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Unravelling intersecting identities: understanding the lives of people who practice BDSM

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ABSTRACT
The BDSM community comprises a diverse group of individuals who engage in bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism, among other practices associated with role play, fetishes and leather. To date, there remains a limited amount of literature and research surrounding the personal and professional lives of those who practice BDSM, along with subsequent implications for health and mental health practitioners. A mixed method online survey was conducted to examine the lives and experiences of individuals who practice BDSM. A total of 63 participants, predominately white, North American, heterosexually identified and college educated responded to the survey. Main qualitative themes included the following: (1) role of various intersecting identities; (2) openness and disclosure of BDSM identity; and (3) shame, empowerment and resilience. Results will be presented from a systemic and strengths-based perspective to help create a clearer understanding of this uniquely diverse community while also providing implications for practitioners in the field.

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Introduction
Researchers and practitioners in a variety of disciplines, professions and settings have turned their attention to the experiences and needs of the BDSM communities. BDSM widely describes the practices of people who engage in bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism, which are also associated with role play, fetishes and leather. In general, there are many adults who engage in such diverse forms of intimate and sexual relationships, many of whom are perceived as being outside or atypical of the heteronormative boundaries associated with sex, gender, sexuality, sexual orientation and other types of relationships (Califa, 1991, 2000; Connolly, 2006; Ernulf & Innala, 1995; Grace, Dawson, & Hillyard, 2010; Janus & Janus, 1993; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; Krafft-Ebing, 1983; Meeker, 2011). Consensual activities common among the BDSM community can include power exchanges that may pertain to pain or intense physical, emotional or mental sensations, role playing and fetishism (Weiss, 2006). BDSM activities may include hair pulling, nipple torture, rope play, choking, spanking, pinching and urination, among others related to use of character play, corsets, uniforms, leather and rubber. The BDSM community comprises a diverse group of individuals including those who identify with a variety of sexual orientations, genders and preferences (Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). However, due to the stigmatised and often secretive nature of this community and such practices, identifying a representative sample of the broader BDSM community is fraught with challenges. Similarly, stigma and oppression of this widely diverse community persists within many fields including law and mental health.
health, among other professions, and also within social service settings (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006). Regardless, the BDSM community continues to gain more mainstream visibility, with an increasing presence within popular culture (Weiss, 2006).

In the last couple of decades, the BDSM community has growingly been normalised through research that contrasts with historical observations and studies that primarily examined forensic populations or used a lens that distorted many lived realities (Simula, 2015). Research now demonstrates that a primary component of BDSM communities is an emphasis on communication and mutual satisfaction (Graham, Butler, McGraw, Cannes, & Smith, 2015) and the establishment of informed consent (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006). Existing research on the BDSM community demonstrates that many live well-adjusted lives (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006; Powls & Davies, 2012; Williams, 2006) and are typically white and more educated than the general population (Sandnabba, Santtila, & Nordling, 1999). Some researchers also have drawn parallels between the growing normalisation of BDSM and the historical struggles of the LGBTQ equality movement.

As visibility of the BDSM community grows, it is increasingly important for health practitioners and professionals to understand and address the rights and privileges of people who practice BDSM in a consistent, culturally humble and affirming manner. This includes understanding the full spectrum and range of sex, sexuality, sexual diversity, and the practices and strengths of individuals in the context of an often oppressive and stigmatising society. This study will examine the lives and experiences of individuals who practice BDSM from a systemic- and strengths-based perspective to help create the better understanding of this uniquely diverse community while also providing implications for practitioners in the field.

**Background**

While there is some debate about the exact nature of BDSM desires, researchers have postulated that it is a sexual orientation, socially constructed behaviour, a lifestyle or a combination of these (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006; Mosher, Leavitt, & Manley, 2006). Considering the existence of BDSM clubs, communities and online groups internationally, the draw to power exchange likely includes a consistent group across many cultures, continents (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006) and historical time periods (De Sade, Seaver, & Wainhouse, 1965). Ortmann and Sprott (2013) offer a simple but elegant description of BDSM, defining it as the ‘erotization of power’ (p. 11). As noted earlier, the vast majority of people who participate in BDSM and who have been researched tend to be well-educated, white, and in one researcher’s estimation, somewhat ‘geeky’ (Newmahr, 2011). Several of the more in-depth investigations into BDSM focused heavily on play spaces and community events (Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011), which may not be representative of all people who practice BDSM.

It is worth noting that communities including racial and ethnic minorities (Bauer, 2008; Simula, 2015) and those with a lower socioeconomic status are among others severely under-represented in existing research on the BDSM community. Several factors may contribute to a lack of racial and ethnic minority representation within the BDSM community. This may be explained by the need to manage multiple stigmatised identities, unlike that experienced by members of white or ethnic majority populations, as well as general discomfort or lack of connectedness to the BDSM community or settings (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). One may also presume this is due to white privilege and elitism, which can limit access to people with less power, agency or freedom to search for sexual pleasure outside of normative sexuality. Perhaps, as acceptance for people who practice BDSM grows, cultures may see more diverse groups represented among BDSM participants. This will require additional research to understand how different groups experience and express their desires for power exchange.

While research has been limited due to the stigmatised nature of BDSM, estimations related to prevalence suggest that the percentage of those who practice BDSM is approximately 10% of the general population (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006). Other research assessing people’s fantasies suggests a higher rate of preference for some aspect of BDSM. Powls and Davies (2012) meta-analysis
located several studies with prevalence of BDSM fantasies suggesting that up to 61% of college-aged men and 64% of college-aged women fantasised about some aspect of power exchange, force, submission or dominance.

**Intersecting identities, development and conflict**

The examination of identity and identity development among members of the BDSM community may provide insight into the integration or separation of personal and professional selves – as well as convey better understanding of the needs of this minority community. The labelling of such behaviours as pathological or deviant, while continuing to stigmatise and promote discrimination ultimately perpetuates shame and distress (Herbert & Weaver, 2015; Reiersøl & Skeid, 2006) for those who practice BDSM. Members of the BDSM community learn about their evolving identities about others with common interests and the larger BDSM community in many ways – whether through exploring personal experiences, from other people relating their experiences and knowledge, through online resources, and so on (Baldwin, 1991).

The process of identity construction is also rather individualised and often inherently self-defined, so much so that the denial of such a frame of understanding related to identity development eliminates subjectivity, most especially for communities of colour (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Such identities develop and change over time, and a process of continuous construction and reconstruction ultimately negotiates new meanings for one’s identity (Baldwin, 1991). Additionally, an individual who experiences distress regarding their sexual preferences, roles or identities may feel such distress due to internal or external shame and stigma. While research in this area continues, additional study may be necessary to identify how different identities interact and impact individual experiences and expressions of BDSM.

**Coming out**

Models and literature that have previously examined identity development related to sexual orientation and gender identity all suggest various pathways of identity development (Cass, 1979; Clifford & Orford, 2007; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994) that include stages associated with conflict, assimilation, integration, synthesis, so on. However, identity formation does not typically occur in a rigid or linear process; rather, it evolves through a more fluid and unpredictable trajectory for many individuals. Baldwin (1991) explored the more challenging realms of a ‘kinky’ or a ‘second’ coming out the process for members of the BDSM community that often occurs privately in secret surrounded by fear, self-loathing and in silence. Such oppressive processes can ultimately have a negative impact upon how members of the BDSM community develop, embrace their identities or provide limited ability to connect with others sharing similar interests or experiences (Baldwin, 1991). Ongoing research related to expanding the understanding of sex, sexuality, sexual orientation, and identity development beyond that of heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, polyamorous, asexual, monosexual and other such lived identities may ultimately challenge traditional development stage models (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

Potential conflicts and challenges related to understanding the integration or segregation of multiple diverse identities may be problematic for some individuals while also offering unique opportunities for practitioners and continued research in this evolving field (Meeker, 2011). Recent research has begun to explore the positive impact that involvement in BDSM has on the community, including an increase in self-acceptance and personal growth, although it is noted that self-acceptance does not shield someone entirely from stigma and discrimination (Herbert & Weaver, 2015). Researchers examining stigma management and the concealment of one’s BDSM identity underscore potential challenges and problems related to the ongoing need to ‘protect’ oneself or others from public disclosure as a member of the BDSM community (Stiles & Clark, 2011). Additional challenges pertain to previous negative reactions to disclosure impacting future
decisions not to disclose one's BDSM identity; and an overall lack of information available that does not stigmatise the community (Bezreh, Weinberg, & Edgar, 2012).

**Discrimination, stigma and oppression**

Discrimination faced by people who engage in BDSM is vast and varied. During the feminist sex wars that began in the 1980s, individuals and feminist organisations actively discriminated against people who practised BDSM (Ardill & O'Sullivan, 2005; Wright, 2006). Research conducted by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF) indicates that people that practice BDSM continue to experience discrimination and in some cases various forms of physical assault as a result of their BDSM preferences or lifestyle (Wright, 2008). 37.5% of participants in the NCSF study reported some form of physical assault or discrimination against themselves or their business as a result of their BDSM preferences (Wright, 2008).

**Systemic challenges and opportunities**

In addition to cultural and legal discrimination, people who practice BDSM may experience discrimination within healthcare and mental health care systems. A survey by the NCSF of those practicing BDSM reported that 11.3% of respondents had been discriminated against by a professional or personal service provider (Wright, 2008). Approximately half those who were discriminated against noted the occurrence with their medical doctor (48.8%), and approximately 40% noted that it occurred with their mental health practitioner (Wright, 2008). This demonstrates the need for more competent education for all those employed within healthcare systems and the need for established guidelines for cultural competence regarding practice with the BDSM community. Ortman and Sprott examined the need for increasing cultural competence pertaining to individuals who practice BDSM, from understanding the level of a novice within the community to providing specific examples of individual BDSM situations leading to growth, healing and how this all may occur through strong alliances and interactions with practitioners and therapists alike (2013).

In the same regard, various fields of mental health promote cultural humility while working to understand the needs of the BDSM community from a strengths perspective for affirming and supportive practice. Researchers from the American Psychological Association have already declared the need for guidelines of BDSM cultural competence (Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2007). Similarly, health and mental health professions including social work, counselling, psychology and the medical field must underscore ethical commitments to eliminating oppression of the BDSM community while openly partnering in such discourse. Additionally, many professions also make a commitment to social and political action through abiding by codes of ethical behaviour (e.g., NASW Code of Ethics, 2017). Such practice guidelines and codes require that practitioners engage in actions that will ultimately lead to changes on a macro level.

**Power and privilege**

Power is a pervasive force throughout sexuality and society, and to deny its existence does not eliminate power differentials (Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). Rather, naming, identifying and acknowledging power and privilege are necessary for a just society and the promotion of a human rights discourse. BDSM practice aims to put words and boundaries around the expression and negotiation of power. Specifically, BDSM communities emphasise the consensual exchange of power, often using either ‘safe, sane, and consensual’ or ‘risk-aware consensual kink’ as guidelines for behaviour. The tension between risk and safety is continuously debated and evolving within and outside of the community (Bauer, 2008). While the focus is often on the practice of BDSM itself, risk and safety is also often extended to people’s decisions about whom to share their interest in BDSM with
because people who practice BDSM are not protected in areas of employment, child custody and healthcare. These larger cultural systems can contribute to shame and secrecy, limiting openness with professionals and limiting access to communities. Systems of oppression that impact people who practice BDSM are likely rooted in the systems that oppress other minorities: inequities in class, heteronormativity, sexism, racial injustice and the gender binary.

Research related to the BDSM community has typically focused on topics associated with individual strengths (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006), the usefulness of mental health services (Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006), discrimination against those who practice BDSM (Wright, 2006, 2008) or social networks of people who practice BDSM (Mosher et al., 2006; Newmahr, 2011). The current study aims to examine the practices of those within the BDSM community using qualitative and quantitative methods to begin to unravel how people form and experience their personal, professional and social identities as diverse members of the community. This study hopes to contribute to existing research by exploring how intersecting identities may influence BDSM identity and experiences, and how to define and identify opportunities for resilience.

**Methods**

A mixed method online survey was utilised to gather demographic data and information pertaining to how an individual who practices BDSM utilises social supports and resources as well as negotiates when and where they choose to be ‘out’ about their personal and professional identities. Survey questions pertained to the following six categories: (1) personal and demographic information; (2) personal relationship with BDSM; (3) professional involvement with BDSM; (4) social involvement with BDSM; (5) recommendations for professionals; and (6) reflections on the survey.

To give the study reflexivity with the studied population, researchers also included additional questions and feedback derived from the first ten participants. As a result, some specific questions were only offered to participants who took the survey at a later date.

As surveys were completed anonymously through a web link, care was taken to express and identify appropriate boundaries. Institutional review board procedures were approved through the secondary investigator’s affiliated institution. Goals of this study were to: (1) assess the intersections of personal, professional and social identities associated with BDSM, and how those intersections impact and reflect an individual’s well-being; (2) contribute to a broader understanding of BDSM and the BDSM community through the lens of feminist theory by exploring how, if at all, identities related to gender, race and orientation impact experiences of BDSM and; (3) suggest professional guidelines for increasing practitioner competence when working with the BDSM community.

**Recruitment**

Participants were contacted via email with the survey link through the primary investigator’s personal contacts, posting flyers and online recruitment using a snowball method. Feminist theory specifies that through the creation of knowledge, one has power, and that power must be considered, acknowledged and dealt with mindfully (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). This stance informed all interactions and discussions during participant recruitment, and subjects were reminded that their choice to participate or not would result in no rewards or consequences related to the relationship with the researchers. Some participants were contacted via phone, with the survey link sent to an email address of their choice to maintain privacy. In some instances, the survey link was sent in a private message to participants known personally to the principal investigator through BDSM or kink-themed websites. In addition, participants were encouraged to share the link with people they knew who were involved in some aspect of BDSM. The link was also shared through a variety of social media formats – in one case the survey link was offered through a sexually themed Twitter feed.
Sample

Criteria for inclusion in the study included the following: self-identification as someone who engages in BDSM, leather, kink or fetish activities; age 18 and older; and an ability to read and write in English. Participants choosing to begin the survey received informed consent information, along with notification of their right to withdraw from participation at any time. In addition, contact information for the primary and secondary researchers was provided. Participants were encouraged to contact either researcher if they had any concerns, thoughts, feelings or needed assistance during or after survey completion. The survey also included a link to the NCSF list of self-identified kink-aware therapists if participants felt the need for additional supportive resources.

Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed through a grounded theory approach. Utilising Charmaz's (2014) concept of grounded theory, themes were identified by separate coding sources and researchers were able to consolidate information indicating differences between groups of individuals who practice BDSM based on other intersecting identities. Themes were identified by the researchers using line-by-line coding and comparing methods until they were confident that saturation was achieved. This form of thematic analysis included both inductive methods to identify new themes and deductive analysis to further explore themes per utilisation of Charmaz's (2014) approach. Researchers utilised both inductive analysis to identify themes and deductive analysis to examine themes in participants' responses. Quantitative results were utilised to triangulate the robustness of qualitative themes identified and emphasise relevance of the findings. The three major themes discussed reflect a contextualisation of the previous literature review.

Results

A total of 63 participants responded to the online study, with ages ranging from 19 to 63, and a mean of 37 years. 55% of survey respondents identified as married or partnered (n = 34); while 45% were single or divorced (n = 28). Participants reported their gender as male (n = 30, 49%), female (n = 25, 41%) and 'other' or preferring not to identify with a single gender (n = 8, 13%). Participants reported their sexual orientation as: straight (n = 22, 36%), bisexual (n = 14, 23%), queer (n = 12, 20%), gay (n = 11, 18%), questioning (n = 3, 6%) and other (n = 1, 3%). A vast majority of respondents identified as White/Non-Hispanic (n = 49, 79%), followed by Black (n = 5, 8%), White/Hispanic (n = 3, 6%) and multi-racial or other racial/ethnic identification (n = 6, 10%). Participant responses with regard to level of education included those who completed college or had an advanced degree (n = 44, 70%); compared to those with 'some' college (n = 18, 29%); and those with 'less than' a high school education (n = 1, 2%). A majority of respondents were from the Chicago area in the Midwestern United States, with several from the southern and western areas of the US and international locations including northern Europe, Canada, England and New Zealand.

Main qualitative findings identified several themes associated with this examination of individuals who practice BDSM including: (1) the role of various intersecting identities; (2) openness and disclosure of BDSM identity; and (3) shame, empowerment and resilience.

The role of various intersecting identities

In line with previous research, overall participants were more likely to identify as submissive than dominant. In addition, male-identified participants identified as dominant 37% of the time, while female-identified participants identified as dominant 17% of the time. No definitive scientific data have concluded the reason for the cause of the difference in this preference, though it is likely influenced by sexual schemas that encourage male dominance and female submission (Yost &
Hunter, 2012). It should be noted that these differences need additional research and for many participants in this study, the interaction of gender and orientation were quite complex.

One theme that emerged from this research was the act of either emphasising or resisting gender or traditional gender roles to increase the excitement or arousal within the BDSM experience. The ‘unconventional’ or ‘taboo’ nature of the experience of resisting gender norms for some served to challenge or interact with gender stereotypes, while others emphasised their gendered experience to increase arousal as noted below:

As a woman with a predominantly male friendship group I am used to people making assumptions about men being more dominant in bed, so as someone who switches but generally speaking takes a dominant role I get a sense of taking on a role which is unconventional, and I enjoy that feeling.

As a male being in a submissive role feels even more taboo, which heightens my feelings/arousal.

I believe I was intended to be born female. I was born male. I often fantasise about 1) myself, sexed and gendered as I currently am, dominating women, and 2) being female and dominating men; I often assume a female identity in internet play.

One female identified participant noted:

In terms of gender, playing up my femininity while in a submissive role works well.

The process of performing gender, which expressed itself for some by resisting stereotypes and others by emphasising it, was connected to heightened arousal for some BDSM participants. Those who identified as ‘other gendered’ underscore the problematic nature of rigidly gendered identities, contexts and categories. Notably, 13% of the overall sample identified neither as male nor as female and reported their gender as ‘other’ or preferred to not identify with a single gender. Such non-binary identities are important to recognise for myriad reasons, especially as gender is often perceived to be, or categorised as, binary (e.g. solely male or female) ultimately creating layers of invisibility and oppression for other genders and forms of gender expression (Farmer & Byrd, 2015). The BDSM community respondents in this study clearly emphasised that such gender norms can and should be challenged. Furthermore, while the response rate among those identifying as ‘other gendered’ was small, the responses indicated concerns related to male-dominated/cisgendered spaces; discomfort with highly gendered/stereotyped contexts; problematic power dynamics; and a desire/preferences for queer-friendly and safe spaces. Examples of responses from participants identifying as ‘other gendered’ include:

Despite what people say, the BDSM community is still very cis-gendered and male dominated. Female dominants and male submissives are expected to fit into stereotypes. The BDSM community is also disturbingly quick to silence assault survivors and/or make excuses for dominants who assault their submissives.

All of it is about power dynamics, and a requirement for my services is that both parties are clear that this is about power dynamics, which may include gender, but which are not gender-oriented to the exclusion of all else. i.e. no dragging the sexist social constructs into the room. I avoid sexist clients, and while anatomically female, do not necessarily identify as any particular gender.

I’d say gender and orientation both...interact to color what feels most comfortable at any given time. I’m genderqueer and also generally not a sub, so I’m deeply uncomfortable with play/language that is highly gendered, especially in a femsub context. I’m always happiest playing with other queer folks of any gender.

Although an exact definition of fetishism was not offered in the survey, male-identified (42%) and female-identified (42%) participants reported that they identified as ‘fetishists’ with similar frequencies. This is notable because male fetishism is more widely discussed and reported within existing literature. This finding indicates that this topic needs further study, particularly with regard to the examination of females within the BDSM community. The increased report of fetishism among women may be due to the fact that female participants may be more comfortable revealing alternative sexual desires in the context of an online survey focusing on BDSM identities.
Respondents identifying as gay were more likely to be more strongly identified with the BDSM community than those who identified as any other orientation. It should be noted that in this survey, the vast majority of people who identified as gay were also male identified, whereas trans-identified or female-identified participants typically identified as either straight, bisexual or queer. Men who identified as gay had a smaller range of when they identified their interests in BDSM versus other groups who at times identified similar interests. No gay male participants identified their interest before the age of 15 (range: 15–42, mean: 23.9), whereas, some people who identified as straight, bisexual or queer reported early teen or prepubescent awareness of their BDSM sexual preferences, though there was also a wide range: straight (range: 5–50, mean 19.22); bisexual (range: 9–43, mean: 20.5); queer (range: 4.5–22, mean: 15.2); other (range: 8 and 16); questioning/unsure (range: 13, 22 and 45).

The racial homogeneity of the sample also highlights important aspects of BDSM intersectionality for individuals who do not identify as white. While race ‘postures itself as a stable, sovereign truth…in fact, it is a dynamic and fluid site of demarcation’ (Cruz, 2015, p. 430). As one non-white respondent noted:

As a black person, I would never engage in race play where I was the bottom. I would have no problem topping a white person in race play though. In society, it is considered wrong for a man to degrade a woman and treat her just as a sexual object. And in the non sexual life aspects of my life, I consider this to be abhorrent as well. But in the sexual aspects of my life, I find being degraded and treated like an object to be arousing, and partly because it is taboo in mainstream society.

This multifaceted positionality offers a unique look at identity politics within BDSM culture, especially with regard to ‘race play’ (Cruz, 2015, p. 409). Though most respondents in this study did not comment on race, perhaps because the majority identified as white, the topics of race and ‘race play’ stand out as important areas for continued study.

**Openness and disclosure of BDSM identity**

The survey asked participants numerous questions related to disclosure, and several trends emerged. First, participants reported being the most open with their BDSM interests with their current romantic partner, and the least open with their family of origin and their workplace, as might be expected. Participants were also asked what advantages and disadvantages they found related to disclosing their identity and people reported the following sub-themes as positive outcomes: increased confidence/feelings of power/liberation; being able to support others and to feel supported (including educating others, increasing social connections and trust); educating others about BDSM; and better sex. Several examples of these sub-themes follow. Noting an increase in confidence, feelings of power, liberation and self-actualisation, a few participants reported:

Yes. It has allowed me to connect socially in ways that I am otherwise not inclined to pursue.

I feel better.

It has given me much more self-confidence and raised my self-esteem, for sure.

[I] have learned to not be so shy.

One participant reported being able to support others and to also feel supported:

Disclosure has made me find other like minded people and has at times made other people more inclined to trust me, as they know I take personal integrity and vetting seriously in my BDSM life.

With regard to educating others about BDSM:

It has opened dialogs. Usually I’m the treated as the “resource” for such discussions.
I’ve been able to advise and support others in the community or to find safe resources for their interests.

The medical students I work with have learned appropriate ways to handle people who come in with bumps and bruises who do feel safe at home.

Noting how their sex life was improved, one participant noted:

I was open about my interest in bondage from the beginning, as we’ve recently begun this transition to domme/sub, I have found myself happier and more aroused sexually.

Few people reported problems resulting from disclosing their BDSM interests, and among those who did, most reported the problems were minor or moderate, although several who reported problems also reported changing strategies for future disclosure. Several respondents noted challenges including:

…in my personal life – either spending hours fruitlessly trying to explain things to friends or possible partners.

Occasional minor to moderate stress around the feminist split on the issue as it arises in online discussions. That’s about it.

One partner threw up when I told him I was Pro[BDSM]; he has since realised it was just a part of himself he wasn’t comfortable with.

I’ve had some issues, but nothing too major. I’ve often had partners who are not kinky and this can be somewhat frustrating. And I was somewhat out to my coworkers at my old job. I felt like they made assumptions about my personality and beliefs based on the fact that I went to [a] BDSM [club], had an alternative look and listen to aggressive music. One assumption that someone made was that they thought that I didn’t want to get married, when in fact I do want to get married.

Working has not shown difficulties because its merely a [restaurant] job. However, as referenced before, I find it difficult to gain, and even more so maintain, friendships or relationships because others seem to not like how I am.

Some people think I am odd or not trustworthy because of my history. I have found that not talking about it with people who may be judgmental prevents that.

I had someone on Facebook threaten to out me to my job because of my Facebook friends. I keep a very PG-13 presence but some of my friends do not. I hadn’t figured out how to lock it down since they kept changing privacy configurations.

All participants who identified as queer reported experiencing positive outcomes from disclosure of their BDSM interests or identity. Among those who identified as gay, none reported any problems or challenges related to the disclosure of their BDSM identity. One participant explained:

No… I was out as gay since teen years, unfortunately I know enough from that to know how to ‘throttle’ openness.

This may suggest that people who learn strategies for identifying their sexual orientation may navigate openness around BDSM identity in a way that allows them to avoid problems. From this research it is unclear what precisely that process may be for many, and it also may not be representative of everybody’s experience, but it could signal that people with experiences coming out with other identities, may find it easier to manage the BDSM coming out process. This warrants additional and more focused research for greater understanding.

Among strategies to cope with disclosure, several emerged as the most common and describe conflicting themes of integration versus compartmentalisation. Among strategies within compartmentalisation, participants reported finding nonjudgmental people or social spaces, either through reading social cues, developing trust or seeking out kink-friendly spaces and ‘sexual spheres’. For the purpose of this study, sexual spheres are widely defined as encounters with partners whether online or in person. Participant responses related to strategies to cope with disclosure included:
I determine by analysis of behavior and social connection whether a new acquaintance would be open to me revealing my BDSM involvement. Generally at present, if it is not a vital association, if I cannot reveal my identification with BDSM, I will not pursue the relationship or involvement with the party in question.

[I disclose] when I care enough about the people I'm with to let them know about me and who I am.

I only disclose my BDSM or my trans status where it is directly relevant and where I feel safe.

I do it when I feel comfortable. When I was younger I would talk about sexual deviant behavior to shock people or challenge them. I try to avoid that now.

Some noted how they limit disclosure based on:

Sexual spaces: When it's age/subject appropriate.

Locations: Pretty much limited to internet when looking for play partners.

Creating separate spheres: Even though I'm involved with the bdsm community, consider my relationship and sexuality a private matter. I don't need to shout to the world "hey, everyone, I'm a submissive." My being submissive doesn't affect anyone other than my romantic partner.

Reviewing additional topics related to identity and disclosure, sub-themes of compartmentalisation were also reflected by participants. Responses detailed how work and family life were separated from sexual or BDSM identities, or how roles in each were distinguished, (i.e. being in control in one sphere was linked to a desire to give up control in another). Examples of separation between private and work life, sex life and primary partnership, and social versus work life follow:

My work limits my access to BDSM activities

My race, profession or gender don't affect my bdsm identity. I'm submissive within a consensual bdsm relationship – not to the world in general…

My BDSM identity as a slave is my sexual orientation and is completely separate from my profession and family life, because I cannot be "out."

I keep my sexual/romance life separate from professional life.

The power exchange aspects of my BDSM identity are mostly influenced by my profession (always in control) and my life (little parental involvement post puberty, always taken care of myself: want someone else to be in control for a while).

When reporting strategies that involved identity integration, participants focused on disclosure strategies that were more self-focused. This strategy involved reflections on an integrated identity and 'being yourself' – rather than being impacted by external environmental factors (i.e. family). This can be seen through the following examples:

I am who I am. I like what I like. I don't need my family to support my sex life or the type of relationship I have, for God's sake.

Just existing means living a kink lifestyle.

BDSM is part of my work and my life, I AM A PROUD DOMME.

In response to questions about identity integration, one participant clearly noted:

My identity is all tied together, there is no separation.

This strategy emphasises both individuality and integration of identity in contrast to previous responses which explored the limitations that lack of disclosure put around one's identity. No strong correlations emerged related to patterns of openness among people with an integrated identity implying that the integration may be an internal response and understanding of identity, rather than the result of something external, like greater social support or reduced stigma.
Shame, empowerment and resilience

Participants reflected on their experiences of shame and empowerment to help illuminate areas of resilience and vulnerability within this population. Because the most pointed questions addressing this issue were added later, and among the final questions, there was a lower response rate than other questions in the survey with a response rate of 28. Overall, out of the 28 participants who answered this question, 8 reported experiencing shame related to their BDSM identity, and 5 of those also reported experiencing empowerment. Interestingly, no straight men reported experiencing shame with regard to their BDSM identity. The most common theme reported related to shame, involved disclosing and negotiating BDSM in relationships, and secondarily in other interpersonal settings. Examples noted by participants include:

After speaking with my current partner I didn’t know what he would say…

Generally when I’m radically kinkier than a partner, and we’re trying to navigate things and I feel like I’m “difficult”. Not major, but can be tied into the similar issues when I’m the high-libido partner in a relationship.

I feel shame when participating in activities in the “swing” community.

I have made (consensual) compromises in BDSM situations that have pushed me past limits I had previously set for myself, which I found some shame in breaching. However, I don’t feel shame about a general interest in BDSM.

Themes that emerged among participants who reported empowerment included increased sexual exploration and normalisation of alternative sexual preferences; increased confidence and self-actualisation. Despite the vulnerabilities caused by shame, 16 respondents out of 27 responding to this question reported experiencing empowerment, and the benefits of the experiences and community related to BDSM appeared powerful and transformative for those who reported them. Responses associated with the normalisation of alternative sexual preferences follow:

It has given me more freedom to explore my sexuality. Being around other kinky people doesn’t make me feel as weird about having my particular kinks and fetishes.

IT HAS HELPED ME TO SEE THAT IM NOT AS DIFFERENT AS EVERYONE ELSE, AND THE KINKS AND FETISHES ARE MUCH MORE COMMON THAN I THOUGHT. IT HELPS ME FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE TALKING ABOUT THEM.

[I]t [h]as allowed me to explore and be more open with myself about desires.

BDSM communities taught the world how to negotiate sexuality.

Sexual and Relationship Negotiation, awareness of power differentials and the ability to consciously change those, exploration of non-standard sensations and the wonders of the human nervous system…All exceedingly positive.

Another participant reported:

It makes me feel like a complete person.

Expressing similar sentiments, a participant remarked:

I feel bold. I feel powerful. I feel like I fit in my own skin. TRULY AWESOME.

Some participants noted an increase in self-actualisation:

It makes me feel like a complete person. It is my sexual orientation and an important part of who I am.

Making decisions about my sexuality and exploring it has led me to broaden [my] world view and the number of people I interact with. I also have pushed myself to go out more and meet people (munches especially). I have chatted up men and started masturbating. I am learning how to bring about my own orgasms….I feel powerful. I feel like I fit in my own skin.

[I]t is good to be able to be who you are and have no issues with it.
However, ongoing challenges remain for participants in this study related to topics associated with shame and the likelihood for avoidance of disclosure related to BDSM interests or activities with practitioners. Out of the eight participants who reported experiencing shame, seven reported not disclosing any aspect of their interests to medical or mental health professionals. Whereas out of the 15 participants who reported not experiencing shame, 5 reported not disclosing their BDSM activities to medical and mental health professionals. Due to the small sample size for each category noted, the results should be approached with caution. Shame appears to decrease openness with professionals, which indicates the need to reduce stigma to increase people’s capacity to disclose interests with providers when needed. Examples of participant responses associated with discussing their BDSM lifestyle with mental health and medical professionals include the following:

Dr. knows all.

I disclose everything – there is no place for shame in medicine.

[When addressing a medical matter] only as necessary, and with a tone of “educating.”

As needed to address any medical issue.

Through these findings, a number of implications for health and mental health practice with individuals who practice BDSM have emerged. The following section will examine the context for affirming and empowering practice with members of the BDSM community.

Discussion

While identifying with BDSM practice often still relegates individuals to have marginalised identities, many of the respondents in this study also indicated important strengths gained through their BDSM identities, which confirms and supports recent findings (Graham et al., 2015; Herbert & Weaver, 2015; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). This provides an important implication for practice. The present study underscores the need to continue to understand the complex identities of members of the BDSM community. In particular, clinical practitioners should be aware of how stigma and shame can act as risk factors for BDSM clients, whereas the empowerment and resilience found in practising BDSM can also serve as protective factors for this population. Additionally, working with BDSM clients also necessitates that clinical practitioners are aware of how intersectional identities may lead to a variety of experiences for members of this population. While these findings uncovered multiple realities experienced by those that practice BDSM, a number of limitations also proved significant in the analysis of these results.

Stigma and shame

Practitioners working with clients who participate in BDSM must be aware of the ways stigma and shame can act as particular risk factors for this population. Due to their varying degrees of openness, many members of the BDSM community engage with individuals outside of their social and sexual spheres and may be hesitant to disclose this aspect of their identities to family or friends. As Holt (2016) notes, such disclosure may lead to ‘losses [in] status, relationships, employment, and respect’ for BDSM practitioners (p. 11). Clinical practitioners must develop the competence to support BDSM clients if this private identity causes any form of distress due to stigma and shame. Openness within the therapeutic relationship is critical to help BDSM clients grapple with the unique struggles that accompany their often multi-faceted identity and provide a safe space for disclosure and ongoing support, and this research identified that people who experience shame are less likely to be open with any medical providers. Much like working with LGBTQ clients, clinical
practitioners must work to understand how oppression, stigma and shame uniquely affect BDSM clients, especially those who cannot or choose not to come out.

**Empowerment and resilience**

There are a multitude of protective factors that counter the stigma and shame encountered by some BDSM clients. Clinical practitioners should be aware of the tremendous potential for empowerment and resilience found within the practices of BDSM culture. More than half of the participants in this qualitative study reported feeling empowered by their BDSM identity and participation in BDSM practices. As Wismeijer and Assen (2013) similarly confirm in their study, ‘BDSM participation [was] associated with a higher level of subjective well-being’ (p. 1950). Such feelings of empowerment, self-esteem and self-confidence are significant as they serve as important beacons of resiliency against stigma and shame. In therapeutic settings, BDSM clients’ empowerment and resilience should be utilised to provide support, especially when working from a strength-based perspective.

**Intersectionality**

Another important consideration for clinical practitioners to keep in mind when working with BDSM clients is the impact of intersectionality on the unique identity formation for each client. Practitioners should consider the myriad ways that race, class, gender, sex, sexual orientation, ability, religion, age and education all coalesce to form an individual’s identity. In the same regard, practitioners should remember that BDSM clients do not share a monolithic identity. As illustrated through the various qualitative responses in this study while many shared similar sentiments, each participant’s response was unique in the way they understood their identity as well as the avenues through which they participated in BDSM practices. Male- and gay-identified individuals displayed some distinct patterns in understanding disclosure and in this sample identified more strongly with the BDSM community than others in the survey. That said, it is also important for those working with this community to guard against broad generalisations and rather work to understand the individual and often complex aspects of each client’s identity and relationship with BDSM culture, sex and sexuality. This was also noted in a qualitative study with the BDSM population by Faccio, Casini, and Cipolletta (2014): ‘sex was defined as “complex” and “constantly in change”, but in a positive sense’ (p. 760). Ultimately, what may be true for one member of the BDSM community may not be true for another.

Additionally, understanding that there are similarities and difference between BDSM and non-BDSM behaviours and contexts may be helpful for practitioners expanding their knowledge of intersectionality factors. In one study, male and female participants showed similar sexual functioning in both BDSM and non-BDSM contexts, while some of their most favoured BDSM practices did not always align with actual activities that individuals most frequently engaged in (Pascoal, Cardoso, & Henriques, 2015). Lastly, continued efforts are necessary for ongoing research to recruit participants from groups that may be under-represented or who may be in a position of particular stigmatisation due to their BDSM interests. Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2004) encourage finding such voices of marginalised groups as a way to increase validity in research by helping uncover power structures inherent in societies. Clinical practitioners should work to understand how all clients’ unique positionalities contribute to their experiences – however, this is especially true when working with people who practice BDSM.

**Practitioner self-awareness**

One of the most challenging aspects of health and mental health practice for many practitioners across disciplines pertains to the ongoing management of individual biases, assumptions,
stereotypes and counter-transference. Such self-awareness is essential when working with diverse populations, such as those within the BDSM community. Practitioners should continue their education and training associated with expanding knowledge and competency of marginalised communities, including an understanding of their behaviours and unique needs. In one study of psychotherapists, researchers found that a majority of respondents did not have any formal training addressing BDSM topics or other sexual diversity issues, even though 76% had seen a client reporting some type of BDSM involvement (Kelsey, Stiles, Spiller, & Diekhoff, 2013). Furthermore, in the same sample of psychotherapists, researchers found that only 48% rated themselves as competent in the area of sexual diversity and BDSM topics (Kelsey et al., 2013). Therefore, it is critical that practitioners seek out good clinical supervision, along with individual therapy if necessary and additional educational and training opportunities to help combat individual experiences of shame and create an open environment to address issues of sexuality as they arise. Such trainings should include best practices and affirming methods and approaches for work with the BDSM community and all sexual minority groups. Ultimately, providing an empowering space within the therapeutic alliance is as essential as ensuring that all programmes, policies, office spaces and staff members are equally affirming.

Limitations

This study includes a number of limitations associated with understanding the unique needs of the widely diverse BDSM community. The first limitation surrounds the composition of the sample as predominately white and highly educated from the mid-western section of the United States. Identifying members of a stigmatised community provides multiple challenges, including the snowball effect of a limited number of respondents sharing the survey link solely with those known ‘within’ their own BDSM community. This may have limited participation responses to those more comfortable with their BDSM identity and excluded those less comfortable or novices, among others. A similar limitation pertains to the distribution of the survey among networks familiar to the principal investigator, potentially biasing and limiting national and international distribution and respondents. However, it should be noted that from a feminist theoretical perspective, knowledge and connectedness to the primary investigator may also be framed as a strength of the study. Lastly, the length of the survey may have been a barrier to completion for some participants, as several did not complete the full survey stopping at the mid-point. Notwithstanding such limitations, there are a number of implications for practice that include expanding knowledge associated with issues related to stigma and shame, empowerment and resilience, as well as identity and practitioner self-awareness.

Conclusions

Studying the community of individuals who engage in BDSM practices is not a monolithic endeavour. While research associated with this population has somewhat expanded within recent years, there remains a significant need for continued study. In particular, as this population is so dynamic and unique in their numerous identities, behaviours, and practices, researchers and clinicians alike must be aware of the complex phenomena at play, especially with regard to power, identification, and resilience. This study is by no means exhaustive as it represents one look at self-perceptions by members of the BDSM community related to their personal, professional and social identities, as well as their understanding of power, disclosure and resilience. The participant sample also demonstrates considerable challenges associated with understanding the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the BDSM community. By analysing and examining these results through a systemic, feminist, and strengths-based perspective, clinicians and other researchers gain the ability to use these findings in strengthening their practice. Recognising the challenges as well as strengths of the BDSM community can allow clinicians
and researchers to develop more helpful and respectful therapeutic resources while supporting
their clients in ongoing personal and interpersonal development. Most importantly, studies like
this may exhibit considerable implications for social justice. By recognising BDSM practices as an
important facet of other identities – people who participate in BDSM are humanised. Among
numerous other discoveries, this study’s findings indicated that people who practice BDSM exist
within a constellation of identities. Practice and participation in BDSM constitutes one of those
identities that is continually informed and shaped by countless others. Understanding people
who practice BDSM must be a continually evolving process as we come to understand more
about the diversity and strengths within various BDSM communities and as our increasingly
global and virtual world continues to expand.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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