



(De-)Pathologizing the Continuums: A Case for New Analytical Frameworks for Studying Bondage and Sadoomasochism

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Abstract: The purpose of this piece is two-fold. First, it serves as an integrative review examining the extant literature concerning bondage and sadoomasochism (BDSM), with a specific focus on BDSM among members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex (LGBTQQI) population. Throughout the review, the authors illustrate that BDSM and related behaviors exist on continuums and that these behaviors (when involving consenting partners) do not necessarily constitute psychological impairment. Second, building on the argument that BDSM and related behaviors are indeed situated on continuums, the authors advocate for the development of distinct analytical frameworks for the examination of BDSM and fetishistic behaviors. As such, in a general sense, this piece serves to provide possible directions for future research concerning BDSM and LGBTQQI persons.

Key Words: BDSM, Sexualities, Pathologies, Identity, Fetishism

INTRODUCTION

"We live in a sexually multi-cultural society. Different ways of expressing sexuality have resulted in the creation of distinct subcultures having distinctly different values regarding sexuality. When these subcultures are able to isolate themselves from the dominant culture, they are able to have

venues where the values of the subculture dominate." (Bettinger, 2002, p. 94)

In the last three decades the American public has become more accepting of so-called "alternative lifestyles." Public opinion polls indicate that an increasing number of Americans accept lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and

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intersex (LGBTQQI) persons marrying and working as educators (Goode, 2011). Further, several states recognize same-sex marriage (or civil unions), many companies offer benefits to same-sex couples, and the U.S. Government recently repealed the exclusionary “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. However, the relative acceptance of LGBTQQI persons does not necessarily extend to other groups who have, at least historically, been historically labeled as “sexual deviants.” In particular, one group of sexual deviants, those who practice bondage, dominance, and/or sadomasochism (BDSM), is at the center of continued sexual and social contention.

Such contention exists despite BDSM-related behavior existing as a constant in human history (Langdrige, 2006) and, in some eras, being seen as a latent aspect of human sexuality (Moore, 2009). This review argues that the source of much of the controversy (academic and social) surrounding BDSM and its related behaviors stems from these behaviors being pathologized and treated as mental disorders. As such, research concerning BDSM is often conducted within medicalized frameworks. These frameworks frequently employ operational definitions of BDSM developed, at least in part, from diagnostic criteria put forth by “The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual” (DSM) published by the American Psychiatric Association. This review asserts that, by employing these frameworks, researchers perpetuate the stereotype of BDSM participants as “patients” in need of treatment. Moreover, this review illustrates that conceptualizing BDSM as an activity of deviants (medical or social) ignores the diversity of human sexual behavior and marginalizes the people who participate in such activities.

The impetus to pathologize BDSM is not surprising, as societies constantly seek to

codify their sexual mores and discourage their citizenries from recognizing the natural diversity existing in sexual practices. Drawing on homosexuality as a parallel, the medical community (until recently) categorized non-heterosexuality as a mental disorder. Such medicalization is evidenced by homosexuality’s inclusion in the DSM-II (American Psychiatric Association 1968). However, partially in light of pressure from homosexual rights groups (Bayer, 1987), homosexuality, as a discrete diagnosis, was removed from the 1974 re-print of the DSM-II and remains absent from the current version of the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 1974 & 2000). Nevertheless, given the social and medical categorization of homosexuality as “deviant,” it is not surprising that non-heterosexuals were marginalized from society, harassed by the police, incarcerated for being “sexually deviant,” and ostracized from their careers and communities.

Practitioners of BDSM are subjected to a similar marginalization to the extent that they are excluded from full social citizenship (Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2008). This ostracization of sexual deviants exists despite sexuality existing as more than a collection of behaviors or attitudes fitting nicely into nominal categories (Kinsey et al., 1998). Building on this more fluid conceptualization of human sexuality, this paper argues that sexual activities and identities exist on continuums, with different people participating in different levels of these activities at various times in their lives. Whether one is addressing sexual orientation or behavioral expressions of sexual desire, it is important that s/he fully appreciates the spectrum of diversity that exists in human sexuality. If the expression of sexual desire is deconstructed with the understanding that sexual behaviors exist not as stagnant categories but as fluid moments of often-healthy sexual expression, it becomes harder

to medicalize alternative sexual practices such as BDSM.

Interestingly, conceptualizing BDSM and fetishism as behaviors occurring along continuums is not without support in the medical community. The DSM-IV-TR (American Psychological Association, 2004) itself allows for such continuums within the diagnosis codes for various disorders. The actual ranges of these continuums, however, are never fully elucidated. As such, the current review seeks to illustrate that BDSM and other related activities are organized along continuums that range from healthy sexual expression to a point where medical, social and legal maladaptation become a concern. Further, as long as these activities occur between consenting adults, we contend that they should be viewed as valid and appropriate sexual practices for people who choose to participate in them. The validity of BDSM-related practices appears to be supported by the fact that many participants indicate such behaviors can be a source of personal growth Hopkins (1997). Acknowledging the validity of BDSM-related behaviors will allow researchers to conduct a broader spectrum of social science research.

In an effort to successfully support these arguments, this paper presents possible definitions of BDSM, traces the history of academic research in this area, and examines BDSM communities, participants, and other of BDSM-related behavior. Drawing on various definitions and the framing of BDSM and its related behaviors, the authors of this review hope to illustrate the need to examine such behaviors as being organized on continuums rather than static phenomena. Once these arguments are made, we turn our attention to possible avenues for future research concerning BDSM-related behaviors.

DEFINITIONS OF BDSM

One of the challenges in discussing BDSM is the variety of definitions that exist regarding the concept. A review of the pertinent literature unearths two distinct and often competing categories of definitions: 1) definitions centered on individual behaviors, and 2) definitions revolving around the individual as being part of larger BDSM and fetishist communities. Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to review these general definitional discourses so that we will eventually be able to construct more specific operational definitions of BDSM. Specifically, we are referencing definitions that draw on the strengths and recognize the limitations of the existing definitions of BDSM.

Individual Definitions

The first set of definitions, based on interactions among individuals, elucidates the use of power—which is one of the foundations of this type of sexual practice—as a primary explanation of BDSM behavior. While most studies of sadomasochism (S/M) discuss on the idea of power, this group of definitions centralizes power as a primary focus. The first definition in this category conceptualizes S/M as an erotic conversation revolving around the concept of power. Specifically, Freeman (2008, states: “Sadomasochism is a sexually ‘minor’ practice, an erotic dialectic between two or more people that ostensibly focuses on the ritualized exchanges of power” (p. 35) In other words, according to this perspective, BDSM and other related practices are a result of interactions occurring within a constructed power dynamic. The second definition of BDSM in this category focuses more on sexual practices, with power being described as a tool used to achieve a desired sexual outcome. According to this perspective, “practitioners use power creatively in their

relationships to accomplish a wide variety of sexual and emotional aims” (Langdrige & Butt, 2005, 70).

Aside from these power-focused definitions, there is a more generalized, individually oriented definition. In particular, Williams (2006) defines BDSM as: “The 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. 335) This is the most comprehensive definition regarding individuals. It highlights how practitioners utilize a number of approaches and tools during their BDSM activity and foregrounds the positive sexual aspects of these practices. Also, this conception of BDSM activity intertwines both the sexual benefits of this practice and how BDSM activity fosters personal growth among participants. In this context, BDSM might allow for personal growth by supplying women with a mechanism that enables them to exert control over their sexual lives and question commonly held sexual cultural norms (Bauer, 2008).

Community Definitions

Moving from a micro- to a macro-level of analysis, the second grouping of definitions of BDSM focuses on community-based conceptualizations of BDSM activities. The first definition in this category focuses on the totality of the S/M culture as a composite of many S/M communities, “complexly delineated across boundaries of sex, gender, and sexuality” (Langdrige, 2006, p. 382). Here, the emphasis is on the idea of communities and intersectionality, as opposed to the concept of isolated individuals who act in an unrestrained and radical manner.

The second definition in this group focuses on the larger context of S/M

communities. Newmahr (2008) argues that “the S/M community is a social network of people organized around S/M, who practice and observe S/M in particular public spaces and attend informational and educational meetings” (p. 316) This definition sounds similar to other small communities organized around a specific interest. It also recognizes the importance of non-sexual activities in these communities, and how these activities foster the growth and strength of the community.

Building on the idea of BDSM-related communities, S/M can also be viewed as a “sexualized lifestyle community,” or a subculture that is formed around intimate practices (Butts, 2007). In contrast to the previous two definitions, here the focus on the primacy of sexual practices in the organization of BDSM communities. Like any other community, these communities have their own rules and norms that members are expected to follow. Moreover, many practitioners who embrace a BDSM identity form S/M communities in direct response to mainstream cultural values (Bauer, 2008; Rudy, 1999). Scholars often view these communities as counter-culture movements. This is particularly true for communities, such as those categorized as “dyke,” that openly exclude certain segments of the general population from membership (Bauer, 2008). Rudy (1999) further contends that practitioners of S/M organize their sexual-social lives on a communal basis operating in the social context of a radical community. In these kinds of sexually radical cultures the sex activities function both as initiations into the community and as concrete practices that bind an entire culture together (Rudy, 1999).

Providing another community-based definition, Yost (2010) characterizes BDSM as “the safe and consensual sexual activities of an adult subculture that practices bondage and discipline, domination and submission,

and sadism and masochism as part of their sexual interactions” (p. 79) By highlighting the importance of consensual and safe sexual behavior in BDSM communities, this definition foregrounds how participants freely choose activities and give those activities meanings that involve their sexual pleasure (Yost, 2010). It also focuses attention on how participants freely choose their boundaries and determine what types of “play” will occur.

Alison et al. (2001) proffer a final community-based definition stating, “sadoomasochism can be conceptualized as a set of interrelated behaviors where individuals give different emphasis to particular themes rather than a label of convenience for a number of independent phenomena” (p. 7). This is more of an abstract definition of S/M, one that expresses the meaning participants give their activities, instead of focusing on the behaviors themselves.

Moving Toward Operational Definitions of BDSM and Its Related Behaviors

The purpose of discussing the various categories of definitions was to highlight the multifaceted nature of BDSM activity. As we have shown, BDSM can be conceptualized in two distinct ways: as an individual-level set of behaviors (incorporating power-based sexual expression) and/or as a community-organizing force. We contend that this fragmentation limits researchers’ ability to develop comprehensive frameworks that encompass the totality of BDSM-related behaviors, activities, identities and communities. As such, in order to fully elucidate the complexity of BDSM, scholars must recognize that BDSM and its related behaviors exist on different planes (i.e., community and individual) and are organized on continuums rather than static categories of behavior.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF BDSM

Humans have incorporated BDSM into their sexual practices for thousands of years, but it was not until 1886 that the terms sadism and masochism were first used (Langdrige, 2006). The application of these terms led to the differential treatment of people who incorporated these activities into their sexual lives. The introduction of these terms also contributed to the medicalization of the practices, which further led to the demonization of participants (Langdrige, 2006). In the early 20th century Freud combined the terms to form a category called sadoomasochism. He then treated S/M as a sexual pathology that resides in individuals as a result of psychic conflict (Langdrige, 2006). This psychoanalytic approach remained the dominant framework for dealing with S/M behavior until the 1950s. However, the impact of the approach is still felt in modern societies, with arrests and institutionalization of open participants of BDSM still occurring within the last two decades. For example, during the Spanner Case in the UK, 16 gay men were fined or imprisoned for consensually partaking in S/M-related behavior (Langdrige, 2006).

The Spanner case, which began in 1990, stands in stark contrast to the fact that by the 1970s many homosexual men were already challenging the dominant system of erotic norms (Brodsky, 1993). In particular, some gay men became involved in the S/M scene as a way to counteract norms that they found oppressive; Brodsky describes this as: “a community of deviants within a deviant community” (Brodsky, 1993, p. 237). This community has its own institutions, such as social networks, specialty bars and clubs, publications, political organizations and motorcycle clubs (Brodsky, 1993).

Current BDSM Trends and Demographic Characteristics of Practitioners

About 10 % of the United States population reports participating in some form of BDSM behavior (Stockwell et al., 2010). These behaviors can range from light spanking to more intense activities such as “hardcore S/M” or “edge play.” Participants in BDSM can be grouped into two categories: the first contains people participating in certain behaviors within an intimate relationship; the second contains those who primarily identify with the subculture or lifestyle with its own set of norms, values, symbols, and organizations (Williams, 2006). In either category participants involve themselves through interaction with other human beings. This distinction illustrates two things. First, it highlights the importance of incorporating both the individual and community components when developing analytical frameworks of BDSM. Second, it demonstrates that the fluidity of participation in BDSM activities is a corollary of the varieties of expressions of sexual orientation—thus indicating the need to recognize these behaviors as being organized along continuums rather than existing as static categories.

At this point, one might ask himself/herself, “Who are these practitioners?” Generally, S/M practitioners are well-educated with positive attitudes about themselves and their behaviors (Sagarin et al., 2009). These self-reported characteristics are in opposition to the popular image of BDSM participants as perverse, sex-crazed maniacs who involve others unwillingly in their sexual practices. In addition, S/M practitioners express that they experience increased relationship closeness as a result of their sexual activities (Sagarin et al., 2009). Again, the notion that practitioners are involved in healthy and satisfying relationships that incorporate

BDSM activities is not generally a part of the popular discourse about these phenomena.

Behavioral Characteristics of BDSM

Stockwell et al., (2010) identify five features common to most BDSM interactions. These findings are echoed by Butts (2007), Taylor and Ussher (2001) and Weinberg (1987), who all note similar features in their own research. The first is that one person is in the more dominant role, while another person is in the more submissive role. This role taking does not occur exclusively in a sexual context as these roles can be taken up in everyday life situations as well. In addition, these roles can also fluctuate, both within a single relationship and from relationship to relationship.

While BDSM sexual encounters can range from “kinky sex” to “edge play” (Butts, 2007), the second common feature of most BDSM interactions is that partners freely consent to adhere to pre-established guidelines or “limits” to the level of pain or types of behaviors that will occur during “BDSM play” (Butts, 2007; Stockwell et al., 2010; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Weinberg 1987). The establishment of limits emphasizes the consensual nature of BDSM interactions. In fact, because these limits are so central to the BDSM community, people who disregard them are labeled as “dangerous” and marginalized from the scene (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). This view is in direct opposition to the popular conception of the sexual deviant who inflicts his/her sexual choices on others.

The third feature of most BDSM interactions is that both parties understand that the activities are sexual for at least one person (Stockwell et al., 2010; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). This is understood even when the activities themselves are not of an explicitly sexual nature. Some people are

sexually excited simply by daily activities that are performed within a BDSM framework. For example, ordering the submissive partner to clean the couple's home might arouse the dominant partner. In this situation, there is a shared understanding that certain non-sexual activities are of a BDSM nature. In other words, none of the participants are shocked that they are participating in S/M activities. The interweaving of BDSM into everyday activities illustrates that these behaviors are embedded in a culture that places a premium on dominant-submissive relationships in the broader social structure (Weinberg, 1987). Finally, the fifth common feature of BDSM activities is that there is an understanding that BDSM interactions may involve role-play (Stockwell et al., 2010). The roles vary from "scene" to "scene" and are dependent on the sexual desires of the participants.

In addition to these five common characteristics, the sociological approach examines the use of pain. While S/M practitioners often employ pain to express dominance and submission, the pain itself is not necessarily sexual in nature (Weinberg, 1987). This is a fairly different view of pain in S/M, which is usually viewed as a strictly sexual tool. It is not the pain itself but what it symbolizes, and the essence of S/M is the ritualization of dominance and submission, not the infliction of pain (Weinberg, 1987). The symbolic interpretation of pain in these activities is crucial to understanding S/M behavior. The concepts of limits, fantasy, and control are intertwined and all related to trust (Weinberg, 1987). BDSM allows participants to define their limits, engage in fantasy, and trust that their partners share their understanding of the activities (Weinberg, 1987).

Symbolic Meaning and Sexual Scripts of BDSM

As a final piece of background information, let us turn our attention from behavior itself to the symbolic meaning of that behavior and the sexual scripts in which that behavior occurs. Hinting at the symbolic nature of BDSM-related behaviors, Langdridge and Butt (2005) contend that a person's erotic life is the product of personal construction. As such, each individual determines their sexual being and proceeds to build a sexual life that pleases them. One could argue that this leads to interpersonal sexual scripts, which are social interactions of a sexual nature between individuals (Sandnabba et al., 2002).

Taylor and Ussher (2001) contend that there are eight common interpretations of such interactions. The first is that S/M can be conceptualized as dissidence, or a deliberate, conscious activity that is practiced in opposition to sexually hegemonic behavior, namely patriarchal heterosexuality. In this interaction, power is unequally distributed but not always along traditional lines. This non-traditional distribution of power can challenge mainstream cultural values. One example of this understanding can be found in Baumeister's (1988) discussion of sexual scripts in which it is argued that male masochists participate in more bondage and performances of oral sex. Moreover, Baumeister (1998) claims that a higher level of severity of pain, frequency of humiliations, incidences of partner infidelity, active participation by third parties, and transvestitism occurs among male masochists—all features that contradict the traditional male sex role.

The next three interpretations of S/M presented by Taylor and Ussher are: 1) S/M as pleasure (not only sexual but also relationship and individual pleasure); 2) S/M

as escapism or a way to transcend the ordinariness and alienation of everyday life; and; 3) S/M as transcendence, where BDSM behaviors are a part of a spiritual or mystical framework. These interpretations align with frameworks that operationalize S/M behavior as a method of escaping one's everyday existence and/or a mechanism for attaining a higher-level of self-awareness (Cross & Matheson, 2006). Cross and Matheson (2006) also contend that from a S/M-centered perspective, S/M represents an eroticized, consensual exchange of power, and the experience of a power differential. As such, BDSM scripts follow a dominant/subordinate format in varying ways that allow the individual to enhance their sexual pleasure. Moreover, certain scholars (i.e. Butts, 2007) posit that subgroups in the leather community are defined by the interpersonal dynamics of these prevailing sexual scripts.

The fifth interpretation presented by Taylor and Ussher is of S/M as a learned behavior. This could relate to the socialization into the BDSM community (see the discussion of "BDSM as a Component of Identity" below). This statement is supported by the existence of role models in the gay male S/M subculture. These role models help facilitate the transition from the masochistic to sadist role (Sandnabba et al., 1999). Taylor and Ussher's sixth interpretation is of S/M as an intra-psychic phenomenon, where involvement in S/M is relocated to the psyche, and is considered an attribute of an individual's personality. This is more akin to the traditional psychoanalytic approach to examining BDSM behaviors. The seventh interpretation discussed by Taylor and Ussher characterizes BDSM as pathological—an assertion that is echoed by the DSM. This interpretation revisits the medicalization of BDSM behavior. Finally, Taylor and Ussher argue that S/M can be

interpreted as inexplicable or defying comprehension.

These differential interpretations point to the fact that not all practitioners experience BDSM in the same manner. The extent of their participation in and the relative importance they give to BDSM-related activities will vary dramatically. Therefore, while certain behavioral characteristics might occur across BDSM relationships, individual responses to these behaviors are likely to diverge. Our position is that these differential experiences lend credence to the argument that BDSM and its related behaviors should be analyzed as a set of activities organized along a continuum rather than as static phenomena.

Discussion of Fetishes/Fetishism

Now that this review has elucidated several BDSM-related behaviors and their possible meanings, we would be remiss not to mention a set of activities that, while conceptually distinct from BDSM behaviors, are closely aligned with them. These activities constitute what is known as fetishism. In simplest terms, a fetish can be defined as an object, body part, or behavior that triggers sexual responsiveness in an individual (Kafka, 2010). The majority of fetishes involve parts or features of the body, or items (such as articles of clothing) that are closely associated with the body (Scorolli et al., 2007). Common examples of fetishes are foot fetishes, stocking fetishes, and latex fetishes. These fetishes are commonly tied to BDSM-related behavior and expressed by both heterosexual and homosexual male practitioners of BDSM (Spengler, 1977).

Unlike BDSM or homosexuality that includes both men and women, fetishism appears to be more male centered (Weinberg, 1987). Moser and Levitt (1987) support this assertion by noting that while women account for a significant proportion

of S/M practitioners, they are a minority among fetishists. In other words, while females indeed can have fetishes, a woman who participates in fetishism is rare. Similar to the position argued in this review concerning BDSM, fetishism is a graduated phenomenon (Weinberg, 1987). Some people may only have a casual interest in their fetish, while others may express it on a more consistent basis. Regardless of their level of participation, most participants express positive experiences that are associated with the development of fetishistic interests (Weinberg, 1987). Given the connection between BDSM and fetishism and the fact that they are often studied in tandem (i.e., Spangler, 1977; Stockwell et al., 2010), it would appear to be inappropriate to study the two phenomena in isolation.

BDSM AS A COMPONENT OF IDENTITY

Until this point, our review has focused on the definitions, history, and saliency of BDSM. In addition, this piece has explored various categories and symbolic meanings of BDSM-related behaviors. Given the nature of BDSM behaviors revealed throughout this paper, it would be easy to assume that practitioners of BDSM form their identities around a central “sexually deviant” culture, but this is not always the case (Langdridge, 2006). For some people, the activities alone fulfill their desires, but others adopt a partial or complete BDSM identity. This means that there is not just one S/M community. Instead, there are multiple communities with contrasting and contested versions of S/M identities (Langdridge, 2006). For example, Chaline (2010) argues that there are plural gay S/M identities, and it is the performance of the practice that forms and maintains sexualities and sexual identities. These identities can include dominant/submissive roles or the

incorporation of fetishistic interests into an identity. These identities are fluid, constantly shifting and repositioning themselves. Further, facework is especially important to homosexual practitioners as they have both gay S/M identities and gay non-S/M identities, which are often expressed separately in recognition of the fact that different identities may not be articulated freely in all situations.

Some argue, despite this fluidity, that there are some common elements to a BDSM identity. For example, Kamel (1983) asserts there are six stages of “becoming” a homosexual male S/M practitioner. The first is the disenchantment stage, where an individual becomes disillusioned with the homosexual world, often considering men who conform to the gay male beauty myth not masculine enough. In the second stage, depression, the man experiences a sense of isolation and retreats into a “second closet.” This retreat mirrors the “pre-coming out” stage, where the homosexual man has not publically expressed his sexuality. In the third stage, the man becomes curious about the hyper-masculinity of the leather-sex subculture, and leaves his isolation to explore it. In a sense, this is the information-gathering stage.

The fourth stage involves attraction, where the individual learns the norms and values of the S/M world and begins to consider S/M as an erotic possibility. In the fifth stage the man experiences drifting, where he attempts to actively involve himself in the subculture and becomes socialized through his participation. This participation can either be in sexual practices or in other facets of the subculture. In the final stage, limiting, the individual discovers what does and does not fulfill him. He finds which activities and roles work for him, and disregard those that do not.

While Weinberg (1987) notes that the stages described by Kamel (1983) are *his*

constructs and may not be applicable to all gay male practitioners of BDSM, Kamel's assertions appear to be supported by the extant literature. For example, Moser and Levitt (1987), drawing on a sample of 178 men, argue that even among heterosexuals, there is a process of "coming out" in the S/M community. This process denotes an entire sequence related to the recognition of the individual's inclination to S/M behavior and their adoption of an S/M identity. In addition, Kamel's assertions, especially those concerning the fifth stage, mirror the work of Spengler (1977) who, in a sample of 244 male BDSM participants, found that sadomasochistic behaviors manifest themselves when homosexuality is already being practiced.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION-BASED APPROACHES TO BDSM AND FETISHISM

As noted earlier, this review has intentionally focused most of its attention on BDSM-related behaviors among the LGBTQI community. The authors' intention is not to ignore the fact that such behavior that occurs in heterosexual populations but to illustrate the impact and salience of BDSM in the LGBTQI community. In doing so, this paper highlights some key differences in how gay men and lesbian women conceptualize and experience BDSM behavior. As such, it appears important to note that BDSM (and its related behaviors) may not be organized one continuum but on multiple continuums that are dependent on the sexual orientation of the practitioner. Therefore, it appears appropriate to argue that future research must focus not only continuums of behavior, but on continuums unique to individual sexual sub-cultures.

Gay Men and BDSM

Gay S/M is defined as the performance of consensual and eroticized power relationship interactions between gay men (Chaline, 2010). In comparison to their straight male counterparts, gay male practitioners tend to be better educated, have higher levels of income, and are more likely to participate in white-collar occupations (Nordling et al., 2006). This places the actual demographics of this group in opposition to the mainstream cultural view of BDSM participants as poor, uneducated, and deranged. Also, according to Nordling et al., (2006), gay males tend to be more sadistically-oriented, become aware of S/M tendencies, and have their first S/M experience at an older age¹. With respect to their fetishistic behavior, Nordling et al. find that gay males tend to favor leather outfits, anal intercourse, rimming, dildos, wrestling, special equipment and uniforms. More specifically, Nordling et al., (2006, p. 54) argue that "the gay male sadomasochistic subculture exaggerates the male aspects of sexual behavior while the straight men seem to play down these aspects and adopt more submissive roles with an emphasis on pain and humiliation." As such, participants appear to be actively opposing mainstream sex and gender roles. While there appears to be a more widespread acceptance of bisexuals in BDSM subcultures than in the larger gay community (Lenius, 2001), bisexuals tend to occupy more precarious positions in both heterosexual and homosexual BDSM communities.

Lesbian Women and BDSM

Lesbian practitioners of BDSM find such behavior to be sexually arousing and

¹ The delay in coming out as a gay BDSM practitioner could be due to the initial phase of first becoming socialized into the gay scene, then becoming disenchanted with it and discovering the BDSM culture.

often feel that it can be used as a tool for personal growth and healing, such as learning to take control of one's sexual being. Bauer (2008) argues that participants within lesbian BDSM communities find that it possesses a political potential that enables participants to question cultural beliefs about power in general and sex and gender specifically. However, politically-minded lesbian BDSM practitioners are not the exception. The BDSM community as a whole does contain a political element, where participants can challenge mainstream cultural norms (Taylor & Ussher, 2001).

Feminist Responses

While many lesbian practitioners view BDSM as a possible source of political transformation (Bauer, 2008), many feminists have voiced resistance to S/M subcultures. In particular, there are three primary arguments feminists express in their criticism of S/M. One argument is that S/M, by replicating hierarchical relationships along gender lines, is simply another vehicle for patriarchy (Stear, 2009). Of course, this position is contradictory to assertions that male masochists often adopt non-traditional sex roles (Baumeister, 1988).

The second argument that feminists who oppose BDSM present is that S/M eroticizes dominance, submission, pain, and powerlessness. These feminists suggest that under such conditions true consent between partners is impossible (Stear, 2009). Given that overt masochism is more common among women (Baumeister, 1988), this argument tends to hold more significance for female participants than male participants. As more overtly masochistic, women might be placed in a submissive position where they are unable to give or rescind consent. Thus, the magnified domination that is characteristic of S/M may represent an amplified version of the social structure in

which women participate during their everyday lives.

The third argument that feminists voice regarding S/M is that by eroticizing sexual dominance and submission S/M actually validates and supports patriarchy, even if it is done unintentionally (Stear 2009). Essentially, the argument here is, that while female practitioners may not be purposefully reproducing traditional gender and sex roles, the fundamentally misogynistic nature of S/M supports the violence and injustice to which Western Culture subjects women (Cross & Matheson, 2006). However, as with the counterargument to the replication of sexual hierarchy, the existence of male masochists would appear to challenge such assertions.

Not surprisingly, since the lesbian community is comprised of women from all political ideologies and walks-of-life, there is no clear consensus concerning the ramifications of BDSM with respect to lesbian women. As mentioned above, it can be argued that BDSM can be a tool for social change by actively challenging traditional gender and sex roles. In addition, on a more personal level, Hopkins (1997) states that women can consider themselves both feminists and participants in S/M. Women who hold this binary perspective often acknowledge the three main arguments posited by feminists but state that BDSM activity sexually arouses them and that they find possibilities for personal healing and growth through these activities. The disagreement regarding the impact of BDSM-related behaviors among different segments of the lesbian community lends validation to the argument presented throughout this review that researchers must take a less static position when examining BDSM and its related behaviors.

PATHOLOGIZING THE CONTINUUM: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

As mentioned at the beginning of this review, all societies try to regulate the sexual behavior of their members, and one of the most common ways to do so is by classifying an activity as a mental disorder. Thus, the debate concerning the medicalization of BDSM is not framed as one of morality but as a question of whether or not certain behavioral patterns warrant categorization as legitimate mental disorders (Williams, 2006). This question highlights the fundamental argument of this paper, which is that, much like sexual orientation, BDSM-related behaviors represent collections of activities organized on continuums and should be examined as phenomenon reflecting the variability of human sexuality. However, the question of the pathology of S/M depends on whether one accepts sexual practices as symptoms of certain disorders (Baumeister, 1988).

Medicalizing BDSM

The DSM names several features that all paraphilias share. These behaviors, according to the DSM criteria, are recurrent, sexually arousing fantasies, urges or behaviors that generally involve non-human objects (Kafka 2010)². The DSM also states that paraphilias involve the suffering of humiliation of oneself or one's partner, or children or non-consenting adults that occur over a period of six months (Kafka, 2010). As such, the psychoanalytic understanding of BDSM problematizes it as symptomatic of mental illness or maladjustment. Working from this perspective, one could argue practitioners of BDSM who actively seek pain in a sexual context do so because of feelings of shame and/or guilt (Cross and Matheson 2006).

² The latter feature is more related to the discussion of fetishism than BDSM proper.

We believe this understanding of BDSM behaviors fails on several levels. First, the linkage of BDSM to shame and guilt overlooks the consensual aspect of BDSM culture that is a cornerstone to understanding it. Second, as argued throughout this review, the medicalization of sexual behaviors leads to societal intolerance of difference, which creates a real human cost of diagnostic stigmatization. Third, the inclusion of these behaviors inappropriately focuses psychiatric attention on individual diversity. Since sexuality and sexual behaviors are organized on distinct continuums, it is inappropriate to outright deem all "deviance" in sexual practice medically deficient.

Moreover, we contend the classification of sexual paraphilias as mental disorders is an effort to codify sexual mores. There are several components of a sexual identity: biological sex, gender identity, social sexual roles, and sexual orientations which include sexual behavior, interpersonal affection, erotic fantasy structures, and arousal-cue patterns (Suppe, 1984). It is impossible to medicalize one aspect of an individual's sexual identity and still claim to respect diversity and choice among persons. It is important to recognize that no categories of sexuality are mutually exclusive (Suppe, 1984), as categories of sexual practices often borrow from different sexual themes.

S/M as Leisure Activity

Finally, and in stark contrast to a pathological model, we suggest that one could instead conceptualize BDSM (and its related behaviors) as a leisure activity. Serious leisure is defined as the devotion to the pursuit of an activity that requires specialized skills and resources, and provides particular benefits (Newmahr, 2008). There are six characteristics of serious leisure: 1) the need for perseverance, 2) the leisure pursuit of a "career" within the

activity, 3) effort in acquiring knowledge, training, experience and specialized skills, 4) durable benefits (both social and psychological) from engaging in the activity, 5) a unique ethos or spirit of community, and 6) a personal identification with the leisure activity (Newmahr, 2008). To effectively practice BDSM, participants must learn safety skills such as proper binding or choking techniques, must purchase their equipment, and must find that the activity provides them with specific benefits. In this context, BDSM activities possess many of the same qualities as exercise, intoxication, and meditation (Baumeister, 1988). And all share in the goal of finding ways to escape from the mundane.

DISCUSSION

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the purpose of our review was two-fold. First, the authors proffered an integrative review of the extant literature that examines bondage and sadomasochism (BDSM). In assessing the literature, we attempted to illustrate that BDSM (and its related behaviors such as fetishism) are activities organized on continuums and that these behaviors are not necessarily indicative of maladaptation. Second, building upon our review and our argument concerning the continuous nature of these behaviors, we advocated for the development of distinct analytical frameworks in future studies concerning BDSM.

Review Summary

To reiterate the substance of our review, we began this paper with a general discussion of sexual norms in the United States and how the medical community, historically, medicalized BDSM (and its related behaviors such as fetishism) in an attempt to codify such mores. This

discussion, of course, illustrated a corollary with homosexuality. Then, the review turned to classifications of BDSM including explicit descriptions of S/M behavior, individual characterizations (including the importance of power) and community-related explanations of BDSM. This multiplicity of definitions illustrated the authors' position that BDSM is not simply a binary category of occurring or non-occurring behavior and that future research must provide an operational definition specific to the plane on which BDSM is being studied. Further, such an operational definition should reflect the varied nature of BDSM-related behaviors across practitioners situated in a variety of sexual sub-cultures.

Next, the review contextualized BDSM historically and provided background information including current trends in participation, the demographic characteristics of BDSM practitioners, an overview of BDSM-related behaviors, and a discussion regarding the symbolic meanings of BDSM. Throughout this section of the review, the authors highlighted the various levels of participation, assorted backgrounds of practitioners, and how BDSM participants partake in sexual scripts that both challenge and reflect conventional sexual social mores. These findings further highlighted our contention that BDSM-related behaviors cannot be conceptualized as a one-size-fits-all collection of activities. Instead, these behaviors must be understood in terms of the participants' level of participation in and symbolic characterization of BDSM. Lastly, in terms of background information, the authors provided a definition and discussion of fetishes as they relate to BDSM. From this contextual knowledge, the review transitioned to a discussion of BDSM as a component of social identities, including highlighting the process of "becoming" a practitioner among gay men. This

discussion helped reveal the continuous nature of BDSM-related behavior. Next, we presented sexual orientation-based approaches to BDSM and fetishism. Specifically, the authors highlighted the challenge that gay male BDSM behavior represents to mainstream sexual mores and the varied (lesbian-) feminist responses to the symbolic meaning of BDSM.

Finally, connecting information presented in the introduction to the body of literature reviewed, we explored the attempt to medicalize BDSM and its related behaviors. Specifically, this section of the review reiterated arguments for including BDSM in the DSM, as well as a call to have BDSM-related behaviors removed from the list of mental disorders. Our review ended with a brief discussion of an alternative framework for examining BDSM: understanding BDSM as a leisure activity. When considering the possibility of such a conceptualization, the argument for a multi-faceted approach to the study of BDSM appears to be at its most salient.

Future Directions

The authors believe that this integrative review has highlighted the multidimensional aspects of BDSM-related behavior. We believe that our review of the extant literature suggests that BDSM exists not as a static phenomenon but as a collection of behaviors in which practitioners partake to varying degrees and that such behaviors occur on multiple levels (individual, community and cultural) of symbolic meaning. Further, our review illustrates that any analytical framework developed must be done so with respect to the practitioners' sexual orientation, as cross-population generalizability seems impractical. With these principles in mind, a number of avenues for future research present themselves.

First, descriptive qualitative fieldwork is in order. Ethnographies and/or in-depth qualitative interviews will be able to assist in the development of operational definitions of BDSM and its related behaviors that are specific to certain populations (i.e., lesbian women or gay men). These definitions could be the starting point for understanding the BDSM phenomenon with respect to the social location of its practitioners. In addition, qualitative interviewing may be helpful in the development of indexes and scales that can measure levels of BDSM-related behaviors. The development of such measures will help researchers recognize the continuous nature of said behaviors.

Once operational definitions and scales have been constructed, survey research could be undertaken to ascertain the prevalence of BDSM-related behavior in large-scale national (or even international) samples. Further, surveys could be commissioned to validate the measurement instruments developed through the use of qualitative interviewing. In addition, these surveys could explore the *possibility* of psychological maladaptation through construct and criterion validation with other measures (i.e., substance use and mental health scales). Finally, *if*, based on the results such qualitative and quantitative research, cross-population generalizability appears feasible, survey research could be undertaken to compare samples comprised of people of various sexual orientations.

Of course, these suggestions represent only a few of the possibilities based on the findings of this review. Additional studies could be undertaken to examine the formation of radical communities, the training of clinicians working with practitioners of BDSM, impression management of practitioners with respect to non-practitioner partners, etc. Regardless of the type and topic of research undertaken, the

common theme of future research should be the examination of BDSM-related behaviors occurring at multiple social levels (with respect to specific sub-populations) and as behaviors that are not *necessarily* maladaptive in-and-of themselves but, instead, represent collections of activities situated on continuums signifying various degrees of involvement and symbolic meaning.

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