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# Is Sadomasochism a Uniquely Human Form of Sexuality?

Harold Herzog, *Animal Studies Repository*



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Hal Herzog, Ph.D., Animals and Us

# Is Sadomasochism a Uniquely Human Form of Sexuality?

Kinky sex is common in animals, but do they ever find pleasure in pain?

Posted Feb 25, 2015

Most people who keep up with this blog probably think of me as a researcher who studies human-animal relationships. But at Western Carolina University, I am known as “the guy who teaches the sex class.” Occasionally, my teaching and research interests intersect. For example, this post concerns the origins of the incest taboo; this one is on the frequency that rape results in pregnancy; and this post discusses whether Bill Clinton was responsible for the popularity of oral sex in America.

When the book *Fifty Shades of Grey* took over the best seller list, I started getting lots of questions from my students about sadomasochism, and bondage and domination. I am not an expert on the topic, but several of the students were. They organized an in-class panel to explain the psychology of BDSM to me and the rest of class. Their discussion of the joys of mixing pain and pleasure did not make me want to order a set of fur-lined handcuffs or a faux leather (vegan friendly) whip from Amazon. It did, however, get me thinking about the similarities and differences between human and animal sexuality, and specifically, are non-human animals interested in experiencing recreational pain?

## Kinky Animal Sex

My course includes a lecture on the evolution of sex. The take-home message is that there is hardly anything that is completely “unnatural” in the animal kingdom. Homosexuality, for example, has been documented in over 400 species. Among my favorite examples of kinky animal sex are cunnilingus in fruit bats and auto-fellatio (!) in walruses, masturbation in horses, transsexuality in fish, and necrophilia in frogs and spiders. And, of course, there is the unusual sexual anatomy of female spotted hyenas. Not only do they give birth through their penis, they also copulate through the opening in it.

## S and M: An Evolutionary Puzzle

From an evolutionary point of view, however, sexual attraction to pain would seem to be maladaptive. Pain is, by definition, aversive. It evolved as a signal to get our attention and keep us out of trouble. And the more agonizing the pain, the more your brain is bombarded with neuronal impulses that scream “Danger! Pay attention NOW!!”. Hence, sentient creatures should avoid pain-inducing stimuli and situations. Yet the sales of over 60 million copies of *Fifty Shades of Grey* are proof that many humans enjoy at least fantasizing about

Bondage/Domination/Sado-Masochism (BDSM). So, is there a non-human analog of finding sexual satisfaction in being whipped, poked with needles, or having hot wax dripped on your skin?

Well, animal sex can be rough. Bed bug males have a sword-like penis they stab through the abdominal wall of females and eject sperm directly into their blood streams. And one time, my wife and I watched, horrified, while three male ducks gang-raped a hapless female in a canal in Amsterdam.

But I could not come up with any animal parallels to *Fifty Shades of Grey*. So I asked the experts. I sent out queries via e-mail and Facebook to some of my animal behaviorist pals. In his response, Harry Greene, author of the wonderful book, *Tracks and Shadows: Field Biology as Art*, pointed out that some lizard sex is so violent the females bear the scars for weeks. John Placyk, a behavioral ecologist who raises ducks and chickens, said he had seen many instances of males intentionally hurting females during sex. Lani Lyman noted that very rough play in dogs, “is often followed by humping...”. Bear researcher Bob Jordan pointed out similarities between human B and D games and the ritualized dominance and submissive behaviors seen during animal play. And University of Tennessee ethologist Gordon Burghardt sent me to an article he had written about sexual play in spiders.

But while these examples bear superficial similarities to human S & M, they don’t strike me as really being the same phenomenon as Ana experiences in *Fifty Shades*. (One of my students lent me a copy. I lasted three chapters.) The ethologist and Psychology Today blogger Marc Bekoff is also skeptical that non-human animals engage in S & M. When I asked Marc if he knew of any examples in animals, he just said, “nope.” Which brings us to red hot chili peppers (the spice – not the band).

### **Hot Foods, Painful Sex, and the Masochism of Everyday Life**

University Pennsylvania psychologist Paul Rozin would probably agree that BDSM is restricted to our species. Rozin refers to inherently aversive activities that are transformed into forms of pleasure as “benign masochism.” He recently wrote “Benign masochism....requires some sort of “cognitive over-ride”, and should be distinctively human. There is no strong evidence for liking innately negative experiences in animals.”

Take, for example, the enjoyment of the burn of chili peppers. Rozin once tried to teach rats to like the taste of hot chilies. This task should be simple as rats, like humans, are omnivores, and learning plays a major role in the development their dietary preferences. Except when it comes to hot chilies. Rozin tried everything: exposing rats to hot peppers from infancy, gradually introducing chilies into the rat diets, pairing chilies with highly preferred foods, etc., etc. Finally, in desperation, he discovered a way to get rats to eat chili-laced foods -- destroy their taste receptors. He concluded that it is just about impossible to overcome a rat’s instinctive aversion to the taste of spicy hot foods.

Later, in a series of elegant studies, Rozin showed that, like rats, humans also find the taste of hot chilies innately aversive. However, over time, many people (including me) overcome their

instincts and come to enjoy the burn. Subsequently, Rozin and his colleagues listed dozens of examples of activities in which humans learn enjoy intrinsically negative experiences -- the terrifying thrill of a roller coaster ride, the peaty taste of scotch whiskey, watching movies that make you want to cry, listening to T-Bone Walker wail "Stormy Monday." Rozin refers to these experiences as "the masochism of everyday life." They are, essentially, cheap thrills that come from tricking your body into erroneously feeling that you are on the edge, that you are flirting with danger. In short, the rush that comes from of the burn of hot peppers in your mouth – or hot wax on your skin – emerges from an unconscious tango between mind and body.

### **Sadomasochism: A Uniquely Human Pleasure?**

In his book *Stumbling on Happiness*, Dan Gilbert wrote that every psychologist who puts pen to paper takes a vow to someday write a sentence that begins, "The human being is the only animal that..." Previously, I have claimed that we are the only animal to keep pets (here and here.) But I may need to add finds "pleasure in suffering" to my "the only animal that..." list.

I asked Julie Hecht, a dog researcher who writes the great blog *Dog Spies*, for an example of canine S and M. Julie was stumped, and she replied, "Maybe this is the area where humans are truly unique!"

I agree. I have hard time believing a dog or a chimpanzee would, like the fictional Ana, come to enjoy the sting of the whip.