

Does Social Work Need a Good Spanking?

The Refusal to Embrace BDSM Scholarship and Implications for Sexually Diverse Clients

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Introduction

One of my favorite things about the field of social work has been its strong interconnections with other fields of study, including a full range of social and behavioral sciences. Social work formally utilizes a generalist approach, thus workers are trained to be able to respond effectively to a variety of client needs and potential problems. In doing so, ethical practice is emphasized, and social workers are admonished to challenge injustice, promote client self-determination, embrace human diversity, and practice with cultural competence (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). Since 2008, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), which accredits all social work education programs in the United States, has required that social work students demonstrate mastery of specific competencies, referred to as Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). These competencies include a focus on ethical behavior (competency 1), embracing diversity and difference (competency 2), social injustice and human rights (competency 3), and the interconnectedness of research and practice (competency 4) (CSWE, 2015). EPAS competencies are designed to apply across social work education and practice.

In this paper, I will summarize scholarship on consensual bondage and discipline – dominance and submission – sadomasochism (BDSM) and briefly explain why this topic is relevant to social work practice. I will then discuss my frustrations in attempting to publish work on this topic within the field of social work. Apart from a notable exception in the journal *Canadian Social Work* (Williams, 2013), the topic of BDSM is absent from the social work literature. However, what is particularly surprising and disturbing to me, based on personal experience, has been the refusal of journal editors and reviewers to accept an accumulating empirical research literature on BDSM, which then results in manuscript rejection. I will discuss my experiences of manuscript rejection and editor/reviewer biases concerning BDSM shortly. Contemporary social work, after all, is predicated on EPAS core competencies, including those mentioned above, and also emphasizes *evidence-based practice* (CSWE, 2008, 2015; Rubin & Babbie, 2014). While I have occasionally encountered difficulty in getting specific manuscripts published, including on the topic of BDSM, it is only in the field of social work that I have faced consistent rejection.

BDSM Research and its Importance to Social Work

There is a long history in psychiatry of pathologizing BDSM and alternative sexual interests and practices, which can be traced to Richard von Krafft-Ebing and further reified by Freud (see Williams, 2013). However, numerous studies over the past few decades have shown that BDSM cannot be explained by psychopathology (for reviews, see Kleinplatz & Moser, 2007; Powls & Davies, 2012; Weinberg, 2006; Williams, 2006). Not only have empirical studies demonstrated that BDSM is not associated with psychopathology (i.e., Connolly, 2006; Cross & Matheson, 2006; Richters, et al., 2008) or prior childhood abuse (Sandnabba et al., 2002), there is some evidence that BDSM may promote psychological benefits as a form of healthy leisure (Newmahr, 2010a, 2011; Prior & Williams, 2015; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013).

Despite considerable research over the past two decades showing that BDSM participation is not associated with psychopathology, many helping professionals continue to marginalize and discriminate against clients who practice BDSM (Hoff & Sprott, 2009; Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006; Wright, 2009). In the *Survey of Violence and Discrimination of Sexual Minorities* sponsored by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, Wright (2009) found that in a large sample of participants (N = 3,058) with alternative sexual identities (including BDSM and fetish enthusiasts), about 40% reported facing discrimination from a mental health professional and 50% experienced discrimination from a medical doctor. These findings illustrate the glaring need for sexual diversity training among helping professionals.

Clearly, there is much current interest in BDSM, thus social workers and helping professionals need to be informed. Nearly a decade ago, Kleinplatz and Moser (2006) estimated that up to 10 percent of the general population participate in some form of BDSM. Social workers, whether they recognize it or not, are highly likely to encounter numerous clients who participate in BDSM but who may seek professional help to address any of a range of diverse personal issues. People who enjoy BDSM, like anyone else, sometimes face typical issues, such as relationship difficulties, job / career decisions, loss and grief, and significant life transitions. However, such clients also could potentially seek help for BDSM-specific issues, including how to navigate alternative relationships or how to deal with stigma that many BDSM participants face. Informed social work professionals could be extremely valuable in helping these clients, including empowering, supporting and advocating for this population as needed.

Social Work Gatekeeping and Dismissal of BDSM Research

Considering where I am in my career (assistant professor currently applying for promotion and tenure), I have a fairly strong publication record with over 50 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, including numerous papers on sexual diversity. Although the topic of BDSM is relevant to the field of social work, my experience has been that several editors and reviewers for social work academic journals are not open to this topic. One editor responded to a recent manuscript submission on the importance of social workers becoming informed about BDSM by simply writing, “This manuscript is not of interest to us at this time.” Similarly, another journal editor also rejected the manuscript “for lack of interest.”

A separate full-length manuscript on how social workers can help BDSM-identified clients has been flat-out rejected several times now and to date remains unpublished. Besides myself, this

manuscript involves coauthors, and one in particular has enjoyed considerable publication success. Nevertheless, one editor declined to send the paper for review, stating that the paper “is not appropriate for this journal,” even though the aim and scope of the particular journal welcomes various types of articles on a diverse array of social work practice topics. More frequently, however, this particular manuscript has been sent for review, and reviewers have disagreed substantially on their evaluations and recommendations. For example, a few reviewers have been extremely positive. One reviewer strongly recommended publication, and stated that the paper is “well done” and “will definitely be a welcome addition to the literature.” This reviewer noted that the paper “gives a wonderful way to explore clinician biases and think about ways to expand our thinking and practice.” The reviewer added that, “clinicians certainly need to be mindful about not pathologizing anyone’s erotic themes, sexual orientation, or sexual identity.” Another reviewer, upon submission to a different social work journal, also strongly recommended publication. This reviewer wrote that the manuscript “fills a huge gap in the sexual diversity social work literature, an important contribution to social work knowledge development.” The reviewer commented that “there are many frontline practitioners still using the outdated (pathological) perspective to work with these service users, with possibilities of inducing stigma and shame.”

However, in contrast to the few positive reviews, the majority of reviewers and editors have been negative and seemed to be either ignorant of research on BDSM or unwilling to accept it. One reviewer wrote that although he or she is “very open-minded” concerning sexual diversity, he or she is “skeptical about findings of no specific or unusual degree of psychopathology in a population of individuals who engage in BDSM behaviors.” It appears, then, that this reviewer is unwilling to accept research evidence, much of which was cited in the introduction of that manuscript, on BDSM. Similarly, another reviewer questioned “whether (BDSM) is freely chosen rather than determined by childhood power experiences involving pain and fear.” This reviewer further noted that in his or her clinical experience, “pain was an important condition for achieving erotic satisfaction.” This response is problematic given the reviewer’s apparent assumptions that (a) BDSM seems to be primarily motivated by childhood trauma, which is contrary to existing research (Sandnabba, et al., 2002); and (b) that pain seems to be the focus of BDSM experience, which is not true for many, if not most (Langdridge, 2007). It is also noteworthy that behavioral scientists realize that pain is highly complex, and even within BDSM situations pain often seems to be experienced and interpreted quite differently by those who enjoy it (Bain & Brady, 2014; Langdridge, 2007; Leknes & Bastian, 2014; Newmahr, 2010b). Before concluding, I should point out that all reviewers, despite their very different evaluations, offered some helpful suggestions for improving the manuscript. Nevertheless, this manuscript has been repeatedly rejected by several social work journals with no opportunity to make revisions.

Conclusion

My experience has been that key social work gatekeepers currently do not seem to be open to considering the topic of BDSM, and some are blatantly unwilling to accept the accumulating research about it. If this is the case, it perhaps reflects a failure by these editors and reviewers to adhere to social work’s own professional ethics and EPAS core competencies, which is highly unethical and professionally unacceptable. Indeed, a qualitative study of psychotherapists who

regularly work with BDSM clients reported that openness, cultural competence, knowledge about BDSM, refusal to pathologize BDSM, and recognition of client strengths are important features in working effectively with this population (Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2008). Practicing social workers who are uninformed about the vast range of sexual and relationship diversity and unaware of their own socio-sexual biases can, unknowingly, cause serious psychological harm to clients. Unfortunately, this does happen. Furthermore, incidents of client harm will continue to occur until more social work gatekeepers become sufficiently open to recent sexual diversity scholarship.

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