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Undergraduate

Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism – The Emerging Subculture

By: Jaskanwaljeet Kaur

Abstract:

Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism, also known as BDSM, is a sexual minority or a subculture, which in the past has been a taboo topic in the public opinion. But recently, as this topic gains limelight due to social media/news/television, it has become an interesting topic of research. Yet, BDSM is still considered an unacceptable behavior or abnormality, even though research proves that to be a false theory. The best way to create change in the understanding of society is to introduce the topic of BDSM in sex education classes, such that students essentially become aware of it and know that it exists. Many individuals who are a part of this subculture live among us, and they are healthy both mentally and physically, the only exception being their different sexual preference. Thus, BDSM practitioners should not be judged based on their sexual preference. Rather, the BDSM subculture needs to be better

understood in order to be acknowledged and for eventual acceptance to occur.

Keywords: bondage/discipline (BD), dominance/submission (DS), sadism/masochism (SM), subculture

Human sexuality comprises of the ability of a male and a female to experience sexual pleasure and be able to feel secure with their partner physically, mentally, and emotionally. This view of human sexuality is the societal norm, but as a society slowly evolves it brings about changes that affect social perceptions, and slowly challenges the idea of acceptable versus not acceptable behavior. One such evolving societal change affecting human sexuality and the perception of sex is the growing popularity of a sexual minority group known as: bondage/discipline (BD), dominance/submission (DS) and sadism/masochism (SM), under the umbrella term BDSM. According to an article published in Psychology and Sexuality, individuals

who practice BDSM, “engage in a wide range of consensual erotic behaviors, often but not involving sexual behavior, that play out an exchange of power, restraint or pain” (Kelsey, Stiles, Spiller & Diekhoff, 2012). BDSM has long been stigmatized by the general public because it is a topic that is usually kept under wraps due to the negative connotation that it is given either through press or myths. Practitioners of BDSM are looked down upon due to cultural evaluations and labeling of BDSM as deviant behavior (Stiles, Clark, 2011). New research on the topic of BDSM is being conducted and myths about BDSM practitioners—having a mental condition or disorder—are being proven wrong. Rather, it has even been proven that “BDSM practitioners [are] less neurotic, more extraverted, more open to new experiences, more conscientious, less rejection sensitive, had higher subjective well-being, yet were less agreeable” (Wismeijer & Assen, 2013). Despite such research results, the BDSM subculture is still far from being fully accepted within society and due to this, very few individuals admit to having BDSM interests, even to their close friends and/or relatives. Therefore, in order for BDSM subculture to be acknowledged and eventually accepted, it has to be discussed in society, especially with students, as they are ones who will take the ideology further. The best way to attain knowledge about BDSM is through implementing it early in a student’s life, such as in sex education classes so that students: learn about it in a suitable manner, know that it exists, and understand that practicing BDSM does

not make an individual mentally unstable or psychotic. This paper will thus examine how BDSM subculture is viewed, by both the therapists and the general public; the effects that it has psychologically and how disclosing the topic of BDSM in a classroom setting can further help eliminate the stigma associated with it.

BDSM: Therapists Attitudes and Opinions of the General Public

As stated before, practitioners of BDSM shy away from telling others that they practice BDSM, and there are actually various reasons as to why this is the case. One of the reasons is: individuals feel that they would be judged harshly for their sexual tastes; therefore they hide behind a mask to seem less vulnerable. As stated in an article, *BDSM: A subcultural analysis of sacrifices and delights*, “secrecy is a strategy that is sometimes necessary as a protective measure against a potentially hostile environment” (Stiles & Clark, 2011). Every individual keeps secrets, it can either be a big secret or a small one, but keeping secrets is a protective measure that ensures that individuals are safe. For instance, a study published in the *American Journal of Sexual Education* provides accounts of individuals who practice BDSM, and one respondent stated that, “I personally knew someone who spent three years in prison for assault in a consensual scene. Handled it with aplomb, but they sent him to jail. And he was a Bay Area guy...This was not Kansas. So it’s real” (Bezreh, Weinberg & Edgar, 2012).

This account shows that societal norms play a big part in how a certain activity is interpreted. If, for instance, individuals try to understand the concept behind BDSM, along with the fact that those who practice it do it consensually and are not forced, then maybe the societal perception could change, but understanding has to come first in order for eventual acceptance to occur. Another reason as to why individuals might not disclose that they practice BDSM is due to a thrill that secrecy provides. Associating with another person in secrecy adds to the thrill of the adventure, or an added excitement, which makes the experience even more exceptional. But despite whatever reasons that individuals may have of keeping their secrecy about BDSM, therapists and the general public opinions are one of the reasons that they shy away from divulging their secrets. In the public opinion, practicing BDSM is considered abnormal, also described as deviant behavior because BDSM is not accepted in social norms; thereby that makes the practice of BDSM itself deviant. Due to this interpretation, many therapists have called the practice of BDSM a psychological disorder. The article *Assessment of therapists' attitudes towards BDSM* even goes to say "... therapists expressed more discomfort working with BDSM-identified clients than with those in same sex relationships and/or group sexual behaviors" (Kelsey et al., 2012). This statement goes to show that public opinion and a culmination of other incorrect facts—such as the stemming of BDSM practices from early childhood abuse or violent relationships—causes even

therapists to form a cynical perception about BDSM practitioners. Factors such as the socio-demographic variables are also indicative of how different therapists would see the practice of BDSM. For instance, "older therapists [are] more likely to report negative perceptions of BDSM and those identifying with more liberal sociopolitical philosophy reported more accepting views" (Kelsey et al., 2012). Subcultures, such as BDSM take a while to integrate into the larger society because the concept of sex and what constitutes as normal sexual behavior is very much engrained in the society and trying to accept a different spin on sexual behavior takes a while to implement. The concept of BDSM can be compared to the concept of lesbian, gay, bisexual, & transgender (LGBT), mainly because both these subcultures have had and are still having a hard time embedding into the larger society. But as support for these subcultures continues to grow, and more and more people begin to acknowledge these new concepts, society will slowly but surely change to adapt to these subcultures.

Psychological Effects of BDSM on its Practitioners

It has long been assumed that individuals who practice BDSM suffer from a mental disorder, but this fact has been proven wrong through research conducted between individuals that practice BDSM versus those who do not. In the article *Psychological Characteristics of BDSM Practitioners*, evidence points to the fact that individuals who practice BDSM

are in, "...relative[ly] good psychological health." The article goes as far as to say that "...BDSM should be regarded as a recreational leisure activity rather than a deviant/pathological activity" (Wismeijer & Assen, 2013). Therefore, this research indicates that individuals that take part in BDSM practice are not only mentally stable, but are also psychologically healthy. The article distinguished between common groups of BDSM participants, such as submissive¹, switches², and dominant³, and the findings of the overall data showed, "... that BDSM practitioners are characterized by greater psychological and interpersonal strength and autonomy, rather than by psychological maladaptive characteristics" (Wismeijer & Assen, 2013). In the view of this article, the general public opinion and therapists' opinion regarding BDSM can be challenged because according to the research conducted, individuals—whether they practice BDSM or not—are both psychologically fit. Rather, their psychological activity is better than those who do not practice BDSM. The results from the paper "...falsify the view that

¹ A **submissive** (Sub) is a slave to the dominant (Dom). Sub is the person who is the individual who is tied up, whipped, flogged etc. A sub gives up control during BDSM.

² A **switch** is an individual who takes an equal part in being either a dominant or submissive during BDSM activities.

³ A **dominant** (Dom) is actively controls the submissive (Sub) in terms of pleasure/pain etc. A dom takes control during BDSM.

BDSM practitioners are psychologically disturbed...and suggests it is unlikely that having experienced one or more traumatic (sexual) experiences is a major cause for developing a preference for BDSM activities" (Wismeijer & Assen, 2013). Finally, the choice of gravitating towards BDSM is not necessarily based on one or more traumatic experiences, rather it is a choice that an individual makes on his/her own terms, and if this experience is consensual, then there should be no harm in practicing BDSM.

BDSM: Is it an Appropriate Topic for Sex Education Classes?

Sex education, also known as, sex ed. is a course taken primarily in high school, but schools are introducing sex ed. in their curriculum as early as in sixth grade. Sex ed. comprises of human sexual anatomy, sexual intercourse/reproduction, sexually transmitted diseases/infections, and other features of the human sexual behavior. The main purpose of this course is to teach the students to take care of themselves, to insure they do not accidentally get infected with various bacterial and viral infections that can potentially turn deadly in the long run. But is it sufficient to know the basics of sexual behaviors? Nowadays, other sexual practices are coming into play, therefore would it not be a good idea to actually teach about other types of sexual activities, namely BDSM? In the article, *BDSM Disclosure and Stigma Management: Identifying Opportunities for Sex Education*, results indicate that an

interest in BDSM can potentially develop in childhood, as stated, “13 respondents reported that by age 15 they were aware of fantasies or feelings which they later identified as SM [sadistic-masochistic] related. Seven correspondents reported that awareness by age 10” (Bezreh et al., 2012). An important aspect related to these results that should be kept in mind is that children nowadays live in a world where technology is at their fingertips, which means that they inadvertently come into contact with sexual imagery, which was not present or very visible even ten years ago. This is indicative of the fact that children become aware of their sexuality very early, sometimes even before puberty starts. Therefore, the early interest in BDSM could potentially be caused through viewing of sexual imagery early in development or through personal encounters of arousing emotions during non-sexual settings. For instance, the article had accounts from the respondents that reported about their early interest in BDSM and one male respondent reported about the start of his BDSM interest as follows:

“I was somewhere around 6 or 7. I have my 1-year-old-sister drag me into a field with a bunch of the local boys where they broke some switches and proceed to switch me. And I ran off screaming and in tears once I broke loose. I got back to the house, sat on the stone steps on the porch and began to feel the welts and became aware that I was...juvenily aroused. And I spent the entire day watching with regret while the welts faded. And then the next day I asked them to do it again” (Bezreh et al., 2012).

The childhood account of this individual indicates that along with sex education, students should also be given classroom lectures on sexual minority groups. Every individual is unique in his/her own right, and by not including topics such as BDSM in the sex education classrooms, students who feel a certain way, such as this individual, can feel isolated among their peers. Isolated or lonely individuals could potentially lack confidence, since they will not be able to express themselves due to the constant fear that someday their secret would be exposed and their family and/or friends would be disapproving of them. Even though disclosure is a very important part of an individual who practices BDSM, it is a complex consideration. Some individuals are more open about being a part of this subculture, whereas some individuals do not want to share this side of themselves with others. Again, individuals practicing BDSM are aware of the stigma associated with it; “The main stigma reported was a taboo against discussing the topic...which made open communication difficult and rare” (Bezreh et al., 2012). Thus, this is the reality of BDSM, where even talking about it is prohibited; therefore, introducing this topic in a classroom setting would help eliminate the shame associated with it, and would also make the students aware of an existing and expanding sexual minority group.

Conclusion and Further Research

Finally, the Bondage/Discipline,

Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism subculture is fraught with stigma, and even more research needs to be conducted in order to understand the reasoning behind practitioners of BDSM. Many individuals who practice BDSM are fearful of disclosing their interests to their friends/family members and thereby do not receive reassurances or support that they could potentially be given. These same individuals could thus be isolating themselves because of the societal perception of shame associated with BDSM. Therefore, in order to avoid isolating individuals, greater efforts need to be in effect. Such as, educating students about sexual minorities in sex education classes where some of the concerns associated with BDSM could be identified and answered. Overall, further research is needed in the area of BDSM, starting with educating students in schools, because eventually these students will be the next generation of individuals working in various economic sectors. Thus, if they are supportive of sexual minority groups, then that could potentially be another step closer to the goal of accepting those who practice BDSM into the larger society without passing judgment on them.

Jaskanwaljeet Kaur is a junior at UC Merced. She is majoring in Cell and Molecular Biology and is pursuing a minor in Psychology. Her interests lie towards attending medical school in the near future in order to become a cardiothoracic surgeon. Her interest in psychology started as a result of taking psychology courses and thinking about those courses in terms of how they could potentially help her with improving medicine in the future. Besides her aspiration to become a doctor, she likes conducting research in fields outside of medicine as well, as is the case with this paper.



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