

It's (probably) not about sex baby, but it is about you and me: A quasi-ethnographic exploration of consensual corporal punishment

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Abstract

Corporal punishment (CP) is one aspect of BDSM play. While enjoyed by many at a low level, some players indulge in heavier play, with the potential for skin and tissue damage. This paper presents the results of an exploratory quasi-ethnographic study into CP, examining the motivations and potential benefits and risks of playing in this way, with the aim of increasing understanding of why individuals engage in heavy CP. Data were gathered from scene observations and semi-structured interviews with participants, including three professional Dominatrices with a reputation internationally for CP. Thematic Analysis was used to assess the data. While sexual arousal was a motivator for some participants, it was not the motivator for the majority. The importance of the marks left on the body was a common theme, as was challenging oneself to increase the amount of CP received or given. This was either to demonstrate a progression along a journey of increasing severity, or to enhance the experience either sexually, bruises / marks wise, or psychologically. Despite allusions by participants to addiction, psychological benefits in mood and mental health were reported by all participants. The main negative aspect of participation was fear of stigma and the perceived inability to be open with others about their interests. Participation in CP is a positive experience for those involved. The importance of bodily marks is a new finding, as is the positive impact on mental health.

Introduction

BDSM (bondage/discipline; domination/submission; sadism/masochism) can involve a range of potential activities and 'play,' usually incorporating one or more of the above elements. Individuals engage in these activities across a spectrum from an ad hoc basis to a lifestyle (Kolmes et al., 2006). BDSM awareness is perhaps growing thanks to the popularity of fiction such as *50 Shades of Grey* (Holvoet et al., 2017) and the increasing use of fetish imagery in popular culture (Weiss, 2006), but it is still not 'mainstream.' One form of play commonly incorporated into BDSM is corporal punishment (CP). Alison et al. (2001) developed a 'BDSM taxonomy' where CP would fit into the 'administration of pain' category, though other elements such as physical restriction (bondage or restraint) or humiliation are often co-present. There is an active 'scene' for players within the BDSM community, for both those assuming the dominant (Top) or submissive (Bottom) roles. In this paper, the 'giver' of the punishment will be referred to as the 'Top'; the receiver the 'Bottom.' Individuals who change between roles are referred to as a 'Switch.'

A CP scene might comprise exposing the Bottom – particularly the area/s to be punished – before being positioned and perhaps secured in place. A 'warm-up' punishment such as a spanking at a lighter level than what will be received later may or may not be administered, before the main element of the punishment is delivered. The aim of a warm-up is to enable the

Bottom to take more or alleviate the discomfort of the main strokes. However, many scenes do not incorporate a warm-up, and readers may well immediately spot a flaw in this description, i.e., this is just one of a thousand possibilities for play and is not representative of all CP interactions. ‘Corporal punishment’ in this paper will be defined as the striking of one individual by another, using either the hand or various implements, where both parties have consented to that activity. CP ranges in severity from a mild ‘playful’ spanking to a judicial-type caning with substantial tissue damage. This paper will discuss the findings of a small, quasi-ethnographic study into the motivations and experiences of a group of CP practitioners, predominantly in the United Kingdom (UK). It will consider the psychosocial aspects of CP from the participant’s perspective, particularly at what might be termed the ‘heavier’ end of the spectrum, i.e., where marks lasting for days if not weeks are made, bleeding might occur, or longer-term skin / physical damage caused.

Most papers consider BDSM activity as a whole and discuss CP — if it is discussed as a specific activity at all — within that context (e.g., Silva, 2015). Play at the level discussed in this paper can lead to long-term injury (Pinson, 2019) and is illegal in the UK. In UK law, an individual cannot consent to harm/assault. The legal position is based on the 2007 case of *R vs. Brown*:

“while consent may be a defense to injury short of a wound or amounting to common assault, an individual cannot consent to intentional injury that amounts to actual bodily harm or worse” (Paul, 2015)

The 2007 case follows the precedent set in 1934 (*R vs Donovan*) in which marks which were deemed to be more than ‘transient and trifling’ – they need not be permanent – would be charged and prosecuted as actual bodily harm (CPS, 2018). Bruises that last for days or weeks are not considered to be transient or trifling. Klement et al. (2017) alluded perhaps to heavier play in their paper on extreme rituals, where they considered the incorporation of a piercing/hook pull ritual into BDSM play and described sexual arousal and positive psychological effects, but this involved hook insertion/pulling rather than CP.

Given the apparent risks inherent in CP play from a legal and injury perspective, the aim of this study is to discover the motivations and desires of players involved in CP, both giving and receiving, before considering potential risks (for example physical in the form of injury or psychological including concerns about social stigma, feelings of guilt or adverse impact on psychological health and well-being) and benefits. The concept of stigma and openness about one’s participation in CP was an issue that arose from the first respondent interviewed, and observations of the discretion and privacy procedures in place at the play events. Bearing in mind the potential adverse effects that stigma can have upon an individual (Bezreh et al., 2012; Waldura et al., 2016), further interviews were adapted to include this route of questioning. Other studies have considered motivations and desires from a pain perspective (Dunkley et al., 2020); BDSM as a whole (Newmahr, 2008); or the psychological benefits and risks of BDSM play (Silva, 2015; Wismeijer & Assen, 2013). These studies have identified motivations for BDSM including sexual arousal, short and long term benefits to mental health or mood, or the identification of self, but none have focussed explicitly on CP.

Method

The study's ethical approval was sought and granted by DeMontfort University's Health and Life Science Ethics committee. The approach adopted was 'quasi ethnographic' (Murtagh, 2007), e.g., not an ethnography in the classical sense of prolonged time immersed in a culture, forming opinions based on observations, field notes, and interviews (Jones & Smith, 2017) but rather dipping in and out, forming conclusions based in part on observation but predominantly on the data gathered from interviews, using partial immersion as a route of entry into a closed world.

A convenience sample of potential participants was identified via three different media: personal contact of three professional disciplinarians based in the UK and South Africa, attending a CP event in the U.K., and internet forums. There was an element of snowball sampling, in that individuals were approached or recommended for potential inclusion in the study by existing participants, particularly the professional disciplinarians. Some potential participants were not included as their engagement in CP was a minimal part of their BDSM activity. The internet was used in the early stages to recruit but was abandoned as changes to digital law (either perceived or real) forced the main UK-based website focusing particularly on CP to close, and no participants were forthcoming from invitations to participate sent via Fetlife – a large Canada-based fetish website. Participants were provided with an information leaflet about the study, and any questions they had were answered prior to consent being obtained.

It cannot be said that there was no selection bias at this stage. Participants were individuals identified by the pro-dominants who could be approached or those the author identified from Fetlife as possible candidates based on their profile and amount of engagement with the platform – an entirely subjective process. At the event, at least one participant who may have yielded very interesting data was excluded due to intoxication and a poor reputation within the scene. As Infante-Rivard and Alexandre (2018) explain, selection bias (in this case endogenous bias) reduces validity of results, but can be controlled for, in quantitative studies at least, via statistical correction. It is doubtful whether the non-inclusion of one individual would have any significant effect on the data set but given the small sample size, it is a factor that may negatively affect the generalizability of the results. However, Fetterman, (2010) states that a deliberate choice of individuals may well be positive, depending on the phenomenon to be studied.

Data were collected from 11 participants using semi-structured interviews carried out by the author. These were either face-to-face in the respondent's location of choice or conducted via SKYPE internet-based video call (Microsoft corporation) due to geographical restrictions. One participant was interviewed over the telephone due to technical difficulties with the internet service. Interviews were transcribed either by the author or a transcription service at DeMontfort University. Data were coded using NVivo version 12 (QSR International) by the author and analysed using thematic analysis. This analysis followed the process outlined by Braun and Clark (2006), where interviews were transcribed before being read through at least twice. On the third read through, coding was initiated and linked to emerging themes as these emerged more data were added, and the themes refined.

Further detail was sought either by email or face-to-face from participants for any areas that required clarity and was combined with observations of online and in scene behavior both in private and public events. Participation at these events was by the author in the capacity of observer only, and these were semi-public events generally. The main event attended was prior to the interviews, and the activities witnessed at this event helped inform some of the interview questions. Observations of participant behaviors at this event and some smaller gatherings helped to triangulate findings from the interviews.

Findings and Discussion

Nineteen individuals were approached and invited to participate in the study; 58% ($n=11$) agreed: five female and six male. Age ranged from 41 to 83, with a mean of 55.3. All were white, and UK-based aside from one who lived in South Africa. Three of the women were professional disciplinarians, with a particular interest and/or reputation for CP; the remainder of the participants had other occupations outside of BDSM (all professional/upper managerial, with varying degrees of stress and personal responsibility) or were retired. All but one participant had a bachelor's degree or equivalent, with three possessing master's level qualifications and one a Ph.D. student. Most were married ($n=6$), including two to each other. Participants identified as either Top ($n=4$), Switch ($n=1$), or Bottom ($n=6$). Sexual orientation also varied, with participants describing themselves as lesbian ($n=1$), bisexual ($n=3$), 'heteroflexible' (very happy to play with members of their gender but not generally attracted to them) ($n=2$), or straight ($n=5$). One man was an openly practicing cross-dresser. Despite all three professional dominatrices being based in areas where ethnic diversity was the rule, they all reported that seeing non-white clients was extremely rare, as was encountering these individuals at social or scene events/parties.

The cane was by far the preferred implement for all respondents aside from one, and that was because his age made self-care for the injuries caused more difficult – he lived alone and no longer had the flexibility to reach any potential wounds. Most Bottoms or Switches preferred some form of restraint during the scene, with five of the seven considering it essential to their enjoyment. Tops were mostly ambivalent about the embellishments to the scene; happy to go along with bondage or roleplay, for example, to facilitate the Bottom's enjoyment in the main, but generally focused on the CP.

A note about these findings is required at this stage. Previous studies of BDSM have noted in their samples that practitioners often come from a more educated background (Wismeijer & Assen, 2013) or higher socio-economic status (Martinez, 2018; Sandnabba et al. 1999). However, one professional domme suggested that the educational status evidence was at odds with her not insubstantial practice, stating that she:

“saw clients, none of whom are thick, [a British idiom for less intelligent,] but more tradespeople than professionals—perhaps they've got more disposable income?” (P1)

Most participants described an individual journey to CP, and not as a result of being introduced by a partner. The exception to this was P2, whose husband had held a lifelong interest in BDSM and introduced her to it, but the journey to CP was a shared one. All other participants

could recall either an inchoate interest from a young age that usually started as stimulation from media usually (films / books / TV programs etc.) that would be considered vanilla, e.g., were not designed to be sexually arousing or erotic in nature. P3 described her enjoyment of the Indiana Jones films, particularly the bullwhipping, as an example of this. One participant described a fascination with a teacher who caned at school but had not themselves been caned. Only one other participant had been caned at school and found the experience a negative one. Five had been physically disciplined by parents, but only one described it in anything approaching abusive terms. CP was the only BDSM activity practiced by two participants (P4 and P5). All others engaged in other BDSM activities to a greater or lesser degree, either concurrently with or as an adjunct to CP. P1, P2, P6, and P7 viewed CP as either an end to itself or foreplay, with P2 and P6 especially taking the latter view as their predominant experience.

The gender split noted in this study is also interesting. It is often claimed that women are more submissive/masochistic than men (e.g. Connolly, 2006), and Silva (2015) identifies distinct gender differences in pain levels desired/experienced and the context in which it is framed. At first inspection, this finding would seem to contradict established ideas of the gender distribution between Top and Bottom roles, with most participants in the Bottom role being male in contrast to the reportedly more common distribution of female Bottoms (Yost & Hunter, 2012). However, all the professional disciplinarians were female, as were the disciplinarians at the play events. While they confirmed that the vast majority of their clients and people they had sessions with socially were male (despite all three being either lesbian or bisexual) and that playing with a female Bottom was very unusual, their gender may well have impacted the sample.

Aside from P2 and P6, only P10 engaged in CP activity with their partner; while most participants had partners who were fully aware, some kept the full extent of their involvement a secret. Only two participants were almost universally open with their interest in CP, and both were pro-dommes (P1, P3). The remaining domme (P11) was open on social media (face visible, etc); while her husband knows about her activities, her grown-up children do not; neither does the majority of her family. The remaining participants' level of disclosure varied from nobody knows (P5, P7, P8), to certain close friends and family members (P2, P6, P9, P11) to wife only (P4, P10). Only three had had to disclose to a health professional with two positive and one very negative result. Fear of adverse reaction and stigmatisation was given as the main reason for non-disclosure. P7 is an active cross-dresser and felt very comfortable being out, but does not disclose their interest in CP. P8 is very active in their local church community, and while that community knows that P8 is active on US-based Fetish sites, the belief is that it is to try to 'save' people, rather than for their personal enjoyment. P6 had experienced negative discrimination when attempting to discuss CP at their workplace or raise it within a professional (nursing) context:

“I wish I could do BDSM CP etc. more... Just be more open about it, that's the main thing. I don't have regrets about doing it, about the stuff we've done, will do, why would you have a regret about something you both enjoy and brings you closer together? I wish we could be more open about it, and I wish there wasn't the judgement about it. Whether that's perceived or actual it's immaterial - I've been on the receiving end of direct discrimination because of it and I wouldn't wish that on anyone.”

Negative reactions from people that participants had told were very rare; however, whether this is due to tolerance, politeness, or careful selection of whom to tell is impossible to ascertain. Yost (2010) identified four categories of stigmatising attitudes, including that it is socially or morally wrong; that BDSM contains non-consensual violence; there is a lack of tolerance; and that traits of dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism translate to wider life. Meeker (2013) identified potential negative effects to being open about BDSM in the workplace, and this is supported by Holt (2016). Damm et al. (2018) cautioned that having to hide aspects of sexuality such as BDSM or CP engagement may be detrimental to an individual's mental health and well-being.

Three main themes emerged from the data when considering the motivation for participation in CP: sexual arousal or desire, feelings of euphoria or well-being, and the desire to push or challenge oneself. Baumeister (1991) identified similar themes in his work 'Escaping the Self,' but this paper introduces some new elements that expand upon this.

Each theme will be explored in turn. Two additional themes of perceived addiction and the importance of marks will also be discussed.

Sexual Arousal

The expectation that CP was sexually driven was the author's preconception before the study commenced, and was a view shared by some respondents — to the extent that one respondent cast doubt on the veracity of those that stated their motivation was not sexual. However, 40% of participants explained that their primary motivation for CP was not sexual; and indeed, most were vehement in this assertion to the point of offense when pressed. If one respondent had held that view, then it could be dismissed as an outlier, but this was a definite trend, supporting a conclusion by De Neef et al. (2019) that motivation for engagement in BDSM could be non-sexual. Only four respondents admitted to direct sexual arousal during CP (one Top, two Bottom, and one Switch; two female and male), and all pro-dommes identified that direct sexual arousal was extremely rare during the CP they engaged in, in contrast to other forms of BDSM play. The participants who expressed sexual arousal as their prime motivation usually found sexual satisfaction after the event, with the experience being replayed from — as P1 described it — the 'wank bank' (a mental repository of memories from a CP episode used as masturbatory resource). During the scene, evidence of arousal — manifesting as an erection in men or vaginal lubrication/vulval engorgement in women — occurred in only two participants. All pro-dommes interviewed agreed that the presence of an erection was extremely rare in their experience and practice; however, they did agree there frequently was evidence of 'precum' in male recipients, despite the lack of erection. At the play party observed, no man developed an erection at any stage while being punished — indeed in some cases quite the opposite effect (shrinkage) was observed. On another occasion however, both the male and female Bottoms became visibly aroused. P3 noted that with female recipients:

“I am close to their bum and obviously their vagina so I do see physical arousal in women from that perspective relatively often”

The production of ‘precum’ may be due to transmitted impact to the prostate, but this is hard to assess. Female arousal may again result from impact transmission, but P2 explained that it was:

“The whole scenario, the nakedness, the bondage. The first few strokes just hurt, but then the pleasure starts”

At first glance, this supports Labrecque et al. (2020), who suggest that it is not pain per se, but it is the combination of pain, scene, negotiation, clothing, and so forth that is arousing. However, in several participants, the pain was identified as the stimulating factor (P3, P4, P8, P9) irrespective of what might be termed scene extras. Labrecque et al.’s study was also only examining the appeal to bottoms rather than tops. P2 also described occasions where there was no negotiation or scene setting, and pain was administered almost without warning; she found these situations arousing as well. This couple was unusual in that they both also experienced direct sexual arousal from bottoming (P2) and switching (P6) and played with each other.

The non-sexual reasons for participation were not articulated as clearly as the sexual ones. To assess the veracity of these statements, the interviewer started asking questions about what aroused the participants or what they masturbated to. Some BDSM play or fantasy element was present in all of the respondents’ answers, but not necessarily CP.

At least one respondent displayed a strong possibility of a reactive formation mechanism (essentially when denial becomes so strong that there is no conscious awareness of the denial; Baumeister et al., 1998) when denying any sexual interest in CP. Others may have distanced themselves from it to avoid potential conflicts between sexual activity and CP in a professional sense.

Well-being

Williams, in a 2006 study of professional dominatrices, identified that they often felt a strong therapeutic element was present in their work. Irrespective of sexual or non-sexual motivation, all respondents of all genders and BDSM orientations, espoused the positive psychological and mental health benefits of participating in CP. These feelings ranged from centering or grounding (P11) to euphoria (P8) and being in a bubble of intimacy (P2 and P6):

“Yes, sexual pleasure, the... yeah... just the happiness, the euphoria that comes with it. The closeness with the person that’s administering it, particularly if it’s someone that you love, that’s... you know, very, that closeness that you can’t emulate, you can’t simulate, you can’t.” (P2)

At the play events, one of the most striking observations was how the general mood changed as the sessions progressed. Nerves and some awkwardness were observed initially, developing into a collective ‘buzz’ and sense of excitement. Some participants were very obviously in an altered (positive) mood after their caning or strapping, and one Top was positively beaming in conversation afterwards. Stress-relieving benefits were widely reported, as were elevations in mood and profound relaxation (P4, P5):

“Definitely, definitely yes. It definitely lifts your mood. Without a shadow of a doubt, definitely lifts the mood.” (P10)

Participants reported that these effects lasted for between 1-28 days post scene, but no participant could accurately predict how long the positive effects might last, or even reliably predict that they would occur to a certain level. The uncertainty as to whether positive effects would occur, or their duration and intensity, is supported by frequent comments in online literature and conversations with participants who did not partake in the study. However, the reported non-sexual positive effects can be seen in mood, contentment and intimacy, amongst other things. This belief is supported by a growing body of literature (Baumeister, 1997; Wiseman, 1996; Wismeijer & Assen, 2013).

The feeling at the time and for at least a short (up to a few hours later) time post scene is often called ‘subspace’ (Sagarin et al., 2015). This state is sought after by some participants and might be described as an altered state of consciousness (Rinella, 2013), or a transition from a state of constant compulsive thought to one of a liberating sense of single mindedness (Newmahr, 2008). While different for different individuals, it is generally regarded as a sensation of relaxation and conversely euphoria that is well recognized within the scholarly literature on the subject (Pitagora, 2017). However, the exact mechanism remains unclear, with various theories, both biochemical and psychological, being advanced. Whatever the mechanism, it is clear that some respondents will go to great lengths in their attempts to obtain it. In caution, it must be noted that subspace is usually defined as a ‘during scene’ state; the psychological benefits described in this section persist far beyond the scene and cannot correctly be attributed to subspace. P2 described the feeling after a session as ‘euphoria,’ explaining this was something she specifically sought when engaging in a scene; while P6 (her husband) explained that the most enjoyable scenes produced this euphoria, and it was an extreme form of this experience that started them both on their CP journey. It must also be noted that Ambler et al. (2017) describe a counterpart to subspace called Topspace (not Domspace interestingly enough), and as its name suggests, it is a state experienced by the Top in the scene. P9 described it as:

“I just go higher... it can last for days.”

P3 supported this, explaining that:

“when it’s prolonged, my focus is prolonged because it’s many people over a few hours then my focus is more intense and my top space much higher. It usually lasts for the rest of the day but not longer.”

Whether Topspace or subspace, the mechanism remains uncertain. Nichols (2014) suggests that subspace is obtained as a result of altered blood flow and body chemical changes, and a psychologically submissive state, but exactly what these chemicals are is unknown. There has been some research carried out in this area, with Sagarin et al. studying cortisol (a stress hormone) and testosterone (a sex hormone associated with ‘male’ characteristics) at a BDSM party (Sagarin et al., 2009), while Klement et al. (2017) considered cortisol during an extreme temporary piercing ritual event.

While interesting, these hormones are not commonly seen as pleasure mediated endorphins in the same way that dopamine might be, for example. Solenzol (2017) offers a comprehensive theory explaining neurotransmitter action in BDSM, discussing the role of noradrenaline (norepinephrine) and serotonin. To the best of the author's knowledge, none of these have been studied in a BDSM context and none explain the mechanism of Topspace or subspace.

Pushing and Challenging - The continued need

All respondents in this study admitted to a desire or need for increasing stimulus. Santtila et al. (2002), in their study of wider BDSM practices, showed that desire for stimulation increased over time, for example, with pain progressing from mild spanking to more extreme play. However, the Santtila et al. study classified clothespins as more extreme than caning, and placed flagellation in a completely different category to both caning and spanking. While this escalation of sensation was a general trend amongst respondents, some factors ameliorated this in certain cases. P8 raised concerns over his ability to self-care for wounds of increasing severity due to his age. P6, P2, P10, and P5 all identified the current need to conceal their activities from others, meaning the associated marks – if visible - would be undesirable; a circumstance P7 and P8 had experienced in their past. There was also a reduction in the individual's ability to cope with heavier levels of play if there had been a significant gap (greater than two months) between heavy sessions. These gaps occurred either because of inability to play (work, childcare, access to partners) or the desire to avoid long-term injuries. Many Bottoms expressed frustration that they could not play as often as they wanted to, with most thinking about the next time they could play within a few hours or days. P2 (female Bottom) explained that she started thinking about the next scene almost immediately and that frequent 'maintenance spankings' kept the desire at bay in the interim.

While the 'power exchange' was the most common reason offered for non-sexual motivation by the Top, the sensation, adrenaline rush, or the desire to push themselves were offered as a rationale by the Bottoms. This desire to 'push themselves' was seen as both positive and negative by participants. P8 expressed frustration that their age meant that they could not play as heavily or as frequently as they would like. P3 noted that some of her submissives would try to goad her into punishing them in a game of one-upmanship with others in her 'stable.' P7 engages in repeated attempts via social media to have their punishment increased by the Top they visit, but most saw this game playing as part of the scene.

Some Bottoms sought continually to push themselves and take more; Tops were generally very happy to accommodate this or actively pushed their partners to greater levels. As one professional put it: "it's a game they can never win, and a great business model!" There were multiple manifestations of this, but the underlying rationale is unclear. Rozin et al. (2013) advanced a theory of 'benign masochism,' where the most pleasure was derived from an activity just below the threshold of what was bearable. However, that suggestion was linked to chili pepper ingestion and not supported by respondents in his study when asked about painful massage – an arguably closer correlation to CP.

Addiction

While benign masochism may be one explanation for the desire to engage in CP, a more pervasive and hard to resist mechanism was perhaps identified by some participants. The Journal of Positive Sexuality (JPS)/Center for Positive Sexualities (and other organizations' including the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists) position statements on sexuality and addiction is clear: the addiction model is inappropriate for use when discussing pornography or sex (AASECT, 2021; CPS, TASHRA & NCSF, 2017), potentially causing more harm than good, and arising from a conservative response to cultural anxieties. The DSM manual (APA, 2013) only includes one non 'substance based' addiction (gambling), and the National Health Service (NHS) website devoted to the topic opens with the statement that 'experts debate whether sex addiction exists' (NHS, 2018). However, there were frequent analogies to drug use and addiction used to describe the respondents' desire for CP.

"You're always chasing the dragon." (P6)

"It's such a big need, a craving, that you just can't stop it." (P5)

"Always chasing that first hit." (P11)

There were also related descriptors used when discussing the length of time between sessions:

"I get a bit twitchy if I've not been able to hit someone for a couple of days."; "If I don't find myself in those positions of power... then I start getting, not depressed, but I think people with Seasonal Affective Disorder would recognize it." (P1)

"You start craving it again, the next day – the same day! It's addictive." (P5)

One individual at the play party event started to bleed almost immediately when the punishment began. In conversation with the Tops afterwards, they described how the bottom was well known for having 'weak spots' on his buttocks that broke down easily, but despite being advised repeatedly to have a break from playing, his desire to continue overrode the damage that was being caused. Kurt and Ronel (2017) postulated that participants went through various stages, including the initial experience, euphoria, intoxication, craving/withdrawal, and increased tolerance to pain, leading them to propose a preliminary addiction model. However, this work appears to be based on behavioral spin theory which tends towards a pathological approach, at odds with some approaches in the fields of sociology, psychology, and health sciences.

Some respondents identified imagined parallels between the experience of heroin users with their first high and CP players who experience a very similar feeling and spend the rest of their BDSM time trying to relive it – usually with a lack of success. For P2, P3, P6, P8, and P11 it is never as good as the first time. This was the one area where there seemed to be real negatives (either actual or potential) for participants: a failed marriage because of the inability to stop engaging in CP (P5), failed relationships (P7, P9, P10), and deceived partners causing guilt and distress to the individual (P8) doing the deceiving.

Marks

The desire to increase the level of severity as experience and skills builds makes intuitive sense, but caution must be exercised concerning CP. A cane, or for that matter most implements of CP, can cause severe injury in unskilled hands. Subspace can be dangerous here; Miller and Devon (1997) caution that “subs who are flying are unable to make decisions!” (p. 175). P3 noted that it would sometimes be:

“irresponsible to carry on, no matter how much the bottom wanted them to.”

This was noted in practice at one of the play events; blood was flowing to such an extent that the Top called a halt to the caning as they could no longer aim accurately, to the Bottom’s obvious disappointment. P1 had a similar, though slightly more cynical stance, perhaps more matching her professional persona than her actual approach in practice:

“If you break your toys, you can’t play with them anymore.”

Short-term injuries are relatively common with CP – bruises, minor lacerations, and so on. All respondents were asked if they had suffered any long term or serious injury and all replied in the negative, though long-term damage is possible; Pinson (2019) described lesions to the buttocks caused by repeated canings. These ‘weak spots’ were identified as a potential problem by all respondents, with the desire to reduce the likelihood of them occurring in the first place or the need to avoid further damage impacting on most people’s play. Weak spots appear to be more common when receiving the cane regularly, possibly due to the repeated tip impact in the same area, as opposed to a broader implement (paddle or tawse) which distributes the impact over a wider skin surface. P1, P3, and P11 had all encountered individuals with weak spots, and all assessed this before play. P3 particularly also checks for the presence of ‘leather butt,’ a condition where the skin has been beaten so much (usually by overuse of a broader implement such as a strap or paddle) it compresses, becoming tough and leathery to the touch (Miller & Devon, 1997). Skin afflicted by this condition is also much more likely to break down and bleed during impact.

The possibility of injury during CP is rarely discussed in the academic literature: De Neef et al.’s (2019) comprehensive literature review of BDSM publications does not mention it, nor does Silva (2015). However, it is mentioned in ‘how to manuals,’ but more about avoiding bony prominences or underlying organs. Injury and marks could be viewed as synonymous, but whereas injury is not desired (in the main), marks very often are and act as motivating factor, particularly for escalation of severity. At play events, comments about the marks received were always made and/or elicited. Bottoms commented:

“Yes, I like to be marked as a kind of reminder really I suppose.” (P7)

“Like most people in my position I view them as a source of pride, you’d be disappointed not to have marks.” (P10)

“I like the marks afterwards, feel the hard flesh, then slowly watch them disappear.” (P5)

“I sometimes think I wish I hadn’t got these marks on my bottom so I can’t take the children swimming LAUGHS, I sometimes think that, but I love the marks, I love the marks on my bottom. I love them while they’re there because it reminds me of a very nice time.” (P2)

“Yes, yes very much so. I think it’s like a mark of pride like they’ve done it.” (P9)

Some people the marks that they receive; that’s an even more intense high to them than the actual session itself. They gush over it and they get on a high about it.” (P3)

All Tops felt the same way and enjoyed marking their Bottoms. P9 commented:

“It is, I love marks and I love to feel the welts, I scratch them with my nails, it’s a big part of what I do. I always get them to send me photos of the marks the next day.”

P1 did not aim specifically for marks, but at the level she plays at, they just happen. Her frustration was not that some recipients could not receive marks, but rather that they complained about receiving them if they had not alerted her beforehand. P11 commented that she sometimes regretted the order she used implements if they obliterated the marks left by the one before. P6 used them as a comparator with P2 when they switched:

“Marks yes, injuries no. Marks definitely, they’re quite fun, you look in the mirror and think that’s fantastic, I remember that stroke and you remember that stroke or whatever. So yes, I like marks and my wife likes to look at them. Usually, to compare them to her own to be fair, and when its dishing out then most definitely and I’m disappointed if there aren’t any. Must try harder!” (P6)

Most participants identified that a fine line needed to be drawn between the level of severity to produce the desired effects in Top and Bottom, and the risk reduction of longer-term damage. Rather than the intensity of the sessions being the determining factor in the development of weak spots or leather-butt, frequency of play seemed to be the predominant factor – unless routinely engaged in full force ‘judicial’ type punishments, when scar tissue would inevitably form. Two individuals at the play party were not able to participate as they had planned, due to wanting to allow time to heal before a particularly intense session they had planned for later in the year. A general consensus amongst participants was that a minimum of three to four weeks should be allowed between canings of any real severity, and that total abstinence for some months was the only way to reduce the progression of weak spots once they had formed.

Strengths and Limitations

Reflexivity, writes Galdas (2017), is crucial in conducting qualitative research. The author’s involvement in this field confers several advantages but also disadvantages to the work. Had the author’s credibility in this field not been established, and vouched for, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to gain access to the participants. The author has written a

separate paper on the methodological challenges encountered in carrying out this study (Pinson, submitted), thus necessitating the quasi-ethnographic approach mentioned above, where the author became involved in the scene to a greater extent than would be routine for this type of research.

Participants who the author and the pro-dommes felt were likely to agree to take part, or had interesting stories to tell, were targeted for recruitment. This selection bias meant it was not a random sample. Individuals were invited to represent a wider demographic section than those who initially expressed an interest in participating. Doing this skewed the results to indicate a broader spread of people than would appear to participate in heavy CP, either from observation outside this study or anecdotally. It was difficult to recruit any further female recipients; all those the author tried to enlist in the study cited fears of exposure and worries about confidentiality as blocks to taking part.

As the author did all the interviews (and most of the transcribing) this limited the number of participants, creating a data set underpowered in relation to the number of people who likely practice CP. Polit and Beck (2014) suggest that qualitative research necessitates smaller numbers than quantitative. While few, the participants in this study offer unique insights into an under-researched field, and with some caution, the results can be generalized to the wider CP community in the UK. The pro-dommes all confirmed the existence of and widespread experience of the phenomena described, amongst their large numbers of clients. They also confirmed a much broader description of a demographic than this sample showed and as described above. The ethnic, gender, and socio-economic status of the participants correlate to previous work on BDSM (Richter et al., 2008), though female numbers could be influenced by the gender of the pro-dommes as could socio-economic status; as one respondent put it: it is an expensive hobby! However, very few male pro-doms are practicing, and it is generally cheaper to visit a CP specialist domme rather than a more generalist BDSM one.

Conclusion

While sexual arousal is undoubtedly a large part of the CP process for some participants, and possibly so on some level for others, it is not universal. There are comparisons with addiction (though it should be noted that these are terms used by the participants themselves) and concerns over the stigma and the inability to be as open as individuals might wish to be. However, improvements to mental health and psychological benefits in both the short and long term were common to all participants and far outweighed the potential negatives. The mechanism for this increase in well-being is unclear, and a biochemical hypothesis seems unlikely – at least on its own. It would not explain the similar effects experienced by both Tops and Bottoms. Likely it is the simple fact that when receiving the impact of a thin, hard, piece of wood, or you are the giver of the perfect stroke, having to concentrate, putting every ounce of skill into delivering it, it is difficult to worry about anything else.

Once the said stroke has landed, the importance of the marks both received and given has not hitherto been explored or identified in the literature. They act as an indicator of accuracy, severity, and a reminder of a good time had by all; a badge of honor to be shared with others or considered alone in a quiet moment. They are a reminder of the connection shared between

individuals partaking in the scene, but they are also warnings of a need to take a break or adjust the tempo and level of one's play. Long term injurious effects are rare but can and do occur; prevention is much better than cure with a gap from three to four weeks being anecdotally advised. Despite the risks, and these are truly minimal, consensual CP is beneficial to its participants, both givers and receivers.

More research into CP is needed. Questions around the multifactorial nature of Topspace and subspace and its prevalence or absence, difference in intensity or duration, or reproducibility compared to non-CP focused BDSM are intriguing: there is certainly room for further exploration into the possible biochemistry at play, perhaps considering the role that different neurotransmitters may have. Work aimed at preventing the formation of weak spots and the associated long-term damage these cause would also be beneficial to the BDSM community.

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