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BDSM Disclosure and Stigma Management: Identifying Opportunities for Sex Education

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While participation in the activities like bondage, domination, submission/sadism, masochism that fall under the umbrella term BDSM is widespread, stigma surrounding BDSM poses risks to practitioners who wish to disclose their interest. We examined risk factors involved with disclosure to posit how sex education might diffuse stigma and warn of risks. Semi-structured interviews asked 20 adults reporting an interest in BDSM about their disclosure experiences. Most respondents reported their BDSM interests starting before age 15, sometimes creating a phase of anxiety and shame in the absence of reassuring information. As adults, respondents often considered BDSM central to their sexuality, thus disclosure was integral to dating. Disclosure decisions in nondating situations were often complex considerations balancing desire for appropriateness with a desire for connection and honesty. Some respondents wondered whether their interests being found out would jeopardize their jobs. Experiences with stigma varied widely.

KEYWORDS *Disclosure, coming out, stigma, sexual minority resources, sexuality education, BDSM, sadism, masochism, sado-masochism*

STUDY AIMS

The topic of disclosure of an interest in BDSM (an umbrella term for sexual interests including bondage, domination, submission/

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sadism, and masochism) remains largely unaddressed in current resources. There is evidence that interest in BDSM is common (Renaud & Byers, 1999), often stigmatized, and that people hesitate to disclose it (Wright, 2006).

We do not assume that disclosure of BDSM interests is analogous to “coming out” about homosexuality, nor that all people interested in BDSM want to or “should” disclose. Rather, we are inspired by the myriad resources available for helping lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals navigate disclosure, stigma, and shame. Many foci of LGB outreach, such as assuring people that they are not alone in their sexual inclinations, helping people deal with shame that may be associated with feeling “different,” helping people cope with stigma, and warning people of the potential dangers of disclosure, translate readily to the arena of BDSM. This project did exploratory research into the disclosure experiences of people interested in BDSM to identify potential areas of support that can be integrated into sex education.

WHAT IS BDSM?

This project mainly uses the term BDSM to indicate an inclusive concern for people interested in bondage (B), domination (D), submission (S), sadism (the same “S”) and masochism (M). When citing research that uses the term SM (alternately “S/M” and “S&M”), we keep the term. Sometimes BDSM is referred to as “kink” by practitioners. An early study concluded that because of such varied activities as spanking, bondage, and role play, sadomasochists “do not make up a homogenous enough group to warrant classification as a unity” (Stoller, 1991, p. 9). Weinberg (1987) suggests that SM could be defined by the “frame” with which people distinguish their pretend play from actual violence or domination; this frame hinges on the BDSM credo, “safe, sane, and consensual.” Another commonality is the recurring elements that are “played with,” including “power (exchanging it, taking it, and/or giving it up), the mind (psychology), and sensations (using or depriving use of the senses and working with the chemicals released by the body when pain and/or intense sensation are experienced)” (Pawlowski, 2009).¹

BACKGROUND

The prevalence of BDSM in the United States is not precisely known, but a Google search of “BDSM” in 2010 returned 28 million Web pages. Janus and Janus (1993) found that up to 14% of American males and 11% of American females have engaged in some form of SM. A study of Canadian university students found that 65% have fantasies of being tied up, and 62% have fantasies of tying up a partner (Renaud & Byers, 1999).

The first empirical research on a large sample of SM-identified subjects was conducted in 1977, and the sociological and social-psychological research which followed was primarily descriptive of behaviors and did not focus on the psychosocial factors, etiology, or acquisition of SM identity or interest (Weinberg, 1987). From research in other sexual minorities, it is known that constructing a sexual identity may be a complicated process that evolves over time (Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman, & Armistead, 2002; Rust, 1993). Weinberg (1978) pointed out that a key component of a man identifying as gay involves converting “doing” into “being,” that is, seeing behaviors and feelings as standing for who he essentially *is*. Whether this process is analogous to people identifying with BDSM is not known. Kolmes, Stock, and Moser (2006) noticed variation in respondents they surveyed: for some people who engage in BDSM it is an alternative sexual identity, and for others “‘sexual orientation’ does not seem an appropriate descriptor” (p. 304).

An interest in SM can appear at an early age and usually appears by the time individuals are in their twenties (Breslow, Evans, & Langley, 1985). Moser and Levitt (1987) found that 10% of an SM support group they studied “came out” between the ages of 11 and 16; 26% reported a first SM experience by age 16; and 26% of those surveyed “came out” into SM before having their first SM experience. A study by Sandnabba, Santtila, and Nordling (1999) surveyed members of SM clubs in Finland and found that 9.3% had awareness of their sadomasochistic inclinations before the age of 10.

There is little research about the ways stigma affects SM-identified individuals, but there is much evidence that SM is stigmatized. Wright (2006) documented cases of discrimination against individuals, parents, private parties, and organized SM community events, demonstrating that SM-identified individuals may suffer discrimination, become targets of violence, and lose security clearances, inheritances, jobs, and custody of children. According to Link and Phelan (2001), stigma reduces a person’s status in the eyes of society and “marks the boundaries a society creates between ‘normals’ and ‘outsiders’” (p. 377). Goffman (1963) noted that stigmatized groups are imbued with a wide range of negative traits, leading to discomfort in the interactions between stigmatized and nonstigmatized individuals. The interactions are worse when the stigmatized condition is perceived to be voluntary, for example, when homosexuality is seen as a choice. According to Goffman, individuals reshape their identity to include societal judgments, leading to shame, guilt, self-labeling, and self-hatred.

Sadism and masochism have a history of being stigmatized medically. The *Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM)* first classified them as a “sexual deviation” (APA, 1952, 1968) and later “sexual disorders” (APA, 1980). In response to lobbying on the part of BDSM groups who pointed to the absence of evidence supporting the pathologization of sadism and masochism, the APA took a step toward demedicalizing SM (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2005). The current definition in the *DSM-IV-TR* hinges the classification of “disorder” on

the presence of distress or nonconsensual behaviors² (APA, 2000). Drafts of the forthcoming *DSM* available on the Web emphasize that paraphilias (a broad term that includes SM interests) “are not *ipso facto* psychiatric disorders” (APA, 2010).

Demedicalization removes a major barrier to the creation of outreach, education, anti-stigma campaigns and human services. In 1973, the *DSM* changed its classification of homosexuality, which had also been categorized as a “sexual disorder,” and much de-stigmatization followed in the wake of that decision (Kilgore et al., 2005). With demedicalization, sex educators can adopt reassuring and demedicalizing language about SM, and outreach efforts are better able to address stigma in society at large.

Only a few passages in extant research touch on what it may be like to disclose an interest in BDSM. A National Coalition of Sexual Freedom survey of adult SM group members found that 70% “were at least partially closeted” (Wright, 2006). Breslow (1986) found that the majority of an SM-identified sample had revealed their interests to significant others. Kamel (1983) outlined the stages of emerging sadomasochistic desires and integration into community for leathermen (i.e., gay men who wear leather to indicate interest in BDSM). He described phases of disenchantment, depression, and “a second ‘closet’” but provided no data. Moser and Levitt (1987) found a positive association between the level of well-being and the degree of integration into SM subcultures. Kolmes et al. (2006) found that disclosing an interest in SM to therapists can be dangerous. The 175 BDSM-inclined therapy patients surveyed in their study had experienced 118 incidents of biased care including therapists considering BDSM to be unhealthy, confusing BDSM with abuse, and assuming that BDSM interests are indicative of past family/spousal abuse (Kolmes et al.).

Meanwhile, BDSM imagery is proliferating across the American pop cultural landscape, a fact first noted in the scientific literature by Falk and Weinberg (1983). In April 2011 the number-one song on the Billboard “Radio Songs” and “Pop Songs” charts was “S&M” by pop star Rihanna (Billboard, 2011). A 1997 *Newsweek* brief article commenting on “the mainstreaming of S&M” in advertising proclaimed that “S&M has become so common-place, so banal, that it can safely be used to sell beer” (Marin, 1997, p. 85).

Weiss (2006), however, cautions against assuming the proliferation of BDSM imagery itself automatically leads to acceptance. She sees BDSM often represented as “an abnormal, damaged type” (p. 111) and of more normative representations (what she calls “acceptance via normalization”) she questions whether something need be common to be acceptable. Weiss sees both approaches as reinforcing “boundaries between normal, protected, and privileged sexuality, and abnormal, policed, and pathological sexuality” (p. 111). When considering how to frame sex education that includes BDSM, educators have a choice of advocating for acceptance of BDSM behaviors

specifically or educating about sexual diversity in general. In a theoretical discussion of the politics of SM, Macnair argues that the end of oppression of sexual minorities comes ultimately with “the end of distinct groups as such” (Macnair, 1989, pp. 151–152).

A “coming out” model of BDSM disclosure may inadvertently and inaccurately distinguish certain sexual behaviors as different from “normal” sexual behaviors. Pawlowski (2009) outlines the ways that various BDSM behaviors fall on a continuum from mild to extreme, where the mild version may not even be identified as BDSM, and concludes that BDSM behaviors are “nothing more than the extreme end of ‘normal,’ ‘ordinary,’ ‘conventional’ behaviors” (p. 74). Macnair also concludes that “in general” SM activities share much in common with non-SM behaviors (Macnair, 1989). Elements of SM, such as exploration of pleasure/pain thresholds, teasing, role playing, and power exchange, are present in many sexual behaviors to varying degrees. Kinsey data from the 1960s, for example, showed that 50% of respondents overall were aroused by being bitten (Gebhard, 1969). Highlighting the variability of human sexual behaviors and fantasies in general may be the best way to allow an individual to find themselves reflected in the information presented.

Existing Resources Informing BDSM Disclosure Decisions are Sparse

The most comprehensive treatment of disclosure as related to BDSM is a book called *When Someone You Love Is Kinky*. Designed to be given to someone who has questions or misgivings about learning that their loved one is kinky, it explains kink and why feeling seen or “coming out” might be important (Easton & Liszt, 2000). *Healthcare Without Shame* by Charles Moser is a handbook for people who want to disclose their sexuality to their doctors and gives guidance to caregivers on how to respond (Moser, 1999). Moser advocates for disclosing an interest in BDSM before suspicion of abuse triggers mandatory reporting. *The Kinky Girl’s Guide to Dating* by Luna Grey offers about seven pages of assurance and warnings about coming out and tips such as using a pseudonym and discretion when joining mailing lists (Grey, 2004).

Online resources are sparse. The Web page *Coming Out into SM: Our Stories* offers 12 brief accounts of people identifying an interest in SM (Coming out into SM, 1996). Some BDSM social groups try to allay newcomers’ fears with a few words on the topic of “coming out” or attending a first meeting (e.g., Kay, n.d., ¶ 1; Mitzi & Thomas, 2006). Searching online for “coming out in SM” shows a Web site for a group therapy practice in New Jersey which warns that mental health professionals can be called upon to testify in domestic violence and divorce/child custody proceedings: “Your

mental health records may be subpoenaed . . . You are literally unsafe if you see a mainstream psychotherapist (IPG, n.d, ¶ 5).”

These resources create a contradictory landscape, some encouraging disclosure, others making it sound dangerous. Meanwhile, BDSM appeared for the first time in a mainstream teen sex ed book: *S.E.X.* includes a discussion on role play, bondage, D/S, and “edge play” as well as a caution against using BDSM play as a way to deny abuse (Corinna, 2007). There is no discussion of identity construction or disclosure, but it is an excellent resource for educators seeking an overview of BDSM (Corinna, p. 171). It also marks a “coming out” as it were of BDSM into teen sexuality education.

Disclosure as a Way of Connecting

In psychology, appropriate self-disclosure is a key ingredient in building intimacy and positive regard, but evaluating the appropriateness of self-disclosure is a complex operation pitting individual factors (personality, gender) and situation (timing, setting, type of relationship) against social norms, which may vary depending on upbringing, culture of origin, and so on (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). Inappropriate disclosure can be perceived as “weird” (Goffman, 1967).

Disclosure of sexual orientation has generally been correlated with positive health and psychological outcomes, bolstering outreach that supports or encourages disclosure of homosexuality. Lesbian and gay youths, for example, who disclose their sexual orientation have been found to feel less loneliness and guilt, greater comfort, wholeness, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, a feeling of authenticity, a sense of being loved and accepted for who one is, and greater access to supportive communities (Savin-Williams, 2001). By contrast, hiding is stressful. Smart and Wegner (2000) described the cognitive burden associated with the constant preoccupation with hiding one’s homosexuality as a “private hell.” In a study about homosexuality and attempted suicide, Cato and Canetto (2003) reveal that “the experiences associated with being a stigmatized sexual minority while young and vulnerable are likely components of [suicide] risk. Coming to terms with one’s sexual minority status can be psychologically challenging” (p. 497).

While we cannot assume these findings translate into the arena of BDSM disclosure, we are inspired by the compassion demonstrated in LGB awareness campaigns that combat isolation and shame. A recent campaign reassuring LGB young people who are bullied or feel different featured contributors such as President Obama:

I . . . know what it’s like to grow up feeling that sometimes you don’t belong. It’s tough. And for a lot of kids, the sense of being alone or apart—I know can just wear on you . . . But what I want to say is this.

You are not alone. You didn't do anything wrong . . . with time you're going to see that your differences are a source of pride and a source of strength. (Obama, 2011, pp. 9–10)

What can be done to begin to express this type of reassurance to young people who may feel “alone or apart” because of their BDSM interests? To inform this question, we were curious how disclosure of an interest in BDSM is currently being considered. The following questions guided the research:

1. What motivates people to identify with BDSM?
2. What concerns do people have about disclosing an interest in BDSM?
3. What experiences have people had disclosing an interest in BDSM?
4. What sex education and outreach needs and wishes do BDSM-identified people have?

METHODS

A study was designed to collect qualitative data in order to form a general descriptive and exploratory picture. As the disclosure decision-making process of this population is largely unstudied, it is appropriate to begin with qualitative methods. IRB approval was obtained from the respective institutions of the authors. Respondents were recruited online via postings on an SM listserv, FetLife.com, craigslist.org, social networking sites, and snowball sampling among those who had already been interviewed. Recruitment text asked people to share experiences about “coming out into SM.” After 15 interviews had been processed, new recruitment was done targeting people who practice these behaviors but do not participate in the SM “scene” or do not disclose. Only individuals 18 or older were included in the study. Participants gave verbal consent at the beginning of telephone interviews.

The interview protocol was semi-structured with an interview schedule of open-ended questions about respondents' experiences with identifying and disclosing their interest in SM. Questions fell into three broad categories: *development of self-identity* (“How old were you when you first had the feelings or fantasies that you later learned were part of SM? When did you learn these feelings were sadomasochistic? How did you learn this? How did you feel about all of this at that time?”), *disclosure* (“Have you told other people who are not into SM about your feelings/ fantasies/ behavior/ desires? What is the relationship of these people to you? Why did you tell them? How did they respond to what you told them? How did you feel about their responses?”), and *larger theoretical constructs about SM* (“How do you describe yourself and your interests? What is your definition of SM? How do you conceptualize your SM interests within the framework of other sexual

minority identifications?”). We also asked demographic questions and Kinsey scales on hetero/homosexuality, submissive/dominant role, and added a scale on monogamy/polyamory.

Interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours. Interviews were professionally transcribed and verified by the researchers. All identifying characteristics were removed from the data. Transcripts were analyzed in Word using color coding, memos, and manual sorting. Categories emerged inductively.

RESULTS

Of 20 respondents, 9 were in their twenties, 5 in their thirties, 3 in their forties, and 3 in their fifties. Thirteen were male (one of whom identified as gender bending) and 7 were female (one of whom identified as trans). Five had graduate degrees, 10 had college degrees, and 2 were in college. As seen in Figure 1, scale questions about sexual orientation, role preference of dominant or submissive, and relationship preference of monogamous or polyamorous revealed a diverse sample, though none of the respondents identified as “predominantly homosexual, but incidentally heterosexual” or “exclusively homosexual with no heterosexual.” Most respondents reported

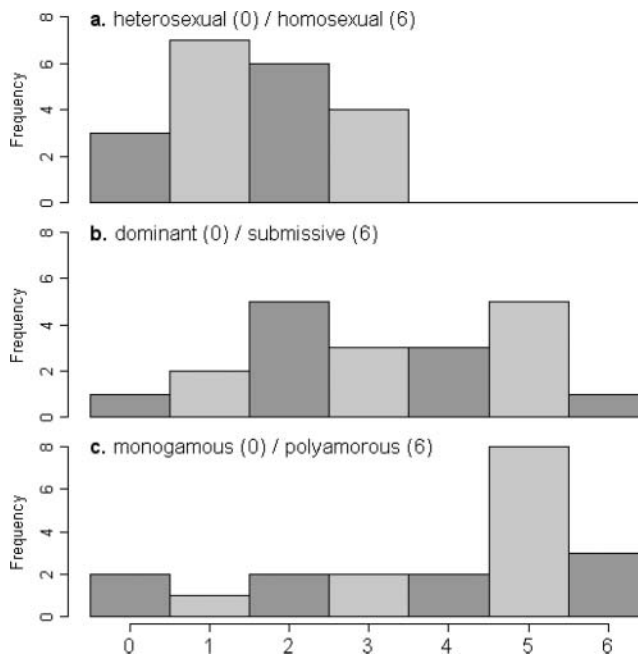


FIGURE 1 The Kinsey scales. Respondents rated themselves on scales from 0–6, where zero meant exclusively heterosexual, dominant, and monogamous, and six meant exclusively homosexual, submissive, and polyamorous. The y-axis shows the frequency of each answer.

being highly identified with SM, one liked some of the behaviors but did not identify with words such as “kink” or “SM,” and several hesitated to adopt a general label such as “SM” to describe their specific interests.

Overall, respondents born in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s reported more shame and stigma experiences than respondents born in the 1970s and 1980s. Many of the older respondents discovered their sexual interests in total isolation, not knowing whether anyone else shared their interests. In contrast, by the time they were teenagers, all but one of the younger people knew about some forms of sexual behavior that gave them a context for their interests, even if they did not know about BDSM specifically, or did not know about whether others shared their specific interests.

Interest in BDSM can Develop in Childhood

As shown in Figure 2, 13 respondents reported that by age 15 they were aware of fantasies or feelings which they later identified as SM-related. Seven respondents reported that awareness by age 10. These respondents characterized their childhood SM interests as preceding sexual fantasy or as their earliest sexual fantasies. None of the respondents mentioned their interest to their parents when they were children. Several, however, reported a time of

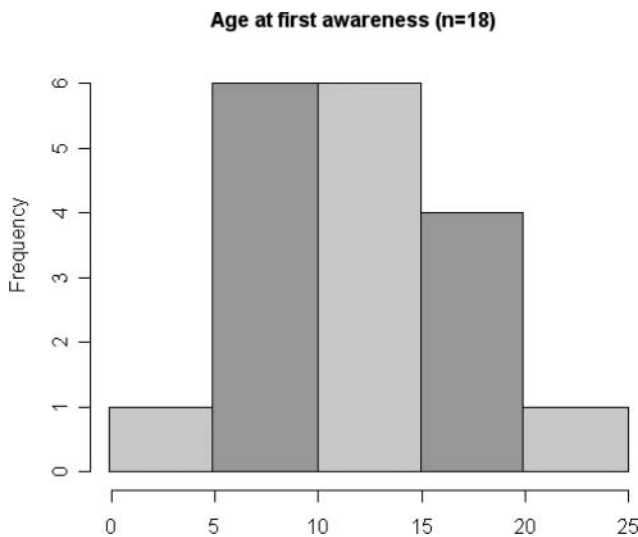


FIGURE 2 Age at first awareness. Respondents were asked at what age they first experienced fantasies or feelings that the later realized were related to BDSM. This frequency chart shows the number of responses for age categories 0–5, 6–10, 11–15, 16–20, and 21–25. Two respondents are not included because they did not feel the question applied to them, having discovered BDSM for reasons other than intrinsic fantasies.

childhood innocence characterized by an unabashed ability to express their interests to peers. One male recalls:

I was somewhere around 6 or 7. I had my 1-year-older sister drag me into field with a bunch of the local boys where they broke some switches and proceeded to switch me. And I ran off screaming and in tears once I broke loose. I got back to the house, sat on the stone steps on the porch and began to feel the welts and became aware that I was . . . juvenily aroused. And I spent the day watching with regret while the welts faded. And then the next day I asked them to do it again.

On the other hand, one female respondent recalled misgivings about early play:

When I was probably 8 or so I remember one summer playing Roman master and slave with my brother . . . I only remember playing it once, actually. I think I was really getting into it and sort of scared myself. Because, you know, slaves and masters are very, very bad things and I was really enjoying being the master and that . . . started to bother me.

Levels of Identification Can Vary

One respondent characterized SM as “sort of a sexual orientation,” and many respondents described BDSM as central to their sexual arousal. Others became interested in BDSM gradually through dating someone, trying and liking an activity, or reading about it. Respondents reported many reasons for finding BDSM appealing, including creativity, pageantry, exploration, play, rush, friendliness of the scene, emphasis on consent and communication, physical release, self-exploration, spiritual experiences, emphasis on non-genital sex, and acquisition of skills and knowledge of how the body works.

Relationships to the BDSM “scene” ranged from those who attended “play parties” to those who preferred private settings. Incongruities between one’s own values and those perceived in the BDSM “scene” impeded respondents’ identification with BDSM. For example, one respondent who hesitated to identify himself as “kinky” argued that “this whole dominatrix stuff, where a person is all dressed up in leather with a whip and everything, that’s not attractive to me . . .” Several felt “scene” behaviors and fashions were too prescriptive or homogenous. One respondent balked at too big a deal being made of his interest: “Just because I’m into SM activity doesn’t mean . . . that’s the focus of my time or energy.”

It Can be Dangerous when People do not Have Good Information about BDSM

An interest in BDSM can exist without knowing about BDSM. One respondent explored BDSM behaviors extensively in high school without terminology or safety precautions:

We knew what we liked . . . , but we didn't know words for it . . . Thinking about it now when we were doing . . . pretty major DS scenes all without a safe word I'm like: oh my God it's amazing we didn't kill ourselves.

Dangerous play is one consequence of not being taught about BDSM in a comprehensive and accepting way, but another is the risk of learning about BDSM in a negative frame. One respondent with a childhood interest in bondage remembered being in "seventh or eighth grade," hearing the term "dominatrix," and asking her father's friend, "What's a dominatrix?" She received an answer about torture and how "crazy guys get off on it." She recalled:

It made me feel even more ashamed. I'm like: *Oh my God! I'm like a female Attila the Hun . . . Men wouldn't be my sexual partners, they'd be my POWs. Oh my God. I'm a horrible person.* It made me feel just so bad.

Lack of reassurance and visibility of BDSM created distress and shame for several respondents. Unaware in the 1950s that there was such a thing as BDSM, one respondent kept his interests a secret, describing an "underlying feeling of like: *God, there's something horribly wrong with me*, that if anybody knew about it . . . they'd be gone." Even after learning that there was a name for their interests, several reported distress reconciling their BDSM interests with their understandings of pacifism and feminism.

Whether to Disclose is a Complex Consideration

Respondents varied in their choice to disclose. Some had disclosed to no one at all or only to lovers, while others had disclosed to friends, parents, or society at large. A sense of integrity was one motivator: "Being myself and exploring myself without shame and encouraging others to do likewise," "Life is easier and there's less angst because you don't have to worry about keeping it secret." Others disclosed for reasons such as being asked directly, to share honestly with friends, to be able to talk about a relationship with friend, or as political activism.

Respondents commonly worried that unwanted or inappropriate disclosure would be burdensome to the recipient of the information: "If I want to be good friends with somebody, I want them to have a good sense of who

I am, but I don't want to dump things in their laps unnecessarily or make them uncomfortable." One respondent felt he needed to protect his parents even though they are aware of his interest:

I've been going to this club for a while. I know my mom knows that it's a BDSM club and I'm pretty sure my dad does. Usually when I say I'm going, I just say I'm going like "into DC" or "the club in DC," so they don't have to think about it.

Many respondents expressed resignation to the norm of not talking about BDSM, and some merely understood it as a silence norm they experienced in other areas of sexuality: "I don't bring up my lifestyle in contexts where it's not appropriate."

Respondents assessed the safety of disclosure based on overall evaluation of a person; being seen as judgmental or narrow was sometimes disqualifying. Not surprisingly, someone else admitting an interest in BDSM functioned as an invitation to disclosure. After hearing a friend say she enjoyed being tied up during sex, one respondent was able to admit her fantasies for the first time, saying, "She was . . . the first person I really confessed to . . ."

Parents Might Need Help Understanding When Their Children Disclose

Many respondents did not feel a need or desire to "come out" to their parents about their BDSM interests. One deemed homosexuality a worthy thing to "come out" about whereas BDSM, for her, was not. Five respondents had disclosed to their parents. Three disclosed on principle, one was directly asked, and another respondent had reason to believe her mother knew but was not certain. At first, this last respondent considered not disclosing: "I started out thinking, well I don't know why anybody would come out to their parents who's kinky. It certainly is none of my parent's business what I do and what an awkward conversation to have!" But the respondent moved forward with telling her mom to allay potential fears. "I actually did come out as kinky to her . . . because I knew that she had very negative associations with BDSM . . . and I wanted her to know that it was safe and caring."

Three parent reactions were described as cautious and focusing on safety. One mother was baffled. A male respondent recalled:

. . . she's like, "uh, I don't understand. I don't have a context to put this in. I kinda understand what you're talking about. Did I fail somewhere in raising you?" Jestingly. And, then I said, "No. But, you know, right now it seems that I'm enjoying this and, you know, it's really doing something for me." So . . . she's like, "Have a good time, be careful."

Another respondent invited a conversation through passive disclosure by not hiding the BDSM book he was reading. He was surprised that his mom responded with concern:

So my mom came up to me sometime later, and was like, “[Name], are you into S&M?” And I was like, “Yes.” And she was like, “Oh,” which was sort of a worried mom thing that she does. And I was actually surprised, because my introduction to [SM] was in an environment where it was so normal. And my parents are generally such open-minded people that I didn’t actually expect her to even have that response. I think that she’s still weirded out by it.

This respondent followed the conversation with some online information: “And we talked about it and she was like, ‘Make sure everything is safe and stuff.’ And I was like, ‘Yes, mom. They do focus on that a lot.’” This focus on safety and the assumption that his interests were unsafe seemed to disappoint this respondent, who was eager to engage in a much richer discussion.

Some respondents reported overtly negative parental reactions. One respondent born in 1986 was “outed” when she was 11 by the counselor she was seeing because of her parents’ divorce:

I confessed to her that I liked the idea of somebody tying me up. And I liked the idea of tying somebody else up . . . I talked to her about it and then regretted it because I came back and I went into my room and a lot of the pictures [for example of pop star Trent Reznor of the band Nine Inch Nails in bondage] were taken off the wall. And I turned to my dad, like, “Where did a lot of my posters go?” And he goes, “You know why you can’t have them. And I’m not going to explain it to you.” And I asked, “Did she say something to you, or did you guys talk about me?” Which makes me still feel very uncomfortable to this day. Because she had no right; what I told her was in confidence.

The respondent describes how she “got the message” from her father’s reaction, and thereafter took pains to prevent her mother from also finding out.

I felt really ashamed . . . so when I was with my mom, I discussed nothing of the kind with her. I was so scared that he was going to say something to her. So I just tried to be the good girl. You know? Good daughter. ‘Hey, let’s go get coffee. Let’s paint our nails!’ Because I was always so scared.

The same respondent described a process of writing and then burning her writing:

... stuff that I wrote, some of it I thought was just way too dangerous and, as soon as I got done writing it ..., I'd burn it in the wood stove ... Or ... I'd always go to another dumpster, of another apartment complex. Just in case, you know, in my horrible, pre-teen sitcom mind that somebody is going to find it and recognize my handwriting. I was always so paranoid.

Disclosure in Dating Can be Fraught with Stigma

Disclosing one's interests to partners met outside of a BDSM context created anxiety for many of the respondents. Some respondents attempted to make the process less awkward by disclosing over the computer, via humor, or sneaking BDSM into sex playfully. A number of people described being rejected by potential partners who refused to participate or learn about BDSM. Refusing partners were worried that the BDSM interest would supersede other sexual activities, were "appalled" by hearing about activities at an SM nightclub, or judged BDSM (in this case, using Velcro wrist restraints) as oppositional to a loving relationship. After her suggestion to try these restraints on her boyfriend, one respondent offered, "How about if you tied me up. Would that make you comfortable?" to which the boyfriend replied, "No that would make me extremely uncomfortable and there's a lot of things wrong with this." Another respondent to the study who worked as a "master" to paying clients reported having some clients with "enormous psychological issues" because they've been told they were "sick" or "depraved," who then never mentioned their interests again.

Several respondents dated solely within BDSM-identified circles, describing a preference for disclosing their interests up front as a pragmatic component of finding a compatible partner. Some used Internet dating sites that cater to specific kinks or sites that allow users to specify their interests through a searchable interface. However, this foregrounding of sexual information did not appeal to everyone: "I don't look for the sexual practices, because that's not the primary element of the relationship that I'm interested in." However, falling in love with a person who does not share one's kinks presented difficulties. One respondent considered "toning down" her kinks to make a relationship work, but another regretted not taking the kink mismatch more seriously before he got married:

I wish I had known enough to say maybe this isn't the right long term relationship for me. I still thought I could sort of suppress everything and, you know, make it to the grave without having to confront these difficult things; that I'd just keep them all buried and let it be.

Disclosure in dating can have big implications for someone trying to keep an interest in BDSM a secret, as was the case for one of the older respondents who married someone he did not even want to be dating anymore, thinking,

“I can’t break up with her now because I just told her my secret. And if I broke up she might start telling everybody.”

Notably, respondents were happy about situations where they got to explore their interests: “I was so happy to be with someone else who was also kinky, whose sexuality complemented mine and who I could play around with and explore these things with.”

A Positive and Accepting Experience is Possible

Not all respondents reported difficulty with identity formation in their developmental years; some experienced accepting and encouraging environments. The younger respondents described attending a boarding school with a kinky goth-identified subgroup, attending a liberal college with openly kink-identified students, or coincidentally developing friendship with another kinky person:

I had a kinky friend . . . starting in middle school. And then in high school I had a kinky boyfriend, and that created a very positive . . . environment where I was free to explore being kinky without fear of rejection.

One respondent described SM becoming normalized for him:

The more that I experience it, the more it’s like anything else that I do. It’s just a thing that I do . . . some people do it and some people don’t. And it moves me further and further away from being able to see why some people are so threatened by it.

Several respondents remembered their sense of astonishment at discovering they were not alone in their desires and that there were social support organizations. This was especially true of the older respondents who experienced long periods of not knowing whether anyone shared their interests:

When I first went to that nightclub . . . I felt like I was at home . . . All of my life I’ve had to hide sexuality desires and like wow, here’s a place where you don’t have to hide.

Many of the young respondents gravitated toward BDSM social groups called “TNGs” that limit their membership to ages 19–35. Some respondents deeply connected with these groups: “I just really felt that I had this sense of belonging . . . It was wonderful.” Here, too, there was a disclosure element to attending a first meeting:

I had a sense of vulnerability of exposing a part of myself that I had always found very difficult and complicated to expose and to share with

people. I wasn't sure how people would take it, whether I would be rejected or . . . people would think I was out there or what have you.

People Wonder Whether it is Necessary to Hide at Work

Most respondents had not disclosed at work. Even two of the respondents who insisted they were completely "out" about their interest in SM put a caveat around being "out" at work. One respondent was actively deciding whether to choose a career path where he envisioned his interests being accepted versus a more high-power one where he imagined hiding might be required. The question on several respondents' minds was whether disclosure needs to be actively avoided to protect one's job security:

I have security clearance that I have to maintain. So, there's some vague concern there in the sense that I wouldn't necessarily want my personal business coming out at work, because it could potentially jeopardize my career. But I'm not really sure that it could or not. It's not really something you can go ask.

A respondent who had been a politician concluded: "Being visible in the political world did mean the kinky stuff had to be very, very much under the radar." For another respondent, the fear of being judged for BDSM themes in her master's thesis was stalling her degree completion.

Mainly, people craved information about whether they had any protection from discrimination. Assuming secrecy would be a problem, not the behaviors in question, one respondent volunteered her interests during the background investigation for her overseas government job, writing, "I participate in consensual sadomasochistic activity. This is not a secret. It is not blackmail material."

People are Aware of Stigma

All respondents were aware of stigma against SM. The main stigma reported was a taboo against discussing the topic ("There's no socially accepted way to express ourselves . . ."), which made open communication difficult and rare. The taboo frustrated one respondent who found deep meaning and beauty in her BDSM experiences: "It's completely outrageous that we can't even talk about the greatest, most powerful mystery of our beings." The stigma landscape was articulated by one respondent as:

The vast majority of people still think that SM has to do with either Torquemada or Heliogabalus . . . and not the 37% that the Durex survey showed used gags and blindfolds in their adult sex.³

This respondent posits a cyclical relationship between stigma and disclosure, saying that these misperceptions persist “because we’re not out about who we are.” Many respondents were indeed circumspect about their disclosures, citing real risk: “I personally know someone who spent three years in prison for assault in a consensual scene. Handled it with aplomb, but they sent him to jail. And he was a Bay area guy . . . This was not Kansas. So it’s real.” Another respondent reported a neighbor notifying social services about his BDSM activities and consequently having to explain and disclose to his son.

Basic Sex Education Needs are Unmet

Respondents were asked what they would wish for from social services or sex education. Visibility of BDSM in general and specific kinks in particular was a common desire. Some expressed frustration about not knowing anyone who admitted these desires; the prevalence of SM pornography was the only way they knew others had these interests. Those whose interests appeared early in life expressed a need for reification, communication (“if somebody would have come to me and talked straight with me”), understanding, and reassurance (“if somebody just told me that ‘there’s nothing wrong with you’ . . . I think I would have felt a lot better.”). Asked what the ideal message of reassurance might be, one respondent offered:

that whatever it is, if you’re dominant or submissive . . . that it’s okay to express these things . . . They’ve been shown in paintings. They’ve been in literature. They’ve been with civilization . . . since the beginning of time.

Many respondents wished specifically for greater ease in talking about SM, hoping for skills or an “acceptable way” to broach the subject. One respondent wished for education of society at-large about consent, concluding that, “If people understood consent, then explaining how it makes the whole world of kinky behavior safe and responsible becomes trivia.” Respondents wished for more media and court engagement with the human rights issues involved in BDSM. One concluded, “I wish people were more out. I really do. I wish people weren’t so afraid and so intimidated . . .” One respondent saw the interview process as an exemplary solution, suggesting simply talking “about real sex . . . seems to be what society might need to just get over . . . the taboo nature of it all.” Many of the study respondents ended the interview with expressions of gratitude for being offered an opportunity to talk openly about this topic.

DISCUSSION

The results from this study and literature review demonstrate that there are many stigma and disclosure issues in BDSM which sexuality education and other social services could address.

While individual experiences varied widely, the data show the stigma around BDSM manifesting in negative framing of BDSM, invisibility and marginalization of BDSM, and taboos regarding speaking about BDSM. Many respondents reported initial childhood ease around fantasies turning to self-judgment or shame as they struggled to reconcile their interests with negative cues from their environments. Many reclaimed their fantasies and reported feeling good about their interests in the present, but even when personal acceptance was achieved, disclosure necessitated continuing consideration of stigma. Evidence of isolation was found in respondents not revealing their interests to spouses, lovers, or friends. Evidence of stress was found, both in planning and enacting disclosure as well as in preventing unwanted disclosure, for example, as in fear of BDSM interests being inadvertently revealed at work. Respondents universally reported awareness of a norm of silence surrounding disclosure of an interest in BDSM, which they variously chose either to respect or disregard.

When thinking about disclosure resources, a useful distinction can be drawn between disclosure to a lover or spouse and disclosure to a family member, roommate, or friend. The motivations, risks, and “appropriateness” calculations vary greatly between these two areas. In considering disclosure to family and friends, the most common concern was that disclosure be appropriate and not burden the recipient of the disclosure. Respondents were torn between the desire for sharing and integrity and a desire to act appropriately. The data revealed complex considerations of personal variables and fluctuating social norms in deciding the appropriateness of disclosing an interest in BDSM, suggesting it can be a challenging and confusing task.

For the development of resources, individuals have vastly different levels of identification with these fantasies or behaviors. Some wanted to disclose to society at-large, for others there was no interest in disclosure at all. Stigma experiences varied from people who were explicitly judged upon disclosure to people who were integrated into accepting environments where the behaviors were not taboo and disclosure seemed unnecessary.

Subpopulations of those interested in BDSM may have different sexuality education needs. For example, children and young people who have fantasies that they later realize are related to BDSM might benefit from parent education about compassionate responses to human sexual variation. People who consider their BDSM interests a core component of their sexual identities or are involved in BDSM activism might benefit greatly from “coming out” language and concepts. However, people who see BDSM as a private sexual activity may not relate to framing disclosure as “coming out” and

benefit from reassuring education about human sexual variation or highly private access to compassionate support about the trials of dating.

Sex educators need to be aware that some young people are already experiencing accepting environments, either socially, via media, or via books like *s.e.x.* (Corinna, 2007). It cannot be assumed that everyone experiences all kinds of stigma, and education about risk would ideally be designed not to induce fear and stigma.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The sample size is small and probably biased toward people who have strong SM interests and who have disclosed their interests, as much study recruiting was done via SM organization mailing lists. The sample did not include any respondents who identified as purely homosexual. Fourteen respondents lived in major cities on the East Coast; this underrepresents rural areas, conservative areas, and sexually progressive cities such as San Francisco. Given the wide variation among respondents, it is possible that subgroups within these populations have specific and distinct experiences of disclosure and stigma not brought to light here. This study is formative qualitative research and cannot be generalized.

Suggestions for Further Research

Studies of subsets of this population might reveal variations in stigma and disclosure experiences: How do they vary by demographic, psychosocial variables, or by specific fantasy or interest? In-depth study of disclosure within sexual relationships might reveal best practices and help people prepare for common difficulties. The appearance of these interests in childhood and teen years invites work on parent education. Studying how (and whether) these topics appear in sex education classrooms today could help support sex educators.

IMPLICATIONS

While future research may broaden the scope of knowledge on this topic, we proceeded to synthesize our findings with the literature review to posit how one might address the known disclosure concerns at our current state of knowledge. Testing these and other messages and developing materials for this population present a unique opportunity for sex education and health communication research because this population has not ever been targeted by campaigns or outreach.

That said, we are not naïve to the struggle often surrounding even basic sex education in America, and we imagine that parents, teachers, and administrators will have concerns about this topic. Outreach to this population may begin in specialized, niche, online, or progressive efforts. Furthermore, a separate research focus is needed to address safety and behavior education. Our emphasis is on helping young people form healthy self-concepts by reassuring them about common sexual variations and helping them navigate stigma and disclosure. Some suggestions for developing such resources are:

- *Reflect the research that we do know.* There is enough scientific evidence to support much general education about BDSM. For example, an interest in BDSM can begin in childhood; BDSM activities are wide ranging; there is evidence that participation in them is common; the activities may or may not involve pain. Some people do “kinky” things without calling it BDSM; kinkiness is hard to define.
- *Have the destigmatizing facts on hand.* Be prepared to explain that research does not support past stigmatization and that current APA pronouncements do not see an interest in sadism or masochism as a problem unless they lead to clinically significant distress or to nonconsensual behaviors.
- *Know the biology.* Explaining how assorted variations of human sexuality are pleasurable (e.g., the endorphin rush of heavy sensation, or the relaxation effect of surrender) might validate people’s fantasies.
- *Teach about consent.* Teaching people about consent in general, or teaching BDSM safety fundamentals such as “safe, sane, and consensual” and “safe words,” may allay ethical concerns and elucidate the dissimilarity of BDSM and abuse.
- *Adapt existing disclosure advice.* The existing body of literature pertaining to “coming out” could be adapted for disclosure of an interest in BDSM. Educators could address that disclosure can be stressful, that there are ways of assessing the safety and timing of disclosure, and that one can anticipate reactions, especially questions about safety. Educators could validate the complexity of the decision about whether to disclose.
- *Validate disclosure as well as nondisclosure.* At this point, there is not enough research to conclusively advocate for or against disclosure of BDSM interest from a health point of view. Educators can use the existing knowledge of disclosure benefits and motivations in general and warn of the risks of BDSM disclosure in hopes of supporting informed decision making.
- *Invite dialogue.* Since people are reluctant to disclose in order not to burden their friends and family, and to comply with local norms the onus may be on friends and family to invite the conversation. Society at large, and caretakers, medical providers, and human services providers in

particular, might be educated on how to invite disclosure, or present accepting attitudes.

- *Coping with stigma.* Sexuality education might include strategies on how to cope with rejection or negative judgments that may be encountered. To deal with internalized stigma, educational materials could address self-doubt and self-judgment, and build self-esteem.
- *Create resources.* Resources could be developed such as hotlines, safe places to discuss disclosure, advice columns, and so forth.
- *Inform about resources.* People can be informed about the National Coalition of Sexual Freedom and its database of “Kink Aware Professionals” and the books *When Someone You Love is Kinky* and *Healthcare Without Shame*.

It is Difficult to Know How Much to Say About the Risks of Disclosure

While there have been cases of BDSM being stigmatized, risk is difficult to quantify. Paradoxically, addressing the current stigma environment might codify and reinforce stigma. Some known risks of disclosure in the current climate are:

- When disclosing to a therapist, there is a risk of being told one is “sick” and being “treated” for an interest in SM. There is also the risk of therapy records being subpoenaed and used against people. Despite the proposed clarification in the *DSM*, actions of individual therapists and legal precedents are unpredictable.
- When disclosing in a dating situation, there is risk of rejection and judgment, as well as potential for frustration and romantic distress.
- When disclosing in nondating situations, there is risk of stigma such as being judged negatively by friends, relations, or employers.
- Some BDSM behaviors might be criminalized even where there is consent. In some cases this may be relevant to a disclosure decision.

Is it possible to warn people of these risks and still present a neutral, welcoming attitude toward sexual diversity? The answer may vary across regions, educators, and target groups. Rather than reinforce a stigma, a legitimate ethical choice for sex educators might be to remain silent on certain dimensions of this topic. Risk might be reduced by nondiscrimination legislation and more social services helping those who experience discrimination or stigma. As things stand, members of this sexual minority may have to fight like members of the LGB “coming out” movement did, voluntarily incurring personal risk and stigma in the name of pioneering disclosure of BDSM.

CONCLUSION

Addressing stigma and disclosure in this population is a relatively new area offering many opportunities for research and resource development. Young people whose sexualities involve BDSM interests currently do not receive many of the reassurances or support offered to other sexual minorities. If they learn about BDSM via a stigmatizing environment, they are at risk of developing shame and isolation. If they learn about it through pop culture, it may be a shallow or stigmatizing understanding. If they act on certain interests without good information, they may be doing dangerous things without proper safety precautions. Once they identify with BDSM, they are confronted with myriad disclosure decisions, each fraught with potential for connection and each with a potential of judgment and stigma. We identified some ways sex education might begin to address some of these concerns. More research on the population and testing of specific education strategies are needed, but we are confident that addressing marginalization and stigma and supporting the decision-making process surrounding disclosure of an interest in BDSM is a worthy new direction for sexuality education.

NOTES

1. For help understanding how intense sensation can be pleasurable, we recommend *Speaking the Unspeakable: S/M and the Eroticisation of Pain* (Landridge, 2009).
2. Educators may find an essay "Is SM Pathological?" (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2007) helpful to navigating the *DSM* diagnostic criteria.
3. The statistic about gags and blindfolds could not be verified, but a Durex survey did find that 23% of British people surveyed had tried bondage, 41% spanking, 42% role play, and 37% owned handcuffs (Durex, 2009).

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