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BDSM is the consensual exchange of power for pleasure. *BDSM* is an acronym made up of three term-sets: bondage and discipline (B&D), domination and submission (D/s), and sadomasochism (SM). As such, it is an umbrella term. *BDSM* refers to a variety of sexual interests and practices. Some practices are physical (e.g., spanking, flogging), some are psychological or affective (e.g., punishment scenarios, master/slave play, fantasy role-play), and others, such as fetishism or bondage, may be a combination of both. BDSM practices are consented to and desired by all participants. For these reasons, BDSM is distinguished from nonconsensual abuse or assault.

The acronym *BDSM* is of relatively recent coinage, most likely from Usenet (Internet discussion groups) around 1990. Terms that existed before *BDSM* include *leather*, *SM*, *S&M*, *S/M*, and *sadomasochism*. *Leather* arose in U.S. gay male communities to describe rough sex, leather fetishism, and gay masculinity oriented around motorcycle clubs; the term is also used by some lesbian communities. *SM* and its variants can, like *BDSM*, be used as an umbrella term to refer to the entirety of the power-exchange community. Other umbrella terms include *kinky* (with its opposite, *vanilla*) and *the scene*, which refers to the BDSM community as a whole (any particular BDSM encounter is called a *scene* or *play*). *BDSM* is used most often in North American and British contexts, although *BDSM* and *SM* are also used in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Italy, Israel, Japan, and Australia.

Although most popular representations of BDSM focus on pain, the central dynamic in

BDSM is the consensual exchange of power. In BDSM scenes, the *top* or *dominant* has control over the scene, while the *bottom* or *submissive* receives the top's attentions; a *switch* is a person who enjoys both roles. An erotic power imbalance is the goal of BDSM play. BDSM is not uncommon; although statistics on sexual practices are rarely conclusive, the Kinsey Institute estimates that 5–10 percent of people in the United States practice BDSM. Other researchers in the United States and Europe have produced estimates as high as 65 percent when including sexual fantasies, desires, and practices on the BDSM spectrum, such as restraining or blindfolding.

BDSM: B&D, D/s, and SM

The triad of acronyms that make up *BDSM*—*B&D*, *D/s*, and *SM*—are distinctive yet overlapping. The *B* in *B&D* refers to bondage. There is a vast range of bondage techniques, including, among others, Japanese rope bondage, suspension bondage, and encasement bondage. The *D* refers to discipline or spanking. In some communities, people interested in spanking are distinct from the BDSM scene (e.g., Christian devotees of corporal punishment in the United States); yet spanking and other forms of discipline (such as caning) are also common forms of BDSM play.

D/s, for domination and submission, is primarily about symbolic power (hence the uppercase *D* and lowercase *s*). *D/s* scenes and relationships emphasize erotic power imbalance and sexual role-play; they may or may not involve physical contact or sensation. *D/s* practices may be a component of a scene or an overarching relationship structure; examples include master/slave or mistress/slave play, erotic humiliation or shaming, and feminization or cross-dressing. People who work as professional, paid dominants are called *prodommes* or *dominatrices*.

Although *S&M* and *sadomasochism* are common in popular usage, practitioners tend to use *SM* and *S/M*, typically to avoid the pathologizing imprint of *sadomasochism*. *SM* has a double

meaning; it can, as above, refer to the entirety of the BDSM scene; it can also refer to more explicitly physical or bodily practices, also called sensation or pain play. Sensation play can range from very mild (e.g., play with soft fur) to very intense (e.g., a single-tail whipping); in all cases, the pain experienced is desirable. Common examples of SM sensation play include flogging, caning, whipping, cutting, and temperature play.

History

Practices similar to those in contemporary BDSM communities have existed in most places and times: ritual flagellation, bondage, and sexual play such as pinching or spanking are not uncommon in the historical and literary record. However, it was not until the late nineteenth century that these practices cohered into discrete sexual identities; it is this categorization that makes current BDSM communities possible.

Sadism, *masochism*, and *sadomasochism* emerged in nineteenth-century medical, psychological, and sexological tracts. Sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing coined the terms *sadism* (“the desire to cause pain and use force,” named after the Marquis de Sade) and *masochism* (“the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force,” named after Leopold von Sacher-Masoch) and popularized them in successive editions of his *Psychopathia Sexualis* ([1886] 1999). From the late 1800s through the 1920s, sexologists and psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Stekel, and Havelock Ellis joined Krafft-Ebing in developing theories of sadomasochism, sadism, and masochism as troubling perversions and violent pathologies.

These categories of sexual practices began to develop into communities with concurrent changes in capitalism—specifically, industrialization and urbanization. The predecessors to today’s BDSM cultures emerged when sexuality became a site and source of leisure and recreation. In Europe and the United States, this was with the rise of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and wage labor. Today, BDSM sexualities and cultures are a feature of societies with advanced capitalist economies: Western Europe, North America, Australia, and Japan.

Europe and United States fetish: 1890–1950

European fetish communities developed in Britain, France, and Germany in the 1890s around the circulation of sexual materials (pornography, pamphlets, comics). These materials often focused on flagellation (birching or caning) and soft objects and clothing, such as satin or fur. In the early 1900s, new aesthetics focused on materials such as leather, rubber, and metal, along with a more diverse range of sexual play—fetishism, cross-dressing, and elaborate role-play—began to appear in brothels, pornography, and literature (Bienvenu 1998). These exchange and distribution networks spread to the United States, where, beginning in the 1930s, sexual materials were circulated primarily through the mail. The iconography of these typically heterosexual fetish and BDSM communities appeared in pin-up photography and the pornographic short films of the 1940s and 1950s (e.g., Irving Klaw’s images of Bettie Page).

United States leather: 1940s–today

The first gay leather communities began to appear in the United States following World War II. In 1950s and 1960s Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, gay leather bars and motorcycle clubs appeared, catering to men who enjoyed leather, fisting, and kinky sex. By the 1970s, there was an array of shops, bars, and clubs catering to leathermen in many U.S. cities, as well as magazines like *Drummer*, begun in 1975 (and the successor to male physique magazines). Although leather neighborhoods were threatened in the 1980s by sex panics around HIV/AIDS, urban restructuring, and gentrification, the leather community continues today both locally and internationally. There are bars and clubs in cities around the world, a globally recognized Leather Pride Flag (designed by Tony DeBlase in 1989), the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago, events such as the Folsom Street Fair in San Francisco (the largest leather event in the world), and leather title contests. The first men’s title was Mr. Gold Coast, awarded at The Gold Coast bar in Chicago in 1972; the first women’s title was Ms. Leather, held in San Francisco in 1981. Today, International Mr. Leather brings thousands to Chicago to

watch local and regional leather title winners from Europe, Australia, the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, and the United States compete for the title.

United States BDSM: 1970s–today

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the market of and for BDSM toys (whips, floggers, bondage equipment), clothing, clubs, bars, pornography (videos, books, magazines), guidebooks, personal ads, and professional domination services expanded dramatically. This period also witnessed the first social and educational BDSM organizations: the earliest organizations in the United States were the Eulenspiegel Society in New York City (pansexual, founded in 1971), the Chicago Hellfire Club (leathermen, founded in 1971), the Society of Janus in San Francisco (pansexual, founded in 1974), and Samois in San Francisco (leatherwomen, founded in 1978). In the 1990s, transformations in information technology, including the first graphical web browser (1993) and personal modems, had a direct impact on BDSM communities. Online resources such as stores, services, and pornography joined the off-line marketplace; at the same time, online message boards (and, later, chatrooms, email lists, and Instant Messaging) increased communication between people who shared BDSM interests. The membership in BDSM organizations boomed: the Society of Janus grew from 35 in 1975, to 250 in 1980, to 450 in 1990, to 700 in 2000, and today is only one of several BDSM organizations in the Bay Area. This mixture of on- and off-line social networking continues today, with social media (e.g., FetLife) and the munch (a social meeting typically held at a restaurant). The first munch was held in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1992, drawing participants from the Usenet group alt.sex.bondage. Today, there are munches in large and small towns across the United States, and also in Canada, England, Scotland, and Israel.

International BDSM today

Leather and BDSM stores, bars, and motorcycle clubs opened in London, Berlin, and Amsterdam throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Today, cities in the United States, Japan, Britain, Germany,

Australia, and the Netherlands have large BDSM communities with conferences, street fairs, and social and educational organizations that host regular workshops on BDSM techniques, discussion groups, and play parties. The Internet connects local scenes: email lists, Internet magazines and blogs, and online communities and networking sites cross national boundaries, typically using English. BDSM conferences and festivals in the United States, Australia, and Europe often feature internationally recognized speakers, teachers, and authors. Contests and fairs are also increasingly transnational: the International Mr. Leather title has featured competitors from outside the United States since its second year, and the Folsom Street Fair, begun in San Francisco in 1984, has licensed the name to leather/BDSM fairs in New York City (Folsom Street East); Berlin, Germany (Folsom Europe); Toronto, Canada (Folsom Fair North); and Australia.

Key scholarship and themes

The history of scholarship on BDSM is fragmented: there is a large literature that takes up BDSM or, more often, *sadomasochism*, but it does so with wildly divergent understandings of the term and its meanings. Work in philosophy, cultural theory, and literary criticism has linked sadism and masochism to Euro-American rationality, and explored sadomasochistic dynamics and themes in literature, art, theatre, and culture. Within feminism, the politics of lesbian SM has been a generative object of debate (see below). Social psychological and sexological research has focused on quantifiable data, such as the percentages of practitioners with particular sexual and BDSM orientations. Finally, researchers in psychology and psychoanalysis have explored the etiology of sadomasochistic desires, providing rich accounts of fantasy, fetish, and the paradoxical nature of pleasure. Yet like the early sexological literature, this work can obscure the consensual BDSM community by presenting sadomasochism as a pathological, destructive, or dangerous drive or perversion.

Only recently have scholars taken more social approaches to BDSM. The anthropologist and Kinsey collaborator Paul Gebhard was the first to

explore BDSM as a cultural phenomenon in his 1969 essay “Fetishism and Sadomasochism” (some credit Alfred Kinsey with the first use of S/M in the 1940s). Since then, researchers have studied gay leathermen in New York (Brodsky 1993), San Francisco (Rubin 1997, 1998), and the Netherlands (Lieshout 1995); pansexual BDSM in London (Beckmann 2009), San Francisco (Weiss 2011), the U.S. northeast (Newmahr 2011), and Berlin (Martin 2011); and queer BDSM in Germany (Bauer 2008). Several recent edited volumes include social and cultural perspectives, and there is also a large body of non-academic books from BDSM community writers that provide accounts of the scene.

Debates and controversies

Pathology and diagnosis

Although many unfamiliar with BDSM assume that it is the same as torture, violence, or assault, contemporary BDSM strives to be safe, sane, and consensual. The community uses protocols such as pre-scene negotiation, safe words, which let a player call a “time-out” or an end to a scene, and safer-sex procedures. BDSM techniques are taught in classes, workshops, guidebooks, and videos, and are designed to promote safety. The desire to distinguish consensual BDSM from sadistic or masochistic violence is one reason why many practitioners prefer the term *BDSM* or *SM* to *sadomasochism*.

The fourth edition of the U.S.-based *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) (1994) defined “sexual sadism” and “sexual masochism” as psychopathological paraphilias. An updated version, the *DSM-5* (2013) distinguishes paraphilias from paraphilic psychiatric disorders. Yet although contemporary communities resist the pathologization of BDSM, there is some debate over whether sadism and masochism should be retained as pathologies in the *DSM*: some feel it is helpful to differentiate nonconsensual, violent sadists from the consensual community, while others feel that the inclusion can only entrench the pathologization of sadomasochism, consensual or otherwise. Outside the United States, the organization ReviseF65, begun in Norway, has

worked to remove sadomasochism from the World Health Organization’s *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD-10). Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland have done so.

Feminism and the politics of BDSM

One of the core debates in the late 1970s and 1980s feminist “sex wars” took place over lesbian SM. Radical feminists in the United States and the United Kingdom saw in BDSM play the repetition of patriarchal, imperialist, and racist forms of power inequality. This charge fractured feminist and lesbian communities, pitting anti-pornography, anti-BDSM, and anti-butch/femme feminists against pro-sex or sex liberationist feminists (Linden et al. 1982; Samois 1982). Today, the question of the politics of BDSM, especially its eroticization of social inequality, continues to interest scholars. Some have explored the queer and feminist politics of BDSM performances; some have considered the ways BDSM might transgress normative embodiment; and still others have debated whether BDSM might prove therapeutic, either because it serves as a break from everyday demands, or because it enables practitioners to rework these demands in play.

Media representation

Since the 1980s, images, iconography, and representations of BDSM have appeared with increasing frequency in popular media, art, film, literature, and music. Images that might once have been reserved for high-fashion clothing ads or art films are now used in advertisements for yogurt, breath mints, and deodorant in the United States and the United Kingdom. Often, media representations have little to do with BDSM community practices. Some representations are appreciated by practitioners; many others appropriate or exploit BDSM’s purportedly exotic clothing or scenes for commercial purposes; and, in the worst cases, some reproduce violent, stereotypical, and pathological representations of BDSM practices and aficionados. Scholars in anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies have debated the politics of these popular representations of BDSM, as well as the relationship between representation and the realities of BDSM cultures.

BDSM and the law

The legality of BDSM varies internationally and is often a gray area. In the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, it is not possible to consent to assault; therefore, when courts view BDSM play as assault, consent is not a legal defense (as in the 1998 U.S. *Jovanovic* case). In a British case known as “Spanner” in 1997, 16 men engaged in consensual BDSM play were charged with either assault (the tops) or aiding and abetting assault (the bottoms). Although consent was not in dispute, they were convicted of violating the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861, which criminalizes the infliction of “grievous bodily harm.” Similarly, the charges that arose after police raids at consensual play parties in San Diego (1999) and Attleboro, MA (2000) demonstrate the uncertain legal ground of BDSM play and practice in the United States.

A different test of the legality of BDSM came in a 2008 British High Court case. Max Mosley, son of the wartime Fascist leader Oswald Mosley, and then-president of the International Automobile Federation, sued the *News of the World* for a breach of privacy after the tabloid newspaper published a story on Mosley’s “Sick Nazi Orgy with 5 Hookers.” Mosley argued that his privacy had been violated by the story; the paper countered that revealing Mosley’s sexual activities was in the public interest. In this case, the decision was based on an analysis of the politics of Mosley’s consensual BDSM interrogation-themed play—specifically, whether it had a “Nazi theme.” If it did, Mosley could be seen to be mocking the Holocaust. The judge ruled in Mosley’s favor.

The determination of the obscenity of BDSM material is a third aspect of its legality. Although key 1960s U.S. Supreme Court decisions made the exchange of pornographic materials far less dangerous, BDSM is often classified as “extreme” pornography, and specifically legislated against. Cases testing the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which regulates Internet pornography, are one example of contemporary BDSM obscenity law.

In response to these legal challenges, and to the stigmatization and pathologization of BDSM practitioners, political organizations have been formed: the National Coalition of Sexual Freedom (NCSF) and Gay Male S/M Activists (GMSMA) in the United States; SM Pride, Backlash, and the

Sexual Freedom Coalition in the United Kingdom; SMart Rhein-Ruhr e.V. and Bundesvereinigung Sadomasochismus (BVSM) e.V. in Germany; IG (Interessengemeinschaft) BDSM in Switzerland; and ReviseF65 in Norway.

SEE ALSO: Capitalism; Culture and Sexuality; Domination and Submission (D&S); Gay Men’s Communities; Internet, Sex and the; Krafft-Ebing, Richard Freiherr von (1840–1902); Lesbian Communities; Lesbian Feminism; Marquis de Sade, Donatien Alphonse François (1740–1814); Pansexuality; Sadomasochism; Sex and Politics; Sexual Identity and Sexual Orientation

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