratives, the theme of power itself varied across each person's story depending on the *fluidity vs stability of power role in kink activities and relationships*. “Leather definitely, daddy and also boy and Sir at times . . . Because I am polyamorous, it kind of depends on the person I am reacting with in the various relationships,” said a 39-year-old White queer genderfluid participant. For many of our participants, shifting power dynamics was an important theme, with several participants switching between dominant and submissive roles depending on who one's partner was. “Switch would probably be what most people would call me, but even that is so dependent on who my partner is. . . . I will switch between partners” – 32-year-old White heterosexual cisgender male. Another participant, a 54-year-old White lesbian cisgender female, mentioned how they also would call themselves a switch, “. . . but, out of that, 80% bottom, 20% top . . . inclined to being very submissive or mildly dominant -- completely depending on who I am with . . . completely depends on the relationship.”

Some participants considered themselves a “switch” to signify that they were fluid in their D/S role, while others preferred to keep their nominal power identities and fluidity without employing the “switch” title. One further reflection of fluidity with power was described by a participant who considered power shifts as “roisserie sex,” adding how they have never been

good with power being equal – 63-year-old White gay cisgender male, demonstrating how some kink-identified people prefer the rotating capacity of power differentials.

While some participants preferred fluidity with power play, others considered a specific power role as a stable part of their identity. As one participant mentioned, being dominant is “how I live and breathe in the world” – 52-year-old White lesbian cisgender female. Another participant reported, “I’m a dominant. I’ve always been and it’s just who I am” – 44-year-old White queer cisgender female

Dimension: Community

Category: (6) *Community connections.*

Involvement with community was important to 43% of the participants when discussing their kink sexuality, whereas others did not mention community involvement or membership in organized groups. Some participants discussed how community became important over time, usually in the context of finding sex-positive acceptance and support for their alternative interests and desires. When the dimension of *community connections* was discussed in a positive way, it was often spoken of as “extended family” or “chosen family.” As one participant mentioned, “The idea that you are in it beyond just play is truly valuable. That I called my mentor when my dad died -- that is family” – 48-year-old Black queer transmale

To me our leather family has supported each other through something extremely vulnerable, shown each other our weak spots. They’re my support network, closer than my biological family. I’d feel comfortable showing up on their doorstep if everything fell apart. We have chosen to lean on and support each other. We’re all going through something together and we’re really good friends. It’s a unit. As far as the community goes, I feel a lot of people throw it up because it’s a popularity contest. Some throw it up because it actually really means something in their heart and soul. – 30-year-old White bisexual cisgender female

I think one of the pinnacles thus far . . . was volunteering as a domme at SOJ during the Folsom Street Fair . . . That filled me greatly, in many ways. Number one I was fully exposed to 400,000+ people as who I am, transsexual. Two, as a dominant, a top, within the BDSM community. And, three, as someone capable and experienced, and trusted by an organization to use whips on volunteers and public bystanders – it was an accolade of trust and acknowledgement by others around me of who I am and how they see me . . . I think that was one of the highest accolades I have received. Because it validated me on all those levels . . . And that to me was the highlight of, I’m finally here, I’m finally in a space in which, not only am I accepted, but encouraged, and actually asked to do this thing. – 52-year-old White bisexual transmale

Many of our participants reported positive experiences with the kink community, often feeling appreciation and trust from the community in a similar way as the participants above. In contrast, other participants said that they felt like an outsider and unable to forge many meaningful connections in community settings, with a small portion of our sample actively

shunning the organized kink community. In two separate parts of the interview, one participant discussed both feeling like an outsider and rejecting the community:

I kind of actually see myself as a bit of an outsider a lot of the time. I am of it, but I'm not in it, a lot of the time. Even though people see me as being... sometimes fairly prominent. I mean, if for no other reason than I am a presence, and I teach, and I... do stuff and what not, yet in a lot of ways I've always felt like a complete outsider to BDSM people. And I mean I'm absolutely not part of any of the in-groups. And I'm absolutely not part of any of the empowered groups... and that makes it difficult to really define thinking of myself as in it . . .

The single worst aspect of the community to me is it's very much like the junior high school from hell. You know, I've never willingly spent any time as an adult in a community that misbehaved this badly. It's so much like a bad junior high school movie, I can't believe it. – 58-year-old White heterosexual cisgender male

Another participant quoted the famous Groucho Marx quote, saying, “I wouldn't be a member of any club that would have me as a member” – 52-year-old White gay cisgender male. Just as with the previous themes of sex and power, the relationship between one's kink identity and the kink community is multidimensional.

Dimension: Headspace

Category: (7) Headspace or altered states of consciousness.

9% of the participants discussed their kink sexuality and identity in terms of experiential “highs” from kink activities, i.e. *headspaces or altered states of consciousness*. For example, a headspace is achieved when one plays a role like “pup” or “slave,” which involves fulfilling a particular mindset. Others discussed how mental stimulation was more important than physical stimulation in their kink practice, with some highlighting the spiritual aspect of their kink practice. “This is spiritual, this is physical. I can have physical sensation, and I can get into a very spiritual place with kink” – 50-year-old Black dyke genderqueer person.

My back was being whipped by this bull whip but I was not there. I was in the forest as a wolf completely detached from my physical body. I had never experienced my wolf side before that. I was immersed into a forest where I was with another group of wolves and my spirit was protecting... it might have been protecting me, or protecting my physical body or... there was definitely a low-level growl, guttural, fierce, protective kind of thing going on. – 55-year-old White gay cisgender male

These participants' responses speak to the unique headspace kink provides for some participants. The kink practices of these participants involved a physical dimension that translates into a spiritual and otherworldly dimension.

One of the really good things about kink and sex is that kink occupies you with a lot of things . . . you get to travel to all kinds of different places, you get to go further, you get

to learn more about yourself and the other person or persons. – 71-year-old Caucasian queer cisgender female.

Several of our participants underscored headspace as a place that kink takes you. As one participant mentioned, “I would give up the church before I give up the kink” – 32-year-old White pansexual transgender female. In the words of these participants, kink “occupies” you and brings you into a special headspace that allows you to develop a special connection to yourself and others, sometimes to the point where the primacy of kink outweighs any religious commitments; in this respect, the headspace of kink becomes king.

Discussion

While conducting the thematic analysis of our interviews, we came to see these themes as actually demonstrating *dimensions* of kink involvement. It is possible that the four core themes we captured reflect aspects of kink identity that one can be “high” or “low” in, or another gradient of, much like the dimensional aspects of personality. We believe that a dimensional approach to studying kink identity can help us better understand the most significant aspects of kink practices. This dimensional, or structural, approach to kink identity contrasts with the narrative approach explored by others (Hughes & Hammack, 2019; Hammack & Toolis, 2016; Hammack et al., 2009), which emphasizes the way in which people use narratives about social categories to make sense of their sexual identities. In their analysis, Hughes & Hammack discuss three themes within a “liberatory narrative” of a kink identity that resists the pathologization of kink practices: the focus on consent and collaboration in scripts and scenes, the reimagining of power play as ‘serious leisure’ (see Newmahr, 2010; Sprott & Williams, 2019), and the emphasis on positive, self-affirming values of subculture and community (2019, p. 152). This narrative approach to identity highlights significant aspects that complement the structural, sex-positive approach taken in our study. In addition, our study aligns with Hammock et al.’s “queer paradigm of intimacy,” especially their axioms of desire, sexual identity, relationality, and consensual power exchange (Hammock et al., 2019, p. 559). On a more general note, we find that queer theory would be an appropriate theoretical framework for future scholarship that expands on this study, mainly because of its emphasis on resisting what is normative and dominant for more fluid behaviors, identities, and orientations that exist outside of established categories (Minton, 1997, p. 338).

A special note is also to be made about the intersection of gender diverse identities and kink identity, in particular. The genderqueer and transgender participants in this study noted that kink identity had important intersections with their gender identity: For some participants, the development of their kink identity facilitated the development of their gender identity, while others temporarily stepped away from the development of their kink identity to more fully explore their gender identity. The intersection of gender identity and kink sexuality has been noted by a number of studies (Sprott & Hadcock, 2017; Simula, 2012; Bauer, 2007, 2008), highlighting that kink interests, behaviors, and community spaces often facilitate the exploration of gender, or can subvert traditional gender roles and the importance of gender in sexuality. Simula, in her study of bisexuality and kink, noted that in the context of kink, there is a “strikingly complex relationship between BDSM bisexuality and patterns of doing, redoing, and

undoing gender” (Simula 2012, p. 501). We saw a similar complexity in our study’s diverse participants.

Since the limitations of our study include the sample selection criteria of adults who were kink-identified and living in Northern California, it is unclear as to how results would compare in other regions of the United States or in other nations. The snowball sampling method also introduces limitations in the generalization or applicability of the results. Future research should address these limitations by expanding kink identity research to broader regional areas and through more diverse sampling methodologies and procedures.

Conclusion

This thematic analysis study presents an initial exploration of the multidimensional structure of kink identity by locating what we found to be four critical themes of kink identity -- sex, power, community, and headspace, along with seven subthemes. Our sex-positive approach to the study of the structure of kink identity emphasizes sexual diversity, which has positive social implications for removing the stigma that is often attached to people who identify as kinky or are involved in kink practices. By helping to expand the general construct of sexual identity and thereby the specific needs of kink-identified people, this study brings sex-positive discourse to the public on the diversity and complexity of kink to improve the health and wellness of sexual minorities.

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Partner Selection, Power Dynamics, and Mutual Care Giving in Long-Term Self-Defined BDSM Couples

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Abstract

Historically, writers from within and outside the BDSM/Leather community have argued that long-term BDSM relationships are likely to fail due to the incompatibility between satisfying SM and romantic affection (Townsend, 1972) and the unlikelihood of finding a perfect match of fetishes and interests (Money, 1986). The present study tested these arguments using in-depth interviews with 33 individuals in 17 long-term BDSM relationships. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to understand the dynamics of the relationships including the ways the partners met, formed their relationship, negotiated the scope of their power exchange, and navigated the challenges of an unconventional relationship style. Compatibility regarding dominance and submission appeared more important than compatibility regarding sadism and masochism or specific BDSM activities. Power exchange appears to serve purposes beyond sexual satisfaction, including facilitating partner bonding and providing a sense of security. Key relationship values that emerged across couples include a commitment to communication and transparency, a high level of trust, a focus on the partner's happiness, and the co-construction of a reality that satisfies the needs of both partners. The use of rituals and protocol in difficult times returned the partners to a state of connection to each other, and this re-established bond helped the partners resolve the present upset. The use of deeper protocol when issues arise is contrary to prevailing community rhetoric that advises dropping out of role to solve issues. Thus, rituals give these individuals a different, possibly safer, way to interact so that conflict doesn't damage their relationships. Results demonstrate that long-term BDSM relationships exist and can be highly functional.

¹ Author Note: We thank the respondents of this study who trusted enough to reveal intimate views into the details of their lives and relationships. The data for this paper originated from the first author's doctoral dissertation, which was completed at the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality. The first author gives special thanks to Dr. Clark Taylor who provided academic guidance from the beginning and to the Science of BDSM Research Team at Northern Illinois University for their feedback.

In 2015, Joyal, Cossette, and Lapierre asked 1516 Canadian adults to rate the intensity of their interest in 55 sexual fantasies. At least 62% of respondents reported the presence of at least one fantasy involving BDSM (Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism). In 2017, Holvoet and colleagues surveyed 1027 Belgian adults regarding their interest in 54 BDSM activities. A total of 68.8% of respondents reported fantasizing about or participating in at least one activity.

Given the prevalence of interest in BDSM, it is not surprising that researchers have focused increasing attention on the subject, offering insights into the demographics and personalities of BDSM practitioners (e.g., Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013), the taxonomies and effects of BDSM activities (e.g., Alison et al., 2001; Sagarin et al., 2009), and the functions and benefits of BDSM communities (e.g., Graham et al., 2015) (see Brown et al., 2020; De Neef et al., 2019, for reviews). However, one particular topic has received relatively little attention from researchers: BDSM relationships. In their review of research on relationship diversity, Hammack, Frost, and Hughes (2019) highlight this imbalance:

We note that overt discussion of kink relationships is extraordinarily rare in the literature. Rather, most research emphasizes kinky “practices” or “scenes” in a way that implicitly delegitimizes the connection among partners as ephemeral or linked mainly to individual pleasure. We call for increased research on relationships that are explicitly defined as kinky. (p. 576)

This imbalance has both theoretical and practical consequences. At a theoretical level, social scientists have only a rudimentary understanding of a relationship form that differs in fundamental ways from normative romantic and sexual relationships. At a practical level, therapists and clinicians have limited evidence to guide their practice when working with clients in BDSM relationships (but see Shahbaz & Chirinos, 2016, for a research-informed guide for therapists serving kink clients).

The present study joins a small set of published studies in beginning to rectify this imbalance. To set a context for the present study, we begin by reviewing past research on BDSM relationships including the four features that Hammack et al. (2019) identify as characterizing such relationships. We then define relevant terminology regarding BDSM practitioners, activities, and relationships. Thereafter, we describe the goals and design of the current study and present the methodology and results.

Past Research on BDSM Relationships

A subset of BDSM practitioners identify as being in, or wanting, a “power exchange” relationship, in which one partner has authority over the other in daily living, sometimes on a “24/7” basis. One of the first academic inquiries into power exchange relationships was Dancer, Kleinplatz, and Moser’s (2006) “24/7 SM Slavery.” Dancer et al. (2006) surveyed 146 slave-identified individuals. The results revealed relationships in which the power exchange was pervasive and all-encompassing, with a high degree of ongoing ritual and protocol. Slaves were treated as partners in the relationship, and structures were in place in order to safeguard the physical and psychological safety of the slave. The vast majority (88%) of participants reported

being satisfied or completely satisfied with their relationship. Summarizing their findings, Dancer et al. (2006) explain that

There is no reason to believe that these ‘slaves’ need saving or freeing. There is no indication that they are more likely to be abused than in other relationships. It would appear that some of the shock from disclosing participation in this type of relationship relates to the terms used to describe the relationship, rather than the actual behavior within the relationship. (p. 99)

Butts (2007) presents a case study that explores body ownership in the context of the relationships between a Mistress and her slaves. Highlighting the pervasive nature of power dynamics in these relationships, Butts explains:

It is significant that I do not use the phrase “sexual behavior patterns” in this statement, as Mistress Linda’s choice to go 24/7 with her M/s identification means the dynamic she establishes with her slaves is not limited to the times during which they are engaged in sex play. This highlights the fact that M/s relationships are, in fact, *relationships*, and as such, they are not as far removed from more typical forms of intimate partnerships as one might suspect. (p. 71, italics in the original)

Consistent with this perspective, Bauer (2019) highlights the ways that studying BDSM relationships can deepen our understanding of relationships in general:

BDSM relationships therefore can serve as a starting point for theorizing intimacy from a perspective that focuses on issues of power and consent rather than notions of (an illusionary) equality and romantic love. (p. 145)

Rogak and Conner (2018) measured relationship satisfaction in a sample of 163 BDSM practitioners who reported being married or in a committed relationship. BDSM practitioners reported relationship satisfaction scores comparable to scores from a prior sample of non-distressed individuals (Crane et al., 2000) and substantially higher than scores from a prior sample of distressed individuals (Crane et al.), supporting the perspective that BDSM relationships can represent a healthy and satisfying relationship form.

BDSM community authors have also explored the dynamics of power exchange relationships. Townsend (1972) had a pessimistic view of such relationships, reporting few long-lasting BDSM relationships and suggesting that Leathermen were best off selecting non-Leathermen for their primary partner and getting their BDSM needs met outside of that relationship. Baldwin (1993), in contrast, referenced long-lasting, working BDSM relationships within the gay leather community of Los Angeles. Baldwin’s writings include numerous anecdotes about couples whose relationship roles and BDSM roles were fluid, reflecting the needs of the individuals and their circumstances. Other BDSM community writers have also discussed working relationships (Bean, 1994; Brame et al., 1993; Califa, 1993; Campbell, 2000), with some offering practical advice about negotiations and protocols.

Hammack et al. (2019) offer a useful framework for understanding BDSM relationships:

Our review highlights four common features or experiences of kink relationships. First, such relationships are typically characterized by recreational power exchange. Second, they are consensual and collaboratively scripted. Third, they are typically embedded in a larger community of shared meaning and practices. Finally, because such relationships may be stigmatized, individuals may experience minority stress related to issues of concealment, disclosure, stigma, and internalized kinkphobia. (p. 576).

In the Discussion, we consider the implications of the present results for Hammack et al.'s framework.

BDSM Terminology and Roles

As an umbrella term, BDSM encompasses a wide range of activities and relationship styles (De Neef et al., 2019). Many definitions of BDSM have been presented within the academic literature as well as the community literature. One such example is Jay Wiseman's (1998) definition in *SM 101*:

The knowing use of psychological dominance and submission, and/or physical bondage, and/or pain, and/or related practices in a safe, legal, consensual manner in order for the participants to experience erotic arousal and/or personal growth. (p. 10)

Some common themes across these definitions include consent and a recognition that people may practice these behaviors for a multitude of reasons, such as eroticism, spirituality, catharsis, skill development, personal identity, and fun.

BDSM practitioners use a variety of terms to refer to their roles. For example, a person may refer to themselves as a Top or a Dominant (or a Master, Mistress, Handler, Daddy, etc.). Likewise, a person may refer to themselves as a bottom or a submissive (or a slave, pet, little, etc.).² Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, there are important distinctions between these terms (and between different people's use of the terms). Below, we offer brief definitions of four terms relevant for the present study: Top, bottom, Dominant, and submissive:

“Top” and “bottom” are physical terms describing who is doing an act and who is receiving. For example, the Top is the partner using the flogger, or doing the tying, while the bottom is the one being flogged or being tied up. The person who is topping and the person who is bottoming can be determined by looking across the room at the activities occurring. Those who enjoy both topping and bottoming (usually not at the same time) may identify as a Switch.

“Dominant” and “submissive” are psychological terms. The Dominant is directing the action while the submissive is carrying out the directions. For example, the Dominant might direct the submissive to get them a cup of coffee. Likewise, the Dominant might direct the

² This paper adopts the capitalization convention of some BDSM communities in which the roles of Top, Dominant, etc. are capitalized, and the roles of bottom, submissive, etc. are lowercased.

submissive to flog the Dominant, in which case the Dominant is bottoming and the submissive is topping.

Power Exchange Relationships

A Power Exchange relationship is a standing agreement to exchange power between the submissive and the Dominant, empowering the Dominant to provide orders and take responsibility for the results of those orders. A healthy Power Exchange relationship empowers the submissive and is not about the submissive becoming powerless. Personal power, in this context, refers to the ability to assume personal agency in one's life. Individuals in Power Exchange relationships negotiate the manifestations of personal power. For example, a submissive may have personal power with respect to their own healthcare but has consented to the Dominant deciding what clothes the submissive will wear.

The consensual, mutually desired exchange of power in Power Exchange relationships stands in contrast to the ways that power often manifests in conventional romantic relationships. Lennon, Stewart, and Ledermann (2012) define power as “the feeling derived from the ability to dominate, or control, the behavior, affect, and cognitions of another person” (p. 97). Relationship researchers have identified that power, and the subsequent vying for power, is a strong, pervasive feature of romantic dynamics (Dunbar, 2004; Lennon et al., 2012). Power is often not shared completely equally between partners (Amaro, 1995; Lennon et al., 2012), even though “contemporary couples increasingly express preferences for egalitarian unions” (Carlson, Miller, Sassler, & Hanson, 2014, p. 975). Power may be distributed within a relationship based on skill, experience, personality, or intensity of preference. For example, one partner deciding which restaurant to eat at could be the result of that person's greater knowledge of local cuisine or because that person enjoys being in control. The way that power is negotiated within relationships can be constructive and progressive or destructive and relationship threatening (within long-term relationships it might well be both).

Individuals in Power Exchange relationships use a range of terms to describe their relationships including Dominant and submissive, Master and slave, Daddy and (adult) girl, Trainer and puppy, Trainer and pony, and many more. Lee, Erickson, and Sagarin (2018) surveyed 135 people in power exchange relationships. Participants identified their relationship styles using over 20 unique labels, including Magister and acolyte, Master alpha and slave beta, Sir and girl, Momma Bear and boi, and Commander and executive officer. BDSM community author Raven Kaldera's (2014) edited volume on different Master/slave styles entitled *Paradigms of Power* highlights how even within one subtype of power exchange relationships—M/s—there is great variety in intent, practice, and perceived benefits. The specific label people use for their relationship style seems to be driven strongly by the relationship partners: People adopt labels that they can feel comfortable with, and that they believe accurately and uniquely reflect their relationship dynamics.

Current Study

The current study consisted of interviews with 33 individuals in long-term BDSM relationships. The study used qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the dynamics of

the relationships including how the partners met, formed their relationship, negotiated the scope of their power exchange, and navigated the challenges of an unconventional relationship style.

Qualitative methods were used to identify themes within each area of inquiry. Shortly after the interviews were concluded, the first author identified common themes that emerged across participants in the areas of partner selection, relationship dynamics, and power dynamics. This process began with the first author reflecting on his memory of the interviews followed by a review of the audiotaped interviews and the written transcripts produced by the third author. During this review, the first author began to identify sub-themes within each theme. For example, the sub-themes of power domains, power fluidity, and role switching emerged within the theme of power dynamics. Some of the sub-themes were anticipated in constructing the interview questions. For example, participants were asked specifically to describe the domains of power held by each partner within their relationship. Other sub-themes were not anticipated. For example, the sub-theme of atonement emerged from the interview question on punishment. Quantitative methods were used to statistically analyze how compatible the couples were in terms of dominance/submission, sadism/masochism, and topping/bottoming various BDSM activities. Details on the coding and analysis are presented in the Results section.

The interviews were collected May 2001 through July, 2002. Given the age of the data, it is reasonable to ask whether the data are still relevant. We believe they are. Although terminology has changed since 2002, the specific dynamics of power exchange relationships are likely still functioning in the same way. People are still dealing with the same issues of how to create a healthy, functional relationship today as they were in the early 2000s. We see three specific issues stemming from the age of the data: (a) The data preceded the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2012). Although *Fifty Shades of Grey* is largely derided by the BDSM community as non-consensual, inaccurate, and misleading (Kimble, 2017; Kravitz, 2018; Smith, 2015), the book and movie have provided arguably the most well-known fictional representation of BDSM. Thus, power exchange couples today have (for good or for bad) *Fifty Shades* as an exemplar. (b) Social media currently provides BDSM practitioners a high level of connectivity to other practitioners. Couples in the study were members of a BDSM organization, but the pool of peer practitioners was substantially smaller than it might be today. (c) Terminology used to identify roles within a power exchange relationship have changed over the years. In the early 2000s timeframe, the term Master/slave (M/s) was not in common use within the community from which the sample was drawn. Today some of the respondents would likely use the term. We revisit the question of the relevance of the data in the Discussion section, particularly within the context of their implications for Hammack et al.'s (2019) proposed framework.

Method

Participants

The 33 participants consisted of 17 heterosexual couples from 16 households. One household consisted of one man with two women; the BDSM relationships were between the man and separately with each of the two women, a wife and a lover. The women did not consider that they had a BDSM relationship with each other. Using the respondents' initial self-labels, the

couples in this study all fell into two classifications, Dominant/submissive (15) and Switch (2), and those labels are used to identify the qualitative quotes throughout this paper.

Seven couples were married. Four couples were engaged to be married at the time of their interviews and six had no marriage plans. All four engaged couples subsequently got married. The three couples with no marriage plans reported they had a life commitment. One couple reported that the collar³ is considered stronger than a wedding band.

The mean age of the men was 48 (range: 35 to 70); the mean age of the women was 40 (range: 20 to 53). Thirteen couples were male dominant. Two couples were female dominant. Two couples were switches, and for both switch couples, the male identified as a dominant-leaning switch and the female identified as a submissive-leaning switch. Within the household with one man and two women, one relationship was male dominant, the other was switch.

Procedure

Sample Selection

The respondents in this study were 17 heterosexual couples in self-defined BDSM relationships who engaged in sadomasochistic or dominant and submissive behavior as a regular part of their relationship. With one exception (the lovers in the triad), all had been in the relationship for at least one year. The duration of the relationships ranged from six months to 18 years, with an average of 5.5 years.

The respondents were all members of the Arizona Power Exchange (APEX), a Phoenix-based BDSM education, support, and fellowship organization. The first author identified committed couples and invited all identified committed couples to participate in the study. In one case, a respondent couple reported to their friends their positive interview experiences and recommended participation. One couple was obtained in this manner.

Interview Process

The first author presented the study as part of his doctoral dissertation. Each couple was told that interviews would be conducted with each member separately. Participants were then asked if they would be interested in being interviewed for the study. At the initial meeting, the research was explained, including the possible risks and benefits of participating and the potential for emotional damage or discomfort. If both members of the couple wished to participate, each partner was asked to sign an informed consent form. No couples declined at this point. The study was approved by Northern Illinois University's Institutional Review Board.

The interviews were conducted by the first and third authors. The first author took the lead in all interviews, and the third author took parallel notes and asked clarifying questions throughout when she felt it was needed. It was originally anticipated that some individuals would

³ A collar is a symbol sometimes given to a submissive or a slave by the Dominant or Master in recognition of the power exchange relationship. Collars can be overt, such as a round steel neck band or a chain and lock, or subtle such as a necklace or ankle chain.

be more comfortable answering questions directly to the third author, a submissive woman. It turned out that the third author's presence was sufficient in building trust and comfort in the respondents, and thus the first author was able to take the lead in all interviews.

All interviews were recorded on audio tape. The taping was presented as optional to the respondents, but none declined to be taped. The tapes were transcribed over the course of the study, and the transcribed answers were spot checked against the field notes.

The interviews with each individual were conducted using a variation of the techniques developed by Kinsey and his associates (Pomeroy et al., 1982). Using the Kinsey form of interviewing allowed the respondents to partly steer the interviews by providing information in a natural flow while ensuring that all the intended questions were covered. This format allowed for consistency in the questions asked and facilitated rapid recording of field notes to maximize focus on the answers and any nuances. After the first few interviews, the form was modified slightly to revise questions that required elaboration or that did not produce results. Subsequently, the first author went back to previous respondents and performed a follow-up interview to fill in potential gaps in the data.

The interviews started with simple questions such as age and occupation, then moved into lifestyle identification. Relationship issues were asked around the middle of the interview. The last question regarded rituals. This provided a forum for the respondent to discuss areas of the relationship that were particularly satisfying, thus ending the interviews on an upbeat note.

In some cases, a line of questioning was abandoned when it became clear that the questions were annoying the respondent. For example, this occurred during some interviews when asking a respondent whether he or she enjoyed taking on the bottom role for a series of BDSM activities. For respondents who exclusively top, saying "no" repeatedly grew tiresome. In those cases, the interviewer moved on to the next set of questions. Statistical analyses include the answers that were provided before the line of questioning was abandoned.

The participants' interview notes and recorded media were identified with only a couple number. These coded identifiers were the only link between the forms and the participants.

Most of the individuals in APEX were open to fellow members regarding their kink and most of these couples openly played at BDSM events. As witnessed by the first and third authors, many of the respondents in the current study had previously revealed very intimate details in group settings. During the interview process, the first author watched to see if he could detect any reluctance regarding the taping process. In two separate interviews he saw a single glance at the audio recorder. The glances were not overt, and thus it was decided to not acknowledge any potential issue and taping was continued. The apparent discomfort appeared momentary and the interviews continued on course. In both occasions, the glance occurred during the question regarding whether the respondent had any secrets from his or her partner.

Results

The results are organized into seven parts: Demographics, Partner Selection, Relationship Description, Power Dynamics, BDSM Roles as Relationship Tools, Managing Boundaries, and Creativity and Adaptability. Illustrative quotes are labeled with role and gender but without age or other demographic information to protect the anonymity of participants. Given the close-knit nature of APEX, adding age or other demographic information to role and gender would have risked allowing participants to be identified.

Demographics

Table 1 displays the self-identification of participants as dominant, submissive, sadist, and masochist. As can be seen in the table, dominant and sadist were not synonymous. Likewise, submissive and masochist were not synonymous. Further, a substantial number of individuals identified in roles seemingly at odds with their relationship type. For example, although all 13 men in male dominant relationships identified as a Dominant, 3 also identified as a submissive, and 5 identified as a masochist. Sixteen out of 33 respondents had tried the complementary role at least once; six of these did not want to repeat the switching experience.

Table 1
Participants' Self-identified BDSM Roles

<i>Sex</i>	<i>Relationship type</i>	<i>Dominant</i>	<i>Submissive</i>	<i>Sadist</i>	<i>Masochist</i>
Men					
	Male Dom/female sub ($n = 13$)	13	3	10	5
	Male sub/female Dom ($n = 2$)	0	2	0	2
	Switch ($n = 1$)	1	1	1	1
Women					
	Female sub/male Dom ($n = 13$)	5	13	4	10
	Female Dom/male sub ($n = 2$)	2	1	1	1
	Switch ($n = 2$)	2	2	2	2

Note. The male participant who is in two relationships is included in the “male dominant” row as that is his role in his primary relationship. He is a switch in his other relationship. As with the other participants in the study in switch relationships, he identifies as a dominant, a submissive, a sadist, and a masochist.

Table 2 displays the demographics of participants, separated by sex. Participants reported a high level of happiness with their BDSM orientation (9.34 on a 1-10 scale). All but one respondent thought a BDSM relationship was required or extremely important in their lives. That one stated that they could have found satisfaction in a more traditional form of D/s relationship, such as being a nurse married to a doctor. When asked if they could leave the lifestyle, none said they could.

Table 2
Participant Demographics

Demographic	Men (<i>n</i> = 16) Mean (<i>SD</i>) range	Women (<i>n</i> = 17) Mean (<i>SD</i>) range
Age	47.8 (8.8) 35-70	40.4 (8.8) 20-53
Frequency of sexual activity	2.5 (3.3) 0.1-14	2.5 (2.4) 0.1-7
Frequency of BDSM activity	1.4 (1.6) 0.25-7	1.5 (1.8) 0.04-7
Sex → BDSM	52% (34%) 0%-100%	55% (39%) 0%-100%
BDSM → sex	60% (38%) 0.002%-100%	68% (42%) 0%-100%
Frequency of masturbation	2.2 (2.9) 0-10	4.5 (7.6) 0-30
Frequency of solo BDSM	0.3 (0.9) 0-3.5	0.5 (0.9) 0-3.5
Number of sexual partners	57.8 (86.5) 5-350	33.4 (28.3) 7-100
Number of BDSM partners	17.6 (21.3) 2-80	19.8 (48.3) 2-200
Age of awareness of being kinky	20.4 (12.8) 10-52	18.2 (14.8) 5-53
Happiness with BDSM orientation	9.0 (1.0) 7.5-10	9.6 (0.6) 8-10

Note. Frequencies were times per week. Sex → BDSM refers to the percent of the time that the participant does BDSM when they have sex. BDSM → sex refers to the percent of the time that the participant has sex when they do BDSM. Masturbation data include one man who reported that he masturbates 10 times per week, one woman who reported twice daily, and one woman who reported masturbating 4 to 5 times per day. One female participant answered that she “always knew” she was kinky but did not provide an age. Happiness with BDSM orientation was measured on a 1 to 10 scale with higher numbers indicating greater happiness.

Partner Selection

A series of interview questions focused on the origin stories of how the couple met, what caused them to explore more deeply, and what motivated them to commit to this relationship.

Meeting the Partner

When it came to the stories of how they met, there was 100% congruity between the partners’ reports as to the circumstances of their meeting and very high congruity as to the details. Frequently the individuals within the couple would use the same phraseology. It is apparent that the couples have told and retold the stories of how they met and have bonded to the point where their mythology is an important part of their relationship. Eight out of the 17 couples first became aware of each other through the Internet, a very high proportion for the 1990s (Rosenfeld, Thumas, & Hausen, 2019).

Submissive Woman: I answered his Yahoo personal ad. “Loving dominant seeks little miss submissive.” And the first thing it said is, “A submissive is not a doormat. She is a gift. The submission is a gift. I will respect her limits.” I found BDSM personals on the net – must have gone through three hundred in one night – just screaming through them – and most of them were “Come suck my cock; you will be my slave; yada yada yada.” Either that or they were really wimpy. And then I find this one. It is very honest and open. Four days later we met in person.

Partner Attraction

When asked what was the initial attraction to their partner, the answers included: lifestyle interests or demeanor (15 out of 33), physical (9), “energy” or presence (7), honesty (6), playful (1), taboo (1), and humor (1). The transcripts of the interviews show that these values were

important even if they were not named at the time of the specific question. When asked what was it that made the partner “the one,” the answers included: lifestyle intent (10), “chemistry” (7), honesty or trust (5), friendship (2), playful (1), and physical (1).

A number of the respondents reported stories of having been in a vanilla relationship before, having been unhappy, and being committed to having a BDSM relationship where their needs could be met.

Dominant Woman: How I really got into it was when we first started dating, he said, “Look before we go any further, I have these things about me you really need to know.” And he sat and told me, and he was so terrified, and I sat and started laughing, not at him, but oh thank you god for sending this wonderful man to me.

Dominant Man: But we’ve always had good communications even from the very first, from the very first day. I didn’t have a play bag with me – a soft cowhide belt I had on. And I whipped her with it. And after I finished, she laid back on the bed and she had this huge sigh and she had this wonderful look – which I’ve grown to love – and she says “Thank God, I was afraid you weren’t going to do it hard enough.” That was what I think one of the most endearing lines she ever said.

Just as couples had a well-established “how we met” stories, a number of couples have a well-established “why we were attracted to each other” stories.

Submissive Man: I thought she was very pretty. She let me touch her. While we stood in the garage and revved up the Harleys. At my buddy's house on New Year's Eve, here's this girl I didn't know, and she cuddled right up to me and I got me a handful of heinie and thought, “What could be better than this?”

Dominant Woman: What attracted him to me was I had this one-piece jumpsuit on and I had a pair of shoes on that had really high heels and I was looking like a fox. We were out there in the garage listening to the bike roar and vibrate, and he reached over and touched my ass. And he said "Ohhh" and I let him touch it, ‘cause I knew I wanted him. And that was it.

Relationship Description

This section explores the roles identified by the respondents and their partner, the level of compatibility between the partners with their D/s and BDSM needs, what they see as working in their relationships, what issues they see, and how they handle differences.

Roles

When asked to briefly define their role and the role of their partner, answers within each couple were largely congruent with a few exceptions. Two submissives referred to their partner’s role as a Master. No Dominant used that term. In one couple, the Dominant referred to their partner as a “slave,” the submissive used that term for themselves and used the term “Master” for

their Dominant. Later in the interviews the respondents were given the opportunity to define their roles in detail. These responses were quite specific, varying from couple to couple.

Submissive Man: I tend to define myself in a first comment as being an ass kisser and a boot licker. I am a submissive to women, I am subservient. I'm not a masochist. I don't like intense pain. I enjoy cross-dressing a lot. I enjoy wearing clothes and it puts me in a different persona that is always submissive.

Switch Woman: I would say we only have well-defined sexual episodes of power exchange. Because for me it's VERY important that it's egalitarian. I think that's because he is a truly egalitarian male. I think that's one of the reasons we got together.

Compatibility with Dominant/submissive and Sadist/masochist Identifications

The respondents were asked to name their primary role, and then asked if they were Sadistic, Masochistic, Dominant, and submissive. During the interviews, the responses were coded by the first and third authors as identified with that role, indifferent to that role, or explicitly not identified with that role. Thus, each participant was coded as identified with, indifferent to, or not identified with each of the four roles (Sadistic, Masochistic, Dominant, and submissive). Many participants identified with multiple roles including seemingly opposite roles (e.g., a participant identifying as both Dominant and submissive, or both Sadistic and Masochistic). The four switches, in fact, identified with all four roles.

A couple was considered incompatible on a particular axis if one partner was positive on the role and the other partner was negative on the corresponding role. For example, a couple would be considered incompatible on the D/s axis if the male partner identified as dominant, but the female partner rejected the identification of submissive. Thus, compatibility could consist of both partners endorsing corresponding roles (e.g., a dominant-identified woman involved with a submissive-identified man), both partners rejecting corresponding roles (e.g., a man who rejects a sadist identity involved with a woman who rejects a masochist identity), or one or both partners being indifferent to the corresponding roles (e.g., a sadist-identified woman involved with a man who is indifferent to the masochist role).

The 15 non-switch couples showed 100% compatibility along the D/s axis aligned with their relationship orientation. That is, all 13 men in the male dominant/female submissive couples identified as dominant, and all 13 women in the male dominant/female submissive couples identified as submissive. Likewise, both women in the female dominant/male submissive couples identified as dominant, and both men in the female dominant/male submissive couples identified as submissive. These 15 non-switch couples showed only 67% compatibility along the S/M axis aligned with their relationship orientation. That is, for 10 couples the dominant's identification (or lack of identification) as a sadist was compatible with the submissive's identification (or lack of identification) as a masochist, but 5 couples were incompatible (2/5 showed a sadistic dominant in a relationship with a specifically non-masochistic submissive, 3/5 showed a masochistic submissive in a relationship with a specifically non-sadistic dominant).

Thus, successful long-term dominant/submissive relationships did not appear to require sadists to be matched with masochists (or masochists to be matched with sadists).

As noted above, the four switches identified with all four rules. Thus, the switch couples showed perfect compatibility on both the D/s and S/M axes.

Compatibility, Perceived Compatibility, and Knowledge of BDSM Interests

Respondents were asked if they were interested in 32 typical BDSM activities from the top perspective and from the bottom perspective. During the interviews, responses were coded by the first author as 2 = I really like it, 1 = I like it, 0 = neutral, -1 = I dislike it, -2 = I really dislike it. Participants also reported their perception of their partner's interest in the activities.

Compatibility of BDSM activities was calculated as the correlation between one partner's 64 responses and other partner's 64 responses with responses paired so that the top perspective for one partner was paired with the bottom perspective for the other partner. Across couples, compatibility ranged from .05 to .78, indicating that all couples showed a tendency to align (albeit some weakly) on which activities they liked and which activities they disliked. Average compatibility ($M = .36$, $SD = .19$) was significantly above 0, $t(16) = 7.75$, $p < .001$. It should be noted, however, that the significant level of average compatibility does not mean that couples had no areas of disagreement. Nearly all couples (16/17) had at least one activity that one partner liked but the other partner disliked. Compatibility did not differ across relationship type (male dominant, female dominant, switch), $F(2, 14) = 0.04$, $p = .96$. Relationship duration was not a significant predictor of compatibility, $b = -0.000$, $t(15) = -0.03$, $p = .98$.

The likelihood that a modest level of compatibility would be workable is contrary to the conjecture by John Money (1986) that so-called "paraphilic" relationships were unlikely to be successful as there would be little probability that there would be a perfect match between complementary interests. The present data illustrate that successful long-term couples do not require a perfect match between interests.

Perceived compatibility was calculated as the correlation between one partner's 64 responses and that partner's perceptions of the other partner's interest in the activities. Perceived compatibility ranged from .07 to .69. Average perceived compatibility ($M = .39$, $SD = .17$) was significantly above 0, $t(16) = 9.49$, $p < .001$. Perceived compatibility did not differ across relationship type, $F(2, 14) = 0.09$, $p = .91$. Relationship duration was not a significant predictor of perceived compatibility, $b = -0.002$, $t(15) = -0.30$, $p = .77$.

Knowledge of partner's interests was calculated as the correlation between one partner's perceptions of the other partner's interest in the 64 activities and that partner's actual interest in the activities. Knowledge of partner's interests ranged from .35 to .80. Average knowledge ($M = .63$, $SD = .10$) was significantly above 0, $t(16) = 24.91$, $p < .001$. Knowledge did not differ across relationship type, $F(2, 14) = 0.31$, $p = .74$. Relationship duration was not a significant predictor of knowledge, $b = 0.002$, $t(15) = 0.51$, $p = .62$.

Summarizing the above, the couples had a significant but modest level of compatibility of interests (average $r = .36$), an accurate perception of their compatibility of interests (average $r = .39$) and a high level of knowledge of their partner's interests (average $r = .63$). The accuracy of the perception of the compatibility of interests is further illustrated by a significant correlation between compatibility and perception of compatibility, $r(15) = .71, p = .001$.

It was expected that knowledge about their partner's BDSM interest would increase over time. However, relationship duration was not a significant predictor of knowledge. This suggests that most of the disclosure by the partners happens early in the relationship. It was also expected that compatibility would increase over time based on the idea that couples would, over time, adopt some of the interests of their partners, but the data showed no effect of relationship duration on compatibility.

What Works

When asked what works in the relationship, respondents listed: communication (19), mutual support (14), openness or honesty (9), lifestyle (7), physical/sexual attraction (4), humor (3), love (2), religion (1), and intimacy (1).

Several themes appeared frequently in the interviews. The respondents held the perception that dominance and submission directly relate to intimacy. There is a high value placed on communication and full disclosure within the couple. There is pride in being able to read their partner and to explore needs until both parties have their needs met. Throughout the interviews, the respondents expressed pride in their relationships and pride in their partner. In the respondents' descriptions of themselves and their partners, there were no indications that one role might be considered better than another.

Submissive Woman: There's not real boundaries as far as walls that are constructed of things that we can't do or shouldn't do. There's this tremendous sense of openness. And that deals with our sexuality; that deals with just about anything. If it's on my mind I say it.

Submissive Woman: I'm teaching my partner how to bite. He comes from a very nice family, very good Norman Rockwell school of BDSM type thing. And I'm like "Bite me" and he's like "What? But it'll hurt." Yeah.

The very close connection of some of the respondents extended well beyond BDSM:

Submissive Man: When we met, both our now former marriages were on the rocks. So together we crawled into a bottle of booze and drugs and partied and carried on for ten years. And after one particular binge, she said "I gotta go to one of them meetings." I stopped drinking right away because I didn't want to encourage her. So, I quit drinking in support of her. We got drunk together, so we got sober together.

Issues

Fourteen participants reported BDSM-related relationship issues: defining their BDSM relationship (6), wanting the partner to be more aggressive or “Tippy” (6), more play time (2). Other issues included better communication (8), polyamory (6), wanting to change partner’s habits (5), aging and health (3).

Submissive Woman: My biggest concern is he may never be able to be the dominant he hopes to be. My every hope and dream is that he is. But I need someone strong in my life. That is a concession I will have to make if I need to. Cause I’m not changing partners.

Submissive Woman: There’s a little bit of insecurity thinking, can I fulfill all his fantasies or enough of them to keep him interested for a lifetime, or is there going to be the new better submissive model that’ll come through?

Dominant Man: To be a good top or dom takes not only some physical energy, it takes a great deal of mental and psychological energy. And sometimes all that stuff, it’s just hard for both of us to get there. And that’s probably more my responsibility than hers because she can flip into sub space without the same energy expenditure that it takes me to be purely in top space.

When the respondents were asked what they wanted modify in themselves and in their partner, they listed issues such as losing weight (24 for self, 16 for other), being better as a partner such as being in tune with their partner’s emotions (19 for self, 15 for other), being better at their BDSM role (26 for self, 12 for other). For example, one participant explained:

Submissive Woman: I wish my beloved partner was a bit more sadistic to get the adrenalin going, but it’s still so new so I ain’t pushing. Right now, he has a real hard time inflicting any pain on me, even if I’m going “Oh god please, help me, give me some – more –now”.

Handling Differences

In handling differences, communication was the most common factor mentioned. With the exception of two respondents (both from the same couple), all respondents discussed communication in either their answer to the direct question regarding handling differences or elsewhere in the interview. In response to this question, respondents listed: communication (23), using counselors (13), arguing or getting noisy (8), using the power dynamic to handle (6), not rushing the process / setting-aside until later (6), letting it sit / agreeing to disagree (2), succumbing / conceding (2), and walking away for the moment (2).

The following quotes demonstrate rather sophisticated self-management and communication tools being used by these couples.

Submissive Woman: If Sir says something and my gut reaction is pain and my other gut reaction is “He did that on purpose.” I have an immediate counter-reaction that says, “He

would never do that on purpose to me. He's claimed me – not to hurt me." It's always made me step back from any intentionality of the pain, so that I could say, "I think I misunderstood because this is what I heard you say and this is what I thought you were saying, you know, hurting." And he recognizes, "no." And so it allows us to get down to a communicative level.

Dominant Woman: We've like "Okay I want to go out for coffee, and I want to talk to my best friend." And so, my partner's cross-dressing persona comes out, we sit there and we talk, so that we're best friends first and we love each other very deeply so that everything else works well.

Submissive Woman: He was always a little bit more reserved than me, so it took a little while to get him used to talking. He was afraid of even opening his mouth because in previous relationships the girl would bolt. I said, "I'm not going anywhere. Tell me anything. You know, yell at me. Try not to, but I will take it in stride, and we will talk about it."

Of the 13 respondents who had been to counselors at some time in their life, two used the counselors to get more comfortable with their BDSM interests. None had gone to counseling to be "cured" of their interest. Four respondents had sought out a kink-friendly counselor.

Power Dynamics

The respondents were asked a set of questions designed to reveal the scope and boundaries of their power exchange. Areas covered included the domains of power transfer, power in sex and BDSM, role reversal, punishment, and a sense of ownership or being owned.

Power Domains

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding power in daily life (Who is the primary earner? Who does the dishes? Housework? Laundry? Who makes the major choices? Initiates sex? Initiates SM? What domains do you have personal power?). Regarding finances, in eight couples the man is the primary breadwinner, in two the woman is the primary breadwinner, and in seven expenses are shared relatively equally. There is no pattern as to income source and power dynamics between Dominant and submissive roles.

Twelve of 17 couples report that the Dominant has control over the submissive in some form in daily life, two couples report that any control is only for the duration of any play scenes, and three couples disagreed as to whether the power exchange extends into daily living. In all cases of disagreement, the submissive said the Dominant has control in daily matters.

Submissive Woman: When it came to the house, we went through a whole process together talking about how we'd do it. We both put a lot of input in and then Sir said "Okay, this is how we're gonna go then." He listens so closely to what my needs and my wants are. He makes sure that whatever is going on is meeting both of our needs and

some of our wants.

Submissive Woman: I told him from the first letter that kids were non-negotiable – I’m not having them. And he was in the gray area about that; but once he started thinking about it, he told me that he felt he was too old and also not set up for children. So that’s when we had my tubes tied.

In describing their areas of personal power, Dominants’ responses included: sex (9), total control or final say (7), dress (4), punishment (3), finances (3). Submissives responded that their Dominants had power in all areas (6), finances (4), dress (4), outside activities (3), and sex (2). When asked to describe their personal areas of power, submissives’ responses included: outside work (6), personal or family finances (6), homemaking (4), relationships with kids or family (4), major purchases (2), ability to voice opinion (2), food (2), healthcare (1), dressing the Dominant (1). Dominants responded that their submissives had control of: healthcare (6), job (6), personal or family finances (5), relationships with children or family (4), veto of BDSM activities (3), dress (2), household (2), day-to-day life (2).

Overall, Dominants and submissives were largely in agreement: there was substantial congruity as to who had the power with no major areas of contention for any of the couples. Answers also revealed that submissives had considerable agency in their lives.

There was good agreement (88%) between partners as to whether the couple was in a 24/7 (full time) Power Exchange relationship. It should be noted that many of the couples went on to define 24/7, saying that of course there are dishes to wash and children to feed, but 24/7 means there is at least a background BDSM presence in their lives on an ongoing basis.

Power Fluidity

In all couples, a common thread is the appearance of a power exchange in BDSM scene space. That is, power exchange occurred during BDSM activities for all couples, even if power exchange did not extend into other areas of life. Frequently respondents talked of absolute control in the scene. At the same time, there were detailed discussions about the Top taking care of the bottom. Thus, even though the Top exerted control over the bottom during BDSM activities, the Top also took care of the bottom—control and caretaking were not mutually exclusive. In most couples, the dominant / submissive nature of the relationship made the boundaries between BDSM power exchange and the power dynamics of daily living very fluid.

Submissive Woman: I have a fair amount of personal power in the lifestyle in the sense that I am allowed to voice my opinion and it is taken under consideration. He has the final say, but if there’s somebody I would like to play with or not like to play with, or if I have feelings that I don’t want him to play with somebody, I can state my case. He’ll listen. I’ve said there’s absolutely no way I want to play with so-and-so. He respects that.

Dominant Man: In terms of power issues lifestyle related, I pretty much retain all the power there. I choose to allow my partner to be a little less constrained than some doms keep their submissives. That being said, I exercise absolute control over who she plays

with, or if she plays with someone. If it's someone that I'm uncomfortable with and she might want to play with somebody, my "No" is an absolute. She would never think of doing that without my permission.

Switching Roles

It might be confusing for an uninformed bystander to watch the Dominant tell the submissive, "flog me." This study found that such combinations are not uncommon. Five out of 13 dominant men and 1 out of 2 dominant women considered themselves masochistic, while 3 out of 13 dominant men and 1 out of 2 dominant women considered themselves submissive. In some cases, the nature of the relationship (e.g., 24/7 Dominant/submissive) meant that this "opposite" role might not manifest in that relationship. In other cases (most notably in the switch relationships), all roles might manifest at one time or another.

Dominant Man: I've participated in certain submissive activities but generally not in a submissive role. I tend always to be in the controlling role of it. One of my favorite activities are water sports and sometimes I find it satisfying to be on the receiving end.

Dominant Woman: I am a dominant that bottoms. More masochistic, some submissive tendencies. I think that I find it really hard to be submissive because I might become submissive. I had a relationship – it wasn't in the S&M community, but the last relationship I had was a real power struggle. That man had me where I couldn't even plant flowers without asking him where. It wasn't consensual, is the thing. I didn't realize it was happening, till it was already happened. That's why I find it really hard to be real submissive. But I do bottom.

Atonement

Two couples discussed punishment as a method of addressing transgression. For these couples, punishment provided atonement and enabled the couple to fully move past the offense.

Submissive Woman: I'd say I've been punished twice in three years. It involves a single swat. But it's a ritual in and of itself. We discuss the offence totally before the actual punishment. And then it's as much of a mental place as it is one physical swat. Punishment for us can only result if: one, we've already discussed something; two, we've covered it and I already know what my behavior is supposed to do; and three, I specifically didn't act on that. It's only happened twice. With the punishment also comes the absolute total ending of that event never to be brought up again.

Dominant Man: Punishment is a cleansing act. It's only done when there's been a serious offense and the punishment marks the end of that offense. She's released of her responsibility from and it doesn't exist in our life anymore as of the culmination of the punishment. I only punished her once.

Rituals

For the final question in the interview, the respondents were asked to describe the rituals they had in their relationship, both one-time rituals marking special occasions and ongoing rituals. The placement of the question was to allow the individual to remember good things about their relationship, thus leaving the interview with a validating experience of the event. Responses also provided insight into “bonding moments” within the relationship.

Rituals were used to return the partners to their BDSM roles, to reinforce those roles over time, and to maintain the bond between partners. These rituals were initiated as often by the submissive as the Dominant. There was often a quality in these rituals that expressed the excitement of preparing to be with their partner.

Dominant Woman: One ritual is when he brings me something, he just sits and holds it until it’s time for me to get it. And sometimes I’ll see it there for ages and I just sit and allow him to hold it because I know that that’s a real special thing because it’s his nature to jerk on me and say “here, here, here,” “I’ve got it, I’ve got it” and it’s my nature to say “I want to take it right this second.” But we both just sit there, and he holds it and prolonged the moment because it’s not typical of us, and it’s so sweet.

Dominant Man: When I am done taking a shower she is there, holding my towel for me. She presents the towel, saying, “Your towel, Master.” It warms the cockles of my heart – it reminds me how much I love her.

The respondents also described one-time bonding rituals. These were frequently a collaring ceremony, in public or in private.

Dominant Man: The collaring actually preceded the marriage by a number of years. That was a one-of-a-kind ritual that occurred with her tied to a tree in the middle of the forest. So, it was a very special and something that we never attempted to re-create because it was just too perfect of a moment.

BDSM Roles as Relationship Tools

The respondents discussed their chosen BDSM roles as tools for supporting their relationship in three areas: getting into their relationship headspace, in initiating sex and BDSM play, and in dealing with conflict.

Getting into Headspace

A number of the respondents highlighted the distinction between their roles in the larger world (employee, parent, relative in their birth family, etc.) where they had to alter themselves to be effective and/or safe in the outside environment and their roles in their relationship. When returning to the relationship, they took time and effort to make a transition to their declared role. Respondents often referred to their private world as the “real world” – it was apparent that they saw their relationship role as their real identity.

Dominant Woman: The clothing helps me with my persona. It's hard for me to be in the dominant mode when I'm wearing bobby sox and gym shoes and jeans. I just can't get into it. I have to have something on sensual that triggers me into my other persona.

Dominant Man: D/s has its own language and that is really important when we reconnect. She wears clothes at work. When we reconnect, she's not allowed to wear clothes. And so that is a visible signal to both her and I that we know we're not at work anymore and now it's time for you to take care of me. The removal of her clothing is a ritual that says, "This is what part you're in."

Initiating Sex and BDSM Play

To get sex or BDSM play started, either partner might initiate a ritual that clues the other. Respondents reported that they feel like they are flirting when using such rituals. Kneeling is one of the symbolic acts frequently used in various BDSM rituals, including initiating BDSM play.

Dominant Woman: We have other rituals, like when we play, we always start it with I walk in and he's on his knees, on the floor, waiting for his collar.

Submissive Woman: All I have to do is kneel, and he has a hard time walking. <laughs> I'm serious. This man has the best circulation system. His spongiosum works constantly. All I have to do is hand him a slapper or hand him the flogger or – first time I called him Master, scared the hell out of me. He came running into the bathroom. I swear to god he was like happy and halfway crying and got a hard-on and the whole nine yards. This is what he tells me, and I see it in his eyes –he is so honored that someone like me who wants to kneel and submit to this man. I've tried almost damn near anything I've ever wanted sexually, so the fact that I would choose him just gives him a raging hard-on. And I just love it. I am so flattered.

Submissive Woman: He likes face slapping. And with my history of abuse that was a real, real hurdle for us. But we can go there fairly comfortably now. I can think of a couple of times I initiated it because it just felt really right in the way everything was going. I put his hand up to my face. Open palm up to my face. And he knew what I meant.

Dealing with Conflict

The language and rituals of the BDSM relationship frequently were used when there was conflict. The rituals and roles seemed to simplify the conflicts and kept both partners out of ego-based stands. The couples also reported that they sometimes use naturally occurring conflict to clear up long-standing issues or to reconnect with each other.

Dominant Man: One time in particular that REALLY stands out in my mind. She was getting in my face about something, and I was being my typical self – I tend to kind of turn everything in. She was getting in my face and getting very – and she – I don't want

to say stepped over the line – but she <ahem> pushed the right buttons and I snapped. I don't think I said kneel, I think I was just like <he sharply points down> on your knees, now, here. And it was like <finger snap> boom, she was on her knees right there with her head down. And it was like “Whoa!” <laughs> It's like “Oh boy, that felt good.”

Submissive Woman: He has found that I can be in like full rowdy-ass mode and all he has to do is go “Kneel.” And I'm right there. And he got a hard-on off of it. And he's like, “Omygod it works.” And it's like, <very quietly> “I told you.” He forgets – as many people who deal with me forget – that all you have to do is say one word, and I'm there.

Managing Boundaries

Many of the couples engage in BDSM with other individuals. Some also engage in external romantic or sexual relationships. These erotic interactions outside the dyad highlight the benefits and challenges of non-monogamy and the ways that couples manage jealousy.

Non-monogamy

Some of the respondents spoke of issues regarding their explorations into polyamory, a relationship form in which individuals have more than one romantic partner which usually includes sex and, for the BDSM community, BDSM. Some respondents spoke of being willing to work with polyamory as a gift to their partner.

Submissive Woman: We have learned over the years to be very selective about who we invite in close. And we are very discerning about submissives who would try to insinuate themselves between the two of us emotionally, or a dominant who would try to do the same thing. We enjoy playing with other people, but they have to be the right people and they have to be people that respect our relationship.

Submissive Woman: I think there's a certain level of gift giving when we're incorporating other partners into our play. I would say me being okay with the fact that he's gonna play with other people – although he definitely has the right. I see that as being a gift to the submissive and somewhat a gift to him. But I have the same opportunity on my end if I have permission. I think the level of trust that we have is a gift that we give to each other. Because we walk a much finer line than in a conventional relationship.

Jealousy

Respondents discussed two topics related to jealousy: the boundaries they placed on their relationship (e.g., what behaviors are expected to be exclusive to the relationship) and how the couple handles jealousy when boundaries, expressed or otherwise, get crossed.

Switch Man: My partner and I do have boundaries. The vast majority of them are sexual although they don't necessarily mean no genital contact. I can do scenes where I've done

clothespins on men. I had this scene where a friend was considering having a group vaginal fisting done on her, and I had interest in participating in that. My partner and I talked about it. She's like, "Well, it's like, god, you have your hand inside her vagina. I mean that seems pretty sexual. But on the other hand, it's fisting," and so that's where we sort of negotiated that that would be okay. Isn't it interesting? Isn't sex interesting? You know it wouldn't have been okay for me to finger fuck her, but it would be okay to actually fist her.

Dominant Man: I used to do a fair amount of piercing of other people. It was very important to me when piercing a woman that her partner be there, and I let her partner be at her head. So, you guys – I'm doing the piercing – but you guys are doing the bonding. The possibility that the woman would bond with me after this intense experience felt threatening to me. It was actually for the self-protection.

Submissive Woman: We went to a friend's dungeon party. One of the women there had what I thought were physical attributes Sir was always attracted. And I felt Sir was paying attention in a very particular way to that woman which is the first time in four years that his attention has ever been on anyone except me. And that was okay, except he stopped touching me in the ways he usually does when we're out publicly with people. So, he was focusing on what he could do with those boobs. It was an unusual experience for me. That's where "Let's rethink about multiple partners." It was fine in theory but to have my first experience of it was like "Whoa let me rethink this."

Creativity and Adaptability

Throughout the interviews, a constant theme emerged of people finding creative ways of meeting their own and their partner's needs. The commitment to mutual transparency, communications, and the practice of paying attention to each other's needs led to many examples of respondents adapting to fulfill each other's needs and desires.

Switch Woman: I had not a whole lot of interest in receiving pain initially. Like with the nipple thing –reading the Beauty books which in some parts they did some things with clamps and bells and I was like "Oh, that's kind of interesting, but—" So there was like a little bit of interest but it wasn't like a thing. And now we do that like a lot. I think he's trained me to respond to it or something. <laughs> It's that whole Pavlov's dog thing. It really does work, well. Well, and like having something done that you don't like while having an orgasm can – eventually you end up associating the two.

Submissive Woman: One time I grabbed the rabbit flogger and just went at him. And he's just like <her eyes widen>. So, I went and got him one and I said, "Come on; let's go." So, we basically had like, I stick my butt out – he nails me and then I turn around and, whack, and nail him back. And of course, I couldn't hardly hurt him at all with that rabbit flogger. After the first ten minutes, his face was like "I don't believe you're hitting me. But after he got through realizing that I was not topping him, he FINALLY HIT ME. And it was just like <sharp inhale through nose> okay, that one sunk in, do it again. It was fun, because he'd never really let himself go that much. It's like a pillow fight with

floggers.

Dominant Man: [W]hat pushes my button is what pushes my submissive's button. I can find enjoyment out of a wide variety of activities with a person who's into them and finds them exciting. So, if a person gets really excited and turned on by being spanked, spanking that individual would be a real button-pusher for me.

Discussion

Voices from within and outside the BDSM/Leather community have argued that long-term power exchange relationships are very likely to fail. From within the community, Townsend (1972) cited the incompatibility between satisfying SM and romantic affection. From outside the community, Money (1986) cited the difficulty of finding a perfect match of fetishes and interests. The present study emerged from the first author's observations of what appeared to be successful long-term relationships within the membership of the Arizona Power Exchange, the fifth oldest pansexual BDSM club in the United States. Thirty-three individuals in 17 long-term BDSM relationships participated in long-form interviews conducted by the first and third authors. The interviews used a Kinsey-style format that provided freedom for the conversation to flow naturally while ensuring that all questions were covered.

Long-term BDSM Relationships

At its most basic level, this study demonstrates that quality long-term functioning relationships do exist for BDSM-oriented couples. The sample included successful male Dominant/female submissive relationships, successful female Dominant/male submissive relationships, and successful male/female switch relationships. Some of the relationships (12 out of 17) have a high degree of apparent control of the submissive by the Dominant in daily living. Others restrict their power exchange to BDSM scenes. Across the couples with a high degree of power exchange, there was considerable discussion of the Dominants having power, but no discussion of the Dominants being better, or smarter, or of more value, than the submissives. We conclude that the surrender of authority by the submissive does not diminish the individual.

The respondents' descriptions demonstrate the multifaceted nature of BDSM. Many of the respondents had an active BDSM history over many years. They became well educated as to the possibilities and had discovered the roles and activities that suited them. Most considered the exploration of BDSM to be an ongoing process and expected that their interests would continue to grow and change. The respondents placed great value on their BDSM interests and activities, reporting benefits of the BDSM lifestyle that included personal growth and self-awareness, contribution to their relationship, a connection to the BDSM community, and better sex.

Many respondents told of having not disclosed their BDSM interests when they were in previous relationships, and of the dissatisfaction that came with the circumstances of those former relationships. All respondents stated that having a BDSM, or some other form of D/s relationship, was very important in their lives. These successful relationships came from early and thorough disclosure of the respondents' BDSM interests to their then prospective partner.

In the process of partner selection, all of the respondents were aware that their prospective partner had BDSM interests prior to pursuing that partner for a long-term relationship. There was high congruity between the partners on how they met and how they chose each other. Partners often independently used the same phraseology in describing their meetings. These “getting to know you” stories were told with pride and had apparently been told many times before. These stories of “how we met” and “how we fell in love” indicate that a common mythology was important in the couple’s identity. Half the respondents said that the lifestyle interests of their prospective partner were the biggest initial attraction.

Relationship Values

Communication, Transparency, and Trust

The most consistent relationship value voiced by respondents was communication, with statements that successful BDSM required open communication and disclosure. This includes the concept of transparency – described as full disclosure of emotions and needs. Respondents frequently told, when they perceived their partner had an issue, of being unwilling to let go until the issue was communicated and worked through. They considered resolution of issues to be more important than any possible embarrassment or discomfort to themselves or their partner. Respondents valued their ability to read their partners; they had invested considerable time and effort paying attention to their partners and learning what they liked and disliked.

The couples disclosed the details of their BDSM interests very early on in their relationships, and changes in interests were disclosed as they were discovered. Couples had a commitment to the personal growth of both partners as individuals. The mutual caregiving in these relationships stands in stark contrast to the troubling examples discussed by Pitagora (2015) of abusive relationships masquerading as consensual BDSM relationships.

In the power exchange model used by some of the BDSM community, the major negotiation is made up front when the individuals consent to and commit to their roles. Subsequently, the Dominant makes the final decisions. These decisions are not always in the submissive’s favor – the Dominant may make choices in favor of his or her own self-interest. In order for the dominant/submissive model to work in the long term, however, the needs of both partners must be included. Further, even in the most stringent hierarchical relationships in the study, the submissive had the opportunity to state their wishes. We do not have data, however, regarding how often the Dominant then made a choice in line with the submissive’s wishes.

Rituals and Protocols

The use of rituals in good times cemented bonding and had a flirtation-like quality. The use of rituals and protocol in difficult times returned the partners to a state of connection to each other, and this re-established bond helped the partners resolve the present upset. Thus, rituals provide these individuals a safe, structured way to interact so that conflict doesn’t damage their relationships. It is notable that the use of deeper protocol when conflicts arise is contrary to the prevailing community rhetoric that advises dropping out of role to solve relationship conflicts.

Submissives/Bottoms Want More

The respondents reported an ongoing theme of the submissive wanting to push the relationship harder and deeper in both BDSM play and in the power exchange dynamic, with some hesitation by the Dominant, who expressed care, caution, and an awareness of responsibility for their actions. This manifested as a consistent pattern in the interviews. Whenever there was disagreement over how much BDSM play or control should exist, the bottom or submissive generally wished to play harder or to define the relationship as more restrictive than the top or Dominant. Sagarin et al. (2009) reported a similar pattern in a study of BDSM scenes in which “bottoms expressed significantly greater anticipation of the evening’s scene compared to Tops” (p. 190). These data suggest that society’s image of the bottom being a “victim” is inaccurate; bottoms are at least as willing a partner in BDSM activities as Tops.

Match of Interests

The Dominant/submissive couples in the study showed perfect compatibility in terms of dominance and submission and positive but weaker compatibility in terms of sadism and masochism. Likewise, the couples showed significant but modest compatibility in terms of specific BDSM interests. It appears that compatibility regarding power exchange was more important for couples than compatibility regarding S&M or regarding BDSM activities. Finding a complement in BDSM interests was part of the partner selection process but finding “the perfect match” was not a necessity for a successful relationship.

All respondents state that their BDSM orientation is built into who they are – their orientation cannot be changed. They did, however, demonstrate considerable fluidity within the BDSM arena, being able to acquire new tastes and being able to shelve some old ones when those interests did not fit with their partner. One process that appeared to facilitate this flexibility was the tendency for respondents to get turned on by their partner’s excitement. So, although respondents did not necessarily directly internalize their partner’s fetishes, they indirectly enjoyed those fetishes through the excitement and pleasure the fetishes provided to their partner.

Six out of 15 dominant men and women also identified as masochistic, and it was not uncommon for the Dominant to order the submissive to apply stimulation to the Dominant. The power exchange was defined by the respondents according to who did the choosing, rather than who received the stimulation. Thus, the Dominant was able to have their masochistic desires satisfied by being flogged by the submissive, while not losing authority within the relationship.

Implications for the Understanding of BDSM Relationships

As noted above, Hammack et al. (2019) provide a four-part framework for understanding BDSM relationships. The present data both support and challenge Hammack et al.’s framework.

The first element of Hammack et al.’s (2019) framework states that BDSM “relationships are typically characterized by recreational power exchange” (p. 576). The 17 relationships in the present study were all characterized by power exchange ranging from egalitarian couples who exchanged power solely in the bedroom or the dungeon to 24/7 couples who exchanged power

on an ongoing and pervasive basis. However, most of the couples would likely reject the term “recreational” as a descriptor of their power exchange. The power exchange, particularly for the dominant/submissive couples, represented a fundamental aspect of their relationship, providing role clarity, security, and tools for communication and the resolution of relationship conflict. To be sure, these couples also derived recreational benefits from their power exchange such as joy, fun, and stress relief. But the totality of the power exchange extended well beyond recreation.

The second element of Hammack et al.’s (2019) framework states that BDSM relationships “are consensual and collaboratively scripted” (p. 576). As with the BDSM community as a whole (Pitagora, 2013), consent lay at the core of the relationships in the present study. Further, the relationships could be accurately characterized as collaboratively scripted. Respondents were well aware that they had co-constructed their reality – that concepts such as ownership and slavery do not fit the “normal” world, and work for the relationship only so long as both parties are in agreement. As part of the co-construction, the respondents frequently used rituals to establish their roles, to bond with their partner, to initiate BDSM play, to work through conflicts, and to take care of each other. The co-constructed reality model of Berger and Luckmann (1966) appears to hold true for the studied BDSM relationships. Relationship partners, through the use of language, describe the nature of their relationship and repeat that description to each other so that, over time, the description becomes the reality for the couple.

Hammack et al.’s (2019) third element, the embeddedness of a BDSM relationship “in a larger community of shared meaning and practices” (p. 576) is one area in which the couples in the present study might differ from couples today. At the time of data collection, the couples were all members of the Arizona Power Exchange, a “community of shared meaning and practices.” But many of the couples met and formed their relationships in relative isolation. BDSM couples today seem more likely to be connected, in person or via social media, to a larger BDSM community. It seems likely that this embeddedness has both positive and negative impacts. Couples can receive support, learn skills, and gain acceptance in this larger community. But couples might also emulate the exemplars they find in the community rather than developing their own dynamics and protocols. It would have been unfortunate, for example, if the couples in the present study who found it useful to go deeper into their power exchange roles to solve relationship problems had learned from the community that this is the “wrong” thing to do.

Finally, with respect to minority stress, many of the participants in the present study told stories of negative stigma, the necessity of concealment, and the challenge of disclosure, supporting Hammack et al.’s (2019) fourth element.

In sum, the present data generally support Hammack et al.’s (2019) framework for understanding BDSM relationships, differing primarily in a power exchange that seems deeper and more fundamental than “recreational.”

Implications for Non-BDSM Relationships

The present couples clearly communicated their wants and needs, which promoted better relationships and better sex. Western culture, with its championing of rugged individualism and the maximizing of personal gain, seems at odds with intimacy. In this individualist model, it is

not always prudent to disclose. The interviewed cohorts recognized that by maximizing the gains of their partner, they too got more of what they wanted. We believe these practices and attitudes could be of benefit to all couples regardless of their level of kink.

Jozifkova and Kolackova (2017) found that vanilla relationships with some level of hierarchy (regardless of the dominant partner's gender) had more children, with almost half of respondents finding hierarchical disparity to be sexually arousing. In personal communications (March 19, 2019), Jozifkova noted that when the disparity was excessive, the relationships ended. Given that Dominants in the present study were hesitant and the submissives wanted more, yet both were happy, perhaps the present respondents found the sweet spot of disparity.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our sample consisted of BDSM couples who were active members of the Arizona Power Exchange. Although a sample size of 33 is sufficient for the qualitative aspects of the present study, it is somewhat low for the quantitative aspects. Further research, ideally with larger samples drawn from other BDSM populations, would be of value in testing the replicability and generalizability of the results.

All the relationships studied consisted of a cisgender woman involved with a cisgender man. Although anecdotal observations suggest equally successful long-term BDSM relationships among gender expansive individuals and among individuals in same-sex relationships, further research with a greater diversity of participants would be of value.

The studied couples deeply valued clarity and transparency in their relationships. Because of the emotionally sensitive nature of BDSM play, the need for open communication may be higher than for the non-kinky population. It is possible that this requirement for communication would lead to closer, more fulfilling relationships than relationships that do not demand this level of communication, but additional research would be needed to test this idea.

Conclusion

The present data clearly demonstrate that long-term BDSM relationships exist and can be highly functional. For couples that manifest ongoing power exchange, the dynamic appears to serve purposes beyond sexual satisfaction, including facilitating partner bonding and providing a sense of security. Taken as a whole, the participants in this study presented themselves as in loving and committed romantic relationships. They showed a commitment to a high level of communication, to the ongoing practice of vulnerability and intimacy, and to examining and realizing a power structure that was unique to each couple—commitments that, we suspect, would serve both kink and non-kink couples well.

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While the *Journal of Positive Sexuality* has a preference for shorter manuscripts (2,000–3,000 words), longer manuscripts up to 10,000 words will be considered. In preparation for submission, authors should observe the following guidelines:

- Manuscripts should have a clear sex-positive focus.
- Given the diverse readership of the journal, authors should write in a straight-forward and non-technical manner, avoiding jargon when possible. Manuscripts should be written such that they can be easily understood by scholars and professionals outside of one's own field or discipline.
- Manuscripts should be written in a style consistent with the latest edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA). Please include DOIs for all references when available. Instead of endnotes, please use footnotes when necessary.

New submissions should be emailed to submissions@journalofpositivesexuality.org, and should include the following Microsoft Word attachments:

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- A fully-blinded manuscript, including: (1) the title of the manuscript; (2) a brief abstract, 100 words or less; (3) the body of the manuscript; (4) references
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