

The BDSM Power Exchange:

Subversion, Transcendence, Sexual (R)evolution

Dulcinea Pitagora, MA, LMSW

Abstract

BDSM interactions can be perceived as a reaction against conventional socio-political roles and rote dynamics of power and subjugation. Inherent in the BDSM power exchange is a means to transcend heteronormative constraints of eroticism by exposing the inadequacies of the typical social constructions that designate agents of power. Academic research reveals that the freedom from constraint sought by BDSM practitioners might have the power to further the potential of human freedom, in the realm of sexuality and beyond. In the negotiation of power dynamics, and the breakdown of traditional gender and sexual norms, a transcendence is possible, for all individuals who fall in- or outside of the statistical sexual norm. With a conscious application of the concepts of gender subversion, and attention to negotiated and consensual power dynamics to all manner of sexual interaction, an evolution of sexual potential for all is not only possible, but likely, and overdue.

Keywords: BDSM, gender roles, power dynamics, gender diversity, alternative sexuality

The BDSM Power Exchange: Subversion, Transcendence, Sexual (R)evolution

Modern society has progressed in recent decades towards tolerance, and perhaps even acceptance, of individuals who do not conform to the statistical norm in terms of sexual and gender expression. Having said that, human consciousness remains overwhelmingly confined by rigid definitions of sexual orientation and gender identification, which reinforce binary stereotypes and the pathologization of individuals who identify outside of the mainstream. Research on the subject of BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Sadomasochism) has historically pathologized BDSM practitioners by focusing on nonconsensual interactions that incorporate elements of sexual sadism or masochism as defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* [(DSM) American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Pitagora, 2013]. However, over the past two decades, BDSM desire and expression have increasingly been considered an atypical but naturally occurring variation of human sexuality in 5 to 14% of the general population (Masters, Johnson, & Kolodny, 1995; Janus and Janus, 1993). In response to the *DSM-5*, critics have raised arguments for the removal of the paraphilic disorders section, based on a lack of objective research to support its inclusion, as well as the section's poorly written and conflicting diagnostic criteria; it is suggested that the disorders remain included largely for historic and/or political reasons (Federoff, Di Gicchino, & Murphy, 2013; Moser, 2013).

It is heartening to see a trend towards the depathologization of atypical sexual orientations and gender identifications, as indicated by the eventual removal of homosexuality from the *DSM* after 30 years of inclusion, and the changes to gender-based disorders that seem to be following suit (Drescher, 2010). It is possible that the paraphilic disorders section in the *DSM-5* will follow a similar trajectory, given that the diagnoses were created using culturally-based criteria with no basis in scientific evidence for their inclusion (Federoff, Gioacchino, & Murphy,

2013; Moser, 2013). Though evolution of cultural and academic perceptions of atypical sexual and gender expression is a long and arduous process, there are signs indicating that societal tolerance and acceptance is on the horizon. For those with the end goal of equality, this is a promising prospect; however, for those who want more than to be included in the status quo, acceptance and tolerance are not enough. That is to say, repurposing atypical sexual and gender expressions so that they fit into the mainstream idea of what is acceptable does little to further the sexual evolution of society as a whole. This line of reasoning presents a conundrum: Is the fight for sexual freedom merely about fair treatment of sexual minority individuals, or also about questioning structures that limit the potential of human freedom for everyone?

In 2012, LGBT social justice activist Urvashi Vaid proposed that equality is not necessarily the ideal end goal for those situated in the margins of sexual orientation and gender identification. Instead, Vaid suggests a superseding goal—that of employing inherent truths in atypical desires and identifications to debunk inadequate and harmful binary systems of sexual and gender expression. For example, by shedding light on the way that the consensual and negotiated sexual interactions typical in BDSM practices can subvert stereotypical gender roles, a world of possibility could be exposed for those mired in rote behaviors enacted within the constraints of societal expectation. The question asked another way: Might an evolution of identity be possible for all individuals, no matter how mainstream and conforming, by learning from those who deviate from the sexual norm?

These questions can be elucidated by unpacking BDSM enactments, and peering into the way that BDSM power roles transcend traditional dynamics of gender and sexual orientation. To many, BDSM interactions and participants evoke very specific imagery, though BDSM is a superordinate term that encapsulates a vast array of erotic behaviors and sexual self-

identifications, including but not limited to: the consensual exchange of physical pain states; restraint; psychological games; and assumption of specific roles for the purpose of power exchange (Alison et al., 2001; Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006). Despite the tendency to think of individuals who practice BDSM as iconic, BDSM participants represent a cross-section of society. Though the literature is sparse—perhaps in part due to the desire of many BDSM participants to remain invisible—there are studies emphasizing the wide range of demographics represented by BDSM practitioners, including various age groups, ethnicities, occupations, genders, and sexual identities.

Those who incorporate BDSM into their sexual interactions do so in widely varying manners and intensities, and self-identify using a variety of terms (Pitagora, 2013). The process of meaning making inherent in BDSM identifications and activities is individualized within and among participants, and terminology can take on different meanings according to the individuals who are using them. Because of this, the most common defining factors in BDSM interactions are negotiations of activity and context, and an agreement of consensuality (Pitagora, 2013). Context includes not only the physical location in which BDSM interactions occur, but extends inward to the boundless arena of cognitive and emotional processes which affects how participants hear and interpret negotiations. Consent is typified by explicit mutual agreement on the part of all parties involved in a BDSM exchange, free from coercion or undue influence (Pitagora, 2013). Context and consent resist rigidity. They can be affected by of a number of factors, as simple as a waning of desire or overstimulation, and as complex as psychological epiphany. Context and consent are interactive and recursive. Factors outside the scene can interrupt and change context, causing a change in consent; for example, an interruption by an outside party, or a physical, uncontrollable change in the environment. To ensure the continued

plasticity of the negotiation process, BDSM participants often incorporate the use of a safe word—an agreed upon word, phrase, or signal that immediately overrides the power dynamic in play, and indicates the desire to stop the scene.

Consent exists on a continuum, is fluid, and may be rescinded at any time, regardless of the physical and emotional intensity of a scene. This premise is an important prime to the mindset of the participants engaging in the scene; it deepens the recursive process of retaining and releasing control, and provides a basis for assuming positions of power or helplessness that are often primary to the success of the scene. A reciprocal exchange of power takes place in a scene set within a negotiated context that is motivated by consent, and though certain roles appear to hold a position of greater power or control, that is not necessarily the case; in fact, some assert that the bottom/submissive retains ultimate power in their capacity to rescind consent and stop a scene (Hopkins, 1994; Pitagora, 2013). It is important to note that if a BDSM scene continues after a safe word has been used, or after withdrawal of consent has been communicated in any other way, it becomes a non-consensual act of violence (Pitagora, 2013). Finally, an activity that frequently occurs following a BDSM scene is aftercare—the process of care and attention paid to the more emotionally and physically spent participant, which often includes comforting physical contact and/or verbal processing of the scene. The concept of aftercare is part of the BDSM scene trajectory, which includes the negotiation of consent, the designation of a safe word, and a collaborative return to a baseline cognitive and emotional state (Pitagora, 2013).

The way that an individual self-identifies and self-defines what BDSM power roles and activities mean to them may or may not be related to their gender identification or sexual orientation, and many BDSM practitioners give precedence to identification in terms of their role

in the power dynamic of a given relationship (Hopkins, 1994). For example, the individual who prefers to present the appearance of wielding ultimate control or to administer physical sensation might identify as a sadist, dominant, top, mistress, or master; some might identify with gendered terms such as master or sir despite also identifying as cisfemale, and vice versa. The individual who prefers to play the subjugated role might identify as a masochist, submissive, bottom, or slave. The individual who is generally more fluid in power role preference might identify as versatile or a switch. There are individuals who push the boundaries of these power roles in identifying as a power bottom (i.e., someone who runs the scene from the bottom) or service top (i.e., someone who tops according to the bottom's desires and direction). Some define their BDSM power orientation as fixed, while others feel that their power role identifications fluctuate to accommodate context or different partners (Pitagora, 2013).

An individual's gender expression is arguably the most visible set of physical characteristics used by society to form assumptions about what is acceptable behavior. This type of automatic social profiling can be exceptionally stressful for those being profiled, as there is no viable way for individuals to fulfill societal expectations of idealized stereotypical gender roles. Many BDSM participants find relief from such societal constraints within the parameters of the BDSM power exchange, and often experience a subsequent release of stress that can be quite therapeutic (Pitagora & Ophelian, 2013).

As noted above, research that explores BDSM interactions from a normative (i.e., non-pathologizing) perspective is a relatively new phenomenon, and research that explores a subversion or displacement of gender roles within BDSM interactions is quite rare. Historically, the literature has suggested that BDSM interactions might be more contingent on gender and/or sexual orientation than power dynamic, likely due to the historical bias that assigns feminine-

presenting individuals to submissive sexual roles, and masculine-presenting individuals to dominant sexual roles (Hawley & Hensley, 2009). In order to refute the “the myth of the alpha male,” a study was conducted in 2008 positing that social dominance in females had been traditionally overlooked in research, by biologists and psychologists alike. The study involved the administration of questionnaires to a relatively large sample ($N = 1723$) of children in grades 5 through 10, reporting self- and peer-ratings on aggression, social motivation, and interpersonal influence. Their findings showed patterns in females that had typically been associated with male dominance, as well as patterns in males that had typically been associated with stereotypical (i.e., less dominant) female behavior; in other words, the study suggested that social dominance exists outside the realm of gender-specific norms (Hawley, Little, & Card, 2008). This tendency toward gender skew was further refuted in Hawley and Hensley’s 2009 study of feminine power, which reported higher preferences for submissive fantasies in men than women.

One common theme described in BDSM activities as deliberately contrary to traditional patriarchal society is the common pairing of feminine dominants and masculine submissives (Hopkins, 1994). Exaggerated parodies of subjugation, oppression, and exploitation emphasize an inequity of power that is not always weighted in favor of men or masculine gender representations; thus, BDSM interactions have been described as parodying traditional heteronormative sexual interactions (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). The relationship between gender and power dynamic was examined in a qualitative study in which 24 participants from the BDSM community were interviewed regarding their sexual behaviors. The transcriptions were coded in order to determine common discourses, or “underlying systems of meaning” (p. 297), and the data showed several instances in which power dynamics were found to diverge from gender identification (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). One common theme described BDSM activities

as deliberately contrary to mandates of traditional patriarchal society, effectively ridiculing, undermining, and deconstructing mainstream sexual interactions toward the goal of exorcising subjugation and oppression (Taylor & Ussher, 2001).

Taylor and Ussher's findings directly counter arguments that many radical second- and some third-wave feminists have put forth against BDSM—that it reenacts and fosters the male-dominated structure of society, and therefore that consent in BDSM interactions is not valid (Hopkins, 1994). Reminiscent of the means by which paraphilic disorders remain included in the *DSM*, these assertions are based in philosophical beliefs and political arguments; there has been no empirical research conducted to support these theories. As noted, the research that has been conducted shows that the power structures established by BDSM participants can in effect de-gender power dynamics through pointed subversion and personal choice. The devaluing of consent in BDSM interactions due to an ostensible association with misogyny effectively strips BDSM participants of agency and reduces them to a stereotype. In other words, to say that BDSM participants are not capable of giving consent because outside viewers may misunderstand the meaning of their actions negates self-determination and further stigmatizes this sexual minority group (Hopkins, 1994).

Because underlying systems of meaning are integral to BDSM interactions, the context and connection between partners tend to supersede whatever activity might take place in a given scene. Although specific activities might be preferred by certain participants, the focus is often less on the physical enactment of a scene than it is on the agreed upon power exchange (Pitagora, 2013). That is not to say that this is necessarily the case for all BDSM participants. Human sexuality exists on a continuum, and BDSM is expressed in a myriad of ways, with a direction and intensity of manifestation decided on by the individuals involved. While BDSM tendencies

have been noted to exist and flourish for centuries, there is a case to be argued for the amplification of BDSM in modern culture.

McClintock's (1993) exploration of the intersection between fetishism and gender power suggests that the prevalence of BDSM continues to expand due to a desire in modern societies to challenge mainstream social constructs of power, gender, identity, and erotic expression. BDSM power roles are said to complicate and/or supersede traditional power roles by subverting socially ingrained power dynamics through the creation and enactment of interactions that pointedly appropriate the privilege to punish (McClintock, 1993). There is no default method of behavior or expression in BDSM; instead, there is a conscious disruption of conformity, which can serve to free the individuals involved from the pressure of conforming to mainstream society, thereby providing psychological relief (Pitagora & Ophelian, 2013). The parameters of a BDSM scene can provide a safe space where any gender can adopt any power role, thereby challenging the constraints of stereotypical gender expression (McClintock, 1993), and allowing for an expansion, elaboration, or contradiction of an individual's typical gender expression in daily life. Participants can fluidly inhabit different sexual identities within or across BDSM scenes, mocking the idea of an expected and fixed identity, freeing individuals to expand their exploration of erotic desire, fantasy, and self-identification (Hopkins, 1994; McClintock, 1993). The vast array of scenarios and activities that fall within the realm of BDSM encourage many participants to seek an evolution of their sexuality and definition of self. Furthermore, many BDSM interactions deconstruct the expectation that erotic acts should be genitally focused, in the exploration of non-genital, atypical erogenous locations on the body or in the mind for arousal (Hopkins, 1994; McClintock, 1993). This displacement and diffusion of arousal challenges the

notion of conventionally enacted sexual stimulation, and allows for an ongoing expansion of physical and psychological outlets of sexual satisfaction.

That BDSM scenes can provide a safe space, free from predefined power structures in terms of gender and sexuality, makes them ecologically ideal for an evolution of the individual as well as that of society (Bauer, 2008). Some BDSM participants have found that the negotiation and explicit consent required in BDSM interactions have carried over into their non-sexual interpersonal interactions, thus providing an example of how heightened states of consciousness set against a subversive backdrop can flow beneficially outward into daily life (Hopkins, 1994). Accordingly, BDSM interactions can be understood as a reaction against conventional socio-political roles and rote dynamics of power and subjugation, and as an appropriation by means of eroticism and transcendence, exposing the inadequacies of the typical social constructions that designate agents of power, and highlighting an opportunity for change (Beckman, 2007). Seen in this way, it certainly seems as though the fight for sexual freedom has the potential to extend beyond the mere tolerance and acceptance of those who participate in non-mainstream sexual interactions. Rather, the freedom from constraint sought by those who question the structures inherent in mainstream society might indeed have the power to further the potential of human freedom. In the explicit negotiation of power dynamics, and the inherent breakdown of traditional gender and sexual norms, a transcendence is possible, not only for the individuals who practice BDSM, but for all individuals who fall in- or outside of the statistical sexual norm. It stands to reason that with a conscious application of the concepts of gender subversion, and attention to negotiated and consensual power dynamics to all manner of sexual interaction, an evolution of sexual potential for all is not only possible, but likely, and overdue.

References

- Alison, L., Santtila, P., Sandnabba, N. K., & Nordling, N. (2001). Sadomasochistically oriented behavior: Diversity in practice and meaning. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 30*(1), 1-12.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Bauer, R. (2008). Transgressive and transformative gendered sexual practices and white privileges: The case of the dyke/trans BDSM communities. *Women's Studies Quarterly, 36*(3/4), 233-254.
- Beckman, A. (2007). The 'Bodily Practices' of Consensual 'SM,' Spirituality and 'Transcendence'. In D. Langdrige & M. Barker (Eds.), *Safe, sane, and consensual: Contemporary perspectives on sadomasochism* (pp. 98–118). Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Drescher, J. (2010). Queer Diagnoses: Parallels and Contrasts in the History of Homosexuality, Gender Variance, and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 39*(2), 427-460.
- Federoff, J. P., Di Giocchino, L., & Murphy, L. (2013). Problems with paraphilias in the DSM-5. *Current Psychiatry Reports, 15*(8), 363: 1-6.
- Hawley, P. H. & Hensley, W. A. (2009). Social dominance and forceful submission fantasies: Feminine pathology or power? *The Journal of Sex Research, 46*(6), 568–585.
- Hawley, P. H., Little, T. D., & Card, N. A. (2008). The myth of the alpha male: A new look at dominance-related beliefs and behaviors among adolescent males and females. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 32*(1), 76–88.

Hopkins, P. (1994). Rethinking sadomasochism: Feminism, interpretation, and simulation.

Hypatia, 9(1), 116-141.

Janus, S. S. & Janus, C. L. (1993). *The Janus report on sexual behavior*. New York, NY: John Wiley.

Kolmes, K., Stock, W., & Moser, C. (2006). Investigating bias in psychotherapy with BDSM clients. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 50(2-3), 301-324. doi: 10.1300/J082v50n02_15

Masters, W., Johnson, V., & Kolodny, R. (1995). *Human sexuality* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Little, Brown.

McClintock, A. (1993). Maid to order: Commercial fetishism and gender power. *Social Text*, 37, 87-116.

Moser, C. (2013). *Evidence-based medicine, psychiatry, the paraphilias, and BDSM*.

[PowerPoint slides]

Pitagora, D. (2013) Consent vs. coercion: BDSM interactions highlight a fine but immutable line. *New School Psychology Bulletin*, 10(1), 27-36.

Pitagora, D. & Ophelian, A. (2013). *Therapeutic benefits of subspace in BDSM interactions*.

[PowerPoint slides]

Richters, J., de Visser, R. O., Rissel, C. E., Grulich, A. E., & Smith, A. (2008). Bondage and discipline, “sadomasochism” or dominance and submission (BDSM): Data from a national survey. *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 5(7), 1660-1668. doi:

10.1111/j.1743.6109.2008.00795.x

Taylor, G. W. & Ussher, J. M. (2001). Making sense of S&M: A discourse analytic account.

Sexualities, 4(3), 293-314.

- Vaid, U. (2012). *Irresistible revolution: Confronting race, class, and the assumptions of LGBT politics*. New York, NY: Magnus Books.
- Wright, S. (2006). Discrimination of SM-identified individuals. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 50(2-3), 217-231.
- Yost, M. R. (2007). Sexual fantasies of SM practitioners. In D. Langdridge & M. Barker (Eds.), *Safe, sane, and consensual: Contemporary perspectives on sadomasochism* (pp. 135-154). Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Zurbriggen, E. L. (2000). Social motives and cognitive power–sex associations: Predictors of aggressive sexual behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(3), 559–581.