

## **Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) Identity Development**

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**Abstract:** Identity shapes how people make sense of the world. Sexual minorities' sexual orientations and gender identities fall outside of heteronormative categorizations. Adults engage in diverse relationships: many of them fall outside of heteronormative boundaries. As an instrument of social justice, Adult Education can be a site for BDSM identity development.

Identity shapes how people make sense of the world and their experiences in it, including the interactions with others (Anzaldúa, 2007; Cooley, 1964; Erikson, 1968; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Sarup, 1996). Individuals' identities develop in stages, and as culture changes; so do the questions of identity (Erikson, 1986). However, identity is not something that people find or that exists once and for all; rather, it is a process through which people try to understand their lives, personally, philosophically, and politically (Sarup, 1996). In fact, people "exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality" (Gergen, 1991, p. 7). Categories of fixed identity can lead to oppression (Anzaldúa, 2007; Gamson, 1995; Mohanty, 2003) and might cause conflict and challenges for people who develop identities outside of fixed, or traditional, boundaries.

Sexual minorities are individuals "whose sexual orientations and gender identities fall outside of heteronormative categorizations of sex, sexuality, and gender as well as outside the dichotomies of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual binaries" (Grace, Dawson, & Hillyard, 2010, p. 21). Heteronormativity refers to "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged" (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 548). Until recently, little was known about the identity development processes that impact sexual minorities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) youth, which resulted in misinformation and a distorted understanding of their lives (Savin-Williams, 2001). Many models of sexual identity development are based on a heterosexual/homosexual binary, even as they depart from traditional models of heterosexual identity development (Clarke et al., 2010). Furthermore, although some models of sexual identity development depart from traditional models of heterosexual identity development, many remain based on a heterosexual/homosexual binary (Clarke et al., 2010).

Adults engage in diverse forms of intimate relationships, many of which place them outside of heteronormative boundaries of gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, and relationship orientation (Califia, 1991; Connolly, 2006; Ernulf, 1995; Grace, Dawson, & Hillyard, 2010; Janus & Janus, 1993; Kinsey et al., 1953; Krafft-Ebing, 1983; NCSF, 1999). Bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism, or sadomasochism (collectively known as BDSM) refer to three aspects of sexuality and sexual orientation. Engaging in or practicing BDSM is a lifestyle choice that places practitioners outside of heteronormative standards (Langdrige & Barker, 2008; Yarber, Sayad, & Strong, 2010).

Grace and Hill (2004) wrote about queer as “representing our spectral community that incorporates a diversity of sex, sexual and gender differences” and queerness as “our ways of being, believing, desiring, becoming, belonging, and acting in life-and-learning spaces” (p. 167). They also wrote about the “sociocultural and political hinterland” in which queer persons are often left to struggle with issues of being, self-preservation, expectation, becoming, resistance, and belonging (Grace & Hill, 2004, p. 177). They link learning and adult education to social justice, where adult education can be an instrument for social action.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss some models and perspectives of sexual orientation and gender identity, common practices, roles and experiences of people who practice BDSM, and how practitioners learn about BDSM; as well as to show that education about and advocacy for BDSM practitioners is necessary to help individuals avoid problems related to suppressed identities, lack of knowledge and discrimination.

### **Practices, Roles and Experiences of BDSM Practitioners**

Bondage and discipline (BD) refer to (a) the materials applied to restrain one’s ability to move, or the act of applying the materials; (b) the training administered by a dominant partner to her or his submissive regarding how the submissive should behave; and/ or (c) punishment and correction when the submissive fails to act in the proper manner. Dominance and submission (D/s) refer to the sexual arousal derived from the consensual domination of one partner over another partner, where someone gives up a negotiated level of control over their lives and the other person accepts the control. It is the psychological and emotional underpinnings of BDSM. Sadism and masochism, or sadomasochism (SM) refer to the consensual use of pain, intense sensation, humiliation, and power exchange for erotic enjoyment. SM may or may not refer to heavy or extreme play, and is a somewhat vague term. SM is commonly used to describe dominance and submission, just as D/s is sometimes used as an umbrella term for SM.

Historically, psychological and medical perspectives have been concerned with pathologizing SM practices, often focusing on acts that are extreme or non-consensual. Recently, interest has grown in studying SM in non-pathological ways (Langdridge & Barker, 2008). From a sociological perspective, SM is a sexual lifestyle, a subculture with its own norms, values, organizations and symbols (Weinberg, 1995), on the cutting edge of society and whose practitioners are marginalized by mental health professions and society (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2006). Kleinplatz and Moser (2006) recognize a need for greater tolerance and understanding of SM and encourage health professionals and society to adopt a more sex-friendly perspective of SM practitioners.

BDSM practitioners engage in BD, D/s, or SM on a spectrum from rarely to “just in the bedroom,” to 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. There are a variety of BDSM-related activities and roles in which an individual can engage. One might identify as a master or mistress, maintaining a permanent role over a slave, or as that slave; as a dominant person who occasionally tops (directs the actions of) another person, or as the bottom to that top. One might identify as a slave who tops, as a dominant who enjoys receiving pain (masochist), as a submissive who enjoys giving pain (sadist) or as someone who participates in all or none of these roles. On the other hand, someone might enjoy one or many of these activities without identifying as a practitioner. An estimated 14% of men and 11% of women have experienced some sort of SM (Janus & Janus, 1993). Of the 1,017 surveys from BDSM practitioners, obtained through the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF) Violence and Discrimination Survey (1999), 51% were men, 46% were women, 1% is transgender, and 2% were intersexual. Twenty-eight percent of

the respondents were “out”; many of the rest were closeted due to fear of job loss, concerns about child custody, or potential harm to family relationships.

Cutler’s (2003) research about couples in BDSM relationships showed that dominant partners make decisions in consideration of their submissive partners, not in a vacuum; and that their activities are not determined by gender or role. A slave may feel cherished and protected when obeying or kneeling at the feet of his or her Master. A masochistic top may enjoy being whipped by his or her bottom without losing his or her stature as the partner in control. Thus, the role that one performs in the BDSM Community or relationship does not dictate, nor is it dictated by, one’s gender or sexual orientation identity.

In his research about women who practice consensual nonmonogamy, Franceschi (2006) found that no studies have looked at how consensually nonmonogamous women deal with societal and familial pressures to get married and become a mother while maintaining a divergent lifestyle. Some participants in his study view nonmonogamy as an orientation, an inborn trait that everyone has, but that some people conform to how they are “supposed to” behave. Franceschi (2006) argued that infidelity in the United States is so common that it weakens the premise of monogamy being the cultural norm.

BDSM practitioners might not form their identities in a linear trajectory, and aspects of their identity might conflict. For example, if a person believes in equality (that everyone should have equal right to pay, to vote, to marry, etc.) but desires to submit to, be hurt by, or humiliated by another person, then perhaps those aspects of his or her identities might conflict. The same might happen to someone who desires to dominate, hurt or humiliate another person; he or she might feel caught in the middle between BDSM and feminism and isolated from both communities (Eckhart, 1996). The potential conflicts and challenges related to developing or accepting such multiple identities seem diverse, could be problematic and offer opportunities for research.

In Smith’s documentary, “BDSM-Alternative Loving” (2002), several BDSM practitioners and educators discussed their practices, often sharing that they do not see it as very different from non-BDSM (vanilla) practices. Brame discussed how media has sensationalized and dehumanized sex and BDSM. She has been asked many times to demonstrate on stage how she would whip someone; yet, she doubts that anyone has invited Dr. Ruth to demonstrate how to give a man oral sex (Smith, 2002). Brame compared SM activity to bungee jumping. When someone explains that he or she went bungee jumping for the rush, the person who asked tends to understand, even if they wouldn’t do it themselves. Yet when an SM practitioner gives the same reason for their SM activities, the reaction tends to be different: incredulous, dismissing, or judgmental (Smith, 2002). A dominatrix interviewed stated that many of the men who employed her as a dominatrix were married men who had not informed their wives of their SM desires, perhaps because they are embarrassed or ashamed of them (Smith, 2002). Someone described a masochist as a person who pushes his or her body or mind beyond limits, like a runner might in order to achieve a running high, and another interviewee shared that she has developed an ability to eroticize pain in certain situations and with certain people; however, she would not enjoy the pain caused by slamming her hand in a door (Smith, 2002).

#### **Method and Procedures**

In a search of existing literature about BDSM and identity development, research pertaining to BDSM-related identities was found (Connolly, 2006; Ernulf, 1995; Kinsey et al., 1953; Kleinplatz & Moser, 2006; Langdridge & Barker, 2008; Weinberg, 1995), but no models specific to BDSM identity development were found. Databases used for the search included

JSTOR, Academic OneFile, OmniFile, and Proquest. Google Scholar (2011) and Amazon (2011) were also used. A search of the terms BDSM, SM, sadomasochism, identity development and feminism produced more than 50 journal articles, many of which focused on LGBT identities or the mental health and counseling of individuals who engage in BDSM. More than 20 books were produced, which addressed topics such as the mental health, relationship dynamics, and activities of BDSM practitioners; how to find other members of the BDSM Community; and topics related to the identity development and experiences of LBGT persons. The search also produced information about websites and college groups that exist to provide support to members of the BDSM Community. Some of these websites recommended additional sources of information regarding BDSM, including blogs and online forums. The search provided books and articles that had already been gathered, as well. Based on the literature gathered, three themes were identified: sexual orientation and gender identity development; how and where learning about BDSM occurs; and the need for advocacy and support of BDSM identity development.

### **Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Development**

The most closely related models or perspectives found through the search pertained to LGBT or queer scholarship, where “models and theories related to sexual orientation and gender identity development differ in scope, format, and underlying epistemological assumptions” (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 33).

Bilodeau and Renn (2005) studied LGBT identity as it is observed and developed in settings of higher education. Considering that LGBT and BDSM orientations fall outside of heteronormativity, these theories might relate to BDSM identity development, as well. In Cass’s (1979) model of homosexual identity development, individuals go through stages of identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor’s (1994) model of bisexual identity development suggests stages of initial confusion, finding and applying the label, settling into the identity, and continued uncertainty. Clifford and Orford’s (2007) model of trans-identity development suggests stages of developing an awareness of being different, starting the process, and acclimatizing to a new life. These models all suggest stages of identity development, but identity formation is not necessarily a linear process; the fluidity of identity must also be considered. For example, some individuals’ sexual attraction, behavior and identity can have more to do with the characteristics of their partner than with their gender (Diamond, 2003; Impett & Peplau, 2003). Fortunately, research in the areas of sexual orientation identity development beyond heterosexual, gay, and lesbian identities is expanding and may challenge the traditional stage models (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). “Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed,” argued Butler (1988), “rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (p. 519). Many young people experience their sexuality as fluid (Savin-Williams, 2005); different identities and practices might be explored and accepted, rejected, returned to at a later point in life, or not consciously acknowledged at all.

### **Learning BDSM**

The Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities (CARAS) Educational Needs Assessment (Sprott, 2010) assessed the educational needs of 1,041 BDSM practitioners. More than seventy-nine percent of the respondents belonged to a BDSM organization. The respondents noted four motivations for participating in educational events: entering the community (25%); maintaining community (22%); acquisition of

instrumental skills (20%); and seeking personal relationships (10%). BDSM education happens in cities throughout the world, in large numbers, and covers a breadth of topics (FetLife, 2010).

Most major cities in the United States have BDSM support and educational groups, many of which organize meetings and seminars to help new members enter the community, learn new techniques, and socialize with like-minded people (Miller & Devon, 1995). Two such groups are the National Leather Association-International (NLA-I, 2010), a pansexual organization throughout the U.S. and Canada and the Society of Janus, a not-for-profit, all volunteer, San Francisco-based organization devoted to the art of safe, consensual and non-exploitative BDSM.

Iowa State University Cuffs is an educational group through which students learn about BDSM and safe, consensual, and non-exploitative human sexuality. Their educational topics include how to safely meet a play partner; bondage; negotiating a scene; and preventing sexual assault (CUFFS, 2010). Risk-Aware Consensual Kink (RACK) is the University of Chicago BDSM club. As a registered student organization, RACK raises awareness about kink and provides resources to interested students (RACK, 2010). Though such groups seem to be safe forums in which students choose to explore and develop their identities, not all colleges have similar groups.

Websites exist for specific interest groups, for local community members to socialize, for people looking for partners, and for academic researchers to connect and share information. Launched in 2008, FetLife is a free social network for the BDSM community, similar to Facebook and MySpace, but for people who engage in BDSM (FetLife, 2011). On November 15, 2010, the FetLife website reported 610,006 members who had shared 2,227,316 pictures and 14,990 videos; participated in 759,894 discussions in 21,085 groups; announced 2,266 events; and created 318,399 blog posts (FetLife, 2011).

Educational books that are often recommended to individuals new to BDSM address a wide array of topics such as defining common terms and practices and suggesting ways to find partners or initiate, negotiate or maintain relationships (Miller & Devon, 1995; Warren, 2000; Wiseman, 1991). Such educational resources also list organizations through which members can meet other members and offer ways for people to encourage their partners to engage in BDSM (Warren, 2000). They also provide ideas about how to give or receive bondage, pain or humiliation, how to use toys, ways to be safer, and where and how to seek help for various situations.

### **Advocacy to Support BDSM Identity Development**

As a system used to determine who is normal and who is deviant, based on the maintenance of strict boundaries; heterosexual privilege also allows the sanctioned discrimination of people who deviate from those boundaries (Rocco & Gallagher, 2006). BDSM practitioners fall outside of such boundaries, more so if their masculinity or femininity falls outside the binary. Partners who engage in Master/slave relationships can be of even greater risk of mockery, shunning, and discrimination, as their relationships might be perceived as beyond simple “kinky sex” (Chasey, 2008).

Califia (1991) suggested that although major improvement has been made in terms of heterosexist mores, such as insisting that a man can be the bottom in a relationship or that a woman can have control, the meanings of all sexual acts should be challenged. Baldwin (1991) wrote about a kinky second coming out, that “kinky people, like gay people, are only supposed to *do it* in secret, in private, in fear, in self loathing, and most of all, in silence. And so we did. For a very long time. Until now” (p. 178). This private shame, self-loathing and silence can

have an impact on how individuals develop or perform their identities, particularly if they have a limited ability to connect or learn with other people with similar interests or identities.

Although BDSM images might appear more often in popular media than they used to, this does not mean that it is understood or more accepted by mainstream society. In fact, as Ravenstone (2010) blogged, it might be another stereotypical portrayal of BDSM to titillate viewers:

I think it more accurate to say *there is more awareness of kink* than to say it's 'going mainstream' in any real sense of the word. The GLBT community is much further along than we are, largely because of the efforts of educators and activists. Whether we want to become genuinely mainstream, or merely left alone, we can't rely on flawed and fleeting media images to do that for us. There's more to raising authentic awareness than that, and it requires the hard work of educating our vanilla neighbors. (n.p.)

Not everything related to BDSM will be as easy, fun, or extreme as is often portrayed in media.

The NCSF advocates for consenting adults in the BDSM-Leather-Fetish, Swing and Polyamory Communities by providing direct services, education, advocacy, and outreach. The NCSF Violence and Discrimination Survey (NCSF, 1999) was administered to gather demographic data about the SM-Leather-Fetish communities and gain an understanding of the effect of social stigma on practitioners. Of the respondents who reported experiencing violence or discrimination, only one-third were out (NCSF, 1999). Respondents experienced various forms of discrimination, including one's doctor calling the desire for body modification "sick," a roommate trying to "save" a respondent by reporting her interests to the practitioner's supervisor, and being ostracized for receiving SM/Leather/Fetish publications (NCSF, 1999). Some respondents reported that they had been beaten up because someone else thought that being submissive meant it was okay to be beaten up and raped. Thirty-six percent of the respondents reported being harassed or attacked due to their sexual practices, but ninety-six percent never reported the crime, for reasons such as they did not think that authorities would believe them or take them seriously (NCSF, 1999).

During the NCSF 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium in 1999, neurologist W. and NCSF Policy Director Wright emphasized to health care providers the importance of understanding the basic principles of SM in order to fulfill their responsibilities to patients (W & Wright, 1999). They provided examples of concerns that patients might be reluctant to share, such as a woman with a vaginal tear from fisting or a man with numbness and weakness in both arms due to bondage. These health concerns, which could have serious negative consequences if not treated, might not be so problematic if there was less embarrassment about consensual BDSM.

### **Conclusion**

BDSM practitioners learn about themselves, other people and communities on their own, with and from other people, online or in person. Identities develop over time, through continuous construction and reconstruction, from which new meanings are negotiated. Identity both shapes and is shaped by the meaning that people make of the world and their experiences in it. Although research models and perspectives on identity development exist, few tried to investigate BDSM identity development as a consensual, non-pathological lifestyle choice. Research can contribute to a more accurate understanding of BDSM practitioners by relying less on data gathered from extreme or non-consensual acts. BDSM practitioners want opportunities to learn and socialize within the BDSM Community. BDSM education can provide a rich environment for research about adult education, especially in settings outside of heteronormative

boundaries, and can promote social justice. Policymakers and educators should understand how heterosexual privilege can negatively impact BDSM practitioners, their families, and society in general. Researchers, professionals and policymakers who want to encourage healthy identity development for individuals who will, in turn, interact in society and form group identities, should strive to understand the various process of identity formation and the challenges and successes, joys and pains that individuals experience as they strive to understand themselves and the worlds in which they live.

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