



Is BDSM a Sexual Orientation or Serious Leisure?

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Abstract

Purpose of Review This review summarizes recent empirical and theoretical scholarship pertaining to two primary ways that BDSM is conceptualized, specifically as a unique sexual orientation or as a form of leisure experience. This review helps clinicians understand how BDSM is currently positioned by scholars and by some within the BDSM community.

Recent Findings Recent studies have found strong support for both the sexual orientation and leisure perspectives, distinctly. The sexual orientation approach currently focuses on a somewhat narrow segment of highly invested BDSM participants, while the leisure approach accounts for a broad range of diverse participation and experience.

Summary BDSM can be understood as both an orientation and as leisure for many but not all participants. Both perspectives share the same underlying multidisciplinary substrate. Although the emphases of the orientation and leisure approaches are different to some degree, the sexual orientation perspective (OP) and the serious leisure perspective (SLP) seem to account equally well for sexual identity centered on BDSM. Understanding both perspectives provides a more complete understanding of the variation and complexity of BDSM.

Keywords BDSM · Leisure · Serious leisure perspective · Sexual configurations theory · Sexual orientation

Introduction

BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism), or sometimes referred to as *kink* and/or *fetish*, involves a range of esoteric erotic interests, behaviors, relationships, and identities. Aspects of kink include eroticizing intense sensations (including but not limited to “pain”), eroticizing power dynamics and power differentials, enduring fascination with specific sensory stimuli including specific body parts or inanimate objects (“fetish”), role play or dramatizing

erotic scenarios, and erotic activities that induce heightened or altered states of consciousness [1••].

Currently in the field, there are several theoretical approaches that do not assume pathology as inherent to BDSM interests or behaviors. Two of the productive theoretical approaches are the leisure approach and the sexual orientation approach. This distinction in theoretical approach is echoed by two different discourses often found in books, blogs, websites, and resources produced by BDSM community members: one discourse focused on pleasurable, fun, technical, and meaningful pursuits; the other on lifelong, innate attractions, and interests that seem beyond the choice of the individual. Is this distinction in theory and discourse important for clinicians to understand? Yes, understanding these two approaches can aid in facilitating communication, rapport, and trust between clinician and patient.

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Brief Overview of Leisure as a Construct

Before specifically addressing the concept of leisure, it is important to note that leisure science is a small but distinct field of study with multidisciplinary roots. Leisure scholars study what (and who, why, and how) people do that is personally meaningful and enjoyable. Similar to sexology, leisure

scholarship is informed by traditional disciplines such as biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics [2]. Surprisingly, despite much disciplinary commonality, the overlap between the sexual and leisure sciences is just beginning to be seriously explored.

As a concept, leisure has resisted a precise definition among scholars. Although lay people commonly equate leisure with simple free time, scholars reject this interchangeability. Leisure may be conceptualized as meaningful time, activity (behavior), setting, or mental state, and each of these conceptualizations is somewhat different [3]. However, scholars are in agreement that leisure must be relatively freely chosen (non-coerced) and intrinsically motivated. Leisure participation is typically associated with various positive emotions, self-expression, stress relief, and relaxation or adventure (depending on the experience). Indeed, the possibilities for specific types of leisure appear to be endless.

The Serious Leisure Perspective

Over the past 40 years, Robert Stebbins has worked to classify and understand the many varied forms of leisure activities, which he calls the serious leisure perspective (SLP). Based on SLP, specific leisure activities fall somewhere on a continuum from casual leisure at one end to serious leisure at the other. Casual leisure tends to be immediate, hedonic, pleasurable, and requires little or no training; and its benefits include stress reduction, restfulness, and restoration of life balance [4, 5]. Stebbins [4] found that primarily casual leisure activities fit one or more of six basic types: play, relaxation, passive entertainment, active entertainment, sociable conversation, and sensory stimulation.

In contrast to casual leisure, serious leisure is so desirable for participants that it involves spending considerable time and effort to obtain special skills, knowledge, and experience [5, 6••]. Serious leisure, then, becomes career-like and requires significant planning, continued effort and perseverance, and skill development, thus yielding durable benefits and rewards contributing to a salient leisure identity [5, 6••, 7]. However, despite the common essential attributes of serious leisure, such leisure varies and is not at all homogenous. “Core devotees” to their serious leisure are much more invested in and committed to their leisure experiences compared with “moderate devotees” or “neophytes” [7]. At the most extreme end of serious leisure is “hardcore” leisure, which requires extraordinary commitment toward what participants understand to be an authentic or superior style of activity engagement [8]. Some examples of serious leisure include people who train to climb the world’s highest peaks, compete in marathons as amateurs, or collect rare books or rare World War II military artifacts.

In addition to activities that are more or less serious or casual leisure, Stebbins [9] identified a third type, project-

based leisure, which has elements of both serious and casual forms yet is distinct in its structure and benefits. Project-based leisure is “a short-term, moderately complicated, one-shot or occasional though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time,” that yields particular social rewards and, unlike serious leisure, is not intended to be career-like [9, p. 1]. An example of project-based leisure would be people who create elaborate installations or campsites at Burning Man or people who volunteer to help create events during a Renaissance Fair or Dickens Fair.

Brief Overview of Orientation as a Construct

Sexual orientation traditionally denotes the sex/gender of the person one is erotically attracted to and does not refer to other aspects of sexuality; so, the construct would exclude kink/BDSM as part of one’s sexual orientation, because kink/BDSM is about eroticizing intense sensation, expressions of power, and fascination with sensory stimuli (fetish)—and not necessarily about the sex/gender of the person. However, recent work attempts to critique the construct of sexual orientation by addressing a larger range of sexuality from a theoretical standpoint. van Anders [10••] proposed Sexual Configurations Theory in response to major limitations of existing theories of sexual orientation; configurations of sexuality, then, can include aspects beyond sex/gender which might fit the criteria of orientation: enduring aspects of sexual interest or attraction that are beyond the conscious control of a person and aspects of sexuality that are distinct from identities and statuses.

Moser [11•], in response to the retention of the concept of orientation in Sexual Configurations Theory, discusses elements of sexuality entailed by the concept of orientation: (a) sexual attraction that is strong and persistent; (b) relative immutability/fluidity of sexual attraction or arousal that is beyond conscious control; (c) early onset, developmentally, in childhood or adolescence; (d) significant psychological consequences to denying, exploring, fulfilling, or repressing sexual attraction and arousal; and (e) lifelong patterns of sexual attraction and arousal. These conceptual aspects of orientation, then, can be used to discern whether or not the sexuality of kink practitioners might fit these criteria and be considered an orientation.

Scholarship on BDSM as Leisure

BDSM remains elusive to define and thus has been conceptualized by participants in different ways [12]. These different conceptualizations, such as approaching BDSM as *activity*, *play time* or *space*, or *kink identity*, reflect the same basic approaches scholars apply in trying to define and understand leisure [13]. The common BDSM standard of consent is consistent with the essential leisure criterion of non-coercion,

while the other essential criterion, intrinsic motivation also appears to be met. Historically, Weiss [14] noted that the beginnings of BDSM cultures emerged when sexuality became a site and source of leisure.

Several studies suggest that BDSM participation reflects the same properties and potential therapeutic benefits of leisure, generally. For example, using semi-structured interviews, Hebert and Weaver [15] found that benefits of BDSM included pleasure and arousal, fun, variety, personal growth, relationship and community benefits, psychological release, sense of personal freedom, and self-expression. An earlier qualitative study by Taylor and Ussher [16] found similar results, with BDSM participation producing various feelings associated with pleasure, freedom and empowerment, an escape from day-to-day monotony, transcendent experience, and producing an adrenaline rush or endorphin high, according to study participants.

A recent large quantitative study with a sample of several hundred BDSM practitioners [17••] found that general properties of leisure were overwhelmingly endorsed by participants, including the following items reported being present most or nearly always by 90% or more of the total sample: positive emotions, a sense of freedom, pleasure and/or enjoyment, sense of adventure, stress relief and/or relaxation, self-expression, and BDSM enjoyed for itself (intrinsic motivation). In assessing BDSM as a potential casual or serious leisure, this same study found that BDSM experience was skewed more toward serious, rather than casual leisure, particularly among more dominant/top identities compared with submissive/bottom identities. In her extensive ethnographic study, Newmahr [18] also found that BDSM participants also met Stebbins' specific attributes of serious leisure. However, a small qualitative study among female dominants who were very active in their BDSM community found that some forms of BDSM can sometimes also reflect primarily casual leisure, by which playfulness and spontaneity function to connect participants' adult identities to prior fun, playfulness, and creativity experienced in their childhoods, along with typical restorative benefits of casual leisure [19].

Scholarship on BDSM as a Sexual Orientation

Herdt and McClintock [20] investigated the role of adrenarche, adrenal puberty occurring between the ages of 6 and 10, in the development of sexual awareness, including preparation for an adult-like understanding of sexuality. In middle childhood, previously unknown or unrecognized erotic feelings and events start to be understood as part of one's sexual attractions, with 10 years old being cited as the age in which one's sexual desires and fantasies become a "robust, memorable experience" [20, p. 590]. This developmental timeline aligns with Moser's [11•] proposal about the early

onset, before puberty, of sexual orientation, whether or not individuals can clearly articulate their desires and attractions.

A 2017 study of a representative sample of the Belgian population found that 61.4% of people who had an interest in BDSM became aware of this interest before the age of 25 and 8% before the age of 15 [21••]. In a study of 184 Finnish participants conducted in the late 1990s, 77.8% became aware of their BDSM interest before the age of 25, 9.3% reported awareness of their BDSM interest before the age of 10, and 5% reporting their first BDSM experience before the age of 10 years [22]. An earlier study of 178 men in the USA in the late 1970s found that 12% had their first BDSM experience at age 10 or younger [23]. A 1977 study of a West German sample of men ($n = 237$) found that 77% first became aware of their BDSM interests before the age of 25 years; 7% of the sample reported their first interest at age 10 or younger [24]. There is some evidence, then, that a portion of people may develop an erotic interest in BDSM at a time when more traditional aspects of sexual orientation develop.

BDSM and Identity Possibilities

While it has been estimated that approximately 10% of the population engages in some form of BDSM [12, 14, 21••], clearly extensive variation exists in how people may construct an erotic or sexual identity based on either leisure or orientation grounds; identities may reflect processes of personal choice, social assignment, or innate person qualities, or all three. Because of this variation, the leisure and orientation approaches to BDSM are not mutually exclusive, but overlap and share the same common ground. Sexuality is shaped by complex biological, psychological, cultural, social, economic, political, legal, ethical, historical, and religious and spiritual factors, and thus is unique to each individual [25], while leisure, broadly, is also shaped by combinations of these same factors [2].

The serious leisure perspective (SLP) is valuable in accounting for the extensive variation of BDSM in terms of interest, time dedicated for skill development, and personal value or importance placed on these activities. For those who are mostly vanilla, but enjoy some occasional kink, such experience may be consistent with properties and benefits of casual leisure. SLP is also particularly useful in accounting for BDSM experiences that are erotically motivated but exhibit various degrees of saliency or centrality as identities, as well as accounting for a range of preferences that are not primarily motivated by eroticism, including involvement in BDSM activities by participants who identify as asexual [26]. The orientation perspective (OP), on the other hand, captures that people may experience their BDSM interests as beyond conscious control, very early in life and lifelong, intricately intertwined with sexual and erotic desires and entailing significant psychological consequences if repressed or denied. The

two approaches could apply equally well for those individuals with a strong BDSM interest that is experienced like a sexual orientation but also likely to be at the far end of serious leisure, being core devotees or even hardcore in their interests and behaviors.

Kink/BDSM Stigma

Regardless of whether BDSM is approached from a leisure framework or sexual orientation perspective, considerable stigma remains toward BDSM practitioners [27, 28]. A growing body of literature clearly shows that kink/BDSM is not psychopathological [12, 29, 30]. However, a survey of kink-identified individuals ($n = 3058$) collected between April 2007 and June 2008, found that 37.5% had experienced discrimination, violence, or harassment because of BDSM interest [27]. Furthermore, 11.3% of the total sample reported that discrimination came from a professional, with the most common occurrence in this category coming from medical doctors (5.5%), followed by mental health providers (4.5%).

Positioning BDSM primarily as leisure or as orientation presents different challenges to addressing stigma; however working from the SLP perspective, it is tempting for critics to dismiss BDSM as “just” leisure, thus assuming BDSM to be relatively unimportant, trivial, and easily changeable. However, such a dismissal is somewhat akin to saying sexual behavior is “just” sex or violence is “just” crime, therefore being oblivious to the complex multidimensional forces underlying each construct.

Regarding BDSM as orientation, it may be tempting to err too much in the other direction, implying that BDSM as an orientation is unchangeable, and thus practitioners are deserving of full citizenship and should not be discriminated against because of a personal trait that one does not control. Such an assumption appears to have temporary political currency, but may prove to be problematic in the long term. For example, a current comprehensive review of research on sexual orientation found that political arguments for immutability of orientation are not consistent with recent population-based studies of sexual attraction in many people and that there are legal grounds other than immutability to protect the rights of sexual minorities [31].

Conclusion

There remains a serious need across the helping professions for education and training on BDSM sexuality [32, 33]. For example, recent studies have found that textbooks and journals in both counseling and social work are glaringly sex negative and tend to ignore, sometimes purposively, topics pertaining to kink and BDSM [34–36]. Given the lack of basic training across helping professions on sexual diversity, it is,

unfortunately, not surprising that many individuals who engage in BDSM have encountered, or are fearful of facing, marginalization and discrimination in healthcare and psychotherapeutic settings [27, 37, 38, 39••].

In short, there are numerous possibilities regarding how specific sexual, BDSM, and leisure identities may coexist and often converge. Understanding both the leisure and orientation perspectives provides a more thorough understanding of the diverse motivations, behaviors, identities, experiences, and benefits of BDSM across the population. Clinicians should be prepared for how patients may differ in their approach and understanding about their BDSM interests, and this preparation can lead to increased rapport and trust within the healthcare relationship. Clinicians also may consider this topic relevant because adoption of a minority identity around BDSM interests may have impacts on health disparities and issues related to healthcare access.

There also remains the need to critique and test these two perspectives, both empirically and theoretically. The SLP perspective seems to emphasize choice, fluidity of interest, and a range of intensity in how individuals approach interests, whereas the OP perspective seems to emphasize lack of choice or conscious control, constancy of interest, and the high intensity of interest in the face of social opprobrium. Further work is needed to examine the utility and parsimony of these two approaches.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

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