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Negotiating limits: Boundary management in the Bondage/Discipline/Sadomasochism (BDSM) community

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**Negotiating limits: Boundary management in the Bondage/Discipline/Sadomasochism
(BDSM) community**

Karen Holt

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate faculty in Criminal Justice in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The City University of New York

2015

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Criminal Justice in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Negotiating limits: Boundary management in the Bondage/Discipline/Sadomasochism (BDSM) community

by

Karen Holt

Dissertation Chair: David Brotherton, Ph.D.

Abstract

This study sought to gain insight into the attitudes, beliefs, and values that shape Bondage/Discipline/Sadomasochism (BDSM) activities and how participants negotiate and maintain boundaries in order to engage in mutually satisfying BDSM activities. Additionally, this study explored the degree and consequences of unintended or non-negotiated harms, including physical, emotional, and sexual coercion. A qualitative approach consisting of semi-structured interviews and ethnography was used in order to develop an in depth exploration of the lived experiences of participants. Grounded theory was employed to reveal common themes which all supported a symbolic interactionist / dramaturgical understanding of the protective and predatory processes involved in BDSM behaviors. The BDSM community has both predatory and protective elements, or characteristics that facilitate or protect from harm. . The predatory can lead to a greater likelihood of harm occurring which include debuting performances (naivety or inexperience), scripting victimization (relying on past scripts of traumas no matter what the performance), lacking a company (lack of support system), lacking stage presence (low self-esteem or self-worth), failing props or blacking out (mistakes that lead to negative consequences), reprising roles (relationships with blanket consent), and the casting couch (the nature of BDSM contributes to attracting predators). Protective elements are comprised of setting

the stage (defining of terms, negotiations of play), auditioning actors (individuals freely choosing to engage in play and creating their roles), delivering lines (communicating needs, wants, and desires to partners and open dialogues with self and community), illuminating the sightlines (the notion of responsibility and transparency among community members), and ghost lighting (safety and ensuring protection from harm). The BDSM community, as a deviant and marginalized group, understands the risks inherent in their actions, are cognizant of the stigma associated with these behaviors, and therefore implement strategies to reduce risks and manage stigma. Most individuals did not report experiencing harm, those that did tended to have a history of abuse or victimization. Implications are discussed.

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To my husband, Tom – words can't express the love and gratitude I have for you. Thank you for not letting me give up and for giving me the support I needed. I apologize for the attitude you received when you tried to give feedback or comments or remind me that I should really be working...

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Americans love the thought of transgression, not the actual act, which explains why Rihanna's "S&M" is a huge hit while actual S&M is not. –Anne Helen Peterson, January 2012

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Individuals who engage in sadomasochistic behaviors represent a unique type of intimate relationships; relationships in which power exchange, physical and emotional sensations, and in some cases physical pain are central components. How do these individuals manage the boundaries of their behaviors in order to engage in mutually satisfying encounters? Additionally, how do they understand and experience “abuse” or “harm”? Where do these individuals draw the line between “play” and abuse? These boundaries have been explored within the general population of non-sadomasochistic intimate relationships, but it is unclear how these constructs are evidenced in non-traditional relationships.

Purposes, Goals, and Objectives

This dissertation represents an advancement in the understanding of the concept of harm and coercion for individuals who engage in sadomasochistic behaviors. Drawing on the rich traditions of the sociology of deviance and symbolic interactionism, the specific aims of the inquiry are to 1.) explore and determine how attitudes, beliefs, and values shape Bondage/Discipline/Sadomasochism activities, 2.) explicate how individuals create and maintain boundaries in order to engage in safe play. It seeks to analyze the degree and consequences of unintended or non-negotiated harms, including physical, emotional, and sexual coercion. The study benefits those individuals who engage in non-traditional sexual relationships, and the communities that have emerged as a result of the stigmatization of these behaviors. The most important aim of the study is to educate both the scholarly audience and general population about the ways in which victimization may be perpetrated in fringe communities and the ways in which individuals can protect themselves.

Methodological choices: Relation to the study's purpose

The current study focuses on how attitudes, beliefs, and values shape Bondage/Discipline/Sadomasochism activities, how individuals construct notions of harm, and the precautions that they take in order to engage in satisfying BDSM play. Through a qualitative ethnographic approach which consists of in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and informal discussions with participants, these research questions are explored. A grounded theory approach was adopted to analyze the qualitative data. Line-by-line open coding of transcripts of interviews, observational notes, informal discussions, and identity memos was conducted, using Atlas ti qualitative data analysis software as well as by hand. The constant comparison method was used to refine initial codes, and develop pattern codes. Themes emerged from these pattern codes.

Research questions

This qualitative study answers the central research question: *How do individuals negotiate and maintain boundaries in order to engage in mutually-satisfying BDSM play?* Additional questions which inform and shape the answers to the central question are: How do participants understand the notion of “harm” and what precautions do they take to avoid it? What are the values and beliefs that shape these understandings?

Theoretical framework

Symbolic interactionism

A theoretical framework which captures the subjectivity of the experience is needed. In particular, symbolic interactionism is concerned with meanings: the symbolic meaning and interpretation of one’s experiences, both with the self and others. This perspective also emphasizes the importance of social situations in the development of the self and the identity,

which is key in the understanding of how someone perceives harm. The way in which the self absorbs and understands the experience of harm will impact further interactions and personal development.

The self is not something that simply exists – instead it is something that develops with social experiences and activity (Mead, 1962). Experiences are organized into the self, and through responses to others these responses also become a part of the individual. Mead (1962) posits that it is the social process itself that is responsible for the appearance of the self and it is not there simply as a self apart from the experience.

This perspective is especially useful in that it asks “How?” as opposed to “Why?” As Katz (1988) explains, asking anyone why something happens will elicit less information than asking how. Individuals may not understand or possess the ability to articulate their motivation behind an event, but are usually quite adept at describing how the event occurred. By shifting focus to the how, it is possible to directly examine the relational components and the process of harm. An understanding of how the self experiences and is affected by what is termed a harmful event and how the incident is framed by the individual will in turn produce a sounder and more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics of harm between individuals with existing relationships. This theoretical framework will be discussed in depth in the following chapter.

Deviancy theory

There are several ways of understanding “deviance”. Adler & Adler (2003) provide a comprehensive explanation of the views on deviance. The absolutist position holds that what is deviant is intrinsically different than what is not, holding that there is an objective essence of deviance. Another view of deviance is that of the social constructionist position, which will be

the approach used in the present study, which posits that there is no absolute deviance and that deviance is essentially in the eye of the beholder. What is important in this view are the meanings, definitions, and reactions associated with the behavior or belief and these are what determines deviant status.

The sociology of deviance, from the social constructionist position, is rich in the labeling, conflict, and critical traditions with central concerns of who is engaging in the behavior and the audience's reaction to the behavior. This framework is focused on how individuals become a part of the deviant subculture, how they identify in terms of self, and how they manage their identities both with individuals in and outside of the subculture (see Becker, 1963; Erikson, 1962; Lemert, 1951). Deviance, therefore, must be considered and examined not only at the micro or individual level, but understood within the context of human collectivity. Erickson (1966) remarked that humans are sorted into various levels of collectivity and one of the difficulties of studying deviance is that the problem is defined differently at each level. For example, what is defined as deviant by a family may not be considered deviant by a larger community. Thus, these levels of collectivity must be considered in any attempt to study deviance.

Studies in the sociology of deviance that have focused more on the micro level have detailed the ways in which the individual "becomes deviant" – both the process and maintenance of the identity (see Matza, 1969). It has been argued that the individual who engages in deviant behavior share the same value system as the dominant social order and 'may not stand as an alien in the body of society but may represent instead a disturbing reflection or caricature' (Matza & Sykes, 1959, p. 717). These 'subterranean values' lie beneath the surface, facilitating deviant behavior. An examination of how one becomes labeled deviant and by whom as well as the

reaction by the individual to the deviant status is crucial to understanding the behavior, attitudes, or conditions under study.

This perspective is especially useful in that it asks “How?” as opposed to “Why?” (see Becker, 1963; Katz, 1988). Individuals may not understand or possess the ability to articulate their motivation behind an event, but are usually quite adept at describing how the event occurred. By shifting focus to the how, researchers can directly examine the relational components and the process of abuse in relationships that fall outside of “normal” or traditional intimate partners.

An understanding of how the self experiences and is affected by what is termed a harmful event and how the incident is framed by the individual will in turn produce a sounder and more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics of harm, coercion and abuse between individuals who engage in non-traditional sexual practices that can involve pain, fear, or emotions that have typically been associated with pathology and abnormality.

Subcultural theory

Additionally, examining the individual allows insight into the nature of subcultures. This theoretical framework attempts to bridge the problem of subjectivity and objectivity by granting the actors meaning within a world of choice and probability which can be objectively assessed (Young, 2010). Deviant subcultures form when individuals with common problems of adjustment come into communicative interaction with one another (Cohen, 1955); the subculture, as a system of values and beliefs generated through interactions, serves to help individuals solve these problems (Weinberg, 1978/1995). Frame analyses, role theory, interactionist, phenomenological, and ethno-methodological perspectives may be profitably used to gain some insight into the world of sadists and masochists (Weinberg, 1978/1995).

Contributions of the study

While studies have attempted to describe the values and beliefs of BDSM participants, the notion of harm in BDSM has been ignored in academic studies. An understanding of the different *types* of intimate relationships and how abuse manifests itself within these relationships would serve to elucidate the inner workings of dynamics in “deviant” or non-traditional relationships. Additionally, the present study attempts to explore the meanings and experiences of victimization in a fringe population that has traditionally been stigmatized by both the larger population and by agents of social control.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Harm in Traditional Relationships

The literature on physical and emotional abuse and violence between intimate partners in the general population is robust, especially regarding heterosexual relationships. Although the term ‘violence’ has been used interchangeably with aggression, violence typically refers to a physical act and aggression frequently refers to any malevolent act intended to harm another person (Gelles, 1985).

Violence is a slippery concept – nonlinear, productive, destructive, and reproductive; it is *sui generis* and always in the eye of the beholder (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2009). Thus, violence is a subjective experience that is not easily defined or categorized. Most violence occurs between people who are intimately known to each other, and the relationship has a direct effect on how the experience is framed (Goode, 1990). Some violence is accepted as part of a “normal” relationship, especially non-physical sexual coercion (Basile, 2002). This subjectivity of experience makes defining violence a formidable task, as how the act is labeled by the individual who experiences it is directly related to the outcome (Kahn, 2004; Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, & Halvorsen, 2003). Violence can best be understood as something that involves social activity; the threat, the attempt, or use of physical force and the intent of gaining dominance over another or others (Brownstein, 2000). Bourdieu (1977) asserted that domination and violence could be found in courtship and marriage but that it can be misrecognized due to its “everydayness” – its familiarity essentially renders it invisible (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2012).

Kelly (1988) conceptualized violence as a continuum; although she emphasizes that this does not imply a linear straight line connecting events or experiences (p.76). She asserted that actions are often defined as abusive, most commonly for women, without ever being reported as such. She attempted to define sexual violence as any physical, visual, verbal, or sexual act that is

experienced by a woman, at the time or later, as a threat, invasion or assault, that has the effect of hurting or degrading her and/or takes her ability to control intimate contact away (Kelly, 1988; p.41). What is useful about this comprehensive definition is the phrase “at the time or later.” This allows the individual the time to process the experience, as many women may not define the event as violent at the time.

The scholarly literature on abuse suggests that not all individuals will experience violence or harm in the same way (Bograd, 2005) and not all victims will identify as such (Rajah, Frye, & Haviland, 2006). There are gender differences among men and women when it comes to how violence is used. While men and women alike employ violence to express anger, release tension, or force communication, women tend to use violence for self-defense, escape, retaliation and men employ violence for the purposes of dominance, coercion, control of partner’s behavior, protecting self-image, and punishment (Bograd, 2005; Cascardi, Langhinruchsen, & Vivian, 1992; Dobash, Dobash, & Hamburger, 1997; Saunders, 1988; Stets & Strauss, 1990; Wilson & Daly, 1992). Additionally, violence is not equally distributed across gender and race. Women are most likely to suffer rape and assault, men are more likely to experience violent crime, and blacks and Latinos are more likely than whites to be victimized in general (Catalano, 2006; Rand, 2009; Rennison, 2002). Class differences and inequalities also affect the ways in which violence is experienced (Hall, 1985; Kelly, 1988).

Harm between individuals is generally not specialized, but more general. Emotional, physical, sexual, and economic forms of abuse often co-occur in the lives of individuals, rather than one type of violence in isolation (Anderson, 2010) and different forms of violence often co-occur in the same relationship (Catalano, 2009). There are a range of negative experiences within

violent relationships in the general population, including non-physically forced sexual coercion and psychological abuse tactics (Logan, Cole, & Shannon, 2007).

Although partner sexual abuse is an important dimension of intimate partner violence it has received less research attention than physical and psychological partner abuse (Logan, Cole, & Shannon, 2001). As Basile (2002) asserts, it is important to explore different types of sexual coercion within intimate relationships. In terms of sexual violence, classifications include consensual sex (desired equally between both partners), altruistic sex (one partner goes along because they feel obligated), compliant sex (one partner goes along because they fear the consequences) and rape (one partner is forced against their will) (Bart & O'Brien, 1985; Brownmiller, 1986; Giddens, Duneier, & Applebaum, 2007). Kelly (1988) also stressed the notion that sexual violence is not a dichotomy (rape / not rape) and that levels of coercion exist, blurring definitional lines. If a woman is coerced into a sexual act and eventually stops protesting and submits, this is pressurized and coercive sex that may not be defined as rape but that challenges notions of consensual sex. Kelly also stated poignantly that in almost all cases a woman raped by someone she knew was unable to fight off an attacker.

Thus, notions of violence have been well studied and documented in the general population; however, what is lacking is an understanding of how violence or harm between individuals manifests itself in non-traditional relationships. In relationships where hurting one another is desirable and individuals seek out pain or humiliation, how are boundaries drawn, or more importantly, crossed?

What are S&M and BDSM?

Sadomasochism (S&M) is distinct from non-consensual violence because practitioners freely choose activities and imbue these activities with various meanings that involve personal

pleasure (Yost, 2010). Participants themselves mutually define the meanings of the acts that are perpetrated (Langdrige, 2007). General population surveys have not established the proportion of individuals who identify S&M as part of their sexual behavior (Moser & Levitt, 1995). Studies of sexuality are often loaded with veritable pitfalls (Presdee, 2000) due to the nature of the subject and the problems in quantifying, defining, and measuring these concepts. A conservative estimate is that approximately 10 percent of the adult United States population participates in some sort of sadomasochistic activity (Moser & Kleinpatz, 2006). This figure is probably a misrepresentation of the actual amount of individuals who have engaged in some sort of S&M behavior and the true figure is, in all probability, much higher. Several studies have suggested that S&M is not rare and is possibly very common (Moser & Levitt, 1995).

Pain or the mental representation of pain is understood to act as a sexual stimulant, because it is the most powerful of all methods for arousing emotion (Ellis, 1903/1926). Despite claims that S&M was not practiced in pre-modern cultures (Gross, 2006); there is a body of research that suggests these behaviors occurred in preliterate and complex societies (Moser & Levitt, 1987), as well as the animal kingdom where some sex results in considerable wounds (Gebhard, 1969/1995).

The terms “sadism” and “masochism” were developed by Richard von Krafft- Ebing (1840-1902) and were derived from the literary works of the Marquis de Sade (*Justine, In the Bedroom*) and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (*Venus in Furs*). While Sade wrote of individual liberty, sexual freedom and the joys of hedonistic pleasure and exploration through pain (mostly non-consensual), Masoch detailed the emotional and physical journey of giving oneself completely to another and surrendering power – essentially complete submission to another human being. Both Sade and Masoch’s work shared the central theme of pain and power as

pleasure; in Sade's case having both in totality, while in Masoch's surrendering them to someone else. Based in this literature, participants in S&M use specific terminology to refer to the roles they adopt and the activities in which they engage. A sadist, dominant, top, mistress, or master prefers to be in control or the one providing the stimulation. Masochists, submissives, slaves, or bottoms prefer to receive the stimulation. Lastly, a switch is someone who is interested in both roles (Yost, 2010; also see Moser & Kleinpatz, 2007).

An early study by Weinburg and colleagues (1984) identified five components of sadomasochism: the appearance of dominance and submission, role-playing, consent or voluntary agreement to "play", a sexual context, and mutual definition that the activity is S&M. Researchers who have examined S&M agree that it is a complex social phenomenon and are unsure whether it represents a set of sexual behaviors, a type of sexual orientation, or is culturally determined (Guidroz, 2006). Broadly, sadomasochism refers to the giving and receiving of physical or psychological pain or sensation for erotic pleasure (Lindemann, 2010). Typically, individuals who engage in sadomasochism define the practice as involving consensuality, an unequal balance of power, sexual arousal, and compatible definitions (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Sadomasochism does not have to involve pain, and as Myers (1992) pointed out "there are many people who prefer a gentler approach to what would be termed S&M" (p. 302). In fact, much S&M involves very little pain, rather individuals prefer acts such as verbal humiliation, cross-dressing, bondage, mild spankings, power exchanges – essentially the illusion of violence and the notion of control (Weinberg & Kamel, 1995). Rather than the mainstream image of S&M where the central focus is pain, a more realistic notion exists involving 'playful' make believe, a game where violence "does not really hurt" (Newmahr, 2010, p. 394). The

temporary, consensual transfer of control from one individual to another is known as ‘power exchange’ and is a synonym for S&M (Califia, 2002).

Although S & M is the term most widely used in the academic literature, Bondage/Discipline/Dominance/Submission or Sadism/Masochism (BDSM) is more commonly used among its participants as it more accurately illustrates the diversity of relevant practices (Williams, 2006). BDSM offers a description of three predominant themes in sadomasochistic behavior: bondage and discipline (B & D), dominance and submission (D & S), and sadism and masochism (S & M) (Ernulf & Innala, 1995). This type of behavior is highly ritualized and involves mutually enjoyable role play where pain may be emblematic of power or powerlessness (Cross & Matheson, 2006). Examples typically include cutting of the skin, needle play, whipping, flogging, flagellation, crucifixion, binding, gagging, and verbal humiliation; although there is no commonly accepted definition of the behavior (see Moser, 1998). Typologies of BDSM behaviors have been constructed based on the purported purpose of these activities, including hypermasculinity (behaviors such as the use of dildos, fisting, and use of catheters), the administration and reception of pain (spanking, caning, the use of clothespins, weights, and electrical stimulation), physical restriction (bondage, use of chains, handcuffs, slings, straightjackets, rope), and psychological humiliation (flagellation, use of knives, face slapping, verbal humiliation, and gagging) (Alison, Santtila, Sandnabba, & Nordling, 2001; Paceblar, Furtado, & McDonald-Witt, 2006).

While BDSM refers to a set of behaviors, it can also refer to the lifestyles or subcultures of participants who engage in these behaviors (Williams, 2006). Much of these behaviors occur within a subcultural context as participation usually involves two or more individuals, and necessitates some sort of social organization in order to be consummated (Weinberg, 1995). The

BDSM subculture represents a community where individuals who enjoy these types of behavior can practice them in a safe environment with likeminded others. It is a system of belief and values generated through interaction and typically serves to solve some sort of problem (Cohen, 1955; Weinberg, 1995), such as individuals feeling that they are sick or perverted and not realizing that they do, in fact, have a world of their own (Goffman, 1963).

Levels of subcultural participation can vary. Those who practice these behaviors regularly in their personal relationships are generally termed to live a BDSM “lifestyle.” For these individuals, bondage and discipline practices represent an integral part of their sexual and personal identity. Many participants claim that identifying as a sadomasochist defines their sexuality and their preferred manner of interacting with a sexual partner (Kamel, 1983; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Others argue that S&M is best characterized as a set of sexual practices with no implication for identity (Langdridge, 2006; Yost, 2010). There are many different types of participants: those active in real life versus those active only online; those who choose to remain anonymous or to deny their desires versus those who proudly proclaim their interests; those who regard BDSM as an interest and those who consider it a lifestyle (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006).

BDSM has a rich tradition within the gay leather communities, which developed in the 1950s after World War II with the “Old Guard” leather system (Baldwin, 2003). The Old Guard system was characterized by its strictness and adherence to a code of conduct. Becoming ‘leather’ usually involved a sequence of steps, termed a ‘career’ that involved: disenchantment (with the gay sex or dating scene), depression (isolation and loneliness), curiosity (the gay leather scene seems exciting but dangerous), attraction (beginning to identify an S & M self by considering participation), drifting (exploring different behaviors), and limiting (knows what will and will not be enjoyed; has limits set in place) (Kamel, 1983/1995).

An individual who engages in BDSM is said to engage in “play” and episodes of play are termed “scenes.” Scenes are deliberately scripted fantasy events in which one partner usually takes a dominant role and the other a submissive role (Moser & Levitt, 1995). Play has been defined as behavior that is expressive and intrinsic in motivation and involves a non-serious suspension of consequences, to create a temporary world of meaning which is often a shadow of the real world (Kelly, 1990). BDSM scenes can involve physical or psychological play, including but not limited to role-playing, power exchanges, and sensation exchanges (see Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984; Williams, 2006). Scenes can occur in private residences during play between intimates, private parties, or public events.

Moser (1984) identified five common characteristics of S&M parties/clubs: the interaction of participants based on the setting, the explicit rules of interaction, the socialization opportunities for new members, the affirmation of participants’ identities, and a chance for both exhibition and voyeurism that is not necessarily based on sexual behavior (Weinberg, 2006).

Media Depictions of BDSM

BDSM has the power both to repel and disgust while at the same time generating an attraction and curiosity. It is much like the human fascination with fire – since early primitive societies, humankind has remained fascinated with fire with its innate and immense power to destroy and create (Presdee, 2004). It comes as no surprise then that BDSM has maintained a strong presence in popular culture. Mainstream media representation of alternative sexualities, including BDSM, has increased dramatically over the last twenty years and shows no sign of abating, arguably making these behaviors less shocking or exotic (Weiss, 2006).

Literary works have detailed the power relations between individuals that are inextricably linked to sexuality. The Marquis de Sade, influenced by ideals of liberal democracy, is one of

the most well-known authors of erotic literature detailing sexual freedom and vice. Other works, such as Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, and Regae's *The Story of O* (1954) are considered classic texts on the art of submission. More recently, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series (James, 2011) has become an international best seller, resonating especially with females, and bringing erotic literature to the general public.

While the success of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* has made BDSM more palatable to the general "vanilla" population, there are those who suggest that this series actually hurts BDSM and those who participate in these behaviors. The novel reinforces the idea that BDSM is a result of pathology (the protagonist, Grey, comes from a crack-addicted mother and suffers from psychological dysfunction) and there is no protocol followed in the book in terms of negotiations and limits, which is especially important for newcomers and newbies like Grey's partner. Connolly (2012) is concerned that all the work that has been done to establish that BDSM is not a pathological symptom, but one of a wide range of normative human erotic interests, is in danger of being undermined by the success of this novel.

Many non-fiction books have been written introducing BDSM and emphasize the dominance and submission or power exchange between individuals (Brame & Brame, 1996; Varrin & Lechon, 2000; Easton & Hardy, 2001; Baldwin, 2002, 2003; Sutton, 2003; Varrin, 2004; Williams, 2006). There are many how-to manuals that include advice on making equipment and BDSM techniques (see Bean, 2000; Conway, 2000; Haberman, 2001; Kent, 2004).

Films, fashion, and advertisements have all utilized the tantalizing nature of BDSM in order to appeal to sell to a consumer culture. When viewers accept or understand BDSM in these ways, they utilize a mode of distanced consumption, where representations of SM offer a

tantalizing glimpse of something other (sexy, exotic, kinky) that is safely viewed and evaluated from a detached, privileged, and normative position (Weiss, 2006).

Theatrical Elements of BDSM

The social organization of BDSM is framed in terms of fantasy or a theatrical production, and this is reflected in the roles of participants, their relations to one another, the scenes that are scripted, acted, and performed, and the argot of the group (Weinberg, 1995). Early studies of those involved in BDSM have demonstrated the rich symbolic, ritualistic and theatrical aspects of the subculture (Weinberg, 1978). There is a subcultural emphasis on imagination, role-playing and staging, revealing a division between physical and mental states (Brewis & Linstead, 2000). For practitioners, setting and performance appear to be an integral part of the experience.

Goffman (1959) used the term “front” to refer to the expressive equipment used by performers. A physical front included setting, décor, physical layout and design. For BDSM practitioners, settings can range from the privacy of a bedroom to the public performance in a club. Often, they may use scenarios including torture chambers, dungeons, plantations, concentration camps, hospital rooms, surgery tables, and coffins. This depends on personal preference, access, and opportunity of the participants. The personal front included the manner and appearance of the performer.

The physical front of a performance, “tends to stay put, geographically speaking, so that those who use a particular setting as a part of their performance cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it” (Goffman, 1959, p. 21). Additionally, the personal front was hypothesized to be consistent across space. In the BDSM play it may be more transitory as actors take on different roles depending on the nature of the scene. The physical front of scenes are negotiated and

designed so that, like any other story, there is a beginning and an end. These narratives allow for the organization of the experience, or stories. Sexual stories are not merely the productions of individual *storytellers*, but rely on *coaxers, coercers, consumers, readers* and *audiences*; perhaps the most important requirement is an interactive social world in which the story is received and reproduced (Langdrige & Butt, 2004; Plummer, 1995).

BDSM activity falls within what Goffman (1959) called the ‘theatrical frame.’ Within this frame various sorts of keyings are used by participants which transform the behaviors (from violence into make-believe), set limits, and which affect roles and dominance order (Weinberg, 1978/1995). Despite the commonalities with the theater, BDSM roles do not necessarily exist for the sake of an audience, and observers at public events tend to drift from scene to scene rather than watch one scene from beginning to end (Newmahr, 2010).

BDSM as Pathology

Psychological and medical theories of BDSM have tended to be reductionist and essentialist in their approach, meaning that generally they have sought to isolate BDSM as a quantifiable and objectively measurable behavior and rooted within the individual (Taylor & Ussher, 2001).

Early studies of sexuality conceptualized sexual deviance as a matter of context and degree. Krafft-Ebing (1908), in one of the first systematic studies of “abnormal” sexuality, asserted that physiology can explain certain “light blows” and “playful taps.” The author cites Shakespeare: “”Like the lover’s pinch, which hurts and is desired.” (*Antony & Cleopatra*, v., 2.), attempting to illustrate that some violence is in fact a normal and healthy part of sexual desire – a primal instinct that is inextricably linked with aggression. Krafft-Ebing’s (1888) introduction of the terms along with writings by the Marquis de Sade (1965, 1966) and von Sacher Masoch

(1989/1870) shaped the way that non-consensual sex, sexual abuse, self abuse, and consensual participation BDSM are understood as manifestations of the same phenomena (Newmahr, 2008).

Krafft-Ebing conceptualized sadism and masochism as opposite, dichotomous constructs. Sigmund Freud, however, argued that the two related more closely to one another as ‘sadomasochism’ and could be found in one individual (Freud, 1938/1995; Guidroz, 2006). In fact most participants in BDSM report that they switch roles; exhibiting versatility rather than specialization (Moser & Levitt, 1987).

The notion that some aggression was normal and in fact necessary in sexual behavior seemed to disappear as medical discourse became dominant. Later studies of sexuality ignored S&M behaviors almost entirely (see Moser & Kleinplatz’s (2006) discussion of Hunt, 1974; Kinsey, Pomerory, & Martin, 1948; Michaels & Michaels, 1994). Eventually S&M behaviors would garner attention once again; becoming a central theme in the discourse of sexual abnormality and trauma. Many psychoanalytic and medical theorists agree that S&M and is symptomatic of maladjustment or sickness (Cross & Matheson, 2006). The use of diagnostic labeling established the persistent stigmatizing of individuals based on sexual desires (Reiserol & Skeid, 2006). People with BDSM interests were seen by medicine, the law, and ‘caring professions’ as at best damaged and in need of treatment and at worst dangerous and in need of social or legal regulation (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2005).

The American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR, 2000) lists the diagnostic criteria for sexual sadism as intense and arousing fantasies, urges, or behaviors that last for at least six months in which psychological or physical humiliation or suffering is sexually exciting to the individual. The DSM-IV-TR specifies that this disorder involves nonconsensual acts as qualifying the behavior as a disorder,

as well as an intense distress caused to the person who harbors these fantasies. (APA, 2000). Despite the word “non-consensual” explicitly stated in the diagnosis, consensual BDSM is still somehow associated with the disorder. The diagnostic criteria are not clear or particularly helpful in warranting classification of pathology (Williams, 2006). Sadomasochism is considered to be a paraphilia that involves the eroticizing of pain (Paclebar, Furtado, & McDonald-Witt, 2006). Although the DSM-IV (2000) conceptualizes these concepts differently than S&M participants, it may be that some negative public perception of S&M is due to the fact that they are diagnosable disorders (Yost, 2010).

By classifying S&M as a medical/psychiatric diagnosis, it became necessary to locate the cause of the “disease” and determine the “treatment.” Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith (2008) posited that there are several common assumptions regarding the BDSM subculture: a taste for BDSM represents earlier sexual abuse, it is a form of psychological abnormality, and that individuals are sexually deficit in some way.

Psychological research has emphasized the influence of early experiences that become inextricably linked to later BDSM activities (Nordling, Sandnabba, and Santilla, 2000). This psychodynamic approach attempts to explain the behavior as compensation for previous victimization, abuse, or fetishism. The aim of the psychoanalytic approach is linkage – to essentially find an underlying cause that one can use to explain the current “deviant” behaviors.

Due to the pathologization of these practices by “experts,” the subculture has been viewed through a lens tainted by preconceived notions of deviance and abnormality. As Rubin (1993) observed, S&M remains outside the “charmed circle”, in the “outer limits” of sexual hierarchy. From the psychological or psychoanalytic perspective, attempting to tie S&M preferences to trauma or a singular event may not be the most fruitful way to understand the

behaviors. Conversely, causal explanations of sexual behavior assume essentialist approaches that may not be representative of reality.

BDSM and Social Explanations

Gebhard (1969/1995) was the first to discuss BDSM at the cultural level, asserting that it is embedded in culture as all relationships operate on the principles of dominance and submission and society values aggression. Sadomasochism had its origin in the norms and values of the larger social environment, rather than being an expression of idiosyncratic individual pathology (Kamel, 1983/1995). Gender roles were a reflection of these values, with the male constructed as dominant and the woman as submissive. Gebhard (1969/2005) made the interesting assertion that sadomasochism is well-developed in societies that are complex and that rely on symbolism. In the case of sadomasochism, sadism symbolized power and masochism as a proof of love. Gebhard (1969/1995) developed a cultural hypothesis of the etiology of sadomasochism that included four assumptions: humans have basic aggressive tendencies; males are more aggressive than females; social organization is hierarchical and there is a “pecking-order”; when problems of sexual gratification are coupled with problems of existing in a pecking order society it results in frustration which leads to combinations of sex and violence.

Chancer (1992) followed with an in depth examination of the dynamics of power and powerlessness of everyday life, describing a sadomasochistic culture. The argument was to extend the notion of sadomasochism to extend beyond sexual definition or the individual level and that it can in fact exist as a dynamic, with social conditions which nourish and correspond to the individual. Other social explanations have framed BDSM as the replication of a patriarchal society (Paclebar et al., 2006). Broader psychosocial theories claim that that woman are by nature masochistic, which some scholars argue is simply a myth that is used to reinforce male

dominance in society (Donnelly & Fraser, 1998). The assertion is that males enforce their dominance on submissive women in the larger culture and that the BDSM culture simply reinforces this.

BDSM and Feminism

One of the most contested issues regarding BDSM is whether or not it is anti-feminist and thus harmful for female participants. Some posit that our culture has two inclinations – to stigmatize women and to absolve men of responsibility for victimizing women and that these are closely intertwined (Schur, 1984).

The literature on BDSM frequently ignores or denies the role of sex. This reflects the shift that occurred in the psychological literature on rape in the 1970s from being motivated by sexual desire to a physical expression of power or anger. The dominant typology of that period operated on the premise that rape is a pseudo sexual act in which sex serves as a primary vehicle for the primary motivations of power and anger (Kocsis, Cooksey, & Irwin, 2002). Perhaps the most noted work in the field of sexual deviance was that of Groth, Burgess, & Holstrom (1977), who developed a typology of rapists based on this assumption. The typology involved classification by motivation of the aggressor, including anger, power, or sadism. Individuals who were motivated by anger used unnecessary force and brutality in the assault, which was retaliatory (against perceived wrongdoings by the opposite sex) or excitatory (an enjoyment of inflicting injury). Those motivated by power sought to establish control and mastery over the victim. Thus, rape was a vehicle used to assert identity and reaffirm masculinity. The sadistic individual represented a Sadeian character who enjoyed inflicting pain and suffering on victims, exhibiting both a sexual and aggressive component (Kocsis et al., 2002). These developments, along with social change in the form of the rights eras, led to different ways of viewing deviant

sexual behavior. The dominant view of what motivated sexual violence was that it was a means of asserting power and venting anger. To sum it up succinctly, this approach “took the sex out of violence and the violence out of sex” (Young, 2011).

Hopkins (1994) refuted the idea that BDSM was anti-feminist and made the distinction between replication and simulation. BDSM may simulate these experiences but it is symbolic and negotiated by both males and females. The involvement of women in the subculture can be seen as empowering since these roles are not placed on the female but rather freely chosen. Despite these claims of empowerment and individual liberty, there is a range of relationships and power dynamics and this may complicate roles and negotiation of roles. BDSM involves much negotiation, much like any other social interaction.

BDSM as Social Interaction

Rather than a fixed preference, sexuality is fluid and arises from social interaction (see Plummer, 2004). Empirical research has supported this notion in part by demonstrating that sexuality is best understood as products of adult socialization processes where real or imagined sexual contact leads the subject to adopt new sexual behaviors and scripts (Alison et al., 2001). Conversely, these behaviors can remain relatively stable over time, depending on sexual preference.

A review of the literature on the social aspects of BDSM behaviors suggests that they appear to be less about fixation and more about exploration and learning. Participants learn about BDSM through their primary relationships, by reading books and other literature, by attending social gatherings, joining groups, or visiting a professional dominatrix (Guidroz, 2008). In all BDSM ‘careers’ the importance of learning of both attitudes and beliefs through a socialization process is evident (Kamel & Weinberg, 1995). The process of becoming involved in BDSM and

forming a BDSM identity can be understood using the concept of career (Kamel, 1980/1995), as there are various stages of development and levels of involvement for participants.

BDSM is dependent upon meanings, which are culturally produced, learned, and reinforced by participation in the sadomasochistic subculture (Weinberg, 1994). The participant defines the situation, applies socially acquired meanings to situations, and learns to understand events through a process of socialization to BDSM (Kamel & Weinberg, 1995). Several scholars have illustrated that pain is a socially contextualized and mediated experience (Best, 2007; Hughes & Patterson, 1997) and it must be understood as an emotion contextualized and constructed socially like all other emotions (Bendelow, 2006; Newmahr, 2010).

BDSM as Transcendence

Foucault (1976) noted that BDSM represented a new form of pleasure that allowed the individual to transcend the mundane and move beyond stereotypical sexual behavior:

S&M is...the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously... they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body—through the eroticization of the body... which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure... These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations... (Foucault 1997a: 165).

The late modern world consists of a sense of vertigo – as Young has described it a “malaise of late modernity: a sense of insecurity of insubstantiality, and of uncertainty, a whiff of chaos, and a fear of falling” (Young, 2007, p.12). He noted that “in a world where pleasure is increasingly commodified and control of one’s life is extremely limited, going to the edge and grasping control out of chaos can be both reassuring and immensely pleasurable” (p. 57). Extant research conceptualizes sadomasochism as a way to escape from self-awareness, similar to other types of non-deviant escapism (Baumesiter, 1988; Cross & Matheson, 2008).

Some have conceptualized risk as ‘the double edged character of society’ (Giddens, 1990, p.7; Austen, 2009). In a world where there are increased opportunities, blurred boundaries, ontological insecurities, and uncertainties, the ability to let go and to relinquish control becomes increasingly difficult. Under the conditions of edgework such as BDSM, the voice of society is silenced, the ‘me’ is annihilated, and what is left is a residual ‘acting’ self that responds without consciousness (Lyng, 2004). Rather than feel robbed of individual choice and pushed through life, some individuals will seek freedom and expression in areas that depend precisely upon risk and skill (Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006).

It is difficult to disentangle the concepts of leisure, deviant leisure, and crime – since the latter is associated with criminal activity (Williams, 2009). Leisure sciences have always been associated with moral reform (Conrad & Schneider, 1992). There are socially appropriate forms of leisure such as sports, music, and travelling being several examples. Some of these pro-social forms of leisure are, in fact, transgressive themselves (music, sports) and sometimes cross the line of what is considered socially acceptable. These types of leisure are not considered “normal” or “wholesome” and there have been movements attempting to prohibit engagement in these activities, including drinking, drug use, and drag-racing.

There is a thrill that may accompany deviant acts; indeed crime and deviance have been conceptualized as exciting and seductive (see Katz, 1988). The BDSM subculture presents a unique space where chaos can occur in controlled fashion; where risk can be embraced and channeled. The quest for excitement and ecstasy, viewed as the abandonment of reason, is directly related to the breaking of boundaries, confronting parameters, and playing at the margins of social life (Presdee, 2000). Taylor & Ussher (2001) noted that relief from boredom or the mundane was a commonly cited reason for participation in BDSM activities, as well as a way to

reach a heightened state of consciousness, known as ‘subspace.’ In terms of sexuality, properties such as flow, intense emotion, and transcendence are typically desired for optimal enjoyment (Kleinpatz & Menard, 2007).

This idea of using one’s body to transcend or transgress and to engage in voluntary risk behaviors has been termed edgework (Lyng, 1990) and has merged with a cultural criminology framework, specifically a ‘criminology of the skin’ which calls for a study of criminal pleasures and erotics, of feelings and passions. (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995; Lyng, 2004). As Lyng (2004) asserts:

The transcendent practices involved in negotiating the edge are wholly embodied in nature and acquire their transcendent power in the context of a social and cultural reality that privileges the mind, discursive practices and rationality over the body, the nondiscursive and the nonrational. (p. 360).

Newmahr (2008) described the experience of transcendence as “boundaries, both normative and personal, were transgressed with every strike of the flogger, every bodily response, and every glance of others,” (p. 624). Brewis & Linstenad (2000) argued that engaging in BDSM enables participants to move towards and extend their individual physical and psychological limits; BDSM has the capacity to disorganize customary understandings of self, being, the body, desire, and pleasure by exposing the socially constituted nature and bringing them into a stark confrontation with corporeality. The participants seek authenticity in emotional, physical and psychological experience, rather than authenticity in their presentation to others (Newhmar, 2010).

Giddens (1992) posited that the relationships of the late modern society could be termed “pure relationships” in the sense that they were complex, negotiated affairs with the open and explicit expression of each person’s desires; relationships that, if deemed unfulfilling or unsatisfactory, could be abandoned. These relationships marked a deviation from the modern

relationship, which typically had fixed gender roles and were characterized by inequality. The pure relationship offered freedom, autonomy, and choice. As Langdridge & Butt (2004) noted, sadomasochism may represent the prototype of the pure relationship.

BDSM as Sexual Adventure

Recent research supports the notion that BDSM is simply sexual activity enjoyed by a minority of the population and not representative of pathology and that these participants are no more dangerous or mentally, sexually, or emotionally deficient than the general population (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Richters, de Visser, Smith, & Rissel, 2003). Many BDSM enthusiasts have been found to be well-educated and well-adjusted (Allison et al., 2001; Sandnabba, Santilla, & Nordling, 2002; Williams, 2006). These studies assert that BDSM practitioners are no more depressed or neurotic, exhibited no more signs of mental illness, and were no more anti-feminist than non-participants (Cross & Matheson, 2006). When it comes to female participants, many report that they are satisfied with their involvement and find their activities to be empowering (Connolly, 2006; Matthews, 2006; Tomassilli, Golub, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2009).

Estimates of sexual abuse are similar to the general population, with about 23% of female and 8% of male BDSM participants reporting that they have experienced sexual abuse in their lifetime (Nordling, Sandabba, & Santilla, 2000). These estimates are in direct contrast with the assertion that BDSM is the reenactment of earlier childhood abuse or trauma.

Participants of BDSM generally report more sexual partners and more varied sexual experiences than those who do not engage in these behaviors (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008). It appears that these individuals are more open to sexual exploration and that BDSM is one activity that comprises a varied and diverse sexual life. Some researchers

posit that BDSM participants appear to be well-adjusted and sexually creative individuals who make safety and consensuality their main priorities (Haymore, 2002; Williams, 2006).

“Safe, Sane and Consensual”: Boundary Management and Negotiations in BDSM

Extant research involving individuals who engage in BDSM has emphasized the consensual nature of the behaviors, asserting that this is the central difference between BDSM and criminal activity. BDSM play is reportedly a highly negotiated and mutually satisfying event (Hickey, 2006). In order for a BDSM scene to be successful, it must be collaboratively worked out, there must be consent by both parties, and adjustments must be made so that both partners are stimulated (Kamel & Weinberg, 1995).

Devotees of BDSM frequently indicate that it is the masochist, not the sadist, who controls the interaction by setting limits (Weinberg, 1978/1995). In a BDSM scene, the action is often, but not always, scripted and therefore collaborative so that neither the dominant nor the submissive usually has complete control (Weinberg, 1994). The development of ‘safe words’ or specific words agreed upon before play, was an attempt to ensure a way to instantly stop or slow a scene down without breaking the frame. The most frequently used system is the “red, yellow, green,” where red is stop, yellow means the person may be reaching their limits, and green means continue (Williams, 2006). Additionally, participants will check in with each other during a scene in order to ensure that a partner is enjoying the experience.

The issues of limits, fantasy, and control are intertwined and all of them are related in one way or another to the issue of trust (Weinberg, 1994). Sadomasochistic sex draws on explicit (rather than implicit) contracts between participants (Langdrige & Butt, 2004). Because S&M play ranges from gentle to extreme, some scenes can become potentially life threatening and there is a constant discourse surrounding trust (Myers, 1995).

BDSM involves behaviors that are ‘safe, sane, and consensual’ (Sophia, 2007) or practices termed ‘risk aware consensual kink’ (Downing, 2007; Barker, Gupta, & Iantaffi, 2007). ‘Safe’ refers to physical safety and acknowledgement of potential risks, ‘sane’ is based on the principle that individuals are engaging in BDSM for pleasure, and ‘consensual’ stresses the required ongoing consent of participants (Green, 2001). Collectively, risk research suggests that those who engage in edgework do not blindly walk the edge, but rather stake it out, evaluating how much ‘chaos’ they are able to manage given their expertise, experience, and ability to maintain their cool in the face of sometimes extreme disorder (Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006; Natalier, 2001). The sadist must develop skills and perceptiveness so that he/she knows when to stop and one who fails to do so, or conversely who stops too soon and risks ruining a scene and breaking the frame, may risk losing play or sexual partners (Gebhard, 1969/1995).

BDSM and the Law

Much of the academic literature on BDSM can be found through medical and psychology databases and operates in a medical or forensic framework, focusing on sexual offenders or serial murderers (Langevin, Bain, Wortzman, Hucker, Dickie, & Wright, 1988; Langevin, 2003; & Richters, et al., 2008). There has been a purported nexus between sadomasochistic activities/fantasy and sexual assaults or murder (Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988). Hazelwood and Burgess (2000) noted that there are sexual crimes that can be physical or non-physical and can be committed against persons, animals, inanimate objects; there are individuals for whom paraphilic behavior is mandatory for psychosexual pleasure, others for who it is intermittently central and those for who paraphilic disorders play no role, and ritualistic offenders who develop complex fantasies and act them out as well as offenders who do not harbor complex fantasies and who act impulsively. The motivations for sexual crime have been theorized to be aggression, sex,

and/or power, contributing to the development of preferred sexual acts and overall ritualistic patterns of behavior, including the use of “scripts” and “plays” (Hazelwood & Warren, 2001; Prentky, Knight, & Rosenberg, 1988).

The “rough sex defense” refers to situations where individuals claim that consensual BDSM got “out of hand”. This defense has most commonly been used in rape cases, where the assertion is that the victim “asked for it”, therefore absolving offenders of responsibility. The most notable case was that of the “Preppie Murder” case, involving defendant Robert Chambers and his partner Jennifer Levin. When Levin was found strangled in Central Park, Chambers initially denied involvement, but later claimed that the death was a result of a mishap during rough sex (Stone, 1986). In this case, the defense confused the jury enough by focusing on the victim that a plea deal and reduced sentence were offered to Chambers (Block, 1988).

There are two other cases where the defense has been used somewhat successfully, one in Missouri where a man strangled his wife and another in New York where a man strangled his girlfriend (Buzash, 1989). Both involved couples in relationships, with the males as perpetrators, who strangled their partners and claimed that the victims demanded it as it was part of their usual sexual practices. In the Missouri case a sentence of seven years was given and the New York case resulted in a four year sentence. In all three of these celebrated cases, the victim’s sexual preferences were used in order to mitigate the responsibility of the defendant.

With the victim’s rights movement, the idea of traits of the victim mitigating offender responsibility was no longer as tolerated by the criminal justice system. As this dissertation is being written, a popular Canadian radio personality, Jian Ghomeshi, has been accused of non – consensual physical violence towards three women. Ghomeshi maintains that he is into consensual kinky sex, and that “sexual preferences are a human right.” (Ryan, 2014). He

maintains that these women were consensual partners, not victims, and in fact he is the victim of a smear campaign. It will be interesting to follow this case, as much has changed in terms of the conceptualization of victims and the discourse regarding rape culture since the rough sex defenses of the 1980s.

BDSM is not illegal, but has become of interest to the law and criminal justice system only when some high profile crime with sadomasochistic overtones occurs (Weinburg, 1995). When it comes to sexual behaviors, the range of activity subject to regulation by the courts include rape/sexual assault, violations of consent, age of consent, sodomy, transmission of disease, public nudity/indecency, fornication, adultery, the abuse of position of trust/authority, incest, bigamy, prostitution, the possession of obscene materials, obscene communications, necrophilia, bestiality, and voyeurism (Posner & Silbaugh, 1996). Of these, consent is the most contested issue surrounding BDSM.

Within the past few years there has been a notable shift in S&M prosecutions charging S&M acts as both assault and rape (Paceblar et al., 2006). Several high profile cases have helped to create some standards. BDSM made its debut in the American legal system in *People v. Samuels* (1967), where the court ruled that “it is a matter of common knowledge that a normal person in possession of mental faculties does not freely consent to the use, upon himself, of force likely to produce great bodily injury,” (Lence, 1995, p. 10). Thus, this case reinforced the notion that to engage in BDSM freely was inconceivable for “normal” individuals, and the individual who inflicted these behaviors was considered to be guilty of harm and legally responsible. After the rights eras of the 1970s and 1980s, the courts in the United States recognized the rights to sexual freedom and privacy but noted that the state has a duty to protect citizens and that consent

to behaviors which cause injury does not necessarily lessen responsibility when it comes to harm (Buzash, 1989).

The British Courts have also grappled with the issues of consensual sadomasochism with the infamous *Spanner* (1987) case, where a group of sixteen homosexual men were charged with assault for consensual sadomasochistic activities. Again, the courts held that state protection of its citizens superseded any right to privacy or sexual freedom and that consent was not a defense.

While the main legal issues surrounding BDSM include the rights to privacy and sexual freedom, there are also concerns when it comes to child custody, domestic violence, and employment discrimination (Ridinger, 2006). Discrimination against individuals based on non-traditional sexual practices and sexual identities beyond sexual orientation have been documented when it comes to these issues (Wright, 2006). A BDSM lifestyle can raise doubts about the environment for children in custody cases as well as be a hindrance if practices become known to employers or one's personal acquaintances. Klein and Moser (2006) detailed a case where a DSM diagnosis of sexual masochism had a major impact on a woman's child custody case when the clinical psychologist testified that this paraphilia presented a danger to her child's well-being, despite the fact that BDSM activities were consensual and practiced behind closed doors with her boyfriend. The psychologist maintained that this was also an indication of the women being a victim of domestic violence. Conversely, some defendants have attempted to use BDSM as an explanation for their violent behavior. Cases exist where defendants claim domestic violence was a result of BDSM or the victim "asking for it" (see Buzash, 1989), although these are generally unsuccessful in mitigating any responsibility.

Another key issue pertaining to BDSM is that of the private versus public space. The *Samuels* and *Spanner* cases both dealt with the government intervening in private

sadomasochistic practices, taking the position that it could not condone these acts, even consensual ones (Kelly, 2006). The courts held that public safety outweighed private liberties and interests.

The legal status of BDSM remains unclear as there is still no consensus on how to define consent, privacy, and protection, constructs that are constantly being redefined and shaped through court cases (see Ridinger, 2006). Although certain behaviors may not be illegal, their association with heinous crimes and criminals has increased the stigma surrounding these acts. While there may be similarities between the behaviors of BDSM play and sexual violence, the latter is purported to involve only the simulation of crimes and is defined as consensual and mutually satisfying. As Fulkerson (2010) asserts, it is within grey areas that practitioners of BDSM often find themselves as the activities can appear non-consensual to those unfamiliar with the lifestyle and this can lead to loss of job, loss of child custody, and even arrest for domestic violence or sexual misconduct.

Framing Experiences

A 'frame' can be defined as principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and the subjective involvement in them (Goffman, 1974). A frame represents how an individual views and understands the situation or event. The frame represents a useful balance between structure and agency (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992). That is, the frame is a dynamic and unfolding event which is being created by the interaction. These definitions, or frames, are only consequential if ratified by the participants in an encounter (Jary & Smith, 1975). Actors themselves define and attribute meanings to the acts in which they engage.

In relationships, a frame reflects the nature of relationship and the type of scene in which the individuals engage. If the slave is playing with his or her master they will enter the

interaction utilizing a primary framework. If, however, the master orders the slave to play with a stranger, the frame may differ being that this is a new encounter with a new individual. The actors involved will create the frames on which the individual relies to navigate through the interaction.

It is important to note that Goffman (1959) emphasizes that the central concern of interaction is not an individual's sense of what is real, but "rather what it is he can get caught up in, engrossed in, carried away by, and this is something he can claim is really going on and yet claim is not real" (Goffman, 1974, p. 60). Thus the perception of the event and the meanings the individual attaches to the event are key in how they are framed. An event may support a number of interpretations and possible realities (Jary & Smith, 1975). Additionally, in social interaction there are many different things happening simultaneously. Thus, a frame is always vulnerable to transformation. One of the ways in which this occurs is the introduction of a "keying" which is "the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (Goffman (1959), p. 43-44).

Applying this concept to BDSM, a primary framework exists and once an event is keyed, it is transformed, while still patterned on the activity. An example would be an active BDSM couple who have been experimenting. A primary framework for physical intimacy and perhaps a "love" or "relationship" frame exists. Lines have been introduced, maintained, and built upon. Perhaps one partner decides to push boundaries during play and ignores the pleas and protests of the other, thinking this was simply part of the scene. This represents a keying since the event was patterned on something familiar (physical intimacy) but the forced event has now transformed the situation, thereby forcing the frame to be revised.

There are many ways in which frames can be transformed, revised, fabricated, broken down, and reconstructed. In examining the reframing aspect of an abusive incident, the salient question is not so much how the event is reframed, but the reason why reframing is necessary. The sense of what is going on or what has occurred makes it vulnerable to the need for various rereading (Goffman, 1974). Reframing is dependent on not only the initial framing, but on how the individual feels after the event. Acts do not possess imminent stigma; rather, disvaluation refers to moral judgments of individual character (Goffman 1963). That is to say that the individual must process the event – the acts, the action, the reaction by the self and others. This is can lead to a sense of shame or negative emotions. Stigma represents a marking or a branding, either in the physical or figurative sense that reduces a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one (1963). The stigmatized person must react to the situation which brought the stigma. This creates the need to reestablish the self, to make a direct attempt to correct what he/she sees as the objective basis of their failing.

For Goffman, the individual must make the decision of how best to manage their identity from this point on. If there is a discrepancy between the individual's virtual and actual identity, what can occur is the spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963). A confluence of factors can affect what occurs next: the initial framing of the abuse, any keying, and reframing of the experience will affect the management employed, if the individual decides that management is necessary. This process is not only dependent on how the self interprets the experience, but on how the individual anticipates that others will interpret it in the event that it is disclosed.

From a social constructionist approach, individuals actively and purposefully construct and interpret our own realities from meanings that are available to them (Gergen, 1999; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). The constructionist paradigm assumes that there is no insistent or essential human

drive or desire which pre-exists its cultural conscription (Foucault, 1976; Plummer, 1982, 1995; Weeks, 1982). Rather experience is developed by social forces, definition, regulation, organization, and categorization (Tiefer, 1987; Taylor & Ussher, 2001).

The identification of victimization is not clear cut. Most individuals who experience some harm or injury are less likely to identify it as victimization if it is perpetrated by someone they know (Garret-Gooding & Senter, 1987). As mentioned earlier, Kelly (1988) conceptualized violence as a continuum and asserted that actions are often defined as abusive, most commonly for women, without ever being reported as such. Kelly's work highlights some of the definitional issues involved with victimization, especially victimization between individuals with an existing relationship.

When it comes to crimes with a sexual component, coercive sex is more likely to be labeled as rape when certain conditions are met; if it involves strangers, occurs in an unsafe public place, if it involves the use of physical force, and if there is evidence of resistance by the victim (Ward, 1995; Kennedy & Sacco, 1998). Christie (1986) argued that there is an 'innocent' victim who is seen as blameless, an ideal situation in which the victim was someone weak, sick or old, carrying out 'a respectable project', in a location where they cannot be blamed for being, and the offender was someone who was 'bad'.

Harm and Coercion in the BDSM Community

In most cases, the only time that sadomasochistic acts are brought to the attention of authorities is when the violence involves creates a negative outcome (Terry, 2006). There are unplanned consequences in any human interaction, no matter how scripted. Taylor & Ussher (2001) noted the fluidity of consent and pointed out that the boundaries in BDSM were negotiable and often shifted during scenes. The BDSM scene is a dynamic one, with constant

feedback of energy between slave and master (Kamel & Weinberg, 1995). Although scenes are negotiated between partners, the concept of frames in social interaction allows for misframings, miskeyings, breaking frames, and errors that lead to consequences for participants. Therefore, it may be that planned or controlled losses of control may go “off the rails,” resulting in unplanned and un-negotiated consequences.

The discourse regarding transcendence and transgression of boundaries may increase the likelihood of situations where injury occurs due to carelessness, excitement, passion, or strong emotional reactions. Lyng (2004) noted that part of the control that edgeworkers perceive to have is illusory and it may be that successful edgework has more to do with chance than with the actor’s skill. The theatrical realization of fantasy and the reality of behavioral risk-taking may coincide, and not all participants in BDSM may maintain role distance (Murray, 1984; Brodsky, 1993).

Loosening the Controls: The Process of Doing Harm

A breakdown in controls can lead to actors causing harm to one another for reasons that are known or unknown to the actors themselves. Mills (1940) detailed an analytic model for understanding motives that was firmly rooted in social psychology. Noting that the imputation and avowal of motives are social phenomena, Mills (1940) argued that “the differing reasons that individuals give for their actions are not themselves without reasons” (p.904). Awareness of self and motive occur only when there is some sort of upset and the actor’s attention is directed outside of the self and are susceptible to the influence of anticipated consequences. Rather than situating the origin of the motive in the self, Mills (1940) conceptualized motives as arising from the situation and the predicament in which a person is situated. The actor is not only influencing others, but also himself, attempting to line up conduct with prescribed norms.

Once a motive or explanation becomes necessary to explain, account for, or justify behavior, there are many cognitive techniques that can be utilized. Sykes & Matza (1957) argued that delinquency or deviant behavior was based on an extension of defenses to crimes in the forms of justifications for deviance that are seen as valid by the deviant actor. They termed these justifications ‘techniques of neutralizations’ and argued that these behaviors freed the individual from controls, allowing them to engage in deviant behavior while enabling them to justify the act after it was committed. These techniques included the denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties.

Other techniques have been identified and typologies based on minimization and denial developed, which include: complete or partial denial of the offenses, minimization of the offense, minimization of responsibility, denial or minimization of harm to the victim, denial or minimization of planning, denial or minimization of deviant fantasies, and denial of personal problems that led to the deviant behavior (Haywood, Grossman, & Kravitz, 1994; Marshall, Andersen, Fernandez, 1999; Terry, 2006). In sexual crimes such as rape, justifications include: the victim provoked the rape, the victim meant yes when they said no or did not resist, victims relax and enjoy the act, “nice” victims do not get assaulted, and finally, that the assault was minor, so the perpetrator is not an ‘offender’ (Scully & Marolla, 1984).

The ability to harm is not necessarily a trait of the individual, but arises from the social situation. Zimbardo (2004) demonstrated that given a role and a uniform, ‘normal’ individuals with no proclivity for violence can act in monstrous ways. Situational factors may combine with personality and individual characteristics (Kennedy & Sacco, 1998).

“Going off the Rails”: When BDSM Goes Wrong

Early works in deviant sexuality noted the potentially disastrous consequences of the link between lust and aggression. Krafft-Ebing (1885/2005) discussed how the impulse of cruelty, when accompanied with the emotion of lust, becomes “unbounded in a psychopathic individual; and at the same time, owing to defect of moral feeling, all normal inhibitory ideas are absent or weakened” (p. 27). If two elements were present – the intensified impulse to a violent reaction and a desire to conquer another individual (Krafft-Ebing (1885/2005) posited that this individual was typically a coy female) then the result was violent sadism that sometimes resulted in the victim’s death. These early studies, however, mostly focused on non-consensual acts with victims who were unwilling and had not consented to these encounters.

Many BDSM participants believe that BDSM activities can escalate into unscripted events that can cause serious harm (Moser & Levitt, 1995). The dangers of engaging in solitary BDSM behavior, such as auto-erotic asphyxiation, have been in some cases ended in tragic circumstances, including accidental deaths (Dietz, 1978; Hazelwood, Dietz, & Burgess, 1981).

There have been several criminal cases in which sadomasochistic activity was alleged to have caused the victims death. The “rough sex” defense became notorious in the “Preppy Murder” case in which Robert Chambers was charged in the murder of Jennifer Levin, a woman whom he had dated casually. This defense asserts that the victim literally “asked for” the conduct which led to the homicide and that the homicide was the result of sexual practices to which the victim consented, perhaps even demanded (Buzash, 1989). There have been two other cases where this defense was successfully employed, resulting in lesser charges for the defendants (see the cases of Dennis Bulloch and Joseph Porto). Two cases where sadomasochistic activities were alleged to have resulted in death have asserted that the state’s protection of the individual

supersedes the right to sexual privacy and ruled that consent to behaviors does not mitigate blame from any serious injury that results (see *State v. Collier* and *Commonwealth v. Appleby* for a full discussion).

While these cases are examples of serious injury resulting in death, there is little known about injury, coercion, and harm that do not result in participants seeking legal recourse. Cailfia (1979/1995) noted that participant's intentions can be dishonorable or skills may be faulty and that these individuals acquire negative reputations quickly. While this applies to play with strangers, there is no mention of play between intimates or those who are well acquainted with one another. A web site search for "abusive BDSM" turned up a checklist developed by practitioners designed to help to determine whether or not an individual who is in a BDSM relationship is being abused by a partner (Knight, 2000/2007). The following are signs of an abusive relationship:

- Abuser may coerce or force a victim into agreements without their full informed consent, especially long-term contracts with newcomers
- Abuser may manipulate a victim into financial or emotional dependence without taking precautions should conflict occur or the need to leave arise
- Abuser may exert non-consensual control, dominance or abuse of a partners children or make demands that go against maternal or paternal responsibilities.(I.E. Restricting access to children as punishment.)
- Abuser may use threats of abandonment or loss of current contract if new demands are not met
- Abuser may force victim to do things alone, together, or with others in ways that violate or compromise previous negotiations

- Abuser may use name calling, mind games, denial of human necessities like food, water, shelter as needed, health care and so forth, especially in ways that reduce a victim's self-esteem
- Abuser may threaten to expose victim or your lifestyle to “vanilla” co-workers, family members, or children
- Abuser may initiate inappropriate or harmful punishments or withhold appreciation or affection as punishment
- Abuser may deny a behavior is abusive and/or may minimize abuse. The abuser may also accuse you of making abuse up, not being submissive/ Dominant enough, and so forth

The site offers links to “kink aware” counselors who are specially trained to deal with individuals who are involved in the BDSM lifestyle. The community itself seems to be aware that harm occurs, however, there is no mention of prevalence or degree.

A Need for Inquiry

The very nature of BDSM may facilitate unwanted coercion. The power relationships that exist in this subculture bring forth questions regarding the nature of consent and the meaning of coercion. The subcultural values and norms may have an effect on the personal responsibility that an individual feels for what occurs during a scene or may allow individuals to behave in ways that deviate from behavior “off stage.” Due to the emphasis on theatrical elements, the role of fantasy, the use of stage names to protect identities, the idea of negotiations, of power exchange, this population may be exceptionally vulnerable to coercion and pushing the limits of consensual play. Despite similarities to the theater, there is no audience to serve as a control, rather drifting onlookers who have little knowledge of what has been negotiated between actors.

Sadomasochism has developed into a subculture and a way of thinking not just about sex but about roles in social life and some argue that this could be a dangerous as it not only

normalizes the behavior but also has the potential to devalue life, sex, and the human body (Paceblar et al.,2006). What is needed is an empirical investigation of what harm means to individuals who are exposed to subcultural norms of violence, pain, humiliation, whether real or simulated, in order to begin to explore the true dangers associated with these behaviors. While there is extant literature within the subculture regarding what constitutes abuse, coercion, and harm (Knight, 2000/2007), there is little information about the experience and meaning for participants.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The Sample

The sample consisted of over one hundred and fifty hours of ethnographic observations and twenty-one semi-structured interviews and with individuals who are active in the BDSM scene in the Midwestern region of the United States. The cities included in the sample were Lansing, Michigan, Detroit, Michigan, Chicago, Illinois, St. Louis, Missouri, and Indianapolis, Indiana. The decision to focus on this region was due to the fact that most of the academic research on BDSM participation has focused on the coasts, in particular New York and San Francisco, due to their social closeness and the size of their BDSM scenes (see Lindemann, 2010). Thus this region remains largely ignored in the BDSM literature.

The goal of the study was to recruit a convenient and purposive sample of participants from the aforementioned locations through the use snowball sampling. Due to the range of BDSM behaviors and individuals who engage in them, inclusion for the sample was based on several factors. All participants had to be at least 18 years of age, must have been active in the BDSM lifestyle for at least six months, and have participated in BDSM activities with at least one other individual. Participants must have engaged in BDSM behaviors over a six month period to ensure they have had some exposure to and understanding of BDSM activities, as well as to accumulate experiences. The requirement that participants must engage in BDSM activities with another person was based on the idea that didactic interactions ensure that they have some understanding of and practical experience with the management of limitations and boundaries between individuals during a scene. Additionally, both males and females were included in order to explore how experiences vary by gender.

Methodology

This qualitative study sought to answer the fundamental research question: *How do individuals negotiate and maintain boundaries in order to engage in mutually-satisfying BDSM play?* Additional questions which inform and shape the answers to the central question are: How do participants understand the notion of “harm” and what precautions do they take to avoid it? What are the values and beliefs that shape these understandings?

There are multiple public events organized by regional BDSM groups that are advertised on-line in various websites, the most common of these websites being “Fetlife,” a sort of “Facebook” for those interested in the “kink” community. These events offer workshops, educational lectures, and “play parties.” Play parties provide participants with the opportunity to utilize a large space and specialized equipment, typically unavailable in a private home. Additionally, these events allow participants to enjoy a sense anonymity or privacy and to meet and play with like-minded individuals. Attending these events provided rich, descriptive observational accounts of the subculture and also allowed for contacts with individuals who may wish to participate in face to face, semi-structured qualitative interviews. Choosing to attend events and interact with participants in their own environment required much reflection on the part of the researcher. As Skipper and McCaghy (1970) noted in their study of exotic dancers, the place in which participants are interviewed and observed matters.

The investigator contacted the organizers of these events via the information available on the websites in order to identify as a researcher and student from the criminal justice department of John Jay College of Criminal Justice and to describe the nature of the study. Once the organizers were briefed they were asked permission for the researcher to attend these events. Once the organizers agreed, the researcher requested that they notify participants in attendance so that all were aware of the outside presence. Additionally, the researcher asked the event

organizer to identify participants who may be interested in being observed in an attempt to snowball sample for any willing participants.

Observations

While interviews illustrate beliefs, attitudes and values, ethnographies allow for direct observations of behavior. Ethnographic methodology is comprised of two research strategies, non-participant and participant, with the latter including: 1) the researcher establishes a direct relationship with the social actors; 2) staying in their natural environment; 3) with the purpose of observing and describing their social actions; 4) by interacting with them and participating in their everyday ceremonies and rituals; and 5) learning their code in order to understand the meaning of their actions (Gobo, 2011). Heritage (1984) asserts that if one is interested in action, the statements made by actors in interviews cannot be treated as an appropriate substitute for actual behavior. Additionally, there is often a gap between attitudes and social actions (La Piere, 1934; Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Buscatto, 2011). When doing ethnography, it is essential to listen to the actors “on stage”, read the documents of the organization under study, and ask people questions; however, what distinguishes ethnography from other methodologies is a more active role assigned to the cognitive modes of observing, watching, seeing, looking at, gazing, and scrutinizing (Gobo, 2011).

Observations were conducted by attending workshops, educational events, weekend-long events, play parties, dungeons, and bars. Once the organizers were notified and agreed to allow the researcher to attend, the researcher also identified herself at these events to the participants and asked for permission to observe their “scenes” or play. All participants were given an information form (see Appendix) which stated the nature and purpose of the observation as well as their protections as participants. Once a participant was briefed of the

purpose of the observation, the researcher observed their behavior for approximately a half hour to an hour, depending on the length of the scene. Observations focused on the physical setting, activities, the human and social environment, formal and informal interactions, nonverbal communications and observation of events that do not happen. No recordings of any kind were made during an event so as to avoid any intrusive data collection and detailed field notes were recorded after leaving the premises. Semi-structured and unstructured field notes were documented after each observation and transcribed for subsequent analysis.

The observations sites consisted of several events in different locations. The first observation was conducted in Indianapolis, Indiana and was an evening event filled with educational classes, speed mixers, social gatherings, contests, and play parties. This event was held at a local hotel. The second observation site was in Lincoln Park, Michigan, right outside of Detroit. This event was an all day and evening event held at a local BDSM venue, a building that had once housed a board of education but had been bought by a community member and now served as a place to hold educational and play events. The third observation site was a weekend long event that was held in Indianapolis, IN but was open to all community members in the Great Lakes area. Attendees came from all over the Midwest for this annual event. The last observation site was a gay “bear” bar in St. Louis, Missouri. This site was chosen in an attempt to interact with homosexual members of the community as the events usually hold separate functions for these individuals.

Frequenting these sites yielded over one hundred and fifty hours of observational data. The researcher observed and participated in informal discussions and socializing as well as sat in on educational classes, social events, and observed participant play in dungeons and play parties. All interactions were recorded in one of two ways. In order to be as unobtrusive as possible, the

researcher would take frequent breaks either to the restroom or outside in order to make short notes either manually using a pen and notepad or using a recording application in the cellphone and recording notes electronically for later transcription. After each observation had ended and the researcher had left the site, extensive field notes and identity memos were recorded on a password protected laptop.

Field notes should be thickly descriptive and fully narrative and contextualized to the time and place (Warner & Karner, 2010). All field notes were written as a narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end. These notes encapsulated as many details as possible about every interaction and observation that occurred. The researcher attempted to describe the setting, participants, the meaning that the participants ascribed to their actions, any direct quotes, and the impact of the researcher on the situation. Because these data are inscribed by the self, they can reflect the self and also the intended future reader (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw, 1994; Warren, 2000). In order to attempt to maintain a critical subjectivity, a reflective component to the field notes through identity memos will emphasize the researcher's subjective opinions, feelings about the observed scenes, insights, and any questions that may arise. Additionally, the use of a field worker as a second reader, who had been present for the observations, proved to be invaluable in terms of reliability of the data and also in soliciting participants. The use of a field worker, that is an individual immersed in the social setting who can generate contacts, is a common sampling strategy in qualitative inquiries and when employed has been quite successful (Miller, 2004; also see Jacobs, 1999 and Wright & Decker, 1994; 1997).

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, either in person, phone or via Skype, to gain significant insights into the boundary management processes of BDSM participants. An

interview is a performance, but that does not disqualify interviews from providing rich data and sparking analytic insights (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011). Questions are designed in an attempt to uncover the lived experiences of the participants. Spradley (1979) classified the types of interview questions into thirty-one categories, of which the most important are descriptive, structural and contrast questions. Descriptive questions are easy to ask and attempt to uncover meanings and language. Structural questions focus on “domains”, or basic units in cultural knowledge (1979, p. 60). Lastly, contrast questions are aimed at eliciting direct meanings that individuals employ to distinguish objects and events.

Additionally, the term “life history” is focused on the interpretation and representation of the individual within the collective experience (Warren & Karner, 2010). Atkinson (2002) noted that the individual life and the role that it plays in the larger community are best understood through story. This method allowed participants to provide narratives which can be used to understand identity formation and management.

Prospective interview participants were identified in three ways. First, the investigator attempted to solicit interviewees at various public events organized for local BDSM scenes. Individuals who consented to be observed were asked if they would like to participate in interviews. If they agreed, the respondents were given an informed consent document and a time and place for the interview was determined. Since these events were open to the public and encourage attendees to ask questions regarding “scenes” they engage in, there were many opportunities to informally chat with individuals who were also asked if they would like to participate in interviews. If individuals only consented to observations, they were given information pages detailing the nature and purpose of the study. If they consented to both an

observation and interview, they were given both an information page and an informed consent form. For individuals who preferred interviews only, they were given the informed consent form.

The second method of solicitation was to contact leaders of groups on FetLife to ask permission to post a thread regarding the study and providing the contact information for the researcher. Many individuals contacted the researcher using this method. They were able to identify themselves yet retain anonymity by using FetLife accounts. All individuals were given the link to the study blog where they could read all informed consent documents. If interviews were conducted via phone or FetLife message, individuals gave verbal consent or written consent via message to participate in the study.

The third method of solicitation utilized a field worker to recruit individuals involved in the BDSM lifestyle. This individual is an acquaintance of the researcher who filled out a confidentiality agreement and has been briefed regarding the nature of the study. The gatekeeper has been a member of the BDSM community for many years and was useful in reaching potential individuals. His status in the community lent some credibility to the study and led to many useful contacts. The use of a fieldworker is a common technique used in qualitative research as it can help the researcher to gain access to a population.

Regardless of the method of solicitation, once an individual agreed to participate in the study, they were given the primary investigator's email address and asked to initiate contact. The investigator responded via email and provided a brief description of the study or directed the individual to a blog that was created for the sole purpose of providing information regarding the study that individuals can access without any concern for anonymity. This blog is <http://kholt-bdsm-study.blogspot.com/>. The use of a blog allowed participants to download a publication without having to register email addresses or other identifying information. This website is

available currently and at the time of recruitment was listed on the consent form and information page.

Once individuals read the description of the study, a one to two hour interview was scheduled. Depending on the location of the participant, the interview took place either in person, via Skype, telephone, or email message. Although face to face interviews allow for more interactions with participants, interviewing via computer can increase both the participant's feeling of anonymity and the quality of reports (see Tournegeau & Smith, 1996). Thus the interviewee choose which form of interview they felt most comfortable completing.

The participant was given a copy of the informed consent document detailing the protections and processes afforded in this study (in all cases except in-person interviews, this was through the use of the public blog where all documents are posted and individuals can refer to at any time.) Due to the sensitive nature of the questions asked, participants were able to avoid signing their legal name on any forms, so the Institutional Review Board approved that individuals could simply mark the signature line with an "X".

Interviews were conducted using the interview protocol developed by the researcher (see Appendix). The interview questions focused on background information, including their introduction to BDSM, level of engagement, disclosure of behaviors to others, and the nature of relationships both in and outside of the BDSM community. Detailed questions were asked regarding practice, boundaries, negotiation of limits, and the nature of harm. Follow up interviews were conducted in the event that an issue required clarification. In such an instance, the investigator initiated contact with the participant via FetLife, email or phone to gain further information.

With the permission of the participants, all interviews will were audio-recorded for later transcription.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

No personally identifying information was collected from any of the participants, such as name or address. Demographic information, such as gender, age, and race, was aggregated so that no participant could be identified based on any physical characteristics. Each participant was given a pseudonym and all transcriptions of interviews and observations used these in order to ensure that participants remain anonymous and that their identity was protected from disclosure.

All electronic data was stored on a password protected computer that only the researcher had access to and all paper data was in a locked filing cabinet located in the researcher's office. Only the researcher and her academic advisor had access to these data. Three years after the completion of the study, all paper data will be shredded and digital data destroyed. Should participants request copies of the published manuscript, they will be directed to the study blog.

Reflexive Experiential Analysis

Conducting research in dungeons, hotels, and at play parties meant that the atmosphere could be at times quite physically and emotionally charged. In order to locate the researcher's position within the research and to sort through emotions and feelings that the research uncovered, the present study utilized reflexive experiential analysis (see Bernstein, 2004; Kelly, 1988) by documenting the researcher's feelings, responses, and experience throughout the project. Females who study sexuality can be subject to a host of unique situations (see Bernstein, 2004). Throughout the present study, the researcher was forced to reflect not only on the participants under study but also on myself. The fact that I am a young, attractive female with my own experiences presented both opportunities and challenges. In order to make sense of these

experiences, as well as minimize any potential bias, rigorous field notes were maintained throughout the process of the study. After any contact with participants or related materials, the researcher's associated thoughts, feelings, trepidations, concerns, and theoretical and methodological notes were recorded. These field notes were also shared with committee members in order to allow for insight.

In order to obtain some semblance of "insider status", I presented as not just a researcher, but also as an individual with ties to the community in the form of friends and acquaintances. My role as a doctoral student and my institutional affiliation allowed me to demonstrate enough knowledge to be taken seriously by participants whose primary motivation was to promote education and awareness.

Triangulation of Data

The triangulation of interview data, informal discussions, observational data, field notes, and research memos was an attempt to get corroboration from different sources in order to strengthen the analysis. Triangulation is a way to get to the finding by seeing or hearing multiple sources of it from using different sources by using different methods and by squaring the findings with others ((Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The validity of these findings are enhanced by using this measure.

Qualitative Analysis & Grounded Theory

In order to analyze these data, the researcher relied on the method known as grounded theory. This is a method of qualitative inquiry in which the researchers develop inductive theoretical analysis from collected data and subsequently gather further data to check these analyses; it is an iterative method process that uses comparative methods (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011). It derives its theoretical underpinnings from Pragmatism and Symbolic Interactionism,

with its two main principles being that phenomena are not static but subject to change and that strict determinism and non-determinism are rejected in favor of an approach that allows individuals to have control over their destinies through responses to a changing environment (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

This method emerged in the 1960s as a result of Glaser & Strauss' sociological research program on dying in hospitals (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Walker & Myrick, 2006). It was an attempt to marry the richness and depth of qualitative interpretations with the logic, rigor, and systematic analysis argued to be inherent in quantitative survey research (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This model involves an attempt to develop categories which illuminate the data, to saturate these categories with many appropriate cases in order to demonstrate their relevance, and the development of these categories into more general analytic frameworks with relevance outside the setting (Silverman, 2010).

Qualitative Coding

Coding is not simply part of the data analysis; it is the “fundamental analytic process used by the researcher” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 12). Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) recommended that the researcher keep a copy of the research concern, theoretical framework, central research question, goals of the study, and other central concerns nearby when coding the data. This helps to focus coding decisions (Saladana, 2009).

The first step in the coding process is initial or open coding. In this step, important words or groups of words are identified and labeled. Additionally, there is in vivo coding, where the important words or groups of words are themselves used as a label (Holloway, 2008). Categories are groups of related codes and are considered to as theoretically saturated when new data

analysis returns only codes that fit into existing categories and these categories are sufficiently explained in terms of properties and dimensions (Birk & Mills, 2011).

The analysis was facilitated through the use of the software program ATLAS t.i, which offers a variety of tools to manage, extract, compare, explore, and reassemble meaningful pieces from large amounts of data in creative, flexible, yet systematic ways (Friese, 2013). All data were recorded in Microsoft Word documents which were then transferred into ATLAS, allowing for coding.

Charmaz (1999) asserted that memo writing is the pivotal intermediate step between coding and the first draft of the analysis. She listed the advantages of memo writing as allowing researchers to: stop and think about the data, develop a writer's voice and rhythm, spark ideas to check out in the field setting, avoid forcing data into extant theories, treat qualitative codes as categories to analyze, clarify categories, make explicit comparisons, develop fresh ideas, create concepts and find novel relationships, demonstrate connections between categories, discover gaps in data collection, link data gathering with data analysis and report writing, build whole sections of papers and chapters, keep involved in the research and writing, and increase confidence and competence (Charmaz, 1995; 1999). After first level codes had been developed, research memos were constructed in order to examine relationships and explore the data. These memos were used in order to develop second level codes, which then were used to develop meaningful themes.

Paradigm Considerations

All research is interpretive and guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world; some beliefs may be taken for granted whereas others are highly problematic and controversial (Denizen & Lincoln, 2005). Thus, it is important to discern a personal

philosophical position before the conceptualization of a research study by identifying underlying assumptions about the world, such as: how do we define our self, what is the nature of reality, what can be the relationship between researcher and participant, and how do we know the world? (Birks & Mills, 2011).

Social constructionism asserts that knowledge involves both understanding the meaning that that interaction has for participants and that any analysis is made from some perspective that informs the analysis, thus knowledge is neither objective nor subjective, but inter-subjective, based on shared meanings of those being studied and those doing the studying (Warren & Karner, 2010). This study utilized a phenomenologically based methodology similar to Ussher (1999) and Taylor & Ussher (2001) with an emphasis upon the multiplicity of interrelated, subjective and often oppositional understandings, each with their own inherent validity (p.295). The present study takes a postmodern view of ethnography as a jointly constructed narrative rather than an accurate objective depiction of social reality (Newmahr, 2008) and seeks to generate phenomenological data from which an understanding may be developed (Taylor & Ussher, 2001).

Sample Characteristics

Demographic Information

The sample consisted of twelve females, nine males, and one transgender individual. They ranged in age from eighteen to sixty-five years, with a mean age of 38.45 years and a mode of twenty-three years. When asked to identify their roles within BDSM, one claimed to be a master (male), six were dominant (one female, four males, one transgender), six were submissive (four were female, two were male), two identified as bottoms (both female), and five identified as switches (three females, two males), and one identified as a “kinkster” (male). Twenty-one of the participants were white and one was African-American (female).

Early Experience

Most participants indicated that from an early age they showed signs of being interested in aspects of BDSM, with interest generally beginning during the teenaged years (86.3%; n=19). Several participants claimed that these predilections began in childhood and have vivid memories of fantasies relating to BDSM (9%; n=2). A male participant explained how he would play games with a young female his age which involved captivity and tying up, and how looking back now he believes that this was a fixation for him. Another participant remembered having explicitly kinky thoughts as a young girl. She stated that “I was having a lot of what you would probably consider a lot of kinky thoughts and fantasies actually from childhood. I remember the first time I watched Beauty and the Beast as a child and I remember having some (laughs nervously) very kinky thoughts.” Her experiences began when she was quite young, as she explained:

“Um, I was no older than eight years old at the time I had those thoughts. And when I was maybe ten or eleven some neighbors moved in to our street where I was living. And they had a mistress slave relationship. They were a married couple. And at first I thought that the one, the dominant person of the pair, was abusive, because her husband was so quiet and withdrawn all of the time. And I got quite confrontational with her one day and I was so young, and I got quite confrontational and that was the point when they took me to one side and they explained the non-sexual aspects of the D/s [Dominance and submissive] dynamic.”

Another participant explained that while he did not necessarily have BDSM fantasies as a child, there were certain childhood events surrounding punishment that he believed were related to the development of his BDSM interests. A male dominant, he expressed that the spankings he

received as a young boy and how he believed that this was directly correlated with his enjoyment of that activity now. He explained:

“In some ways, I’ve always had this as, is a part of me. I was always interested in spanking. They talk about the effects of spanking on children, and one of the correlations is that children are spanked like to be spanked as adults or like to spank as adults. I think that’s definitely true, I have three sisters, all of us were spanked when we were young, occasionally belts, occasionally hair brushes, wooden spoons, what have you. So I don’t really believe it all comes from there, but I definitely think some part of it comes from there.”

While he was able to identify that these early experiences left an impression on him, it was not until his early adulthood that he was able to fully understand the extent. He stated that: “My interest grew as I become sexually mature in my 20s and 30s, where I liked giving girlfriends a swat on the behind, um either in the course of intimacy or just in the course of just walking passed her in the kitchen. Um, and spanking in particular was the one thing that I always identified with.”

The teenage years and early twenties represented a time ripe with exploration and experimentation with BDSM for almost all participants (86.3%; n=19). One young submissive woman who had been practicing for about two years explained how she began to experiment with a boyfriend after she had a disturbing fantasy as a teenager. She stated that:

“Um I well I grew up uh you know and to me it’s like in my adolescence I had a rape fantasy which at the time I totally did not understand and was completely ashamed of. And so I didn’t really talk about it with anyone and then when I started my relationship with my boyfriend I finally told him about it. And so we

started kind of um slowly kind of playing with it. Um just starting out with you know during sex he would hold down my hands and stuff like that. And that was kind of like our introduction and so we didn't really know what we were doing until we um I guess got some we got some books. I think we kind of sort of learned about it through that.”

Other participants (13.6%; n=3) reported that BDSM was something that they stumbled across in their adulthood. Some learned about it through pornography, others through friends and partners. One woman discussed how she came to become a professional dominatrix by chance. She explained that:

“Actually it was this a weird chance. I had met a guy and we were talking and he starting talking about different things in the lifestyle. And I'm like ok I've never heard of things. Let's talk more. And so we just discussed different things. He was talking about playing and stuff like that and he's like you seem like you'd be a person that would really be interested in this. And I'm said, well I'm interested in just about everything. I mean you gotta try it first right? So I tried playing with him and I said ooh yeah I do like this actually. And I mean my personality is always been dominant anyway.”

Identifying as “Kinky”

No matter when participants began to express BDSM interests, they all indicated feeling that they were somehow different from what others considered to be “normal”. Some participants felt that they never really fit in with the dominant culture. This feeling was not only a result of interest in BDSM, but in some cases was simply a general feeling of not belonging. One submissive female explained that, “And I just so it was that kind of thing that I just always felt on the fringe. I didn't feel like there was a section of society, especially a big section that I really

fit into. I just always felt like I don't belong. If these people really you know really knew things about me you know they they'd go screaming um and so, you know, I was a fringe animal. I've always felt that way."

Another participant reported feeling a sense of relief when she found that there were others with similar interests. She described her experience: "I googled BDSM lifestyle and it was kind of like, oh my god, there's other people out there who think about this kind of stuff. So I guess you could say I was born kinky." She had always felt different and once she identified a community of like-minded individuals she was able to define her early experiences as being "born kinky".

For all participants, no matter when they discovered it, kink has become a part of their identity. All reported that they date within the lifestyle and would have to be open with romantic partners about their kinkiness. As one participant expressed: "The vanilla stuff, yeah, it just it doesn't cut it." Only one participant, a male submissive who admitted to sexual addiction, indicated that there were times when he wished that he could be "vanilla". This participant had run into financial difficulties as a result of calling 1-900 numbers to speak to dominatrices and also due to engaging in "financial domination", where dominant females demand money and gifts in exchange for some sort of communication. He had accrued so much debt that his family had become involved in order to help bail him out. He explained that sometimes he felt that it would be easier to be "vanilla", but that he knows that "God made me a kinky boy."

History of Abuse

Several participants (31.8%; n = 7) reported that they had histories of abuse that occurred in childhood or young adulthood. Most were female (71.4%; n = 5). Of these participants, two were abused by non-family members and one was abused by someone outside of the family in a

BDSM setting. The rest of the participants were abused by family members in the non-BDSM setting of the home.

One woman speculated that many women have been sexually abused or assaulted but that they do not disclose this abuse. She explained that, “I think that the majority of American women, more of them have been sexually abused than not. I think that we’re in denial as a country, I think that women are in denial. I think that a lot of women have been sexually abused and they somehow block it out or justify it, I know I did for a long time.” It was her belief that due to low self-esteem or self-worth, many women fail to even recognize abuse when it occurs, which affects their reporting.

Participants seemed to be mixed in their responses when asked about the role of their history of abuse in their predilection toward BDSM. Some reported that there was a direct link and that BDSM was a way to deal with the trauma and a way in which to regain control. Others claimed that the two were completely unrelated and that BDSM had no correlation with the abuse that they suffered.

One woman expressed concern about her enjoyment of BDSM activities, and stated, “Um because I’m a rape survivor. I was emotionally abused as a child. So you know it I think that a lot of us have those kinds of like oh gee I wonder if I’m just trying to relive this, or if I’m trying to work through it in like unhealthy ways.” While she seemed to maintain that BDSM was a healthy way to explore power dynamics, she was also keenly aware of the ways in which for her this may be related to previous negative experiences. These thoughts seemed to always be present in her mind.

Another participant, a female submissive who became interested in BDSM after a failed marriage in adulthood, was vehement that these activities had nothing to do with her abuse. . She

had been sexually abused by her grandfather as a young girl. She stated that being abused and growing up in an abusive environment had meant that she was forced to always be in control in some way. As an adult who recently found BDSM through a partner, she was relieved to be able to relinquish control as a submissive. She explained that:

“It’s a struggle because I’ve had to be in control over everything all my life. As a child I grew up in a very abusive you know childhood and I was in charge. You know of you know I was my mother’s best friend. Very inappropriately and because I had to be in charge and um I’ve had to be in control for so long it’s so nice not to be but yet at the same time there’s that that mechanism that you know one kept me healthy and sane growing up in an abusive environment um but you know it no longer serves me. It’s nice just to completely let go and trust. And so you know I do feel like I lose control all the time. Um in a good way.”

These remarks sound as if she is saying that her abuse and her need to let go of control are inextricably linked. Interestingly, this participant continued by denying that her BDSM activities or predilections were in anyway related to her history of childhood abuse, and stated, ““But I don’t believe that I am interested in you know the DS and the pain and you know all of the activities we do because of the childhood I had. I don’t think it’s related.” So for her, the element of control is something that she can relate to an abusive past, but the physical sensations involved in BDSM are very much separate.

The extant psychological literature has asserted that there is a link between trauma and BDSM. Although this is a small sample of the BDSM population, it does appear as though the percentage of individuals with a background of abuse is consistent with the number in the general population.

Multiple Marriage

Although most participants were not or had not been married, it is interesting to note that there was a high rate of divorce for those who did report previous nuptials. For participants that had been married (36%; n=8), the majority of these marriages ended in divorce (87.5 %; n=7). It is an interesting finding and it is unclear whether this is due to the high divorce statistic in the general population or if it is more prevalent in these alternative communities.

A male participant expressed that initially, he used BDSM as an outlet for intimacy during his marriage. “My marriage was not going real well but not to where I felt about cheating. I was looking for an outlet which did not involve sexual intercourse.” For him, BDSM offered intimacy that he considered to be “safe” from being designated as cheating.

One woman explained:

“And then my marriage started to dissolve and break up and there were lots of issues and one of them had, you know one of those issues was um with sex. And you know another issue that I’ve come to realize was the fact that I’m not dominant. I am submissive. Um and in my in my marriage I was required to be dominant in all ways. Make all the decisions, decide what the plan was, what our goals were, how we were gonna get there, my husband was really good at you know tell him what to do and he would go do it. But um I just got tired of being in charge.”

For her, her eventual discovery of BDSM during her divorce would allow for the loss of control that she had craved throughout the duration of her marriage but never felt that she could achieve without consequence.

For the one participant who had since remarried, she reported that her new spouse was an active member of the lifestyle. This also was the case for the two participants who were currently on their first marriages, with one spouse tolerating behavior and the other spouse being an active participant. It appears as though being married to someone who is also in the lifestyle, or at least to someone who understands or supports it, is related to a successful outcome.

Disclosing Information about Lifestyle

All participants were open about their lifestyle in some way. This ranged from being open to just about anyone to being open to a selective few people in their life. Views on how open one should be seemed to vary. Some individuals viewed being kinky as part of their private sexual life and did not find it socially appropriate to be open with just anyone. One male participant explained, “Some people ask me, “Are you out to your family about your kink?” I’m like, “Do you talk about your intercourse with your family? Then why would you talk about your kink with your family?!” That’s my view.” Another female participant, a professional dominatrix, explained that “Because I’m very up front and open with everybody. I mean even my kids know. It’s not a thing that I can hide.” With clients coming to her home, it is understandable that this would be difficult to hide from her family.

One participant felt that they did not need to hide their kinky side from anyone. She explained, “I’m dangerously open about myself.” She stated that she would talk about the lifestyle to anyone that would listen, although some people preferred not to hear about it.

Most other participants were selective about who they discussed kink with, choosing only to talk about it with close friends or others that they had met within the community. One woman, a graduate student and teaching fellow at a Midwestern university, explained that while she is very open, it is important to establish boundaries. She stated that her university had several groups for those involved in BDSM but that she did not feel that it was an appropriate venue for

her own involvement. She explained that when it came to those events, she was cautious: “I’m not very involved because they have lunches out at restaurants or they meet on campus like literally in the middle of campus and while I’m totally out, like I talk to people and I’m not closeted, I’m not gonna meet with a bunch of BDSM people in the middle of where I work.”

In general, participants agreed that while kink is part of who they are, it is not necessarily something that needs to be discussed indiscriminately with just anyone. Close friends and intimate partners are examples of people to whom they disclose this information, but generally disclosure is evaluated case by case.

Reasons for Engaging In BDSM

Participants offered many reasons for engaging in BDSM, all consistent with previous literature. Several themes emerged when discussing reasons for participating in these behaviors: authenticity, overcoming, exploration, and relief.

Authenticity involved participants feeling as if they were finally engaging their “real” or true” self. One woman submissive explained that she had always felt like an outsider. Additionally she always felt the need to be in control in her life, which she resented. She stated that,

“You know there was part of me that really wanted to submit. And but there was nobody I could submit to so that got locked away. Um until it was safe to come out. Um the really embracing the fact, I’ve always known I was a fringe animal. Um but really embracing that and the confidence.”

For her, BDSM offered a way to finally “come out” and embrace who she was. Another participant echoed this sentiment. A male master, he also felt that he was finally living as his true self, and explained that, “I fought too long to be authentic and no one’s gonna take that away

from me. I am not hiding from anybody. What you see is what you get.” His involvement in the lifestyle gave him a sense of authenticity and freedom.

One participant explained that she remembered as a teenager, her first experiences with BDSM left her feeling comfortable and relaxed. She stated that, “We didn’t do much of the physical stuff but emotionally it was all there and it just felt so, how do I put it, it kind of felt relaxing, like I was taking off an outfit that didn’t quite fit me and I was stepping into a warm bath and I was just being myself, you know? It was very nice. It was very...it was liberating almost.” Her experience with BDSM offered her a sense of comfort, like she was finally able to let go and be who she was.

Another female participant discussed that she enjoyed the real, authentic relationships that BDSM facilitated. She found that these relationships allowed exploration of power, control, and other constructs that are usually considered to be taboo in vanilla relationships, or at least given negative connotations. She also cautioned that these relationships are not for everyone. She explained:

“What I have found is these relationship styles are very complex. You, anyone who is not interested in digging into the way that they function as a human being and what interests them in the world and really interested in some self-inquiry, really should avoid this stuff. Cause you can’t be successful in this realm without really looking at yourself and others. But that’s one of the things that I find so valuable about it, is that it will, these complex relationship forms will bring up all of your insecurities, all of your jealousies, all your fears, it’s all gonna come up, and then you can actually deal with it. What’s so many of us do is we keep them hidden and we shove them down, “No, I’m not afraid! No, I’m not afraid. No,

I'm not scared, No". She emphasized that through these relationships one is able to really get a sense of self and identity.

Through questioning, she claimed that one can really determine who one is:

“And when you go through these relationships or these styles force you to question. And when you come out of that questioning process, what I've found is that more people are so much more certain of who actually are. Or even if it's not who they are, who I want to be, and what there is, what work there is for me to do to become that person. I just think there's such an amazing, and untapped avenue for growth and development, and satisfaction in all your relationships, not just your sexual or romantic ones, just comes out of the questioning and are encouraged in these relationship styles.”

For her, BDSM also represented opportunities to learn tools for self-awareness and self-improvement that she did not find in vanilla relationships.

Another woman described BDSM as empowering and quite simply, as an honest way to live. She described:

“It feels, I don't know, it feels honest. And I mean by that I mean it feels like I'm being honest with myself. Like I feel like it says genuinely who I am. It's not like something that is exciting. I mean definitely it is exciting don't get me wrong. But it's more than that for me, like it is it is something that I need. Just like people need sex, I need BDSM to you know for myself to be empowered.”

This woman had spent many years in an unhappy marriage and had discovered BDSM later in life with her current partner. For her, BDSM kept her feeling strong, independent, and true to herself.

This idea of BDSM as honest was expressed by another participant, who described dating online as being easier and more honest on kinky sites. She explained, “And it’s interesting ‘cause the vanilla sites you have to drag out these long back and forths. Everybody just wants sex anyway. By the time you get to have sex you’re bored and you’re ready to move on to the next person.” For her, dating individuals who were involved in BDSM proved easier as they were more forthcoming about what they wanted and their expectations, which according to her, generally involved meeting up for play.

Another theme that emerged was that of overcoming. Some participants felt that BDSM was a way to overcome (see history of abuse section for a discussion of overcoming trauma). In terms of overcoming, many felt that BDSM offered a way to explore “the dark side” of human nature or the self. It allowed for a way to examine the things that produce fear or anxiety and to own them or engage them. One male who identified as a kinkster explained, “It’s about the ability to expose your fears in order to own them. It is throwing someone into an intense, almost traumatic situation and then bringing them back. They dip their fingers in the fire, but they are still okay.” BDSM for him was a safe way to explore the things that scare or intimidate. BDSM play offered a haven of sorts, a place where dark fears could be engaged in a controlled way (see Presdee’s controlled loss of control). He also felt that BDSM was a way to share the darkest parts of yourself, parts that cause you anxiety, fear, shame, etc., with someone else who will not judge you. He stated that, “You know, it’s like self-abuse. If you have ever engaged in self abuse. BDSM is like if you could share or touch that part again with a lover; that sums it up.” For him, BDSM was partly about sharing your most vulnerable self with another in order to overcome powerful emotions or feelings.

Another participant expressed the attractiveness of playing with the limits of fear. A master with two female slaves, he explained, “I’ve got to learn how to use my fear as energy. I’m so afraid. I’ve never done that. Ok. Let’s see let’s take that fear apart. Because my idea is that fear is the best friend you’ve got, but you’ve got to know how to use its energy. And you’ve got to know how to play by its rules.” This participant enjoyed turning fear into power that he could control and direct and he attempted to instill these same ideas into his “slave girls”.

Some participants enjoyed the challenge that engaging in BDSM presents. One explained that for him, the biggest challenge was that of reading a partner:

“Can I know my partner well enough that the slightest move or gesture can send her over the edge? Can I play her like the fine instrument that she is? Can I coax a soft melody from her cries, and have it accompanied by her writhing harmony? When the havoc is over, can I cradle her gently and nurture peace from the chaos? This is my journey.”

He spoke of the ability to play along the edge – to push his partner to her limits and to be able to safely bring her back, all through reading her body, breathing, and response to him. For him, taking care of her after such powerful experiences was where true intimacy lies. Helping his partner to overcome, to exit her experience safely and to bring her back from it, was what really attracted him to BDSM play.

Related to authenticity and overcoming is the desire for exploration. Participants expressed that BDSM was a way to “untap” what is normally hidden in most individuals. One woman described this as, ‘I believe that giving each other the freedom to touch the darkest parts of ourselves only helps us shine all the brighter. For me, this journey isn’t so much about

Dominance and submission per se, but rather forging pathways to unlock our hidden potential.”
Again, BDSM offers the ability to explore the self in order to achieve a sense of authenticity.

Other participants expressed that BDSM allowed for avenues of exploration that would never be considered okay in a non-BDSM relationship. One woman expressed:

“But I suppose I could say that for me, BDSM is way, amongst other things, is a way to allow me to express and explore some things that I probably wouldn’t be able to in a vanilla sex life. I mean, how could I turn around to a vanilla man and explain that I want to be you know, tied up and essentially raped and pretending to be a kid at the time and all this kind of thing. You can’t do that in a vanilla sex life. It just doesn’t happen. So I guess maybe a lot of people get into BDSM not necessarily into the lifestyle completely but they get into different aspects of it as a form of catharsis. You know, to exercise some of the things that have happened. That’s just my theory.”

This participant had a long history of abuse and she used BDSM in order to work through her traumatic feelings in a way in which she felt that she could maintain control. For her, BDSM offered a way to make sense of her experiences and to regain the sense of control that her abusers had stolen from her. BDSM was therapeutic and allowed for catharsis.

Tied to the idea of catharsis is engaging in BDSM for some sort of relief. One participant identified this as:

“I do know that there’s something, there’s also I feel very balanced and grounded into pain. There are times when I’ve got all this stuff going on in my head and um I you know I’m just it feels like I’m going a million miles a minute and I’m trying to think about a hundred different things and the pain will actually like remove all

of that. It'll just strip all of that away. Um sometimes and I love that balanced grounded feeling.”

For her, BDSM offered a way to balance herself and turn off her mind.

The participant who is a professional dominatrix reported that it offers an escape for many of her clients. She explained,

“It’s kind of therapeutic but then it’s kinda actually in a way it’s making them not really have to deal with their life. You know the same reason that you know we don’t always read books just because they’re knowledgeable and they’re good right? We read them as an escape. We watch movies because it’s an escape. It’s like oh I’m in that movie you know I’m on the beach and I’m walking and I’m having a good time. Cause people need to escape from real life. Cause real life is not always good.” For her, clients paid money to come and escape for a little while. She offered not only physical sensations, but a safe place where individuals could let go and let her work. She confided that sometimes, men just want to be mommied. And sometimes, “they just want the shit beat out of them.”

The study resulted in a range of individuals who identified as different roles, which was useful in that the researcher was able to ascertain any variation in perspectives. All individuals who were interviewed were friendly, open to discussion, and seemed genuinely interested in educating the academic audience about their lifestyles. A qualitative analysis of the interview and observational data led to the development of categories that all related to the concept of theater; BDSM being a social and dramaturgical interaction. The following chapters will explore the themes and categories that emerged from these data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

CHAPTER FOUR: THE BDSM COMMUNITY AS PROTECTIVE

Chapter Four details the protective nature of the BDSM community and discusses the ways in which participants police themselves and each other in order to engage in satisfying play. This can best be understood through symbolic interactionism, particularly through a dramaturgical lens. Consent in BDSM can be understood as a theatrical performance. It is an ongoing interactive and dynamic process that is comprised of setting the stage (defining of terms, negotiations of play), auditioning actors (individuals freely choosing to engage in play and creating their roles), delivering lines (communicating needs, wants, and desires to partners and open dialogues with self and community), illuminating the sightlines (the notion of responsibility and transparency among community members), and ghost lighting (safety and ensuring protection from harm). The BDSM community, as a deviant and marginalized group, understands the risks inherent in their actions, are cognizant of the stigma associated with these behaviors, and therefore implement strategies to reduce risks and manage stigma. Throughout observations, informal discussions, and interviews, it became apparent that there are many protective qualities of the BDSM community. Due to the deviant status afforded them by the larger culture, self-policing and surveillance is essential to satisfying experiences. All participants were able to identify ways in which the community attempts to protect its members and to ensure that all involved are able to explore the boundaries of sexuality and sensuality within a safe environment

Performing Consent

Consent is performative in nature, meaning that it is constantly occurring and is a process that is always unfolding, informing the definition of the situation and the meaning. It is

constructed by actors in the theater of interaction. As Beckerman noted: “Theater does not exist except when it is occurring...the script may exist as well as the scenery...a poem is a thing made. Theater is not.” (Beckerman, 1976). Burke (1969) detailed a dramaturgy of social life using the following conceptual scene: the act (how the situation is defined), the scene (situation and place), the agent (performers), the agency (meaning and the ‘how’), and the purpose (the ‘why’ and accounts of what happened). Performing consent is central to the consensuality of BDSM. One of the most striking qualities of the BDSM community is the importance it ascribes to consent and the lengths it goes to in order to promote education and awareness regarding issues of consent and safety. One of the mantras expressed was “When you build consent you build community.”

Performing consent seems to revolve around five interrelated theatrical concepts: setting the stage, auditioning actors, delivering lines, illuminating the sightlines, and ghost lighting (terms from Lathan, 1996). Both interviewees and informal discussions at scenes and events highlighted the importance of consent and its role in structuring scenes from start to finish. Specifically, scenes may begin with the process of negotiation of consent, continue under the assumption that consent can be withdrawn at any time, and that once consent is withdrawn, the scene stops immediately. Each element of performing consent will be explored below.

Setting the Stage

With any performance there are many tasks to complete beforehand that are crucial to the success of the show. Back stages are critical to performances because the impression left by a properly staged show is compromised if the audience front stage is privy to the back stage where the performance is prepared (Edgley, 2015). For the actors of the show itself, backstage is where preparations occur. Firstly, parties must have a mutual understanding of what BDSM behaviors

are acceptable to them. These are limits and boundaries that individuals have discovered through a process of self-reflection and through interactions with others. The actors must be informed of what will take place and the parameters they will work within. Essentially, an informed agreement precedes any performance.

Setting the Stage: Differentiating Hurt from Harm

One of the major differences between BDSM and ‘vanilla’ sex or erotic interaction is that sometimes depending on one’s preference, hurt is desired or is constructed as positive. One recurring theme that emerged from discussions with participants was that of hurt versus harm. All participants, when asked to make a differentiation between the notion of “hurt” and “harm”, were able to identify distinct differences.

Hurt, in BDSM, is considered desirable for some. Many individuals actively seek out hurt, are aroused by hurt, and enjoy the sensations that hurt; however, harm is something negative, something that can cause damage and which is always to be avoided.

One participant explained, “Hurt is a good feeling, like a spanking is supposed to hurt. Harm is a bad thing and results in extended or permanent damage to one’s body.” Another related it to her own experience with her current partner, and stated that,

“I absolutely believe he would never knowingly willingly consciously harm me. Um he hurts me all the time at my you know at my request. Um definition of harm, harm... there’s a consciousness to it but then thinking of the way that that M hurts me in the way that I like to be hurt, there’s consciousness in that too. Obviously he’s conscious about what he’s doing. Um but harm feels like a little bit more deliberate or an uncaring. Um maybe that’s maybe that’s the difference, is there’s an uncaring. Um and there is a very much selfishness to it.”

Other individuals expressed that harm has to do with the effect that the act has on a person and related it to the concept of “damage”: “You know does she feel psychologically damaged, mentally damaged, emotionally damaged. And maybe that’s part of it too, maybe that that idea of damage.” Another participant also touched on the idea of damage by discussing scarring: Hurt is a physical discomfort. And that can be harmful but it can also not necessarily be. So, I feel like harm is harm is more like damage. You know you’ve left the, you know, a little bit of a, you know, scar either physically or emotionally.”

A female participant claimed felt that several things differentiated hurt from harm, most importantly the notion of intentionality. She explained:

“There’s first issue of intentionality. Um...anyone who’s intention is to harm or do violence immediately their coming from a bad, wrong place. Right? I can’t get down with that. You know, then you get, “What if the other person consented?” That’s, to me, that’s the area where ok, there’s possibly some illness going on here. These people are consenting to actually having themselves physically harmed, that’s, who, that’s got to be some gray area right there. That’s a hard one to get straight about. I, how do I identify...violence, I think that violence is intentional. Harm might not be intentional, but I think that violence is intentional. I don’t know that’s it’s possible for someone, let’s look at the inquiry, is it possible for someone to do unintentional violence? I think violence as more of a baring than as, yeah, ok, if I look at this, I guess I think of harm as a physical and a mental outcome. Far more as an outcome and violence more as the act. Let’s see, yeah and we definitely distinguish between hurt and harm. You can hurt me, like you can bruise me, I might be cut, ok great. I’m going to heal from those things,

right? Harm is, you know, a bruise on my arm, that's hurt. A fracture of my arm, that's harm. Harm is going to get in the way of my ability to function.”

Another female participant discussed hurt and harm in terms of how the recipient felt about the actions they had received. If someone left a scene feeling good about the pain or discomfort, this was hurt, a positive experience. Otherwise, negative feelings indicated something harmful. She explained that:

“For me, hurting somebody is anything that causes any sort of physical or emotional discomfort, it could be humiliation play, it could be sadomasochism, um, anything that brings about a physical or emotional response that is generally considered to be, um, not traditionally a positive one. Whereas harm is something that...it's the same things but it's something that the person's not happy with having inflicted on them. It's the difference between um, say if I, if I do a harsh caning on a submissive who really enjoys the cane – yes, I'm hurting them. That's the point, that's what they want. I'm not harming them. But if somebody were to cane me, I mean, that's terrifying. Even if it was a punishment, that would be harm, it would be both hurt and harm because it would cause longstanding psychological damage to me. You know, it would go into my list of traumatic experiences. And it would solidify my fear of the cane. So it comes down to how the person feels about it afterwards. If they walk away thinking, “yeah, it hurt but I'm happy about it”, that's hurt. If they walk away thinking “that hurt and I'm not happy about it”, that's harm. A very simplified version obviously but I think that's pretty much what it boils down to, you know?”

One woman discussed ways in which to physically differentiate hurt from harm, specifically when authorities became involved. She indicated that there are ways to tell whether

some activities are in fact consensual. She described some intricate cutting designs that her partner had recently done on her breasts. She explained the ways in which she had heard you could determine whether an act such as theirs was consensual and not harmful:

“When there is a case, you know a police case or a court case, or somebody goes to the hospital, one of the things they look at are those lines you know those cuts or whatever, the um the designs are they deliberate? Because I honestly had to stay very still for him to do what he did. There was consent. You can tell just looking at the designs there had to be consent. And I guess you could say he could have tied me up and kept me bound but I think there still would be some they weren’t random. They weren’t slashes that could have shown that there was a sign of struggle. You know just in the fact that they’re very deliberate um you know and I know that that’s some of what they use in the court cases.”

All participants agreed that hurt and harm are two different concepts, especially in the context of BDSM. Harm is something that is a result of negative experiences, something that all precautions are set up in an attempt to avoid. Participants indicated that when it comes to harm, intentionality is a key concept. Did the individual mean to inflict damage? The result of the interaction is key in distinguishing harm – how does the person feel afterward? Has there been some type of damage done? The key to preventing harm is through the process of consent.

Setting the Stage: Informed Agreement

If consent is performative, then acknowledging the parameters of play occurs through an informed agreement that happens “back stage”. In BDSM, informed agreement is part of these preparations. This means that both parties have been educated on what type of play will occur

and that they have a reasonable expectation of what will happen during the scene. They have discussed this with partners and all have acknowledged the limitations of the interaction.

This process begins with pre-scene negotiations. These pre-scene negotiations occur prior to play and are crucial to establishing boundaries. People act toward objects, other people, institutions, ideals, and activities on the basis of the meanings that things have for them (Blumer, 1969). Additionally, meanings can change depending on the context. Therefore, participants are part of an ongoing process of defining and redefining the situation. They negotiate their places in the BDSM community through relationships with other community members and shared values and beliefs. Identities that are more group-based in nature assume more uniformity of perception (Burke & Stets, 2009) and because meanings and responses are shared, they form the basis of expectations for others (Mullaney, 2015).

According to participants, the nature of the play will determine the scope and depth of the negotiations. Light play with minimal risk may not warrant the same level of negotiations as heavy and intense play. It is up to the individuals involved to disclose any information that may affect the outcome of this play. This includes a discussion of what types of play a person enjoys, their limits of what they will and will not do, and any information that they think a partner should be aware of. One woman explained, “We usually talk about what we will do ahead of time. So you know anything that we’ve done we’ve usually talked about and we talked about the parameters. This is what we would do. This is how we would do it.” This allows for both participants to have insight into how a scene will unfold.

Another woman explained how someone she knew would test her partners regarding their stated limits:

“So it was a female dom and a male submissive and they were negotiating, and he said, “I have a hard limit for knives, my absolute boundary is knives.” And she said, “Oh, great, awesome!” and they got warmed up, and they taped a taser to his hand, like a stun-gun, you know, like a little zappy thing, and taped that to his balls. And then pulled out of knife, and she said to him, “Your safe word is to zap yourself”. And then she pulled out a knife and he zapped himself instantly. And she untapped him and she said, “You’re right, your hard limit is knives”.

All participants agreed that the best way to prevent harm is through negotiations in advance.

One female stated that:

“When we don’t negotiate things or we don’t talk out our expectations in advance, and you’ve got the dominant saying, “Oh goodie, I can push your safe words”, and the submissive who’s thinking, “Oh goodie, I can go into totally safe, easy, simply fun, not challenging at all”. I mean, really? You’ve got two people coming at the same interaction coming from two completely different perspectives.”

Participants vary in their thoroughness regarding the negotiation process. Some participants report that they use surveys or spreadsheets and have potential partners complete these before playing. One female switch provided me with a negotiations sheet that she requires all of her partners fill out. She finds the following pieces of information to be crucial to good negotiations: likes (what a person enjoys doing), hard limits (what a person absolutely will not do and has no interest in trying), soft limits (what a person will not do but may or may not be willing to try), health issues (any medical condition that may affect play), mental/emotional

issues (abuse or something that may affect play), and aftercare (what procedures are needed after play to bring an individual back to a pre-play state).

Several participants pointed out that there is no substitute for speaking face to face. The Internet has made it increasingly easy to handle all of these transactions online, eliminating the need for much face to face interaction. And while there are many negotiation resources available online, meeting potential partners in the real world is preferable for some. One participant explained, “There are lots of foggy online negotiations for, or questionnaires about things you like, things you don’t. They really can be valuable, but I think it’s more valuable to do on your own.” Another participant explained that partners are sometimes surprised by her thoroughness:

“I actually talk to the person. It’s just not like you’re gonna call me or you’re gonna email me. You’re gonna meet me right now. That’s never gonna happen. Ever. We’re gonna talk first because I’m gonna see where are you exactly coming from. I wanna know everything. I even wanna know about your health. And that turns some people off because they’re thinking well why are you wanting to know so much about me. You’re putting your life in my hands. I need to know everything. And they say well you know I’ve been doing this for years and nobody’s ever asked me that. Because you’ve never talked to me.”

No matter which method an individual preferred for negotiations, agreement regarding the importance was consistent across the sample. One participant expressed that these negotiations should not be an option, but that everyone should care enough to want to protect themselves: “Do it so that you get a sense of what you do and don’t like. Don’t do it for someone else, do it for yourself.” Pre-scene negotiations can help to avoid any

misunderstanding and ensure that individuals enter and leave the interaction with the same expectations.

Auditioning Actors: Free Will

Any stage needs actors. In BDSM, actors must freely choose to play a role in a performance. Individuals search one another out, through websites, play parties, and mutual friends in order to engage in BDSM behaviors in a safe environment. These individuals share common interests and are entrusting their satisfaction and safety to a play partner. In a community full of likeminded individuals, decisions must be made on who is an acceptable co-star. Who would best fulfill the role in the performance? Through talking and negotiating and stage preparations, actors audition for one another. If they are chosen to perform, will they be called back to perform again? Whatever the outcome of the performance, all actors must perform willingly and consensually.

Therefore, free will is ongoing and occurs throughout the show. Free will is the idea that the agreement is made willingly and there has been no coercion. Coercion can be understood as any influence outside of the individual that may affect their decisions or actions. Coercion can result from power differentials between individuals, pressure from others, or being under the influence of a substance that can alter decision-making (drugs, alcohol, etc.) One participant explained it as simply doing something because you want to: “For me consensual just means that people are doing something because they want to do it, they know what they’re getting into, and they’re not being coerced in any way.” If one or more parties removed consent at any time, the understanding among all participants was that play ceased. As one participant explained, the line between abuse and play is maintained by consent: “There is a fine line between BDSM and abuse. In BDSM **BOTH/ALL** participants must consent to the play and the activities. If **ONE**

participant removes the consent, and the activity continues; it has become abuse.” Consider the following excerpt from field notes of an event:

We went to a demonstration of how to “put the sexy back in BDSM.” The man running it was older, a bit dumpier, and wore all leather. He explained that he was a master with years of experience. During the panel he asked for a volunteer from the audience. A young blonde woman, wearing a red tube dress that was barely covering her and no shoes, held up her hand. She had been sitting on the floor. He asked her if she was consenting to the scene. She said yes. He whispered something in her ear. She giggled and nodded. From what I could tell, there were no pre-scene negotiations done. I wondered if this was a set up and they knew each other. He again asked her to tell the audience that she was volunteering to play and that she was doing so of her own free will. She repeated this. He grabbed her by the hair and pulled her close, whispering in her ear. She closed her eyes and nodded. I wondered if these were the pre-scene negotiations and he was telling her what he would do. He pulled out his whip. He gently wrapped it around her throat and then pulled her in tightly. She moaned. He asked if she liked it. She said yes. He moved the whip down her breasts and between her legs, again asking if she liked it. He pulled down her dress and began to flog her gently while holding her hair. Throughout the scene, he asked if she wanted it, if she liked what he was doing. To which she always replied yes.

This excerpt is an illustration of the importance put on the word “yes” in BDSM – the “yes, I consent”, “yes, you can,” “yes, I like this.” The individual asserts their choice in

participating in the interaction. Both actors are freely acting in the performance, and this will be asserted through communication.

Delivering Lines: Communication

Performances are dependent upon actors delivering lines. These lines convey emotion and shape the performance and the reception of the performance. Communication between partners is crucial to performing consent and occurs again throughout the entire performance. Open discussions of boundaries and limits are what consent is contingent upon. All participants agreed that communication was the way in which consent was exchanged and could be withdrawn. Communication was understood as a responsibility and a tool for empowerment; one of the tools with which an individual could protect themselves and enjoy mutually-satisfying play.

Participants stressed the need to communicate during scenes by checking in with partners, utilizing a safeword system, and taking safety precautions. From the development of scenes to the aftercare provided after, open communication is key to maintaining the agreed upon parameters of play. The onus is on the individual to speak up and communicate with a partner. If a boundary is violated and nothing is said, it may be interpreted as being enjoyable. The only way to protect oneself is to use the tools available to manage the scene.

Scenes occur through improvisation. All participants reported that, not unlike “vanilla” sex, their scenes were not scripted beforehand, but were usually fuelled by an idea and improvised. As one participant explained,

“We never prescript our scenes. Nearly all of our scenes are created at the time. They may change due to equipment available, time available or other people. Most of the ideas come from my Dominant. She may start with some plan, but can improvise as the

scene develops. I have dropped ideas from time to time, but the final decision and flow is controlled by her.”

Participants explained that ideas for scenes can come from anywhere: “Everywhere. My environment, books, movies, the world around me.” Sometimes one of the partners may have an idea of what type of scene they would enjoy. One dominant woman stated that, “I create them [scenes], but don’t actually write them. Or, at times, a sub might ask for a certain activity to be allowed, and then I create whatever scene I feel will support that.” She went on to explain that the spontaneity of the scenes allows for more enjoyment: “Not everything always goes “as planned” and being flexible, to me, is part of the fun.”

Once scenes have been discussed amongst partners, desires communicated, and play has begun, all participants discussed the need to check in with partners throughout play by paying attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues. For example, one participant explained that, “During it, if it’s something that has danger or not, even if it is just flogging, he’ll stop, he’ll come, he’ll check on me. He’ll move the hair out of my face. And just to see, he’ll make eye contact. How am I doing? And then so there’s like pre, during, and post that we’re always evaluating.” Communication between actors is constant and ongoing throughout play.

Because consent is dynamic in nature, all participants indicated that it can be revoked at any time. There are many reasons why it can be removed. One male participant discussed this issue, but expressed that not all individuals have the same level of respect for the process. He explained,

“I know this guy, he’s an attorney. One of the meetings that I was at I heard him talk about his view of two out of three. He said if somebody comes to me and they consent with what we’re going to do, that’s a win, in the middle if they’re still consenting that a

win, and at the end if they're still consenting, that's like three strikes for me. He says, but what it comes down to, I only need two of those. So if they consent in the beginning and consent in the middle, and changed their mind at the end, I don't care because they gave me two consents. If you consent in the beginning, and consent in the middle, but don't consent in the end, that's two wins also. I don't know how you don't have the consent in the beginning and then have it in the end, ...I didn't completely buy it.”

This participant recognized that this “two out of three” philosophy did not represent the basic principles of safe BDSM play. At all stages there should be consent and both parties should be enjoying the activity, otherwise it is no longer play, but may become something harmful or unpleasant.

After a performance, this communication is crucial and can be the opportunity to evaluate a “show”. In BDSM, this means a chance to discuss scenes and work out any issues that may have arisen. It is at this step that one is processing the event and preparing to leave the interaction and what unfolds can make a difference in how one perceives and remembers the event. This is a time for partners to not only physically and emotionally “come down” from a scene, but also for discussions of how the scene went and what participants enjoyed and did not enjoy. All participants reported that they engage in some form of aftercare. Some participants reported needing very little aftercare, while others, some with past histories of abuse, had very detailed accounts of what they needed after scenes, especially scenes that involved potential “triggers” (see Chapter 5).

One male submissive participant explained:

“Our aftercare usually consists of cuddling, holding/hugging, refreshments, etc. She wraps me in a soft blanket or throw, we discuss the scene and generally unwind. It usually lasts between 10 and 30 minutes. We always discuss the scene afterwards, sometimes even for days.”

The fact that for this participant scenes are discussed for so long was interesting, as it seems that is probably more focus and concern than most vanilla sexual encounters.

Another participant, a submissive female who only plays with her partner in the context of their monogamous relationship, described aftercare as being similar to cuddling or intimacy after non-BDSM sexual activity. She stated that, “With aftercare it’s almost always he climbs into bed or you know wherever we are. You know pulls me close, wraps his arms around me and just holds me, rocks me, kisses me if I you know you know nice little kisses on my head, my neck, whatever just. And we’ll stay there as long as I need it.”

All participants agreed that aftercare is very important to positive experience. One participant explained:

“Aftercare is different for each person and may be for each scene. It is a very PRIVATE affair. IT consists primarily of reassuring the sub they are ok, comforting them in any way they need, and providing for their physical and psychological needs. Aftercare is essential. Once the sub is cared for, then cleanup of the scene area, after which the Dom/Domme sub should discuss the scene. What went right, wrong, what wasn’t liked, what to try next time, etc.”

Aftercare provides an opportunity not only to comfort a partner but also to discuss the scene. Here individuals can express what they enjoyed, what they did not enjoy, and what they

would have liked more of or less of. Any element of the scene can be analyzed and explored during the aftercare phase of the interaction.

Other participants talked about the need to “come down” from the interaction. Some BDSM play can be very intense and aftercare is a carved out space and time for participants to return to pre-play states. One female participant explained:

“Um I do aftercare in the sense that I need um I need a space and time to come back into myself. To come out of la la land to um you know to the connection that you can create with someone in a scene is very intense and it’s when it’s over you the two of you just part ways suddenly. You’re kind of feel bereft. Um you need time to I need time to be with that person just for a little bit and come back to normal. I’m not out of the altered mindset, the altered headspace I go into.”

Another participant, a male, described aftercare as more of a time for debriefing, again, stressing the importance of communication. He stated that if aftercare is not specifically asked for then he will initiate a dialogue about it:

“Depending on the scene and how intense it was and how late it is in the night, sometimes it’ll be, sometimes it’ll be afterwards. You know once we’re both sort of back to feeling back to normal and our adrenaline has calmed down. Um uh we’ll talk about it. Um other times it might be a day or two later. Depending on what happens. But um that’s uh when I’m a bottom if they don’t ask I offer. If they don’t ask me I’ll say to them um would you like to discuss, would you like feedback or would you like to debrief about um how it went?”

Aftercare becomes more intense and more involved if participants have a history of negative experience of abuse. As one participant described,

“And I’ve seen some people who have issues, who’ve been used really hard, had a fantastic time, they’ve really enjoyed it, and then they go home afterwards with little or no aftercare and they end up practically suicidal sometimes. Because they come down off of the adrenaline and the endorphins and they just crash and every single one of their issues builds up on top of them and it can really mess with them. Aftercare is just so important. I think there just aren’t words in the human language to express how important it is.”

In Goffmanian terms, aftercare can be related to the concept of face work. Goffman asserts that an individual experiences an emotional response to the face which contact with others allows him, and that he maintains face when an image is presented that is internally consistent. In other words, we attempt to maintain the face which we feel most appropriately defines who we believe we are. In an interaction, we do not want others to attribute a face to us that is inconsistent with our own belief or identity as this causes shame, anger, upset, and negative emotions. We want to leave an interaction knowing that we presented a certain face to others.

Relating this to aftercare, no one wants to leave an interaction in a negative light. Aftercare offers a unique opportunity to clear up any misunderstandings that may have arisen regarding the duration or intensity of the play. Perhaps one individual feels that their boundaries have been pushed or violated by something that occurred. Having the discussion immediately following play can help to resolve any issues that either party may have. Through open communication during aftercare, it may be possible to prevent framing experiences as harmful when perhaps there was no intention to harm. The ability to

communicate throughout a scene and to be an advocate for yourself and your partner is one way to ensure that play is enjoyable and that no harm is done.

Participants were able to identify several situations where communication may become difficult. One of the concerns expressed by several participants who were submissives was the ability of individuals to communicate and perform consent once they enter the “subspace.” Subspace is a mental state which a submissive partner may enter during play. Not all submissive report entering subspace and those that do each describe it differently.

One participant explained, “Subspace is a condition which the sub “zones out” and may become very lethargic due to a large dose of endorphins received by the play.” The idea of subspace as zoning out was a common one used to describe this state. A female submissive participant described subspace as:

“Um ok so head like the submissive head space it’s kind of like I retreat into this like bubble and like the lights dim. You know everything is just focused on him and me, there you know everything else just goes away. And I stop worrying about other people, you know? I kind of forget who I am in the moment. I just feel like the energy pass between him and me and um kind of ride the endorphins.”

Another participant defined subspace in more psychoanalytic terms, as a state of being that the submissive partner may reach during play where:

“the ego slips behind the id. It is like a meditative space. There are levels to it – the space where the sense of self is released to the dominant. There is no ego in subspace. No “I want, I feel”...the id can be because the ego and the superego have constructed what’s acceptable. So while the id is the master force, something is still aware. That is where the safe word comes in – and you can let go. You can also read each other.”

One participant described the subspace experience as being similar to that of out-of-body. She explained that, “Sub-space for me is when I reach that level of floating. I know I am still being dominated, but reach a level of almost an out of body experience. For example if I am being spanked, I still feel each impact, but can take more or faster or harder blows and still be above it.”

Another participant explained that for her, subspace is similar to what she has heard about near death experiences. She claimed to receive messages from her partner’s deceased mother, which she insisted her partner was able to confirm and verify. She expressed that “Sometimes sub-space is very, um, very eventful and very interesting and sometimes it’s just this like there isn’t any of that and it’s just this um I call it the white place. Um, it it’s like a...almost like a holding area to where there’s nothing, you know not having any visitations. It’s this quiet place and I can’t really talk when I’m there.”

Because of the nature of subspace, several participants noted that it can be difficult to advocate for oneself during this state. One participant explained that, “The sub MAY know what is going on, but not be totally cognizant of their own condition except the feelings of pleasure and warmth they currently feel due to the endorphins.” They may be so focused on the feelings that they are experiencing that they tend to be unaware of the events that are transpiring. Another participant felt that this space was a vulnerable one and that sometimes a submissive could lose the ability to recognize when they need to slow down or stop play. He explained that, “A Domme must be very careful when a sub goes into sub-space as some subs then cannot use their safeword.” This altered state of being may not be unlike being under the influence of a mind altering substance for some and this can be a difficult issue when it comes to consensual and responsible play.

Another issue that can arise with communication is the notion of blanket consent, situations where two individuals have made an agreement regarding the nature of their relationship. Roles have been defined, limits discussed, and consent granted and extended across all interactions. In these situations, consent has been given and there is no need to negotiate each interaction, rather, one individual has complete control over what happens to the other individual. This is common in master/slave relationships where the terms of the relationship are discussed and a contract is signed. In some of these relationships, individuals feel that they are able to express when they are uncomfortable with a certain act. One woman who only played with her partner of two years explained that,

“What I’ve told him is he gets to use me in any way he wants. And I really mean that. I really mean that if you know whatever lengths he wanted to go to he can. I think one of the reasons I give him that you know that much leeway that he gets to make you know really any decision is because I also know that he loves me, protects me, and will keep me you know ultimately safe.”

In this situation, the woman felt that she knew and trusted her partner well enough to give him complete control over what happened to her. She had been in a relationship with him for two years (her first BDSM relationship) and she had no reason not to trust him with her wellbeing.

Another male participant, a master with two slaves and a wife who is not involved in the lifestyle, discussed what ownership and slave training was like. He stated that all of his slaves know their roles, know the limitations of their slaveship and are very happy about the relationships that they have negotiated with one another. What was interesting was an informal discussion with one of the female slaves revealed that she was in fact not happy with the

situation, as her master had reported. In fact she seemed very conflicted about “sharing” her man and was looking for feedback regarding how to deal with jealousy. It made one wonder if there were other aspects of the slave contract she was also not happy about but did not necessarily feel that she could address with her master.

Another factor that can affect communication was the fear of disappointing a partner. This was a common theme amongst participants. Some individuals expressed that they were reluctant to use safewords because they wanted to please their partners and did not want to interrupt a scene. This led to them failing to speak up when play was unsatisfactory and in some cases, harmful. One participant explained that this was the case early on in her BDSM activities,

“Um one of my earliest partners, for some reason I had it in my head that um because he was my dominant and I was his submissive that when we would do S and M activity, um I had to take it even if I didn’t like it. I thought that that was my duty as a submissive. Now he never said that to me. He never... he didn’t put that thought in my head. It was already there from the fiction that I had read and from listening to other you know misguided people talk. Um I’m and so one day when we were playing, we were having a series of bad scenes because I wasn’t enjoying it. And then one day like it got so bad that I sort of like spaced out and quit responding because I was in so much pain from what he was doing. And we were at the dungeon and he called over one of the dungeon monitors and he said hey help me come and get her untied and uncuffed. And um he said what happened? And I’m like I couldn’t take anymore. I had to I just I just kind of spaced out because I couldn’t take the pain anymore. He’s like why didn’t you use your safe word? And I said cause I’m I thought I was supposed to take it because you wanted me to. He’s like he looked at me with this incredulous look on his

face. He didn't say this but it was almost like he was saying you idiot. Um and he's like I want you to enjoy yourself. If you're not enjoying yourself let's find something else to do. And he said if I can't trust you to use your safe word, I'm not playing with you. Cause I'm not willing to experience the guilt of that feeling right now. You know? If I can't trust you to use your safe word then I can't I can't play with you. And that was sort of my 'ah ha moment'."

Another female participant explained,

"And as a submissive, especially as someone who is service oriented, one of the things that is very challenging is that we want to please so much, is that we will disregard our own boundaries and give more than is healthy for us to give. And I don't think that's only submissives and service-oriented people, I think there are a lot of people in the world, and a lot of women in particular who do that."

Other participants felt able to safeword when they needed to, although they were concerned about disappointing partners as well. For example, one woman stated,

"I mean there's always the fact that I don't want to disappoint him. But it's not a debilitating thing. Not to where I'm really screwed up as a result of feeling that way. Um you know there so there have been times when I've said you know I'm sorry I can't take anymore and I'm really sorry. But usually when that happens we are pushing the limits."

Although disappointing a partner was a common reason to not speak up during play, most participants indicated that they felt comfortable enough to do so when it was necessary, although many indicated that if playing with strangers this could be a dangerous situation. Strangers may not have the knowledge of a partner necessary to read the body or non-verbal

signs that play is unsatisfying or unenjoyable. Trust and communication is not yet developed between two individuals who do not know each other and this may make speaking up more difficult in these situations.

Another issue with communication that was identified by one male participant was that sometimes, during a scene or during play, it can be unattractive or unsexy to ask for permission for everything. He explained:

“That’s not sexy, in terms of what we do, it’s not fun to ask permission to do everything. And you know, in just speaking from a love, well, not a love, a sex standpoint, in BDSM, the analogy would be to a sexual situation, “Can I touch your nipple now? Can I squeeze your breasts now? Can I stick my hand down your pants now? Can I put my hand under your underwear right now? Can I touch your clitoris right now? Now can I put my finger inside of you?” You know, it gets a little bit nuts. But that’s in essence what this consent culture is trying to advocate.”

Illuminating the Sightlines: Responsibility

In the theater, the sightlines represent the area of the stage that everyone can see (Lathan, 1996). The entire stage, or the community as a whole, must use this ability to see as a way to protect one another. This is central to performing consent, the notion of responsibility. Not only do individuals have a responsibility to protect themselves, they also have a responsibility to protect others. One participant explained that there are some situations where even if consent is given, there may be a need to step back and evaluate whether or not the consequences of the actions will be beneficial. She cited several examples: extreme torture, amputation, incest. She stated that even in these situations, a person can be “100% knowledgeable and give verbal consent” but may not fully appreciate or understand the ramifications of their actions. Therefore,

she expressed that simply because something is consensual does not always mean that it is appropriate or not harmful. For her, it was important that even if one party gives consent, the other party has enough foresight to think beyond the situation and to recognize their own responsibility to say no.

Participants have a responsibility to themselves and to each other in performing consent. One of the “grayer” areas regarding consent was the notion of pushing limits. All participants agreed that sometimes pushing limits is acceptable during play. Participants expressed that they had both hard and soft limits, and while hard limits are non-negotiable, soft limits are often fair game for exploration. Due to the edgework qualities involved in BDSM, it is sometimes preferable to attempt to push a partner to or slightly past their limits. For those who are performing the action, they have the responsibility to make sure that they respect the boundaries in place even when attempting to test the limits of their partners. They are charged with the safety of their partner and must take this responsibility and accountability seriously, or face negative consequences should the interaction go badly.

One participant explained that if you know your partner, have negotiated previously, and have precautions in place, then pushing boundaries can be a good thing and can liven the experience with suspense. He stated:

“Um, so, it might mean that I tie her up, I blindfold her, and she doesn’t know what’s going to happen next. Her ability to object is basically that which we’ve agreed upon in previous negotiation and discussions. And there are things that I know she likes and doesn’t like, and sometime I’ll push that boundary a little bit. Um, usually I’ll push it on an occasion where she hasn’t experienced something, so she just thinks she doesn’t like it.”

The participant who was a professional dominatrix felt that playing too close to what a client negotiated took away from her art. She felt the need to improvise and be creative:

“But you know I’m always gonna throw in something there. I’m not one of those kind of people I don’t wanna go with a script. Because it seems like it’s all you know organized. And I don’t like organized things. You know we’re gonna do some of that stuff you know it sounds good but you know there’s gonna always be something I gotta throw that wow in there. That’s for me. And then that person’s like God where’d that come from? Don’t know. Just came off the top of my head.”

In this case, she felt that part of her responsibility as a dominatrix was to take people to places where they did not expect to go; to provide an experience beyond what they had envisioned or fantasized.

Responsibility also includes the person being acted upon, who must speak up if they feel they are not enjoying play or are uncomfortable or unhappy with the performance. A male participant explained that when limits are pushed, there are two choices: “Things come up and you go along with them. You can either say no or you go along with it.” He believed that the onus was on the individual to stand up for oneself if limits were being pushed as only this individual knows what is what is not okay.

One participant explained that sometimes it can be difficult to process emotions during a scene, and that at times she can feel as things may have gone too far, “Sometimes it’s a matter of holding off on safewording for too long, sometimes the very nature of a scene really jerks around my perceptions of what’s ok and what isn’t.” She reported that during a scene there can be very intense sensations that occur and for her, it was often difficult to process exactly what was going on at the moment. These sensations affect her level of responsibility for herself.

Most participants felt that pushing limits was generally a positive experience. One male submissive explained, “I give my Domme enough leeway to be creative, and expand limits. I have grown to enjoy some BDSM activities that I did not realize I would like through the freedom I give my Dommies.” For him, the ability to push the limits of experience allowed for exploration and discovery. Another participant stated, “I think there is validity in pushing someone’s boundaries a little bit. There are definitely lessons that can be learned from that.”

If a limit is pushed and it is not received positively, participants stressed the importance of addressing it. One submissive female, a relationship coach, explained, “And I come very much from a space of personal responsibility. If my boundary is violated the first time, then mistakes are made, you know? It’s very common for people to trip over a boundary and get upset because no one knew it was there. That’s often how we discover our boundary. When something all of a sudden happened, and now I’m really upset, wow, that’s why I say the first place to look is, “Did I have a boundary that I allowed to get crossed, or did I have a need that I didn’t stand up for?” This participant felt very strongly that it was up to the individual to take personal responsibility for what happened to them, “It happened, he did what he did, but if I can find where I can be responsible, like, “Oh, I didn’t realize that that was actually an issue for me, and if I did not communicate that in advance...so that we could both be responsible for that”. Lesson learned! Now that I know that’s a boundary line for me, then I can say we made a mistake, it’s nobody’s fault and now from here forward, I can be responsible for communicating that, and then, if he crosses it, we have a serious issue. Right? But a lot of times what happens is one of us is not standing up for

our needs or our boundaries, and then it's very easy to blame the other and no one gets anywhere in that.”

While pushing limits was understood as having positive aspects, all participants agreed that there is a fine line between pushing limits and boundary violations. This is where context is important. Certain factors can affect how this pushing is interpreted, such as the relationship to the play partner, level of trust in play partner, private or public scene, previous experience, and pre-scene negotiations and discussions.

One participant felt that the BDSM community can sometime place too much emphasis on responsibility and that ultimately the activities become less enjoyable and less fun. He further stated that:

“But there's a very big difference between someone who consenting to a scene and then made a mistake. Or a victim who's like, “Well, I didn't want him to do that, I didn't say he could do that, but I didn't say no either. He should have known I was not enjoying it”. There's a big push on the consent culture, where you have to consent to everything.”

In his opinion, the community has become too fixated on blame and protecting potential victims and has lost sight of the fun and spontaneous nature of BDSM interactions. He felt that differentiating consensual play from harmful abuse was confounded at times by many factors, one of which was the emphasis on what he termed “consent culture.”

Again, both parties are responsible for their respective performances, and if one party fails to communicate, safety can be compromised.

In the case where harm is done, the community has a responsibility to protect the individual who has suffered. Members of the kinky community can mimic the state, using laws

and mainstream cultural conventions to functionally exclude certain groups of people from parties or to monitor behavior and membership (Luminais, 2015).

From discussions with participants, it seems that there are two ways that harm can be dealt with – through institutionally sanctioned measures or through vigilante justice. Only several participants (n=3; all male) discussed taking any vigilante action when they learned of harm done. These individuals felt it is much better to simply step up and take control when you see activity that looks suspicious and felt that it was important to step in and stop scenes when it was apparent that the individual was not enjoying themselves or was being hurt or harmed. As one individual stated,

“And you can tell when they are having a good time. Why would you ever be part of something that wasn’t a good time? I was at a play party and a guy was beating this chick with a flogger with metal and she was crying and screaming and people were standing around and she was bleeding and she was screaming stop and I grabbed the guys hand and said what are you doing? He said she wanted to have the shit beat out of her. He actually went back and hit her again so I grabbed him by the hair and smashed his face. And this girl was crying and shaking and thanking me.”

Another male participant explained that his position of responsibility within the community gave him authority to step in and take matters into his own hands. He explained, “I am what’s called a senior dungeon monitor. Which means I have the authority to stop a scene dead now if I see something that is potentially dangerous. And I will step in on you. I mean in an extreme, a couple somebody two years ago the guy beat the woman into unconsciousness. Ok. And the way she was unconscious, her face was to the wall, and it wasn’t until someone walked on the other side of the (muffled) and yelled John

she's not breathing. You've got my attention. I'm not a doctor but I know enough about CPR and all that stuff. Ok and even alright he was yelling questions at me. Want more? Want more? Want more? She was unconscious. She couldn't answer. He just kept yelling. And was making so much noise that two or three of us really hit her on the way over there (muffled). And um I was the one who took the whip away from him, which he didn't appreciate. Specifically after I hit him with it. Which he also didn't appreciate. And the other two were taking him down had to call the ambulance. This is not the idea you want at a public event. Right. So on the very end of it he said you have no right to take my whip and hit me with it. Let me have it back. So I gave him back his whip. And I hit him with a right cross that knocked his ass down. And the owner of the dungeon said you are never allowed to be here again."

He went on to describe another time when he decided to handle predators on his own:

"Do you know what happened to that predator? Somebody at a play party walked up behind him with a Louisville slugger and whacked him on the side of the head and knocked him down. Who do you think that was? You got it. I made a trip to Rhode Island just to get him. He looked up and I said I am Y's friend, next time I'm not gonna be so nice. And I did it in a public place and within days he was on the shit list. He was Hester Prinn, and he was wearing an A. For what? A for asshole."

He explained that at an event, you are not going to call the police, but everyone there has a responsibility to protect each other: "You tear up two or three people I'll get you myself. Because that's how we protect each other. There is a thing called the black list down here at Crucible. And in this in this tri-state community. Once you're on it it's like being a child molester. You never get off."

The concept of a “blacklist” is one method of institutionally sanctioned justice that individuals can utilize to protect the community. Since the kinky community can only enforce adherence to the community standards through ostracism, an effective means of social control (Luminais, 2015), this method can be used as a sanction for transgressions.

Another method that was discussed was the use of review boards, however only one participant seemed cognizant of the existence of such a board. This participant explained that some communities have a committee of members that are in place to discuss matters of abuse when they arise, but that these committees are extremely ineffective. “It’s a lot of hearsay, and nothing really gets done.” It is unclear whether these committees have any real protective effect on the community as a whole.

None of the participants reported that they would involve the police to intervene or to assist them with BDSM related harms. The police have the very real power to strip people of their liberty and can cause social ruin and most community members felt that that they did an adequate job of protecting their own through self-policing and surveillance (Luminais, 2015).

All participants recognized the responsibility to educate regarding the potentials of abuse. The BDSM community is not without individuals who may take advantage of others and who are so focused on transgression and seeking pleasure that they do not respect the boundaries of others (see Chapter Five for a more detailed discussion). Individuals who have been abused must feel that they can come forward and report these stories to a community that will respond. While all participants agreed that victims should be protected, several discussed special situations in dealing with claims of abuse.

One male participant also wondered what the nature of relationships were in abusive interactions: “I sort of wonder about these situations that have been called out as abuse, at what

point, along the spectrum were they on the emotional intimacy, the physical intimacy, the I don't know you from a hole in the wall scale." In this sample, it appears that, consistent with research on victimization in the general population, most abuse occurred outside of the BDSM world and with people who were known to the abused party.

There was one male participant who felt that it was too easy to "pull the abuse card" in the BDSM community these days. He explained:

"And particularly because they're allowing anonymous accusations, I think that's extremely bad. We have, they have talked about the rape culture, we also have a victim's culture and we're starting to get to the place, and actually I've read something online about it today, but we're more interested in protecting the quote unquote victim, than we are on maintaining civil rights and you know, the right of someone to face their accuser, and to defend themselves. And I think that's a very, very dangerous place to go."

He further elaborated that: "I don't think there's enough done to make sure that the victim is not the person who's being accused. And if the person is being accused is turned into a victim, then they should be entitled to some justice. taking accusations at face value, especially when they're made anonymously, I think that's a really big problem. Because, I'm sorry, that's basically Soviet court time, we're going back to the Soviet Union, when you would be taken to court and you would be told, "You've been charged with submissive behavior toward the state"... Well, what have I done? "... We can't reveal that, but you've been charged and we're going to find you guilty"... Oh good, how do I defend myself to this?"..."You can't, you're done, you're screwed"..."

What was interesting about this participant was that he had a history of childhood sexual abuse but was very concerned about the accusation process and protecting individuals from false accusations. He was also very critical of victims that he did not feel actually made an effort to prevent the abuse, even going as far as to state: “But it would also be inherent in that some potential understanding and explanation to the person who calls themselves a victim, well did you say no? well...” While hinting that a victim may be responsible because they failed to protest borders on victim-blaming, the participant believed that all members of an interaction are to have equal protection while attempting to determine whether harm has occurred. In this case, protection for the accused is as important as protection for the accuser.

Being part of a community seemed to be one way that participants felt responsible for one another and this led to feeling protected. As one participant explained:

“I would say people who are part of a community, people who go to who already part of the public community go to events, special parties, I would say there’s probably a low rate of victimization. Because um because they’re exposed to, they they’ve heard of what a safe call is. They belong to um a submissive education group on Fet Life. They’ve read, you know they’ve read or been told um information on how to keep themselves safe. But I would say there’s kind of a low rate of victimization. For people who aren’t in the community. I would guess that it certainly happens, to various degrees. I think the incidence of people being like literally restrained against their will, not allowed to leave, and having um various sexual or masochistic things done to them, I think that probably doesn’t happen that much. I’m sure it does.”

The dialogues that the BDSM community encourages regarding consent, precautions, issues of consent, abuse, and preventing victimization are all ways in which the community attempts to be protective of its members. It is unclear whether formal attempts of the community to deal with transgressors are successful; however, vigilante justice and more covert means of rectifying claims of harmful behaviors were believed by participants to be useful in maintaining safety – or, to use the argot of the subculture, to keep things “safe, sane, and consensual.”

Many participants felt that being a part of the community and attending public events was a way to build ties with others and promote a sense of responsibility for one another. For some, the community offers a type of family where individuals protect one another. Belonging to and being active in these communities was one way to protect against negative experiences or harm, as there is a sense of accountability for oneself and others. As one participant expressed:

“Um I heard people talk about how the community the BDSM community was their family of choice. And it showed me how people even if they’re not related, they can love each other and have respect and loyalty to each other in a way that they will come together um in good times and in bad times.”

The community and the positive aspects of belonging is one reason that some participants felt that their BDSM play was not restricted to the bedroom, but was representative of their identity. As one male participant stated:

“Community is the key word. If I wanted, I could keep all of my activities to my bedroom and some do, but there’s something special about talking and spending time with people who share these interests. People in the community are willing to discuss the intricacies of safety philosophies and multi-partner dynamics, something most

people just won't get. Of course there's also the practical side. Flogging or fire play isn't something you should learn from a YouTube video. You need to be learning with someone who knows what's going on and can correct you before you hurt someone. There's also the aspect of finding play partners. Just because I have sexual partners who participate in BDSM doesn't mean I don't want to occasionally do a scene or two with someone else. There's so much to learn and experience out there. Ultimately though, it comes down to the fact that I fit in, feel comfortable and know that I have people to watch my back."

Participating in the community and attending public events was one more safety measure that individuals can take. Many participants felt that playing in public offered safeguards that are not available in private play:

"And I think that playing in a public space like the like a dungeon where there are other people around to listen for your safe word is really like the best idea. Especially when you're you know you're playing to somebody you don't know. Because anything could happen behind you know closed private doors, but when you're around other people who you know they're a part of the community. They know the code. They can look out for you. I think that's probably as good as you can do."

When it comes to having open and honest dialogues about issues of power differentials, consent, abuse, and harm, many felt that those in the BDSM community were more willing to do so than their vanilla counterparts. As one male participant stated: "Because this shit errs more to the vanilla world if anything I would argue that at least people within the BDSM world are articulating it and trying to do work with it. Rather than pretending that it doesn't exist."

Another female participant echoed these sentiments:

“And so I would argue that the BDSM world does a much better job of acknowledging and admitting ok there are power differentials. How are we gonna deal with that? How are we gonna play with that? And how are we going to explore it so we understand it better?”

Perhaps because of the fact that these individuals play on the edge, there is great care to ensure that those who play do so understanding the rules of the game and the risks that may be involved. The emphasis on the need to be informed, to play safely, and to have open and frank discussions regarding boundaries and violations are all aspects of the notion of responsibility espoused by the community.

Ghost lighting: Safety

When everyone has left the theater, a light is left on to softly illuminate the stage so that it is never completely dark (Lathan, 1996). This light is a measure of safety, preventing trips, falls, and accidents. Safety represents another important facet of performing consent. This is crucial to preventing ‘prop failure’, as Goffman (1959) termed it. All participants stressed that being safe was a responsibility that accompanied playing with anyone else. Once individuals consent to play, safety should be the central concern throughout the interaction. Precautions should always be taken in order to make sure that all play meets the safe, sane and consensual expectation.

For almost all play, participants agreed that a safeword system should be in place. This safeword system varied in complexity, from the usual traffic light system (green meaning go, yellow, slow down, and red meaning stop) to a ten-point scale. All systems allowed for either immediate cessation of activity or simply slowing things down. One woman described her system:

“It’s important to distinguish in what way safewords are used. I use two – one for “slow, caution, we may have an issue” and one for “STOP”. If they use the one for “STOP” the scene ends and we don’t play again that day, so they are cautious to use the right safe word.”

A male submissive confided that he had never had any negative experiences and he attribute this to pre-negotiations and the use of a safeword system. He explained the system that he used with his dominant:

“If something is beginning to stray, I use a safeword. We use a 3 color method of safewording. Green is all is okay, proceed; yellow means slow down, ask or check in or switch to another function, etc. red is stop, instantly all functions, the scene is over. I have never used the RED word, but have used the Yellow often. I feel some scenes for others go wrong because a safe word is not setup or understood. A safeword should end the scene at once.”

Other safety precautions that were mentioned were that of practical considerations. For example, if participants are playing with handcuffs, the key to those handcuffs and a spare set should be readily available. Those kinds of practical precautions can mean the difference between satisfying play and a disaster. At an event in Indiana, one master shared a story about some play that he had done with a submissive female at her apartment early on in his BDSM career. He had her bound and gagged and realized that he had left the flogger in his car out in the parking lot. He left her as she was and ran out to the car, but realized when he got out to the car that he did not have keys to her apartment door. He remembered that he felt terrified as he was not sure that he would be able to reenter the building and she was bound and gagged and could not move or scream for help. If she had any problems

(cutting off circulation, unpleasant sensations, fear, etc.) she would have been on her own with no one to assist her. Luckily, the doors to get back in were unlocked and he was able to return. But he learned a lot that day about basic safety and reported that if something like that were to happen today he would have handled it much differently.

Checking in with a partner throughout the scene, establishing means to slow down or end play through the use of a safeword system, and taking general safety precautions are all tools that are used to maintain the limits and boundaries of play. At one event, the researcher agreed to be suspended in a leather birdcage. The following is an excerpt from field notes:

Woody is an older man, in his seventies. He is wearing a black T-shirt and kilt. He looks like, and probably is, someone's grandfather. He asks if I want to try his leather birdcage. He explains that he made it himself and it is always the most popular feature at play parties due to the craftsmanship. He explains how it works, just step in, the restraints are tightened and the cage is lifted and you swing back and forth, above the ground by a few inches. I decide to do it. He asks if I have any medical conditions, and I say no. As he straps me in he asks how the straps feel, are they too tight, etc. When the cage is tightened he checks my circulation in my fingers. I am lifted off of the ground and begin to swing. He asks how I am doing and continues to check my circulation periodically.

This is an illustration of how safety is performed throughout play. He asks about any conditions that may affect satisfying play. He checks in throughout each stage of the process, asking how the participant is doing and how they are feeling. He checks the circulation to make sure that the restraints are not too tight. And after play is over, he asks how it was and how the participant feels.

In terms of performing consent, at every event that this researcher attended there were multiple resources, whether classes, workshops, or informal discussions regarding these concepts. In both informal discussions and interviews, all participants agreed that performing consent was integral to the practice of BDSM, and There seems to be a general consensus among participants regarding the meaning of consent and this was consistent across the sample; however, the nuances of consensual and non-consensual behavior seem to be a more abstract and nebulous concept. This is not to say that participants do not attempt to define it, understand it, and at times push it to the limits. All seemed very aware of the potential risks and downfalls of BDSM play and were open to discussions regarding these risks.

Ghost lighting: Protecting from the State and Agents of Control

Due to the deviant status of BDSM and some of the legal issues that can arise for participants, protecting each other from the “outside” world is one of the central concerns of the community. The concept of anonymity and discretion is one of the understood and revered values of the community. Therefore, community members know that it is forbidden to “out” anyone and this can result in excommunication. Identities are protected in several ways. Individuals do not have to show any kind of identification at these events or sign any waivers. Legal names were not required and stage names could be used if preferred. Additionally, precautions are taken to ensure that at public events, anonymity is protected. Consider the following excerpt from a field note of a weekend long event:

We all sat in the dungeon. We were about to hear the rules and regulations. A muscular man introduced himself. He looked like he could be a cop or in the military. His wife, a tall, thick blond woman stood next to him. He said that she was a lawyer and in the case that the police were to show up, she would act and

speak on behalf of everyone. She told us that as long as we were not completely naked and were not engaged in sex, there was nothing to worry about. Should the cops show up, we were to stay calm, stay where we were, and let her do the talking.

This self-policing is consistent with previous research on the BDSM community. Luminais (2015) asserted that characteristics that community spokespersons share with police are generally highlighted. In this case, the male was muscular, clean cut, and his demeanor was consistent with law enforcement. His wife was a lawyer, so she could potentially pass as being “one of them”. Her knowledge of the law was considered an attribute that could protect the community members from any action on the part of the state. As long as certain rules were followed, members could trust that they were in a safe environment where they could play without fear or repercussions.

While these members were enlisted to deal with outsiders, dungeon monitors were appointed to police the participants. Dungeon monitors are volunteers who have spent considerable amounts of time in the community and who are well known and trusted. Dungeon monitors are there to provide service style policing as well as law enforcement duties if need be. They walk throughout the dungeons and play spaces, looking for signs of distress or watching for any infractions. They are not supposed to drink alcohol or engage in scenes until their “shifts” are over. They remain in control and ready to provide assistance. These individuals are tasked with making sure that the values of safe, sane, and consensual are practiced and protected. At clubs or private events, leaders are expected to assume the responsibilities of moderating and ensuring that individuals abide by the codes of conduct within the community.

It is through micro and macro level actions and processes that the community acts in a protective manner. At the micro level, individuals engage freely in behaviors that are satisfying,

play within negotiated limits, communicate openly, take responsibility for themselves and for partners, and take safety precautions. At the macro level, the community as a whole is charged with protecting its members through education and policing individuals and events.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the protective nature of BDSM was highlighted. The entire BDSM interaction, from beginning negotiations to aftercare, can best be understood as a symbolic interactionist process of performing consent. This process is comprised of setting the stage; initial negotiations to build the “set” and determine what BDSM means to each participant and what is expected from the interaction. Limits and boundaries are set here. Sometimes actors may ad lib, or improvise, pushing limits of their partner. This can be enjoyable or can result in a prop failure, which leads to a black out – the stage becomes dark; and the experience is framed as unpleasant, negative, or harmful. Auditioning actors vie for parts in the interaction, acting freely and participating of their own volition. Delivering lines is the process of communicating needs to one another. Throughout the performance, communication shapes the BDSM scene. Aftercare is the denouement – the action is resolved, face work is completed, and the actors leave the stage with a framed experience. Illuminating the sightlines illustrates the need for individuals to be responsible for themselves and the community as a whole. Stage managers in the form of dungeon monitors supervise public events. Informal sanctions are in place to punish transgressors who do not respect boundaries or limits of others. Lastly, ghost lighting refers to the need for safety measures to ensure satisfying play. Protection, both from one another and from the “outside” world, is central to the BDSM community and is an integral part of maintaining limits and boundaries.

CHAPTER FIVE: The BDSM COMMUNITY AS PREDATORY

Chapter Five describes the perils and dangers possible in the BDSM community and pinpoints how such harms may be diminished, including ways in which to minimize the likelihood of victimization. Like the protective qualities of the community, the predatory ones can also be understood through symbolic interaction, specifically a dramaturgical perspective. Certain factors can lead to a greater likelihood of harm occurring, debuting performances (naivety or inexperience), scripting victimization (relying on past scripts of traumas no matter what the performance), lacking a company (lack of support system), lacking stage presence (low self-esteem or self-worth), failing props or blacking out (mistakes that lead to negative consequences), reprising roles (relationships with blanket consent), and the casting couch (the nature of BDSM contributes to attracting predators). This chapter concludes with ways in which individuals may protect themselves from these dangers.

Debuting Performances

There are certain characteristics that can make a person more susceptible to harm. In the theater, a debuting performance is an actor's first time on the stage. No amount of rehearsal can prepare for opening night and that first performance. Stage fright is common, and may accompany many performances. The same is true for individuals who are entering the BDSM community for the first time and beginning to explore their predilections. Participants report feeling excited and uneasy, a sense of nervousness at finally finding likeminded individuals with whom to explore their interests. The qualities of these debut performers may serve to put them at risk.

Participants agreed that those individuals who are entering the community for the first time, or "newbies" as they refer to them, are particularly vulnerable to harm as they may possess

a certain naiveté. They are not yet familiar with the norms of the group and lack social support and ties to the community. Those who have not been around for very long are unfamiliar with the members of the community and are not able to make informed decisions regarding a person's character and integrity.

Being new holds a certain appeal and attractiveness. Upon entering the local communities, I was the center of much attention. The strange and unfamiliar face in the room. Many people went out of their way to introduce themselves, to ask me questions, and to encourage me to ask them questions. People showed me around, explained events, scenes, procedures, and demonstrated techniques. One male dominant offered to accompany me back to my hotel room to watch me and my partner "try things out" and to offer advice on techniques.

Newness facilitates possibilities. Possibilities to make new friendships, to begin new relationships, and to meet new play partners. It was easy to see how an individual coming into the community for the first time could be overwhelmed with the attention and kindness. Most of the individuals in these communities probably have the best of intentions and are genuinely being welcoming, however, being new can also attract those individuals who look to prey on individuals and to take advantage of them. All participants recognized that this is a possibility, just as it is a possibility in the vanilla world.

This appears to be true both in the "real" world and the online world. When it comes to online behavior, several participants mentioned the ways in which women are approached on the Fetlife website. One participant explained how the website, although its main purpose is social networking, is often used as pornography: "Just put a picture of a half-naked woman as your profile picture. Not you, but just any half naked woman. You'll get bombarded with messages and requests. Because a lot of the people on Fetlife just want to jerk off to people's pictures." In

fact, when I used the website to communicate with participants I was surprised at the number of messages and friend requests that I received in a short time (over 300 in a little over a year) from strangers with various motivations, ranging from requests to meet up in person, see more pictures, or chat online.

Being new in the real world presents a host of unique problems. Related to being new is a lack of experience. If an individual does not have much experience with BDSM, this can lead to a greater risk of negative experiences. These individuals do not know what to expect from the relationships that they may form, and may not fully understand the process of setting boundaries or limits, or how to handle a situation that may arise when limits are pushed. They may lack the skill level needed to play safely and responsibly and may be at risk not only to be harmed but to harm others. One woman expressed that she knew that many people enjoy having new and inexperienced partners: “And I know a lot of people, especially those into age play and consensual non-consent, they like the idea of having someone inexperienced, they like younger partners, they like virginal partners, those who haven’t done D/s [Dominance and submission] very much.” Inexperience offers a chance to mold partners, to teach and train them according to one’s own preference. Additionally, the emphasis that the community places on transgression may serve to confuse matters, especially for those who are new and do not yet know what their boundaries are.

In addition to being new and inexperienced, there are certain factors can increase the likelihood of negative experiences. These include scripting victimization (having a history of abuse), lacking a fan base (this applies both to others - an unsupportive family, no “outside” friends, as well as the self - a lack of personal boundaries or self-worth.)

Scripting Victimization: Emotional Memory

Of special importance is the notion of “scripting” – past scripts that individuals have employed will color the present interaction. Individuals who report having a history of victimization are more likely to rely on these scripts of victimization, which affect their ability to advocate for themselves and leads to negative and sometimes harmful BDSM play.

All performances rely on scripts that inform actors of every word, expression, movement, and emotion they are responsible for portraying. The concept of scripts have been applied to sexuality; they specify with whom people should have sex, when and where they should have sex, what they should do sexually, and why they should do sexual things (Laumann, Gagnon, & Michaels, 1994). This can also be applied to BDSM play – scripts guide interaction between participants.

Unlike stage scripts, the scripts of interaction, specifically sexual or sensual, are not hard and fast; instead they suggest broad plots and schemas that we may deviate from and there is no director to pull us into line if we stumble (Weinber & Newmahr, 2015). These scripts have three elements: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1987; Weinberg & Newmahr, 2015).

Additionally, the notion of emotional memory is when an actor calls upon previous personal experiences in order to perform a role convincingly. Shelley Winters, a noted and celebrated actress, was once quoted as saying that actors must “act with your scars.” Emotional memory requires that an actor recreate an event from the distant past in order to regenerate the ‘feelings’ experienced at that time and these feelings thus regenerated are then used in the current acting situation in order to fill out the role with ‘human depth and personal involvement’ (Benedetti, 1998).

Actors who have a history of victimization may rely on harmful previous scripts and emotional memory when engaging in BDSM and are among those who report the most negative experiences. Interestingly, only females with a history of abuse reported negative experiences. All of them mentioned the concept of “triggering” during consensual BDSM play. For participants who have a history of abuse the concept of a “trigger” is an important facet of interaction. A trigger is anything that brings the person back to the abuse they have suffered. It can be the result of a physical act or sensation or it can be an emotional response that arises to any part of an interaction. One female participant stated,

“Playing with me can be like playing in a minefield. I was emotionally, physically, and sexually abused as a child. I don’t always know what will trigger me and what won’t. A lot of my triggers are related to my kinks. I’ve listed my triggers in my limits but I just don’t know them all. If I have a panic attack, I will be alright if the scene stops and I get some aftercare. I won’t ever blame a partner for a panic attack.”

Most participants were able to identify known triggers. One woman described hers: “Blindfolds, bondage, dactylphilia, consensual non-consent, age play, all of those things are triggers of mine. Um, age play because I was a child when I was abused, tears and anxiety are you know, pretty self-explanatory, um some of them are more specific than others. For instance, when I was a teenager, for three years, from 12 to 15 I was being abused by one specific person. But every so often he would blindfold me and tie me up. And he would have other people pay to come in and use me. So I always associated being blindfolded with being used by somebody who I didn’t know and I didn’t know what they were going to do with me. And so being blindfolded, yeah, it absolutely terrifies me. But, if I am with somebody who I trust then being blindfolded

gives me, this, this thrill this rush. A little bit like having sex and somebody's downstairs and could come up at anytime or could hear you. It's a similar thrill but it's much more intense. Um, but you know sometimes, if the person I'm with doesn't touch me enough, doesn't talk to me enough then sometimes I'll forget who I'm with and I'll trigger. But as long as it's done well and it's handled properly it can be really, really thrilling. But you know, the same thing applies to just about all of the things that I listed earlier really."

All agreed that it is impossible to identify everything that could possibly remind them of the experience of being abused. The most challenging part of playing with a history of abuse seems to be dealing with these triggers as they arise. One woman described, "I was playing with a guy for the third or so time that day, and I got triggered and had a flashback to a very unpleasant experience with my rapist. I safeworded, and everyone was really wonderful and supportive, but there's not really a good fix for that". In this instance, she was able to recognize immediately that she had been triggered and used her safeword to end the scene.

Some participants, however, expressed that they do not always recognized that they have been triggered. The emotional processing of a trigger can sometimes be slow and can leave a participant in a bad space for quite a while. She explained,

"But usually if I don't know what the trigger is it's the first time something's triggered me. I'm completely oblivious to what it is, sometimes for several days. So it can be quite a ...it can be quite a difficult process and sometimes it doesn't all happen at once, it happens in little intervals and I don't realize I've triggered sometimes. And it gets very messy and very complicated." She went on to give an example: "Um, and the last guy I was with, I explained to him, I was like "look,

this means, you know, this means, go ahead, keep pushing, do your thing; you know, be the dom. But when I say this or when I do this, this essentially one of the warning signs. Um, and I think um, he just kind of ignored that part and assumed that I would just use a safeword. Trying to explain to him that sometimes it's a bit more complicated than that. Because sometimes I don't realize that I actually need to use a safeword. And sometimes, like I said, I don't know that I'm triggered. I'll start to trigger and I'll trigger very slowly or gently and I don't know that I'm triggering. And, you know, and trying to explain to him what some of the warning signs are, for instance. And he just didn't seem to understand it. Um, you know, needless to say, that was a relationship that ended quite quickly."

Another participant talked about how triggers can essentially "sneak up" during play, despite feeling that things are under control and enjoyable. She stated that, "Well, the last scene I had was very nice up until I was triggered. There was rope, some light impact play, some general lovely feeling of physical dominance, and then it all went to hell in a hand-basket." Her experience demonstrates the dynamic nature of interaction.

One participant described playing with partners as a kind of never-ending process where one is constantly learning and evolving through trial and error. She described the process as, "So every person I'm with, in every relationship, I seem to uncover triggers which I've had to overcome. But it seems to be coming easier now than it was a couple of years ago. And hopefully, you know, I'll continue to manage them better and better each time." She seemed hopeful that each experience brought more self-knowledge and that her ability to recognize her triggers and care for herself after each episode would improve over time.

She further explained how a history of abuse can make it difficult to stand up for one's self or express one's needs, despite consent and mutual satisfaction being a central tenant of BDSM. She stated:

“I know that BDSM is all about, you know, consent and everyone walking away from it happy. I know that logically and I know that about BDSM but I think it comes from the fact that I spent so much, so much of my formative years of sex, being in a position where I wasn't allowed to say no. Or where I was punished for saying no. And so I would sometimes feel that with the person I was with even if I didn't associate it with the abuse itself. I would feel bad about the prospect of saying no. But I wouldn't understand why. And even in people who have not been abused but who have just have low self-confidence for instance, or something like that. I do find it sometimes, I find that they feel bad for saying no to something or about standing up to something. Especially that they feel, that they feel submissive to. Because you feel like it's your purpose to serve them and if they say no to them or if they try to put any restrictions on them then they're doing something wrong. They're messing up.” Another submissive woman expressed that her history of abuse affected her ability to stand up for herself as well:” I think I mentioned earlier on, is sometimes I don't know that I'm triggering. And I'll feel unable to use a safeword because I feel like if I do so, I'm a failure.”

Despite the negative experiences that can arise for participants who have a history of abuse, several expressed that they purposefully play with triggers and use BDSM as a way to engage some of their darkest memories and experiences. One woman explained,

“You know it's um, it gives me...I say this sometimes to people because sometimes the people I talk to can't understand why it is that I essentially look to recreate some of my

worst experiences. And I explain to people that it's a way of distancing my current sensual activities from the things that were done to me in the past. And it gives me the opportunity to take this horrible thing, to isolate it, cut it away, and put it in a little black box and then to bring that box into my current life, and put it into something good and enjoy it. And it kind of destroys it ultimately. It's almost like digging out this horrible thing in my past and turning it into something positive that I can enjoy and explore with someone I love. It's, essentially, in my own mind at least, it's psychologically raping the rapist. It's about taking the power back. You know, and I speak to a lot of people in my, in my sort of position or with my sort of history, who to one extent or another say exactly the same thing.”

Others expressed that they find that their triggers co-mingle with sexual excitement. A young submissive woman explained, “I'm one of those weird people who a lot of my triggers are also my turn-ons but I have to be really secure with the person I'm with.” Playing with these triggers, then, seems to be an exciting and arousing experience that can lead to some very negative consequences.

For participants who have a history of abuse or trauma, this can complicate play. Individuals struggle with triggers, not knowing when one will occur, how long it will last, or how to stop it. As participants expressed, it is possible to identify some triggers, but managing and controlling for all of them is nearly impossible. These episodes can have devastating emotional consequences and make satisfying play difficult at times.

Lacking a company and stage presence

In the theatre, the company is the team that is crucial to the success of a performance. It includes all of the individuals who participate in stagecraft – writers, directors, musicians,

electricians, designers, managers, and cast members, all with a specific function to perform that is crucial to the performance. In BDSM, an actor without a company cannot be successful. A lack of a support system can lead to a person feeling isolated and lonely. Individuals who do not feel that they have anyone in the “outside” world may seek comfort in the community. These individuals may finally find the likeminded individuals that they have been searching for, however, if they eventually sour on the community or have negative experiences within the community, they may find that they are essentially “stuck, with no friends or family in the outside world who they can open up to. This may cause difficulty for individuals in that they feel that they are unable to seek and receive help when it is needed. One male participant felt that the community in general could be a dysfunctional place with individuals who lacked good judgment. He explained that: “That is another question that comes up in the community, how many people in this community are crazy or lacking in good judgment? I would say the ones that are crazy are probably no more prevalent than the rest of the world, but there are definitely ones that are lacking in good judgment, there may be borderline, or particularly borderline or narcissistic.” If an individual finds that the community is no better than the outside world, but has no one in the outside world to turn to, it may cause them to stay in situations that are unhealthy or harmful.

In order to be successful at their craft, actors need stage presence. This “wow” factor is the difference between an actor and a star. Stage presence is concerned with charisma, confidence, and the ability to mesmerize and command an audience. In BDSM, a lack of stage presence manifests as a lack of personal boundaries or self-worth. This may increase the chance of a negative experience. One female participant felt that many women who enter the community have low self-esteem and are looking for attention and affection. She stated that:

“I think the majority of women are and I’m just talking about my experience, what I’ve actually seen, the majority of women in the Chicago community who identify as sub, bottoms, and submissives, they are over-weight insecure desperate women who they so desperately have low self-esteem, uh and they seem to be willing to do anything to get the attention of a man. And that’s what bothers me.”

This participant felt that it was sad that some females do not enter the community for enjoyment and empowerment, but instead were passive actors who let individuals do things to them. She said:

“Um but it’s the lack of self-esteem, that really, these girls will let anybody do anything to them. And I you know I remember watching the scene in Chicago where this man was literally chasing this girl. She was running away from him. And you can tell she was not enjoying herself. And I just I wanted to cry. I was like that’s sad. You know and so it’s like and I’m overweight and I have some of these issues but it’d be a cold day in hell before I would accept some of the treatment that those girls do. And that seems to be the difference. It’s really interesting. Some of them and they’ll submit to just about anybody. You know these girls who walk around with their heads hanging and they’re constantly looking at the ground and they call everybody daddy or everybody sir. I think that those people have some deep psychological issues that that they need to deal with.”

Another female participant felt that it comes down to self-worth and how people think they deserve to be treated. She explained that,

“I think it a lot of it comes down to like what do you think you deserve? And these people think that they can’t do any better that they don’t deserve anything better. Um

and I think people are reluctant to talk about it. They're reluctant to admit it. Um but I also think that you know and I really I never wanna blame the victim. However I also want to say some of these people who have these bad experiences over and over again, you need to be choosier, more choosey about who you play with.”

Another female participant spoke of the importance of agency, and distinguishing between what women want to be done to them and what they tolerate or come to expect to be done to them as a result of past experiences. She said that women need to become empowered in order to “help them differentiate between I want to have this done because it turns me on and I want to have this done because it's been done to me my whole life and that's all I know.”

One participant was a nineteen-year-old young woman who came from a very strict Muslim family that she felt was too controlling. She developed a sort of double life, creating an account on Fetlife and hooking up with locals in the area for play. “If you want to hear about abuse, I am the person you want to talk to,” was the first thing she said during our phone conversation. She reported that she had been physically and verbally abused by several older female doms in the area, and all in the span of several months. What became apparent after talking to her and looking through her public online profile was that she wanted to escape her family and her life. She would meet individuals in the scene, usually older females, who would take her under their wing. There was little to no courting period. This young woman jumped right in, and as a result ended up feeling used, abused, and broken after these relationships would end quickly and badly. In an open letter to her abusers that she posted online, she wrote:

You lured me into your Realm with promises of support, help, friendship, freedom, and promises to help me escape the abuse I had become far too accustomed to. I leapt at the offers without looking for any red flags, or listening to anyone who tried to warn me of

potential dangers. "Blindly", "deafly", I stumbled into your Realm, I believed your lies, I fell for your deceptions. You used my "blindness" and "deafness" to your advantage, as well as my newness and lack of experience, and my prior abuse, to help you prey upon me.

This is an example of where youth, newness, naiveté, inexperience and a lack of boundaries led to instances of what this young woman claimed were abuse and harm.

Additionally, lack of personal boundaries and self-worth affects the ability to communicate ones needs and wants. Many participants cited the inability to communicate as one of the reasons for experiencing harm. "I feel people are victimized by lack of communication between players." Some individuals cannot be their own advocates.

Failing Props and Blacking Out

On the stage, several things can happen that can ruin even the most well-rehearsed performance. Accidents or malfunctions can occur, actors can get injured, stage props can fail to work, and the result is a black out, or a sudden darkening of the stage – the performance ends in an unintended and sometimes disastrous manner.

In the BDSM world, prop failures that occur can be intentional or unintentional and take the form of harm. Intentional harm can include the overstepping of negotiated boundaries, or some type of verbal, physical or emotional assault, and is a conscious effort to make another person feel badly. Harm can also be a result of inexperience or technical malfunctions. Accidents can happen, and some BDSM play is riskier than others. One participant claimed that,

“Yeah, for all of these things, there’s in general there’s a better way to do them than others. Because there’s no safe. There’s just no safe, sorry. It’s a nice picture, but it doesn’t exist, so as long, especially when you’re in somebody’s mind, especially when

you're doing mental play, if you're doing anything like humiliation or it doesn't look like its physically risky, but you are in somebody's brain. Who knows what you're gonna trigger and what's gonna come out of there. It could be something they forgot they left there, so who knows? I do believe that, yeah, breath play is risky, when you get to the point of unconsciousness. When you get to the point of whether it's a blood choke or whether it's actual breath restriction, air restriction. Any time you get to the point of someone blacking out, you never know how they're going to come back from that. I just...it makes me nervous.”

Only a small percentage of participants reported having had a negative experience, and for most of these participants, these experiences were minor.

One female participant explained that in the beginning of her exploration with BDSM, her and her partner's inexperience were to blame. She reported that when she was a teenager she had a rape fantasy and that now, in her twenties and exploring BDSM with her boyfriend, they had decided to attempt to recreate it. She explained, “I would call it a scene, although we didn't really know what it was. Like we acted out the rape fantasy although we didn't know about things like aftercare and things like negotiation. And so um like afterwards I was like kinda shook (sic) up by it and so um after that then we kind of like had to learn like how to do it right.” Her feelings after the scene were negative and over time her and her partner learned the correct ways in which to play with these powerful emotions.

Another female participant shared that she had a negative experience when she felt that she was not listened to by a friend who was also involved in the BDSM lifestyle. She discussed a situation where she wanted to stay at a play partner's house for an evening as she had a conference in his area early in the morning.

“So I asked him if I could stay with him, and he said “Fine”, but I was very clear, “we’re not playing...this is not a scene, this is not fun, this is a favor, as a friend, that you’re doing for me, are we clear?” “Yes, yes, absolutely”. As it turns out, the first night that I showed up, he opened the door to, I knocked on the door, the door opens...ok...I walk in, and all of a sudden, there’s a man behind me, in a cape, with an arm around my through, like he’s going to take me hostage. And I freaked out!! I freaked out and screamed at him, “What part of THIS IS JUST SLEEPING, do you not get?” I was so mad. And he was not, he was not a natural, he was not an inherently dominant person, in my opinion he was someone trying to figure out whether he was, whether he wasn’t, how he could be, he was kind of searching around, and I think he felt he had something to prove, cause what the hell was he doing? Totally. Totally non-consensual.”

Luckily for her, she was able to verbalize her feelings and her anger and the situation did not escalate.

Another participant, a male dominant, discussed a time when he accidentally caused some physical harm to a play partner. He had begun to play with a female and was whipping her. He claimed that she was unresponsive to his whipping and he thought that he must not be doing it hard enough. He increased the intensity of the whipping and eventually called the scene off because he found her reaction unsatisfying. It was then that he noticed that she was bleeding and had seven large gashes where the skin had broken. He explained:

“So I cleaned her up, I think I used alcohol on her first, and then I put the Bacitracin on her. Um, and but she was fine with it, and I was like, “I’m really sorry”. She said, “No it was really fine, it was ok”. I was, that was a learning opportunity for me, in terms of

really knowing how far this whip can go. I'm not sure there's any way I could have known that other than doing that or seeing someone else break the skin. That's the first time that I have, that's I've gone too far. Fortunately the woman I was doing it with, it was essentially consensual. She was saying it's ok to hit me harder, so it was consensual in that sense. I don't think she would have said go ahead and break my skin, and if she asked, I would have said, "No, I don't think I want to do that". But this is a case where good intentions, complete consent, but yet accidents happen. And fortunately we were both adult about it."

Through this experience he learned the importance not only of keeping himself in check during play but of checking in with his partner and physically checking the skin to make sure that he was not inflicting unwanted injury. Another participant, the female dominatrix, also detailed the one time a scene went off the rails and she inflicted injury: "Only once, and only a little too far - when I drew blood unintentionally while giving a beating. The sub was fine with it, the scene went on - and it wasn't the blood that shocked me, but the fact that I didn't intend to beat that hard, but it happened anyway."

Another female participant reported that she had experienced unwanted touching after giving consent to play with rope. She explained,

"I went to a play party. And there was a switch girl who wanted to do a rope uh rope corselet on me. And first of all she was upset that I wouldn't take my shirt off. Um because I didn't know these people and I wasn't comfortable and I'm like well if you wanna practice your rope that's cool. Because you know I'm not in any danger. Like whatever but what she had done she started playing with my breasts. And I'm like that's not ok. Like, that's not consensual."

Several participants detailed the negative side of playing with endorphins by describing what is commonly termed “subdrop”. This is when a submissive/bottom person feels depleted, emotionally or physically after a scene. This can leave a person feeling badly for hours or days.

One female explained:

“Um I have had I experienced a bottom drop. Which um I don’t know if you’ve heard of it, it like happens like a day or two after a scene. And so and I couldn’t figure out...it’s like why do I feel like crap? I just was just so down and sad and I was like on the floor in my living room bundled up in a blanket. And I just really needed my boyfriend and of course he was at work. And so I just it was like totally miserable. I was like why can’t he come here? So that that was my uh one experience uh with um sub-drop. It was terrible. But I haven’t really had it since.”

Another participant shared that she is still trying to find ways to cope with subdrop, “But it’s the sub-drop that I hate. And that’s something that that I don’t I still don’t quite know how to deal with that. I need lots of chocolate but that’s not a solution.”

One woman described a scene that she had watched which she felt was very negative:

“I actually saw a scene once where it was two trans guys. It just this scene was so disturbing to me, it’s the only scene I’ve ever left. They were punching each other and stapling each other with staple guns. And it was so violent and it was so angry and they really seemed to hate each other. I mean it just, you know like most of the scenes I even when somebody’s getting beaten there’s like some kind of love between the two people and this was so like self-loathing in the extreme and I had to leave.”

Whether or not they reported a negative experience, almost all participants knew people who had one or had heard stories about negative experiences, ranging from partners pushing them too far to minor injuries to sexual assault to death.

One participant explained that he had heard of people feeling like scenes had gone too far that have resulted in minor injuries. “I have known some subs who did feel that way. For example, excessive bruising or bleeding. Normally it occurred because of a misunderstanding during pre-scene negotiations.”

Another participant discussed a female friend who had a long history of negative experiences. She claimed that her female friend was indiscriminate in who she played with and this had resulted in many harmful situations. She explained:

“But from her you know even before that I heard about the stories where you know pretty much you know she had to go to the hospital because she had a torn rectum. Um men that treated her just really badly emotionally and mentally. Um you know in the lifestyle. And you know you see stuff um online and you know in Fet Life and just hear about people’s stories there. So I have heard you know of the horror stories and I feel like I’m really lucky.”

Another participant discussed one of her friends who had a bad experience at a play party: “She was telling me she went to a party, and she was playing with this mistress that she had played with many times. And she was doing something, and not particularly well, and this other dom came over, a guy, and the mistress invited the guy to start playing with her. That was non-consent, that mistress screwed up because she didn’t ask consent to bring somebody into the scene. Now, in her mind, the relationship dynamic may have allowed that, but in my friend’s mind, it didn’t. And it was the

disconnect there that I told her, you need to talk to her about that, make sure that doesn't happen again. But then, she left, the mistress left, and left this guy on with her. And the guy then started doing things that went beyond, pulling down her pants, I believe he ended up playing with her sexually, stuff she wasn't particularly ok with. And certainly nothing she consented to, but once you're in the context of a scene, I've heard a lot of submissives say, "I can't say no once I'm in the scene"."

One participant felt that the pressure to perform for others that is inherent in public events can lead to a de-emphasis on safety and precautions. "I have seen some injuries," he explained. "People play stupid. At play parties a lot of the time it is someone who has three years' experience and they have got someone in this portable rig. Because it is not about safety it is about an act." His opinion was that now it is more about the spectacle and there is little concern over actual skill level. Another participant felt that no matter what the skill level of the players, accidents were still a legitimate concern. She explained that,

"The problem that I see is that people, everyone can make mistakes. I read wonderful article about a mistake that the author made. She was doing a suspension, a sort of flying suspension with someone at an event, and something must of gotten rigged wrong, and her submissive fell down...from midair, on the stage. And she, it was this really wonderful post about, you know what, no matter how much you educate yourself, no matter how many books you read, no matter how much hands-on life rope experience you have, whatever it is, things can still go wrong. And you know, it takes work on both people's sides to forgive themselves for that. I've heard people doing, even really stupid riggings, like a closed collar on someone's neck, hands are bound so they can't take their collar off, and then you tie their collar up to something above that

is rigid, tie them off to a rigging point, well, what happens if their knees give out? And you're not there fast enough? It's like how stupid!"

A participant who is a master and a dungeon monitor explained that everyone is susceptible to mistakes. "I say chances are you have a pretty good idea of what you're doing. I assume you do know what you're doing but I'm gonna watch anyway. You have three groups of people. In the A group I expect fuck ups. In the C group I don't. In the B group it all depends on how you roll the dice. So experienced people make mistakes, I make mistakes."

Other participants felt that mistakes are common when inexperienced people fail to learn the skills needed for good and safe play. One female explained:

"No, it's somebody who, for instance, people who watch "The Secretary" and think that spanking your girlfriend until she walks away covered in bruises is the way to do it. You'd have to hit somebody bloody hard, you know, most people anyways, you have to hit them bloody hard to have them walk away with those sort of marks just from a spanking. And they don't understand how to do it and how to do it safely. And they don't understand how to build up to it. They don't understand what the dynamic has to be. All they know is what they've seen in an isolated incident. And it's not malice, it's just that they haven't had enough experience with it yet. You know? I get that everybody has to start somewhere but generally speaking the good ones, in my opinion, start off with, okay, I want to know more. Where do I, how do I go about learning more? You know, they seek out an experienced submissive who knows what they're doing. They don't go for the first person who will just say "yes sir" and go with it. You know? It's not malice, it's just ignorance, but again, it tends to be about fifty-fifty mix. You know, people who know what they're doing and people who don't."

Another participant felt that BDSM in general could be dangerous psychological territory. She claimed that it could be easy to have negative experiences if you did not take precautions, especially for submissive individuals. She reported that “Submissive to me is all headspace and that’s very dangerous territory. And I just don’t submit to anybody. Um I bottom to several people but I actually haven’t been in a in a real relationship where I felt like I’ve been a submissive I’ve always been a bottom. Because I haven’t met somebody where I feel psychologically safe with them to do that.”

All in all, everyone has heard of negative experiences. Most people have had very minor experiences, with few exceptions.

Reprising Roles: The Master/Slave Dynamic and Blanket Consent

Some actors have reprising roles, meaning they are in repeated performances. They may have one role that they star in for every production of a play. In BDSM, the master-slave dynamic, where one person is owned by the other (“collared”) and there is an agreement between the two on the dynamics of the relationship, is similar to the reprisal of roles.

Take the following excerpt from a field note of the researcher’s encounter with one such couple:

“We are at the GLLA event in Indianapolis. We are sitting in a room waiting for a panel to begin on rough play. Everyone is seated, about twenty people. I notice that across from me is a bigger middle aged man, looking gruff and wearing leather. He has a young girl on a collar and leash. She is sitting in a heap by his feet. Her head rests on his black leather boot. She looks lethargic, detached, and her eyes look vacant to me. She is skinny and looks somewhat unhealthy. It makes my stomach turn. I recognize that this is me imposing my

feelings and beliefs on the situation. I try to remember the feminist literature on being owned and how sometimes it is a choice a woman makes, and she is liberated through slavery. But I keep thinking of the Story of O and her eventual destruction. The Nine Inch Nails song, "Happiness in Slavery," runs through my head as I sit and try not to be obvious in my staring. She looks like a victim. Why does she look like a victim to me? Is she a victim? This is the girl I want to talk to, but unfortunately she is not the one who would talk to me. I would have to go through her master, and he would likely police her responses by insisting to be present. It makes me wonder about how consensual these situations are. R explains that many people she knows have very loving blanket consent master and slave relationships because there is a mutual respect between the two. I can understand that. But these two don't seem like equals to me. The power differential bothers me. But BDSM is about power differentials...although in order for it to be respectful, I think the person had to have relinquished the power. What if they never had any to begin with? Is that still consensual?"

This situation brought to mind Goffman's (1979) discussion of the non-verbal actions involved in doing gender and his argument that these actions serve to reinforce the stereotype that men are superior to women. In the example described above, the young woman sits passively at the master's feet and rests her head against his boot the same way in which a dog rests with its owner. The master sits proudly, holding onto the leash and displaying her as if she is an object. And maybe she is.

Several participants expressed that these master-slave relationships, if developed properly and responsibly between two people, could be very satisfying and healthy. A good master must

accept full responsibility for his slaves and their wellbeing and must not be afraid of the power that their role can bring. As one master explained: “Because there are people who are just you know being responsible for other people scares ‘em to death. If that’s the case, you’re not a master.”

And slaves must also understand that they also have great responsibility in the relationship. As one participant stated:

“A slave has no limits, no safewords, nothing like that. But ultimately the slave has the control because the slave can choose to say, no I want to step out of this dynamic and if necessary I’ll walk away from the relationship for it. A slave has the ultimate power to walk away. But beyond that it all comes down to what their master decides to do with them. While a good relationship like that – the reason that they don’t have safewords and limits is because they don’t need them. Because the master understands exactly why the limits would be there if they were there.”

Another participant stressed the consensual nature of healthy master/slave relationships:

“But I do know people in those sort of relationships and they seem to be perfectly happy with it and they understand that the slave can walk away at any time. And if the master takes too many liberties with the slave that will eventually happen. Now, I think it’s a bit of a grey area and again we’re never going to get to a point where everybody agrees on it, but again, my view is that if everybody, if everybody is happy, then, then carry on.”

A master explained the responsibility that he has in looking out for his slaves:

“Slavery is freedom. Which mean their whole existence is focused on being in service to me. And my responsibility is to look out for them. Not like Marlon Brando in the

Godfather, but there are certain things that they do by contract that are required for them to keep their focus and balance.”

Despite the consensual nature of the relationship, the idea of the blanket consent seemed like it could have some complications. The slave’s ability to speak up and to challenge aspects of the contract, and what happens if they do so, remains unclear. Additionally, the master who participated in this study reported that he would bring his slaves to several events where he would let others play with them. It is not clear that what, if any negotiations are done. He stated:

“We have this event here. Four of five masters will bring their slaves with them.

Whoever loses ok loses. Then he’s out of the game. Whoever wins the pot gets the pick of which slaves he’s won. And look ok I know Naomi really likes a spanking. I’ve never spanked her but I’ve watched her. Will I spank her? Hell yes.”

In relationships where one individual owns another, consent can become a bit murkier, at least to the outsider looking in. Reading some of this master’s slave’s writings, it became clear to me that there were aspects of the relationship that she was not happy with but I am not sure that she communicated this to her master. Again, in these relationships, it is not clear to what extent slaves feel that they can advocate for themselves, but it is probably dependent on several factors, such as the nature of the relationship and the individual characteristics of the person.

Becoming a slave and allowing someone ownership over you is not something to be taken lightly. One man in the Indianapolis area was notorious for being a predatory master. He had a website that advertised that he accepted “wayward slaves”, or slaves that felt they were being mistreated or abused. He owned his own home, where he would take individuals in to live with him in slave relationships 24/7. One of the acquaintances that I made in the

area was feeling lost in her own relationship and moved in with this individual, despite the horror stories that circulated and warnings from others in the community. Her friends expressed to me that he had brainwashed her. After several months she left his home and returned to her community. She has never disclosed what occurred while she was in this home, but issued a statement to the local community simply stating that it “did not work out.” She has since cut ties with that master and anyone associated with him. Her on and off again dom and now fiancé informed me that the master was a predator that took advantage of her fragile state; however, she has never confirmed nor denied this.

One male who frequented professional dominatrices explained that there were several times when he felt “thrown” into situations and just had to go with the flow. He described an incident that occurred with his mistress where she called him over to her home. When he arrived he found a naked male and she ordered him to perform oral sex on this strange man. This participant stated that they had agreed to certain terms in their relationship and that this act in itself was not a boundary violation, but he was not in the mood to perform this act and really did not want to do so. He did not feel as if he has the right to deny her and so he engaged in oral sex with the man, but did not feel “into it”. He also described another incident with the same mistress where he was called to her home and found that there were several other dominant woman with submissives. The dominant woman ordered the submissive to have sex with one another, and he felt very conflicted as he had just begun to date a woman in his “other” life. He felt very badly about engaging in sex with these people but did not feel as if he had the option of saying no based on their blanket consent and previously negotiated relationship parameters.

The Casting Couch: Attracting Predators

“Is my cock big enough?
Is my brain small enough?
For you to make me a star.
Give me a toot, I’ll sell you my soul.
Pull my strings and I’ll go far.”
- “Pull My Strings, The Dead Kennedys

The “casting couch” is a well-known term in the entertainment industry. This is a term that refers to actors being cast in roles as a result of doing sexual favors for directors or producers who can make casting decisions. It is about individuals who have power preying on weaker ones in order to exploit them.

The BDSM world, with its emphasis on consent and safety, is not free of individuals who prey upon weak individuals or who seek to do harm. There are individuals who wish to act out cruel and violent fantasies and for them, the BDSM community may offer a pool where they may find compliant victims.

Alternatively, it may not be a conscious search to do harm but rather the discourse of transcendence and transformation found in BDSM that leads to dangerous practice. Foucault asserted that erotic ordeals could enable a human being to grasp creatively, in a “moment of truth”, its singular daimon and thus transform fate and history (Miller, 1993).

One participant felt that BDSM actually offers more chances for predatory behavior and she stated that, “Um, there are creeps out there, and my belief is that we may have a slightly higher percentage of creepy people than the regular population.” Another female thought that it was probably more accurate to say that there is a mix of types of people:

“In my experience, it’s a fifty-fifty mix to different degrees. That’s not to say that all the people out there are pedophiles and abusers. But, I kind of have two categories. There’s the good side and there’s the bad side. The good side are people who know what they’re

doing and they know what they want. It could be hardcore, kinky 24 lifestyle or it could just be a bit of kinky sex. But either way, if they know what they want and they are happy to go out there and look for that – great, fair enough, you know, good luck to them, let them carry on. The negative side are those who, well obviously there’s those like the abusers and those who are looking to take advantage but it’s also a lot of people who just don’t know what they’re doing.”

One male participant knew of at least one predator who was currently active in the community and surmised that there are probably others: “I do know of at least one guy, actually I should say there’s a few I think are dangerous in the community right now.”

Another participant described why he thought that the BDSM community was a place that attracted predators:

“Because as a community, we’re very accepting of other people, and whatever their little bit of chosen weirdness is. Um, that acceptance can be misviewed (sic) by somebody who’s a predator, as accepting them as a predator. And I try to make it very, very clear that I don’t accept that. I have somebody that I was very, not that I was very close to, but somebody that I was fairly close to, I’d done some work for them, he was a big player in the scene several years ago, and he was accused rape, he was accused of non-consensual violations, of abusing young girls, and there was this incredible blowup and tirade against this guy. And I was really upset and concerned about what the truth was. Because there was a lot of shit come flying in both directions. I talked with him, I talked with other friends who knew him, some of the circumstances, and somebody just raised this anonymous group brought this up again, you know brought his name up. Somebody I know just did a little tirade on him. Well, he’s unrepentant.”

One participant discussed why he believed that someone he knew of was labelled a predator: “You hear these stories about oh he his thing is he likes to hear he likes the way women cry. He likes to make women safe word. And it’s like that’s not a nice person.”

One female participant explained that in her opinion, predators looked for young, vulnerable females who are not secure within themselves:

“Here are some of these really young girls, and a lot of them are really cute, they’re overweight. They have low self-esteem. They might have daddy issues or whatever. And this scummy fat greasy fuck that they hang out with. I mean really. You know it’s like I wonder about these men. Um and many of whom are predators and I just you know I recently went to another state, this guy was opening a club and it became really clear to me right away that he’s really bought the community. He has started his own club and he lets people come and they pay if they can and they don’t have to if they don’t have any money. And so it’s attracting a lot of young kids. And then I see him he’s in his mid to late 40s, he’s a fucking predator. You know? He’s hitting on these girls who are 21. And he really and I do I think that a lot of these men are predators. And so I think that I always tend to like focus on the girls, and think about all of the damage that’s been done to them. But then I’m like wait a minute they’re getting re-victimized over and over again. Um but these men they know they are fucking predators. And they know the signs. And so I think that the BDSM world is a perfect environment for them. Because they can just come and get these girls. Literally and pick em up.”

All participants acknowledged that predators exist among the community, but few had any direct experience with one. It is interesting to note that when this researcher first created an

email account (which contained a picture of myself) in order to communicate regarding the study, I received over one hundred messages from strange men that ranged from explicitly sexual solicitations (the majority of messages) to requests to meet up for coffee to “talk” (not about the study). Many sent sexually explicit messages or requested photos of myself. So for all of the discussion of the importance of getting to know individuals, playing with people you know are safe, etc. there are many men who do not seem to be following those guidelines, but are instead looking for sex and play. Whether they have intentions to harm or are just looking for sex remains unclear.

Performing Success: Preventing Harm

As stated previously, when it comes to a successful performance or preventing harm, negotiations are key. As one male participant expressed: “I recommend pre-scene negotiations. Also the usual cautions.... never meet someone alone or not in public. Have a friend to phone when the meeting is over, etc.”

Additionally, all participants stated that playing only with people you know and trust is important. One woman, who had a history of childhood abuse, discussed the trust that she placed in her current partner. She explained that:

“I trust M implicitly with my life and you know he owns me. And part of all of that is the fact that he has my best interests at heart. You know he’s my protector. He is my daddy. He is my protector. He’s going to keep me safe.”

In terms of getting to know one another, one participant stressed the importance of using the community, both on and offline, as a resource:

“So, let’s see if I were out and I met someone I was interested in playing with, and I’m new and I don’t know anything about this person? One, seriously community is so

important, community is so very important, that's one of the reasons I really like FetLife, because there are groups for pretty much whatever city you're in. and you can pop into a group...what I would do, I would stalk someone on their page. I literally do...I go on a say, "Where have they commented? Where have they posted? Who are their friends?" I'm gonna go look at their friends, I'm gonna look at what their friends say, I'm gonna look at all the, anything they've commented on, I'm gonna see what can I glean about this person from that? But it's hard, let's say they don't have a FetLife profile and you don't know anything about them...I would say great, go to, spend some time doing some public events. Go to a public play event, you don't have to play there, but go with them. Because it's an opportunity to see, not only how they behavior with you, but also how they behave with other people. You kinda wanna get a sense for who they are. Are they respectful of the people around them? If they're not, I might wanna know that."

The female dominatrix explained that in her line of work, getting to talk to someone before meeting is always an expectation for her:

"You know they wanna do all the yahoo chats and all the emails. You gotta try to talk to this person on the phone. I mean hear the person's voice. A lot of times I will sit up there and email someone back and forth and I'm only gonna do it so many times. And I'm gonna say call me. And sometimes that person will not call me. Then you know what? Don't even bother to email me anything else. Because we do not need to spend all this time communicating online. For what I don't know."

Another female participant explained that by dating online it gives her a chance to get to know someone, whereas in the real world it is a bit more rushed:

“And I find that dating online initially is actually a lot easier because it gives me a chance to talk to somebody and establish how understanding and how compatible we are. And to be blunt, to weed out the ones who are genuine rapists, abusers, and pedophiles. Because sadly, if you wait until you are actually being tied up by that person or you know, if you’ve actually met them at a munch and they know what you look like and where you live, it’s...I’d rather do it online. It’s much safer.”

This participant felt that through online communication you can get to know individuals over time and perhaps eliminate some of the danger of meeting face to face in the real world. While online communication, through sites like Fetlife, may be safer in that you have some degree of anonymity and can choose to ignore users, it is unclear if using online methods to solicit partners is any safer, and this should be explored in future research.

Several participants emphasized the importance of safecalling, which is letting someone know when you are meeting up with someone, whether to play or simply talk. Setting up times to call and check in with this designated person is one way to make sure that someone knows where you are and that someone will look for you if you fail to make the scheduled calls. As one participant explained:

“I encourage strongly the use of safe calling. Even if you’re not meeting to play even if you’re just meeting somebody that you only know from online. You’re just going to have a cup of coffee with them, get to know them, have a safe call, somebody that you can when you get there, before you go in. Somebody that you call you know 30 minutes into it and maybe another call arranged an hour or an hour and a half, and then after you’ve already left and gotten home. Um the way that works is if you call to check in

within five minutes of the appointment time they immediately call the cops and tell the cops where you were and who you were with.”

Another participant stated,

“If I’m going somewhere that I don’t know anybody, I’m probably going to let somebody know that I’m going. If I’m going to meet someone for the first time, I’m gonna let someone know, “yeah, I’m going out to coffee with this person, and that’s where I’ll be and I’ll ping you when I leave. Right? You’ll hear from me within two hours. But, I really recommend, I think with safety calls, people are like, “oh, that’s so paranoid”...No, it’s just being safe. Just being safe.”

One participant expressed the importance of making intentions known to the person you are meeting. She stated that you should be forthcoming about what will and will not happen when you meet. She explained:

“And especially if it’s at a public play event and even if you’re not gonna play, and I recommend being extremely clear about that intention before you go. You don’t just invite someone to a public play, “Hey, let’s go to this great place space where people are gonna be fucking each other all over the place”, without saying to them, is it ok if you spank me, or I have no expectation of being spanked, nor will I allow that. But you want to set, like my intentions, you and I go to this event, to know each other, to go with each other, to interact with other people, and we can say, “Oh, I like that. I like that. That makes me nervous. Why is that?” You can have really great conversations and get to know each other’s demeanors better.”

Other participants spoke of empowering themselves through communication:

“I have a problem with it, because I think there’s a little abdication of responsibility, if you don’t say no, I mean understand consent counts, but you still have the responsibility to say I don’t like that, please stop. You know, or can we do that another time? You can couch it in, if you’re not afraid of offending somebody, you can couch it in terms like, “I have to go to the bathroom now”. Something, whatever terms you want, I think this is something that some need education in, how to say no. What I tell newbies into the scene, and I’ve dealt with quite a few of them, is you need to make a list of what your limits are and you need to stick to them. You need to share them when you’re meeting somebody for the first time and say ok. “

Another participant also agreed that the best way to prevent victimization or abuse is to speak up. She explained:

“What I can speak to is, the kind of communication they might employ to empower their submissives, so that they can have that leeway and have it be effective.

“I think that the dominant can be responsible for really empowering their submissive, to be responsible for their safe word. And in that case, they can push freely knowing they have done everything they can to say no, I really want you to use the safe word. What comes up is, “Oh I will have failed if I safe word”. Or, “Oh, you’ll think less of me”. If the dominant were able to say no, I, you know, I will actually be so impressed if you safe word. I mean, Yea! If we got to that point and you actually stand up for yourself, then yea, I think that there’s a way it can be done responsibly.

Another female participant emphasized the need to trust your instinct regarding other people. She said that sometimes you have to pay attention to red flags and just go with your gut:

“I read the signs and I’m very you know and I notice the red flags. And if somebody says one of those off I’m done. Like I don’t understand these people who make excuses for bad behavior.”

“And there’s a guy – I won’t play with him. Every time I see him he comes up and hugs me oh and he’s always hitting on me. He sends me the sweetest messages. But something he said to me the very first time we talked and it was just like, “I would love to tear you up some day.” And I’m like you know that’s not ok. You’re never ever gonna do that. And so that’s like always in the back of my mind and I’m very polite to him. You know I’ll give him a hug and say hi. But uh and I’ll even tell him I’m like you play way too hard for me.”

One participant said that a red flag that some newcomers may not recognize is when someone is too flexible to change. He explained that, “Another red sign is when somebody or it’s is really too willing to change their list of fetishes for you.” Limits are not something that should change so easily, and someone who can so easily adapt may not make for a good partner as they may not fully respect other’s limits.

One participant, who is also a dungeon monitor responsible for making sure everyone is playing safely, detailed how if he has a feeling that something is not right about play, he does not hesitate to step in and make sure things are copasetic. He described this process:

“If I see a cold sweat all of the sudden in either party, I’m gonna take another look. Ok. If I see that master because or a top or whatever you wanna say, they’ve been playing for a while and they’re getting tired and he squeezes his eyes and that flogger moves forward, I’m gonna stop that puppy. Ok. And just now also on the other hand I know people tops and bottoms, when they. A man by the way physiologically we cannot

sneeze and keep our eyes open at the same time. It's physiologically impossible. Ok. You probably knew that already. If I see someone who is so either into the scene that they have a hard time standing straight and they're balance starts to be effected I will be over there. Okay. So I'm using my knowledge of how the body functions and my clinical radar. And uh am I play conscious? Yes. Have I been wrong? Yes. Have I apologized? Yes. I don't mind that. But again I tend to be over-cautious."

He went on to explain how he trains his own slaves to look out for predators: "Part of my training with every slave girl I've had and every slave I've trained for this is how to spot predators. And it's easy once you know how. Or what to look for." For him, part of his responsibilities as a master are to ensure that his slaves are able to protect themselves. He did not want to discuss what exactly you look for, but informal discussions with his slaves revealed that in reality, he forbids them to talk to any males and all communication must go through him, the master. This is one, albeit an extreme way to prevent victimization; however, it seems to be a bit restrictive and severe.

The professional dominatrix explained that individuals who want to rush into serious relationships are individuals who should be avoided. She stated that:

"I get emails all the time saying I wanna be your slave. That is not gonna happen. Because you have to be a sub before you can even be a slave. That takes time. They think slave oh that means I'm gonna come over there and just do whatever you tell me to do. I'm gonna be your slave. No you're not. Cause we don't even know each other."

She felt that any good submissive would understand that these complex relationships take time and anyone who tries to rush things is immediately suspect. She also warned against letting others take control of situations by calling the shots in term of where play occurs:

“You know I mean some women do go to the sub’s house or something like that. See now I would never do that because see now you’ve messed up the control factor. That’s not my space there. I don’t know what’s going on there. That’s just like even the one uh women that do sessions at hotels and motels. I don’t do that. Because that’s not my space. You know the maintenance man could come and knock on the door, or you know the desk clerk anybody. I mean you know that’s just not my space. So therefore I don’t feel comfortable in that space. I have to be the one that has the control. Of what’s going on and you know and that’s why I just can’t do those kinda things.”

Interestingly, participants who had a history of abuse also identified the need to protect themselves from themselves, recognizing that they can play a role in their own victimization if they are not careful :

“I don’t trust myself as a submissive completely because I have recently identified that I sometimes have a hard time using my safeword when I need to. And it’s something that I always warn my doms , something that I tread very carefully because I don’t want to put a dom in the position where he feels that he’s done something wrong to me.

Through what is essentially my own failure. I don’t hold it against myself, I know it’s not my fault but I know that I shouldn’t be playing with those sort of triggers if I can’t use my safeword. I take responsibility for that. And you know, it annoys me both as a sub and as a dommy you know, when you are with a submissive who is not willing to do the same, you know?”

Another participant mused that protecting the self can be the hardest part of BDSM. He expressed that, “In this game, this is where the struggle is. First you don’t have anybody. The second well we have to protect ourselves from ourselves. The question is how do you do that?”

One of the female participants felt that men needed to be held more accountable for the prevention of victimization. She felt that the onus is on the victim, but should be on the potential abuser:

“And I think that that men need to have the integrity and the self-respect to say this and to be turned off by that. You know to be turned off by somebody who’s willing to lay on the floor and let you kick them until they’re internally bleeding. You know? Or somebody who literally would walk around and lick your shoes the first night she meets you.”

Another female participant agreed that individuals needed to take more personal responsibility. She felt that too often, people will play with anyone who is willing. She felt that it was important to understand that some individuals are more vulnerable than others and need to be protected: “I think that people in the community need to say that person is mentally ill and I would be abusing them if I took advantage of that.”

And as always, education and knowledge are important to avoiding harm. Knowing the risks and informing your potential partners of these risks is part of playing responsibly. As one participant stated:

“I learned, and this is something I’m very big on, you need to understand what the risks are, you need to explain what the risks are, you need to take proper precautions so that the risks are elevated above a reasonable or acceptable level. So you do need to attend classes, or read up on these things to really understand the before you do some of the more edgier types of play.”

The predatory elements of the community discussed here are certainly not exclusive to the world of BDSM; however, due to the nature of the activities involved they certainly more openly

discussed. All participants recognized that there are predatory aspects and emphasized that the way to protect each other was through accountability to others and personal responsibility through safe, sane, and consensual play.

All participants reported having heard of “horror stories” – negative experiences that have happened within the community. Only several participants reported actually experiencing harm themselves; however, the fact that all had stories to share regarding others is an interesting finding which raises questions about the prevalence of harm beyond the scope of the present study.

Conclusion

Despite the great lengths that many participants go to in order to protect themselves and others and the discourse surrounding consent and education, the community is not without perils and dangers. The predatory aspects of BDSM can best be understood through symbolic interaction, specifically a dramaturgical perspective. Certain factors can lead to a greater likelihood of harm occurring, debuting performances (naivety or inexperience), scripting victimization (relying on past scripts of traumas no matter what the performance), lacking a company (lack of support system), lacking stage presence (low self-esteem or self-worth), failing props or blacking out (mistakes that lead to negative consequences), reprising roles (relationships with blanket consent), and the casting couch (the nature of BDSM contributes to attracting predators). There are precautions that can be taken to minimize the risks inherent in BDSM behaviors, but participants understand and acknowledge that harm occurs and is sometimes unavoidable.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Boundary Management in the BDSM Community

This dissertation represented an advancement in the understanding of the concept of harm and coercion for individuals who engage in sadomasochistic behaviors. The aims of this inquiry were to 1.) explore and gain insight into how attitudes, beliefs, and values shape Bondage/Discipline/Sadomasochism activities, 2.) understand how individuals create and maintain boundaries in order to engage in safe play. It sought to investigate the degree and consequences of unintended or non-negotiated harms, including physical, emotional, and sexual coercion. This qualitative study answered the central research question: *How do individuals negotiate and maintain boundaries in order to engage in mutually-satisfying BDSM play?* Additional questions which informed and shaped the answers to the central question are: How do participants understand the notion of “harm” and what precautions do they take to avoid it? What are the values and beliefs that shape these understandings? Additionally, this study advances the understanding of these behaviors by going beyond an exploration of the behaviors themselves and focusing on the concept of harm – the distinctions made by participants and the precautions taken to avoid it.

Through qualitative interviews, participant observations, and informal discussions, these questions were explored. The BDSM community is a difficult population to reach due to the nature of their activities and the social stigma that individuals may feel as many practitioners are not motivated to “come out” (Guidroz, 2008; Moser and Kleinpatz, 2006). Many participants were willing to have informal discussions or to be observed but recruiting interviewees proved to be more difficult as they are more invasive and more time-consuming. This resulted in a sample size which was small, which limits the generalizability of the findings. In order to account for the sample size and to increase the validity of the findings, the present study utilized data

triangulation. Interviews, observations, and informal discussions informed the analysis. While most studies of BDSM use surveys, this method was not appropriate for the research questions. The methods used to collect these data were an attempt to provide rich, descriptive accounts of the lived experiences of BDSM participants and their observable activity. The use of ethnography allowed for exploration of public play parties, educational events, and social functions held in local dungeons and related facilities. Attending these events and observing the associated sights, smells, and sounds allowed the researcher a glimpse into the BDSM lifestyle and activities that would have been impossible if more non-intrusive methods had been used. By talking to individuals, through both formal interviews and informal discussions, relationships and rapport was formed between the researcher and the participant, which provided hours of fruitful conversations regarding both general information and the concepts under study.

Employing the qualitative method of grounded theory, these data were analyzed in order to understand, organize, and conceptualize key concepts. Through the utilization of this method, what emerged were themes that were consistent with a dramaturgical symbolic interactionist theoretical framework. The entrance of individuals into this community, the learning of behaviors and values consistent with the identity of the community, and the measures which individuals employ to procure partners, protect themselves and each other, and engage in satisfying play is all performative in nature. Consensual and satisfying BDSM play is a process of “doing,” reminiscent of other behaviors such as gender and sex and learning through interactions (see Becker, 1953). Butler (1988) asserted that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts (p. 519)”. This is also true of identity in BDSM and the roles which individuals construct. These roles are the result of experimentation

and learning - of practice, play, and trial and error. Of watching and interacting with others, reading books and magazines, going to public events and educational workshops. While some participants may have a predilection towards being kinky or dominant or masochist that is present before they enter the community, it is through interactions with others that one fully comes to “be” that role. Much like the marijuana users in Becker’s (1953) exploration of becoming a user, one becomes a “kinkster”. Becker explained that the presence of a behavior is the result of a sequence of social experiences during which the person acquires a conception of the meaning of the behavior, and perceptions and judgments of objects and situations, all of which make the activity possible and desirable (p. 235). This seems to be the experience of those interviewed in the present study.

The values and beliefs are learned as one practices and becomes a part of the community. The present study revealed values and beliefs consistent with those found in previous studies of BDSM (see Fulkerson, 2010; Weinberg, 1996). The central concern of the community is consent. This is, according to participants, what separates pleasure from harm. Key elements of consent were awareness, informed agreement, free will, communication, responsibility, and safety. Consent is an active process throughout the stages of play. Community members stress that it is these values which make the community strong. Protective aspects of the community included methods in order to create and maintain boundaries and limits which allow them to engage in mutually satisfying play. In terms of its protective nature, the community’s espoused central concern is the education of its members regarding the notion of safe, sane, and consensual practice. It is through open dialogues regarding consent, issues with consent, managing scenes, negotiating aftercare, and discussing boundaries and pushing limits that the protective nature of the community is apparent. Participants recognize and embrace risks and

employ many methods in order to avoid harm. Consistent with other forms of behavior that have been labeled as deviant, strategies for risk reduction can be found in BDSM. Risk reduction is based on that idea that participants perceive and attempt to manage the risks that are inherent in these activities (see Cherbonneau & Copes, 2006; Cromwell & Olson, 2004; Jacobs, 1996, 2000; Wright & Decker, 1994, 1997 for a discussion of risk reduction and criminality).

What is interesting is that there exist, however, values and beliefs in the community that may actually be inconsistent with protecting its members and in fact may prevent those who experience harm from exercising their voices. There is an emphasis on secrecy and privacy and protection from disclosure to the outside world. Most participants reported that they were only “out” to close friends but that most people in their lives did not know about their involvement in BDSM. The fear of stigmatization is still strong, despite some claims from participants that BDSM is more accepted now than it was thirty years ago. Fear of disclosure is strong as it can result in the end of marriages, the loss of custody, interference from authorities, loss of employment, and ostracism from family and friends. This stigma can cause individuals to believe that they are constrained by the secrecy of their lifestyle. So in the case that something criminal occurs, there is a code of conduct that may prevent individuals from seeking help. Additionally, the members hold values and beliefs that create an atmosphere of distrust of the police and the law.

Several participants felt that not only the values of the community but also the nature of BDSM as a fringe or alternative sexuality also contributed to the dangers that members may face. BDSM is about walking the edge, with an emphasis on transgression and sexual explicitness served to attract some individuals who may be looking to take advantage of others in order to fulfill their own desires. Intimacy, risk, trust, authenticity, and transgression are all integral

components of these behaviors, which may attract individuals who are looking to push the boundaries of experience. As participants noted and consistent with previous research, authenticity is achieved through overcoming pain, fears, or exhaustion, much like mechanisms found in competitive sports (Lindemann, 2010; Waquant, 1995). The literature on pain within a competitive context explores strategies for enduring pain for the sake of victory (Newmar, 2010). This idea of using one's body to transcend or transgress and to engage in voluntary risk behaviors has been termed edgework (Lyng, 1990) and has recently merged with a cultural criminology framework, specifically a criminology of the skin which calls for a study of criminal pleasures and erotics (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995; Lyng, 2004). As Lyng (2004) asserts:

The transcendent practices involved in negotiating the edge are wholly embodied in nature and acquire their transcendent power in the context of a social and cultural reality that privileges the mind, discursive practices and rationality over the body, the nondiscursive and the nonrational. (p. 360).

The BDSM literature frames the term power exchange as the willing surrender of sensual control (Brame, Brame, & Jacobs, 1996). This sensual control is freely given, taken, borrowed, and returned depending on the desire of the players. This control allows for an intimate exchange without concern or anxiety. Intimate exchange of power need not include physical sexual contact. The search for authenticity, power differentials, and inherent trust and risk assumed in some BDSM may lead individuals to fall prey to predators who are searching for willing and compliant victims under the guise of BDSM. It may be that predatory individuals recognize that in a fringe population there are opportunities to exploit weaker people. Additionally, that potential victims would be more hesitant to involve police due to the fear of disclosure.

Negotiating Limits

Just like any other human interaction, BDSM involves a discovery of likes and dislikes, of desired and undesired contact. The process of coming to know what these limits are is similar

to other processes of “becoming” – to cite Becker’s (1953) example of users again, he asserted that there were three steps to becoming a user: 1) learning how to engage in the behavior; 2) learning to recognize the effects of the behavior and how to connect them with the behavior; 3) learning to enjoy the sensation that is perceived. The process of negotiating limits in BDSM is similar – first, individuals are introduced to BDSM and learn how to play. They learn techniques and skills and seek out others who may have similar skill sets or alternatively skill sets which they are interested in acquiring. They recognize the effects of the behaviors, that is, how the play makes them feel. Lastly, they must make sense of these sensations. Positive feelings will lead to positive experiences and framing of the interactions, and in turn, continued play. Negative experiences, or experiences which bring about negative sensations or feelings, cause individuals to feel discomfort, pain, and in some cases, damage or harm. When these are experienced, individuals have discovered a limit. According to participants, these become either “soft” or “hard” limits. Soft limits are those which are open to exploration but under careful monitoring or consideration. Hard limits are non-negotiable – these are behaviors in which individuals do not wish to engage and are not interested in exploring no matter what the circumstance.

Understanding Harm

Perception of experience is central to understanding how harm is constructed. Scarry (1985) argued that if pain does not feel aversive to the person who is experiencing it then nor psychologically or philosophically can it be defined as pain. The consensual nature of the sensations in the BDSM actions, the attraction to and desire of these behaviors, challenges static definitions of pain. Perhaps pain can be best described as the intended and desired outcome of the actions of another actor (Newmar, 2010). This notion was succinctly illustrated in the cult film *Roadhouse* by actor Patrick Swayze’s character Dalton, who says, “Pain don’t hurt.”

For these individuals, harm is not necessarily related to pain, but to the concept of intention and damage. This does not differ from traditional constructions of harm and ideas of what it means to be victimized. These individuals may play with power, push boundaries, and engage in behaviors that scar, tear, burn, electrify, or bleed, but they do not seek harm.

The precautions that these individuals take to avoid harm is dependent on their previous experiences, roles in the community, and their levels of perceived benefits and risks. As discussed earlier, individuals with a history of victimization are more likely to report negative experiences in BDSM play. These findings are consistent with the extant literature on victimization and revictimization. Exposure to abuse or violence as children significantly raises the risk for perpetration and victimization across a range of contexts (Grych & Swan, 2012; Ehrensaft, 2003; Finkelhor, Omrod, Turner, & Holt, 2009). Individuals who experience violence in one domain will typically experience it in another (Finkelhor, Turner, Omrod, Hamsby, 2009). In this sample, the individuals who reported a history of abuse all described the concept of “triggers” – events that occur that bring up memories of abuse and cause psychological distress. Consistent with the symbolic interactionist concept of cultural scripts, these individuals carry with them victim scripts from past experience which are then reused when they experience a situation that is similar to an abusive one from the past. Despite the knowledge that this is not necessarily abuse or revictimization, these individuals report that they cannot separate themselves from past trauma and it affects the current interaction, coloring or tainting the way in which it is framed. When playing, despite negotiations, consent and safety precautions, what seems to be a harmless word or action can turn what is seemingly enjoyable play into a traumatic thrust into past memories of abuse or victimization. Events are keyed and transformed and

become unpleasant or negative and may be framed as harmful. In these cases, past harm begets harm.

Implications

BDSM has long been framed as pathological or deviant behavior that is likely to stem from some sort of psychological distress or sexual dysfunction. The present study revealed that participants view themselves as authentic and sexually adventurous. Few reported any type of psychological problems. The majority of participants did not report a history of abuse or any victimization, which supports findings that suggest that BDSM is a sexual interest attractive to a minority and the activities are not a pathological symptom of past abuse or difficulty with “normal” sex (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Nordling et al., 2009; Richters et. al, 2008; Stiles, Clark, Hensley, 2007; Weinberg, 2006).

Additionally, in this sample it does not appear that BDSM participants are at more risk of victimization than the general population. BDSM participants do not report that they have been more likely than nonparticipants to have been the victims of sexual coercion in the past (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008) and this was also supported by the present findings. In the present sample, women were more frequently victims of sexual abuse or coercion and were more likely to report psychosocial distress, which is consistent with previous research on sexual coercion (de Visser, Smith, Rissel, Richters, & Grulich, 2003).

Thus it appears that while there are risks inherent in these behaviors, they are no more dangerous than the risks that “vanilla” individuals take in traditional sexual behavior. In fact, the BDSM community seems to have an open discourse regarding risk and danger, more so than the general population. Power differentials are identified, discussed, and “played” with in a

controlled environment. Participants manage risks as best they can and do not seek harm, only pleasurable sensations that may or may not include pain.

Future Directions

The present study represented an attempt to gain insight into the attitudes, beliefs, and values that shape Bondage/Discipline/Sadomasochism (BDSM) activities and how participants negotiate and maintain boundaries in order to engage in mutually satisfying BDSM activities. Additionally, this study explored the degree and consequences of unintended or non-negotiated harms. BDSM remains a fascinating topic that offers many avenues for further study as it involves sexual behavior that is readily observable (Moser and Kleinpatz, 2006).

Most BDSM research has relied on surveys. This study attempted to gain a more explanatory and descriptive analysis and so interviews and observations were employed to answer the research questions. There are caveats to the answers uncovered through these methods. For example, those individuals that volunteered to participate may be qualitatively different from those who did not, and this must also be considered when evaluating the findings. Several participants (n=2; both male) regaled the researcher with stories that were obviously fabricated. For example, one claimed to have been given to the Russian army at age two, where he was trained in dominance and submission and considered a master by age eight. While this report is interesting and says something about the participant, it also illustrates one of the issues with interview research in that participants may lie or exaggerate and therefore affect the nature of the findings.

It may be that individuals who do not wish to participate in academic studies have had negative experiences that they do not feel comfortable discussing or sharing. Therefore it is difficult to estimate how prevalent harm or victimization is within this community. Perhaps a

more accurate measure would be to attempt survey research, where the participants could retain more anonymity than with the methods used in the present research. While the methods utilized were an attempt to gain rich qualitative descriptive accounts, it may have limited the amount of information that may have been collected using a more anonymous method.

All participants were aware of the existence of the community and had some experience as a part of it, but they also reported to practice BDSM in private as well. While the present study was able to examine the beliefs and attitudes of a small sample of individuals, all observations took place at public events. Thus it was beyond the scope of the study to fully investigate the issues that may be inherent among private BDSM play. It may be that individuals who play in private have higher risks of harm or negative experience than those who do so in public.

Additionally, the present sample was almost exclusively heterosexual, with several female participants stating that they had bisexual tendencies. Examining concepts of boundaries and limits in homosexual relationships is an area that warrants investigation to see if there are any differences among those with varying sexual preferences. It may be that the homosexual experience with BDSM is different than the heterosexual one and these possible differences should be explored. Is there a double stigma for gay BDSM practitioners?

There are several interesting avenues for future study. Examining how the length of time in the community affects individual's definitions of harm as well as their experiences would be allow for a better understanding of the careers of BDSM practitioners. Kamel (1980) examined the careers of gay leathermen, focusing on the sequence of stages or steps among the path leading to new levels of involvement, and while this provided a rich descriptive account of the heterosexual experience it is unclear how these steps occur in heterosexual BDSM. The present

study was limited in asking about previous experiences; however, follow ups with individuals over time would allow for an exploration of the BDSM careers of participants. It may be especially fruitful to attempt to follow newcomers and document their experiences over time as they become acculturated as this would allow for examinations of the subcultural processes that shape and define experience.

Additionally, examining differences in online versus offline interactions within the BDSM community is an unexplored area. Given the number of participants who are active online, it would be interesting to learn more about individual's engagement in online activities and the effect that the online community has had on real life interactions. Specifically, online negotiations would be an interesting area of study – what are the experiences of participants who choose partners and negotiate scenes using online methods only? Is this a safer method or do these participants report more negative experiences?

Another area of potential study would be to examine whether there are regional differences in the BDSM community themselves. The present study was conducted in the Midwestern region of the United States, while most BDSM research has focused on San Francisco, California and New York, New York given their large BDSM communities. Therefore this represented an exploration of uncharted territory and there are many large communities in the Midwestern region that should be explored in future studies. Additionally, are there differences in how individuals experience potential stigma in these areas? Is BDSM generally more accepted in areas like San Francisco or New York, which are well known for their large alternative sexuality communities? A comparison of these regions may provide interesting data on how region affects different aspects of living a kinky lifestyle.

Comparisons of individuals who engage in public BDSM play with those who only frequent dominatrices in private settings would be of interest to researchers. Do the motivations for these types of BDSM play differ? Is it possible to develop some sort of typologies of public versus private BDSM practitioners?

Race of participants may be an interesting area to explore. One participant in the current study was African-American and the majority of participants at various events were Caucasian. When asked about the lack of diversity in this sample, the African-American participant stated that “they have their own websites.” Race and ethnic diversity is lacking in works on BDSM and an examination of issues related to this would allow for a more intersectional analysis (Guidroz, 2008).

The popularity of the *Fifty Shades* series has sparked some debate about BDSM versus abuse. The public reaction to the book was overwhelming - it is much like the human fascination with fire – since early primitive societies, humankind has remained fascinated with fire with its innate and immense power to destroy and create (Presdee, 2004). This attraction has been postulated to be ingrained deep in our collective unconscious – an evolutionary drive that society has tamed somewhat through its development. Yet still, despite best efforts to control, to domesticate, and to repress, nature has a way of imposing its will on human beings – the elements of fire, water and air still have the potential to create much destruction despite the best efforts of human beings. And in this destruction, there is something compelling – perhaps a flicker of recognition of something within ourselves that has been restrained and that we have been socialized to forget. It may be that the book is a reflection of subterranean values as Matza (1964) described. Matza argued that the “deviant” values of a subculture are necessarily distinct to that group, in fact, all individuals share those values. What separates the subculture from

conventional society is how often individuals allow these values to emerge and engage in actions that are consistent with them.

While there has been speculation regarding the effects of *Fifty Shades*, this is an area that may warrant study. It remains unclear how the popularity of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series will affect the BDSM community. How does the movement of an esoteric world into the limelight affect the community as a whole? Firstly, it would be interesting to see if in fact communities report more newcomers entering the scene and to determine their reasons for seeking out these activities. In the cases where individuals are seeking BDSM as a result of reading the series, asking about their perceptions of BDSM before joining a community, how their perceptions were accurate or inaccurate, and how the reality of BDSM measured up to their expectations would provide insight into how the world of fiction distorts or supports real life practice. Additionally, asking these newcomers about their experiences, especially first contacts with community members, would allow further support or disconfirmation of ideas regarding the community as being either protective or predatory.

Asking community members if and how *Fifty Shades* has changed the ways in which “vanilla” individuals relate to and interact with them would be a way to explore whether in fact the series has served to remove stigma from BDSM. The findings of the present study indicated that most participants are open with close friends or in some cases family regarding their practices. For those individuals, asking about their experiences after the books success would allow for understanding how *Fifty Shades* has affected stigma and stigma management. Weiss argues that current depictions of BDSM that “mainstream kink” signify a paradox: individuals are drawn to the exotic enough to peer in on deviance, and alternately co-opt what is disdained by turning sexually provocative or dangerous imagery into pabulum (Moser and Kleinpatz, 2006).

Her argument is that simply because BDSM is more visible does not mean that it is more accepted or understood. Asking practitioners about their experiences post *Fifty Shades* popularity would be an interesting way to explore this argument. If the popularity of the series continues or does have some impact, it may be that the stigma of BDSM involvement may be reduced. Conversely, it may result in a change of dynamics in the community. IT may cause the community to retreat more from public view as more “tourists” appear to encroach on their lifestyle. Continuing research is needed to explore how this community will change over time.

Studies of sexuality and sexual behavior have ignored BDSM almost completely and it is unclear why BDSM has not engendered more attention from researchers (Kleinpatz, 2006). Those extant studies have focused on BDSM as criminal or pathological, with the exception of research by several scholars (see Weinberg and Newmahr). It is imperative that researchers continue to explore these behaviors in order to enhance the understanding of the range of sexual behavior. Researchers should utilize methods beyond survey data in order to gain a more descriptive account of BDSM and the nature and scope of the phenomena.

Additionally, researchers should continue to attempt to examine the boundaries and limits involved in BDSM relationships, focusing on the specific dynamics and roles involved in these relationships. An understanding of the different *types* of intimate relationships and how harm may manifest itself within these relationships would serve to elucidate the inner workings of dynamics in “deviant” or non-traditional relationships. Victimization is underreported in general, and for those in fringe populations it is even more difficult to come forward to law enforcement.

As mentioned in chapter one, BDSM poses a unique situation for law enforcement. It is necessary to educate law enforcement about the ways in which victimization may be perpetrated in fringe communities and the unique problems posed by their deviant status. At all functions the

possibility of law enforcement showing up unexpectedly was discussed. Public events may be an opportunity for more clear discussions about the need to consider “scenes gone bad” as not necessarily part of risk aware consensual kink but as potential criminal events where law enforcement should be involved. The greater the understanding on the part of law enforcement of what BDSM is and what it entails, the less hesitation the community may feel in involving police when it is necessary, which would eliminate the need for vigilante justice. Additionally, potential predators may be less inclined to attempt to harm individuals if the community begins to emphasize the importance of police involvement in cases where it is appropriate. If law enforcement can begin to understand BDSM as a sexual preference and not a deviant marginalized community, it may be that victimization and harm can be decreased.

It is imperative to develop an understanding of those individuals who engage in non-traditional sexual relationships, and the communities that have emerged as a result of the stigmatization of these behaviors. There is a wide range of behaviors that are grouped together under the term BDSM and more studies are necessary to perhaps conceptualize it along a continuum, to recognize all of the “shades of grey” and to, if they are in fact common, begin to normalize these predilections.

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Script for Primary Investigator

Hello, my name is Karen Holt. I am a graduate student at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Part of getting my degree is a required research project which is called a dissertation. I am interested in sexuality and have decided to focus my dissertation research on BDSM, specifically because of the way in which the behaviors have been somewhat stigmatized by the larger society. I am here to learn more about the lifestyle and to attempt to explore the meanings, behaviors and attitudes.

I am trying to do interviews with people in the community. They are completely voluntary and I am not offering any incentives, but this would help to provide a better understanding of this type of behavior and hopefully clarify misconceptions about the lifestyle. Would you be interested in participating in a one to two hour interview?

(If no) Well, thank you for your time. If you know of anyone who you think would be interested, please let them know.

(If yes) Great! Let me give you my contact information and we can set up a time to talk.

Recruitment Script for Field Worker

I am helping out a friend who is a graduate student at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Part of getting her degree is a required research project which is called a dissertation. She has decided to focus her dissertation research on BDSM and the community specifically because of the way in which the behaviors have been somewhat stigmatized by the larger society. She would like to learn more about the lifestyle and to attempt to explore the meanings, behaviors and attitudes.

She would like to do interviews with people in the community. They are completely voluntary and she is not offering any incentives, but this would help to provide a better understanding of this type of behavior and hopefully clarify misconceptions about the lifestyle. Would you be interested in participating in a one to two hour interview?

(If no) Well, thank you for your time. If you know of anyone who you think would be interested, please let them know.

(If yes) Great! Let me give you her contact information and you can set up a time to talk.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

My name is Karen Holt and I am a student in the Criminal Justice department at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, which is part of The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), and Principal Investigator of this project, entitled “Negotiating Limits: Boundary Management in the BDSM Community.” This is a research study of Bondage/Discipline/Sadomasochism (BDSM) practices. The study is expected to explore how the boundaries of BDSM “play” are maintained or transgressed as well as generate insights into how attitudes, beliefs, and values shape BDSM behaviors. I am also interested in how participants construct intimacy, consent, risk, harm and coercion. I would like permission to interview you about your experiences.

This interview will take from one to two hours. I would like to audio-record this interview so I can record the details accurately. The recordings will only be heard by me and my advisors. All information gathered will be kept strictly confidential, and will be stored in a locked file cabinet, to which only I, and my advisor, will have access. At any time you can refuse to answer any questions or end this interview.

There are minimal risks involved in the study. There is a chance that you may become upset as a result of the disclosure of sensitive information. If you are concerned about your anonymity you may feel free to sign all documents using an “X” rather than your legal name. Being asked to recall past sexual experiences and situations where there may have been harm or coercion may cause some psychological distress and if you feel any negative emotion please contact me via the information on this form and I will provide a list of counselors in your area.

There are no monetary incentives for involvement in this study. The benefits will be to gain a better understanding of the BDSM subculture and your role within it and to assist me in the creation of a descriptive account of the negotiation of limits and control in BDSM activities. In turn, this may elucidate the reasons that these behaviors have traditionally been stigmatized and pathologized and perhaps help to gain more tolerance and acceptance by the larger society. This study will also allow for a fuller understanding of “normal” sexual behavior and identify the ways that social stigma affect individuals engaging in so-called “deviant” lifestyles. There will be approximately thirty participants taking part in this study.

I may publish results of the study, but names of people, or any identifying characteristics, will not be used in any of the publications. If you would like a copy of the study, you can access it online by going to <http://kholt-bdsm-study.blogspot.com/> in order to eventually download a publication. This website does not register email addresses or other identifying information. All data will be kept on a password protected computer in the investigator’s office and all hand written notes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. There will be no identifying information collected and no one will have access to any files other than the primary investigator and her advisor. After three years, all data will be destroyed (paper documents shredded and audio and digital files deleted).

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at 646- 464- 1904 or by email at kholt@jjay.cuny.edu, or my advisor Jock Young at 212-237-8999 or by email at jyoung@jjay.cuny.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you can contact Kay Powell, IRB

Administrator, The Graduate Center/City University of New York, (212) 817-7525,
kpowell@gc.cuny.edu.

Thank you for your participation in the study. I will give you a copy of this form to take with you.

I agree to have this interview audio-recorded please [circle one]:

Yes No

Participant's signature Date

Investigator's signature Date

APPENDIX C

INFORMATION PAGE

My name is Karen Holt and I am a student in the Criminal Justice department at John Jay College of Criminal Justice which is part of The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), and Principal Investigator of this project, entitled “Negotiating Limits: Boundary Management in the BDSM Community.” This is a research study of Bondage/Discipline/Sadomasochism (BDSM) practices. The study is expected to explore how the boundaries of BDSM “play” are maintained or transgressed as well as generate insights into how attitudes, beliefs, and values shape BDSM behaviors. I am also interested in how participants construct intimacy, consent, risk, harm and coercion. I would like to conduct participant observations at public BDSM events in the area. This will include me watching scenes that you engage in, with your permission and recording these manually using a pen and paper. At no time will any audio or video be used to observe your participation. You may ask me to cease the observation at any point in time, or additionally if you would prefer that certain activities not be recorded please let me know and I will cease recording.

There are no monetary incentives for involvement in this study. The benefits will be to gain a better understanding of the BDSM subculture and your role within it and to assist me in the creation of a descriptive account of the negotiation of limits and control in BDSM activities. In turn, this may elucidate the reasons that these behaviors have traditionally been stigmatized and pathologized and perhaps help to gain more tolerance and acceptance by the larger society. This study will also allow for a fuller understanding of “normal” sexual behavior and identify the ways that social stigma affect individuals engaging in so-called “deviant” lifestyles. There will be approximately thirty participants taking part in this study.

I may publish results of the study, but names of people, or any identifying characteristics, will not be used in any of the publications. If you would like a copy of the study, you can access it online by going to <http://kholt-bdsm-study.blogspot.com/> in order to eventually download a publication. This website does not register email addresses or other identifying information. All data will be kept on a password protected computer in the investigator’s office and all hand written notes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. There will be no identifying information collected and no one will have access to any files other than the primary investigator and her advisor. After three years, all data will be destroyed (paper documents shredded and audio and digital files deleted).

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at 646- 464- 1904 or by email at kholt@jjay.cuny.edu, or my advisor Jock Young at 212-237-8999 or by email at jyoung@jjay.cuny.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you can contact Kay Powell, IRB Administrator, The Graduate Center/City University of New York, (212) 817-7525, kpowell@gc.cuny.edu.

Thank you for your participation in the study. I will give you a copy of this form to take with you.

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I appreciate you taking the time to participate in this study. Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

I am just going to start off asking you some basic questions about yourself. If there are any questions that you don't want to answer, just let me know and we can skip them.

1. How long have you been practicing BDSM?
When did you first start?
What was your first BDSM activity like?
How did you first learn about it?
2. Can you describe how you got involved in the local scene?
3. Do many people in your life know about your participation?
Who are those people?
Why do they know?
Who wouldn't you tell?
How do people react when you tell them?
Do you keep this from your intimate partners outside of the scene?
4. Are you in a relationship?
Do they participate with you?
Do you only date people who are involved in BDSM?
Do you conceive of your BDSM relationships as different from your regular sexual relationships?
5. Can you explain your participation in the scene and what you enjoy?
What types of play have you participated in?
What is your favorite kind of play?
Is there anything that you think is too dangerous or too risky?
Do you usually stick with one role or do you switch?
Do you think dominants and submissives are distinct types?
Are there differences between the two?
Do you practice BDSM both in public at events and in private at home?
Does it differ depending on the setting?
How involved are you in BDSM online environments?
6. How are your scenes created?
Do you write your own?
Where do ideas come from?
Do you change them while you are doing them?
7. What feelings do you experience before a scene?

During?

After?

8. How do you make sure that the scene goes as planned? Precautions?
Have you ever felt like you or your partner lost control during a scene?
Have you ever felt like a scene went too far?
Have you ever known someone else who felt like a scene went too far?
How much leeway do doms' have during a scene?
Can you think of a time a scene went wrong? (not according to script, disappointing, scary, etc.)
How often have your scenes gone wrong?
In general do you think scenes go wrong because of the dom or the sub?
How often have you had to use your safe word?
How long does it take to stop when a safe word is used?
9. Can you describe the aftercare procedures?
What occurs right after a scene?
How do you and your partner interact?
How long does this last?
Can you describe the "sub space"?
Do you discuss the scene after it has ended?
Have you ever felt bad after a scene?
10. What was your last scene like?
What role did you play?
What activities did you participate in?
How did you feel afterward?
11. Do you have anything that you would like to add?

APPENDIX E

Observations

Anticipated Behaviors to be Observed

Spanking
Flogging
Whipping
Cutting
Piercing
Needle Play
Mummification
Verbal humiliation

CITI Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)

Graduate and Post Doctoral Responsible Conduct of Research Curriculum Completion Report Printed on 7/18/2011

Learner: Karen Pepper (username: karenpepper)
Institution: City University of New York (CUNY)
Contact Information 616 West Blooming Glen Drive
 Perkaise, PA 18944 USA
 Department: Psychology
 Phone: 215-313-4600
 Email: karenpepper218@hotmail.com

Graduate and Post Doctoral Responsible Conduct of Research:

Stage 1. Basic Course Passed on 12/16/10 (Ref # 5360031)

Required Modules	Date Completed	Score
Introduction to the Responsible Conduct of Research	12/16/10	no quiz
Research Misconduct 1-1215	12/16/10	5/5 (100%)
Case Study Plagiarism 1-1473	12/16/10	1/2 (50%)
Data Acquisition, Management, Sharing and Ownership 1-1308	12/16/10	5/5 (100%)
Publication Practices and Responsible Authorship 1-1380	12/16/10	3/5 (60%)
Case Study in Irresponsible Authorship Sherry's Secret (All Science)	12/16/10	1/1 (100%)
Peer Review 1-1368	12/16/10	5/5 (100%)
Mentor and Trainee Responsibilities 01234 1250	12/16/10	6/6 (100%)
Mentoring Case Study: The Business of Mentoring.	12/16/10	4/4 (100%)
Conflicts of Interest and Commitment 1-1622	12/16/10	3/6 (50%)
Collaborative Research 1-1450	12/16/10	6/6 (100%)
When Collaborators Become Competitors 1-1182	12/16/10	2/3 (67%)
The City University of New York (CUNY) Module	02/01/08	no quiz

For this Completion Report to be valid, the learner listed above must be affiliated with a CITI participating institution. Falsified information and unauthorized use of the CITI course site is unethical, and may be considered scientific misconduct by your institution.

Paul Braunschweiger Ph.D.
 Professor, University of Miami
 Director Office of Research Education
 CITI Course Coordinator

[Return](#)

APPENDIX F

TO: Ms. Karen Holt
Criminal Justice

FROM: Richard G. Schwartz, Ph.D.
Graduate Center IRB

SUBJECT: IRB Approval (Expedited Review)

STUDY: **11-08-183-0135 Negotiating Limits: Boundary Management in the BDSM Community**

DATE: September 12, 2011

The Graduate Center IRB has approved the above study involving humans as research subjects. This study was Approved - Expedited Category: 6 & 7 - based on 45CFR46.

IRB Number: 11-08-183-0135 This number is a Graduate Center IRB number that should be used on all consent forms and correspondence.

Approval Date: September 12, 2011

Expiration Date: September 11, 2012

THIS APPROVAL IS FOR A PERIOD OF ONE-YEAR OR LESS. YOU SHOULD RECEIVE A COURTESY RENEWAL NOTICE BEFORE THE EXPIRATION OF THIS PROJECT'S APPROVAL. HOWEVER, IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO INSURE THAT AN APPLICATION FOR CONTINUING REVIEW APPROVAL HAS BEEN SUBMITTED BEFORE THE EXPIRATION DATE NOTED ABOVE. IF YOU DO NOT RECEIVE APPROVAL BEFORE THE EXPIRATION DATE, ALL STUDY ACTIVITIES MUST STOP UNTIL YOU RECEIVE A NEW APPROVAL LETTER. THERE WILL BE NO EXCEPTIONS. IN ADDITION, YOU ARE REQUIRED TO SUBMIT A FINAL REPORT OF FINDINGS AT THE COMPLETION OF THE PROJECT.

Consent Form: All research subjects must use the approved and stamped consent form. You are responsible for maintaining signed consent forms for each research subject for a period of at least three years after study completion.

Mandatory Reporting to the IRB: The principal investigator must report, within five business days, any serious problem, adverse effect, or outcome that occurs with frequency or degree of severity greater than that anticipated. In addition, the principal investigator must report any event or series of events that prompt the temporary or permanent suspension of a research project involving human subjects or any deviations from the approved protocol.

Amendments/Modifications: All amendments/modifications of protocols involving human subjects must have prior IRB approval, except those involving the prevention of immediate harm to a subject. Amendments/modifications for the prevention of immediate harm to a subject must be reported within 24 hours to the IRB.

Stipulations:

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Kay Powell in the IRB Office at 212-817-7525.

Good luck on your project.

cc: Jock Young Ph.D.

Criminal Justice

Sign the Verification Statement below. Return the original signed copy of this memo to the IRB Office and retain a copy for your records. The IRB Office must receive a copy of the signed verification statement before research may begin.

Verification:

By signing below, I acknowledge that I have received this Approval and am aware of, and agree to abide by, all of its stipulations in order to maintain active approval status, including timely submission of continuing review applications and proposed protocol modifications, as well as prompt reporting of adverse events, serious unanticipated problems, and protocol deviations. I am aware that it is my responsibility to be knowledgeable of all federal, state and university regulations regarding human subjects research including CUNY's Federalwide Assurance (FWA) with the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Human Research Protections.

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

Signature of Faculty Advisor for Student Research

Date

CITI Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Human Research Curriculum Completion Report Printed on 3/18/2010

Learner: Jock Young (username: Jockyoung)
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Social and Behavioral Investigators:

Stage 1. Basic Course Passed on 03/18/10 (Ref # 4235508)

Required Modules	Date Completed	Score
The City University of New York (CUNY) Module	03/18/10	no quiz
Introduction	03/18/10	no quiz
Students in Research - SBR	03/18/10	9/10 (90%)
History and Ethical Principles - SBR	03/18/10	3/4 (75%)
Defining Research with Human Subjects - SBR	03/18/10	5/5 (100%)
The Regulations and The Social and Behavioral Sciences - SBR	03/18/10	4/5 (80%)
Assessing Risk in Social and Behavioral Sciences - SBR	03/18/10	5/5 (100%)
Informed Consent - SBR	03/18/10	5/5 (100%)
Privacy and Confidentiality - SBR	03/18/10	2/3 (67%)
Research with Prisoners - SBR	03/18/10	4/4 (100%)
Research with Children - SBR	03/18/10	2/4 (50%)
Research in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools - SBR	03/18/10	4/4 (100%)
International Research - SBR	03/18/10	3/3 (100%)
Internet Research - SBR	03/18/10	4/4 (100%)
Group Harms: Research With Culturally or Medically Vulnerable Groups	03/18/10	3/3 (100%)
HIPAA and Human Subjects Research	03/18/10	2/2 (100%)
Workers as Research Subjects-A Vulnerable Population	03/18/10	4/4 (100%)
Conflicts of Interest in Research Involving Human Subjects	03/18/10	1/2 (50%)

For this Completion Report to be valid, the learner listed above must be affiliated with a CITI participating institution. Falsified information and unauthorized use of the CITI course site is unethical, and may be considered scientific misconduct by your institution.

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