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Socialization, Role Attainment and Stigma Management in BDSM

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SOCIALIZATION, ROLE ATTAINMENT AND
STIGMA MANAGEMENT IN BDSM

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Sociology
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Ronald Lynn Hopper Jr.

December 2011

SOCIALIZATION, ROLE ATTAINMENT AND
STIGMA MANAGEMENT IN BDSM

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I dedicate this thesis to my wife, Lindsay Hopper, and to my family for their continued support, love, and guidance. Without these, I would not have seen my true potential.

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This research focuses on the methods of introduction into BDSM, role identification, and the management of private information as it relates to BDSM. The method utilized for this study was in-depth interviews of fifteen current participants in the BDSM subculture. It is primarily through peer association, sexual scripting, and impression management that new members are introduced, learn their role, and manage their information within the BDSM subculture. It was found that peer association is the primary method of socializing members. Role identification is accomplished through both a method of sexual scripting as well as complimentary differentiation, the process by which a stimulus is transmitted and received, and subsequent stimuli are transmitted back, reinterpreted and responded to. It is through impression management and stigma management that members learn to maintain the privacy of their participation. Future research should include additional analysis with a larger sample size to determine if the current findings will continue to hold true.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sticks and Stones may break my bones, but whips
and chains excite me. So throw me down, tie me up,
and show me that you like me (Myniceprofile.com 2010).

While authorship of the above phrase is unknown, a Google quoted phrase search returned 296,000 results, indicating frequent use of this phrase. For some this may be more than just a funny saying; it may be an indicator of preferential sexual activity.

This research seeks to address aspects of socialization within the Bondage, Domination, Sadism, and Masochism (BDSM) subculture. First, the research will determine those social factors that help introduce a person to the BDSM subculture. Second, the research will specify how individuals identify the roles associated with the subculture and adapt to them. Finally, the research will address how members of the subculture manage and overcome associated stigmas.

The importance of researching and understanding the BDSM subculture in the United States is needed for several reasons. First, there is a lack of recent empirical research regarding participation specifically within BDSM, as most of the relevant research has been conducted within the SM community (Brenslow, Evans, and Langley 1985; Moser and Levitt 1987; Ernulf and Innala 1995; Alison, Santtila, Sandnabba, and Nordling 2001; Newmahr 2009, 2010). The topics typically examined, such as demographics and behaviors, have been investigated primarily through quantitative rather

than qualitative analysis. Much of the research has been from the medical-pathological model and has not been reflective of SM, or BDSM, participants (Newmahr 2009).

Second, much of the generalized social understanding comes from the commoditization of this type of exotic sexual behavior by the media (Weiss 2006). It is this level of commoditization that may help to explain how participants first learn about BDSM.

Third, there remains a level of legal sanctions and public stigma associated with the subculture and its participants due to lack of understanding by those outside the subculture (Ridinger 2006; Wright 2006). This research will explore and identify the social factors that are influential in introducing a person to the BDSM subculture, how members learn and adapt to roles associated with specific acts, and how stigma is managed and overcome. It is necessary to do this empirically in order to gain a clearer understanding of the members, their motivating factors, and their participation within the subculture. The social factors of interest are those things which influence a person's decision to become a member of the subculture, such as peer influence, media advertisement, and internet availability, and even things such as family influence.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

For this project it is important for us to understand theoretically the processes through which new members of the BDSM subculture become socialized into that subculture, learn and adapt to its roles, manage stigmas associated with it and deal with formal and informal sanctions from both inside and outside the subculture. The theoretical perspectives that seem most useful in framing my research derive from the paradigm of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is the micro level paradigm that studies the participation and co-participation of individuals and small groups. Early sociologists such as Emile Durkheim (collective conscience), and later thinkers more typically identified with the symbolic interactionist tradition--W.I. Thomas (definition of the situation) and Charles Horton Cooley (looking glass self) have contributed to our current understanding of how we are socialized, how we learn and adapt to the roles of society, and how we maintain ourselves as productive members of society.

It is instructive to view the dynamics of the BDSM subculture from the symbolic interactionist perspective because participants are members of specific reference groups within the subculture with which they share norms and values. The reference group serves as the model by which judgments may be formed about the participant by comparing and contrasting the behaviors of the group with that of the participant. "Reference groups arise through the internalization of norms; they constitute the structure

of expectations imputed to some audience for whom one organizes his [sic] conduct” (Shibutani 1972:165).

Values and norms of the dominant culture are transmitted through agents of socialization. How do members of subcultures, such as BDSM, learn the values and norms ascribed to that subculture? This process can be seen by the application of “idioculture” as described by Gary Alan Fine (1979:156). Idioculture is a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs that are shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and that serve as the basis of future interaction.

It is also important to understand the subculture from the interactionist perspective in order to highlight how individuals employ methods of impression management, role breaking, face work, and stigma—discreditable and discrediting (Goffman 1963a, 1963b, 1967). While there is disagreement within sociology as to where to specifically locate Erving Goffman and his body of work, his contributions to symbolic interactionism are relevant to this research.

Socialization

Socialization, in general, is the process of social interaction through which people internalize their society’s way of life and develop a sense of self. That is, it is how people act toward, respond to, influence, and are influenced by others. A person’s sense of self comes from his/her own experiences that make him/her a distinct, unique entity. We are socialized through various agents of socialization that include family, peer groups, and social institutions such as school or church, and media.

Adult Socialization

Socialization is not a new concept in sociology. However, historically, much of the discussion surrounding socialization has focused on the process during the early stages of life. The concept of adult socialization was developed as a means to counter the argument that important behavioral roles occurred during childhood with adult behavior being a mere “rearrangement” of those previously learned behaviors (Becker 1970). Adult socialization, therefore, can be seen as the outcome of the social interactions of an adult individual occurring within institutions and groups that serve as a reference for his/her respective attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

After childhood, members of society are exposed to a much greater number of social situations and groups from which to draw and develop new experiences and behaviors. Take for example high school juniors who attend their first prom dance. While there can be expected a level of consultation with parental and authority groups, the closer nuclear group of friends is likely to be consulted for advice on activities, dress, behaviors, and after prom festivities. These topics may or may not be discussed with parents. Much in the same way as the high school junior, it seems logical that a new member of the BDSM community will likely discuss activities, expected behaviors, roles, and norms of the group with those who are not only members of the subculture, but who are also in one of the closer concentric circles of his/her peer group.

Just as Becker (1963b) indicates that people may perform a socially nonconforming act of deviance unintentionally at first, a person participating in the BDSM subculture may not always make the conscious choice to first participate in BDSM. His or her first participation may in fact have been accidental or in a playful

manner; a loving slap on the buttocks of one partner by another that elicited a favorable response or a night of intense passion where one lover physically pins another lover down during love making may also elicit a favorable response. From these experiences, those involved may have later expressed a level of pleasure received from such acts and consent to explore additional acts. Perhaps it is just as Becker stated "...instead of the deviant motives leading to the deviant behavior, it is the other way around; the deviant behavior in time produces the deviant motivation" (Becker 1963b:42).

One area of interest for me is whether media influences members to seek out and join the BDSM subculture. While Moser and Kleinplatz (2006) have indicated that alternative sexual activities would not be as widely disseminated by media if not for the market, they also emphasize that caution should be taken in any attempt to correlate an increased availability of deviant sexual media with an increase in tolerance or understanding (Moser and Kleinplatz 2006). Weiss (2006) has suggested that the sexual acts considered as deviant are gaining exposure and popularity because people have a desire to view the exotic in a safe and private manner, that we as humans are drawn to those things considered taboo or off limits. As a result, this has led to a commoditization of deviant sexual acts for capitalistic gain. While she suggests this can be seen in the use of sexual behaviors by companies to advertise their products, it would also seem logical to consider that the increase in technology and product delivery has allowed for a level of consumer culture that can remain private and hidden. Thus, it is possible for a person to purchase deviant sexual media from the privacy of one's home without fear of reprisal or stigma.

The question remains as to what factors are influential in a person's choice to participate in BDSM. Is it media influence, peer influence, or some other social factor that explains a person's choice to participate in BDSM?

Role Identification

In considering role identification, we can apply Howard Becker's (1963b) study of marijuana users to other deviant subcultures. While participation in BDSM may not be the same as marijuana use, the argument can be made that both are considered deviant subcultures. Therefore, it is germane to examine the results of Becker's work on marijuana users to establish a baseline for participation in and role development within the deviant subculture. Much in the same way as with marijuana users, participants of BDSM would appear to have a proper technique to learn in order to elicit a pleasurable response to the applied stimulus. Bishop (2005:462) has described this learning process as "complimentary differentiation."

Complimentary differentiation involves the transmission of stimuli and the reception of responses between involved parties. In applying Bishop's example of complimentary differentiation to BDSM participation, if one participates in spanking for pleasure and is subsequently spanked too hard (or not hard enough) to elicit the appropriate response, the participant may then choose not to participate further. It would seem plausible that sexual activities between consenting parties should, in fact, be pleasurable. If pleasure is not attained, it could be that the stimulus giver, who may be a new member, has not yet learned the proper technique.

Complimentary differentiation has been adapted to contain steps that move beyond the psychological idea of operant conditioning, or simple stimulus/response. In

essence, complimentary differentiation can be seen as a new application of George Herbert Mead's ([1934], 1962) SIR model of stimulus/interpretation/response. This is a necessary point to make regarding BDSM because as a stimulus is applied it must be interpreted as either pleasurable or not pleasurable before the subsequent response can be given to complete the cycle. This cycle creates a system in which both the giver and receiver become simultaneous stimuli givers, interpreters, and responders to one another.

The learning of techniques, as applied to marijuana users by Becker (1963b), is applicable here as well because, as most people will recall, first sexual experiences among inexperienced participants were most likely not as pleasurable as one would have expected. Techniques of pleasure giving are learned and developed over time and perhaps through interactions with different lovers. If each person was born with the innate knowledge of how to give and receive sexual enjoyment then it seems likely that there would be no need for sexual exploration.

The same logic may be applied to the giver and receiver in BDSM activities learning to perceive the proper effect. As sexual partners, the giver of the stimulus should be aware of the responses of the receiver in order to determine if the stimulus is having the desired sexual effect. Yet, at the same time, the giver may also be a receiver of sexual gratification and must learn the perceived effect of satisfaction on them because of giving the stimulus.

The stimulus/response techniques and perceived effects should be developed mutually in order for both members to enjoy the desired effects. Whereas marijuana smokers must learn to enjoy the effect, sexual gratification is a physiological and psychological response that is virtually unmistakable. This is not to say that the desired

effect is orgasm every time. The desired effect could be additional sexual stimulation that further enhances the experience and intensifies the orgasmic experience.

Another explanation for role learning, in terms of sex, would be sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1973; Simon and Gagnon 1986, 2003). Sexual scripts can be used to explain how we learn the sexual behaviors considered socially acceptable (Ryan 2011). The scripts identified by Gagnon and Simon (1973) are cultural scripts, intrapsychic scripts, and interpersonal scripts. Cultural scripts guide our sexual behaviors with socially prescribed and proscribed expectations to goals, behaviors, and relationships. Intrapsychic scripts relate to our desires and fantasies, while interpersonal is the method by which the actor becomes a partial scriptwriter, combining both the cultural and intrapsychic scripts to create behaviors in specific sexual contexts. It is important to note that we learn both the socially prescribed and proscribed behaviors through each of the scripts. That is, we learn which acts are considered acceptable and unacceptable.

BDSM participation can also be viewed from the perspective of both relational and recreational scripts. Relational scripts function as a means to express intimacy within committed relationships. Recreational scripts legitimate sex outside of committed relationships and define mutual pleasure and sexual release (Groce 2000). Gagnon and Simon (1973) report suggest that males at younger ages are more likely to engage in recreational scripts while females at younger ages are more likely to engage in relational scripts. They conclude that as we age, a change occurs in which males begin to engage more in relational scripts while females begin to engage in recreational scripts.

In social contexts, we know that prescribed sexual activity and situations are considered normative unless conducted outside of accepted situations. Therefore, while

learning any new sexual activity that may not be socially prescribed, a person has to ensure their activities remain private to avoid social stigma.

Stigma and Impression Management

Stigma is any socially harmful characteristic, known or perceived, possessed by a person (Goffman 1963b). There are two types of social stigma identified by Goffman—discredited and discreditable. A stigma is discredited when the harmful characteristic is known to others or can no longer be hidden from others, and a stigma is discreditable when the harmful characteristic is not yet known to others. While stigma may be of concern for those who are learning about BDSM and their identified role, the question of what constitutes normal behavior versus abnormal or deviant behavior, in terms of sex, is important to understand. Several studies have indicated that sexual acts, such as sadism, masochism (SM), and homosexual behavior, have been met with strict social and legal sanctions (Ridinger 2006). Given that disagreements exist over the definition of “normal sex,” it quite possibly could be easier for people simply to view normal sex from the perspective of sexual scripts.

Cultural scripts, in terms of sex, provide information to people that elicit erotic and/or sexual responses to certain sexual activities, typically considered by mainstream society to be heterosexual in nature. These activities would include kissing, breast fondling, genital stimulation, and penile-vaginal intercourse (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels 1994). It is these types of activities that have been referred to as “vanilla” sex and activities (Taylor and Ussher 2001). However, this still fails to address acts such as anal sex, does not take into account homosexual sexual activity, and is unclear as to the criteria used to define “genital stimulation.”

Questions regarding the normality of sex and sexual activity have been addressed, often with limited successes and multiple difficulties (Marmor 1974). In the U.S., normative sex is often something assumed to be confined to the bedroom and to encompass a single accepted position—missionary (Duberman 1975). Some now consider oral sex to be normative (Pruitt and Krull 2010). It is currently unclear who has the authority to determine how normal sex is defined. Moser and Kleinplatz (2006) question who may be capable of determining how a particular sexual act is to be defined. The groups they identified that have the authority to define sexual acts are professionals who treat sexual behaviors in a clinical environment, lawyers and legislators who determine if an act is to be considered deviant or criminal and work to assign regulatory sanctions to such acts, researchers who attempt to view the act from the perspective of the participant, and finally the participant themselves. Within the sadist and masochist (SM) subculture there is disagreement among the participants as to how to define SM (Moser and Kleinplatz 2006). Among the participants of BDSM, there is also a level of disagreement as to the definition of their own subculture with regard to what the members consider normative versus non-normative sexual acts.

Participation in BDSM is seen as non-normative by the larger society. The difficulty of properly defining the BDSM culture has led to the lumping together of many different sexual activities under the broad labels of BDSM, SM, Dominance and submission (D/s), and leather (Moser and Kleinplatz 2006).

Those who participate in the BDSM (specifically SM) culture have been subjected to harassment, physical attacks, discrimination, and even legal sanctions up to incarceration as a result of the commonly held belief that SM culture is violent and

abusive (Wright 2006). Part of the problem is the lack of valid knowledge provided to society and the commoditization of SM culture and other sexual acts (Weiss 2006). The prevalence of legal sanctions against practitioners can be seen as a result of assuming that BDSM is violent or abusive. Wright reports that acts of "...harassment, physical attacks, and discrimination..." (2006:217) have occurred against those who identify with BDSM, specifically SM practitioners. Despite the widespread availability of material, educational and otherwise, a high level of social stigma still prevails, and there is a need for participants to continue to hide their behaviors from those who are not of like mind and preference in order to avoid sanctions. While the primary issue is that of consent, for all, BDSM practitioners of scene play, such as consensual non-consent, fear they may be at greater risk for prosecution. Consensual non-consent is a role play scenario in which participants act out a scene of forced sexual interactions.

However, as pointed out by Ridinger (2006), legal precedence for participants in sexual subcultures outside of normal sex raises several serious questions not only for the participants, but also for every person engaging in any type of sexual activity, regardless of whether it is seemingly normative or non-normative. In addition to the question of consent, several other legal issues have been raised in the debate regarding sadomasochism, including sexual freedom, child custody, employment discrimination, and the right to privacy (Ridinger 2006:201).

The above-mentioned levels of both formal and informal sanctions act as a means of social control and are factors influencing participation in any behavior, deviant or otherwise. With respect to the BDSM subculture, Becker's description of supply, secrecy, and morality (1963b) is applicable. While there are BDSM parties that take place, these

activities are likely not to be widely publicized due to formal and informal sanctions. Therefore, participants must seek out others in order to enjoy the activities desired. As legal sanctions are brought against participants, and questions of morality are applied to BDSM participation, the need for secrecy remains strong.

Many participants of socially proscribed sexual subcultures are forced to live what Bryant called a "counterfeit" lifestyle (1977:147). In using his example of homosexuals we understand that, prior to increased social tolerance, many homosexuals were forced to hide their true sexual identities. Since we can initially apply the concept of a counterfeit lifestyle to one category of sexual activity considered deviant, it seems reasonable to allow the application of the same term to other forms of sexual activity that may also be socially proscribed and thereby considered deviant.

Erving Goffman (1963a) provides a framework for understanding stigma and the subsequent means of stigma neutralization as part of his discussion of impression management. He emphasizes the process of "fitting in," whereby an action that is seen as acceptable in one situation may not be seen as acceptable in another situation. Clearly, it is important for participants in BDSM to master fitting in.

Goffman further indicates that while in non-sexual social contexts, individuals attempt to ensure that the presence of sexual indicators are not shown to others. This provides a degree of impression management whereby social conformity is maintained. Yet Goffman (1963a) also discussed the behaviors of nursing students, forbidden to smoke, who deliberately slow their walking in order to smoke without being seen. These students were then participating in a system of breaking role and role release. Similarly, participants in BDSM are also participating in a type of role breaking. They may feel the

need to break from the conformity role of traditional society in order to fully enjoy the sexual activities that have been defined as abnormal or deviant.

The methods that may be employed by participants in BDSM subculture as a means of stigma and/or sanction management are avoidance and corrective behaviors (Goffman 1967). If others do not know of deviant behaviors the individual is participating in, it is easier for the participant to avoid a socially embarrassing situation than if their behaviors were made known. The corrective process is most likely employed by those who feel that avoidance is no longer an option and may cause them to opt for complete removal from the BDSM subculture.

Accounts: Excuses and Justifications

Those who remain in the BDSM subculture may make use of accounts as part of stigma management. Accounts are linguistic strategies—excuses and justifications—that individuals employ whenever their behavior is subjected to evaluative inquiry (Scott and Lyman 1968). An excuse is something a person offers when s/he admits to the behavior in question and knows the behavior is considered wrong, but denies responsibility for the behavior. Excuses are provided to explain why the person committed the act, but through no responsibility of their own. The four types of excuses identified by Scott and Lyman are *appeal to accident*, *appeal to defeasibility*, *appeal to biological drive/condition*, and *scapegoating*. The other category of account is the justification. Justifications are used when a person recognizes an act as wrong, accepts responsibility for it and attempts to neutralize the stigma associated with their participation in the act. Scott and Lyman identify six techniques of justifications: *denial of injury*, *denial of the victim*, *condemnation of the condemners*, *the appeal to higher interests*, *sad tales*, and *self-*

fulfillment. Scott and Lyman's discussion of accounts help us understand how participants of the BDSM subculture justify their own behaviors or find acceptable reasons to continue participation in spite of potential social and legal sanctions.

It does not seem likely that excuses would be used by BDSM practitioners, as their participation is voluntary (and, thus, acknowledgment of responsibility is implied). The first justification which may be employed would be denial of injury. While victimization may be subjective under the law, the argument could be made that all participation in BDSM is consensual. While injury may appear to be taking place, sexual gratification is the intended result. This justification may be employed often by BDSM participants, as participation is consensual and no perceived injury results.

A second justification which may be employed is denial of the victim. Denial of the victim is used to place the wrong-doer in position of retaliation against the "victim," thereby making the victim the wrong-doer. It does not seem likely this technique would be used by BDSM participants. While denial of the victim may be a justification used to explain why a person committed an act, it does not seem likely this would be used to control information. Members of BDSM participate voluntarily and it seems unlikely that an instance of involuntary participation would be discovered.

Condemnation of the condemner is a justification whereby participants may attempt to discredit their condemners by highlighting instances of socially accepted behaviors that appear hypocritical. A counter argument may be presented in which participants blame their condemners for their ignorance and lack of understanding of the BDSM lifestyle by showing that the condemners actions are equally, if not more, socially unacceptable. This seems applicable to justify a participant's behavior in BDSM.

The justification of appeal to higher loyalties is essentially one of role conflict. That is, the member may choose to perform the role of BDSM instead of one of the more normative roles of the dominant culture if the BDSM role is seen as having greater value or being more important. This does not mean the member rejects roles of the dominant culture. While an appeal to higher loyalties does seem to be a viable technique to utilize in regards to the BDSM subculture, most members will continue to adhere to the roles of the dominant culture in order to avoid having their BDSM participation become known.

The sad tale is a justification used to explain the person's current state of involvement or to explain their reason for involvement. That is, it is an emotional or disheartening account of a previous situation that has led to the person's involvement. This could be in the case of childhood sexual abuse experienced by the participant whereby they feel inclusion into BDSM is the only means by which to be accepted. I expect to uncover instances of sad tales, considering the findings of Alison *et al.* (2001).

Self-fulfillment is a justification whereby the person elects to continue an act in order to gain some level of personal satisfaction or benefit that cannot be gained otherwise. Within BDSM, members may use self-fulfillment as reason for continuation since they may feel they cannot achieve the level of personal, relational, or sexual satisfaction outside the BDSM community. Self-fulfillment would seem to be a technique of justification more appropriately used to further explain a person's continued involvement in BDSM. It seems likely that practitioners garner a high level of personal benefit and gratification from participation.

It seems plausible that *condemnation of the condemners, sad tales, and self-fulfillment* may be employed by participants to explain positively their behavior, should it

become known outside of their intimate peer group. It is important to investigate involvement in the subculture in order to determine if techniques of impression management and justification are employed and, if so, which ones are used.

The information presented thus far provides only a theoretical explanation for the process of socialization into BDSM, the identification of one's role, and stigma management. The next step is to identify and document empirically those aspects of adult socialization that facilitate an individual's attempts to seek admittance to, participate in, and identify the roles, and manage associated stigma of the BDSM subculture.

CHAPTER III

LITERATURE REVIEW

The wide variety of activities and behaviors usually included in the category of BDSM underscores the need to carefully examine extant literature in order to properly frame my research. Not everyone who is placed into the BDSM category “fits,” as there are those who may only practice light bondage and not sadism or masochism (Moser and Kleinplatz 2006; Alison *et al.* 2001; Sandnabba, Santtila, Alison, and Nordling 2002).

Newmahr (2010) has observed that the United States’ population generally lacks understanding of the SM subculture. One problem seems to be an assumption that all sexual subcultures, such as SM, are about sex exclusively. Alison (2001), in highlighting additional problems and calling for more well-defined research, found that not only do researchers conceptualize members of the BDSM subculture, specifically participants of SM, with labels of convenience, but also that there is a systematic failure to differentiate varying behaviors among the participants. What is needed, he argues, is a higher level of cultural understanding than the current literature provides. Newmahr (2010) adds that if we fail to revise our view of SM participants we risk bias in our understanding by, in effect, invalidating participants’ experiences failing to understand what the culture truly represents, and failing to grasp that SM is about more than *just sex*.

Previous research into this type of sexual activity has not taken into account participants’ preferences for one type of behavior over another. Those who participate in

spanking see themselves as different from those who participate in SM (Plante 2006; Newmahr 2010). “Consensual sadomasochism (SM) is a complex and poorly-understood social phenomenon. In popular culture, it is commonly represented and understood as either harmless bedroom ‘kink’ or a side sexual interest of serial killers in crime thrillers” (Newmahr 2010:314).

Earlier definitions of SM are also incorrect (Moser and Levitt 1987). The same may be said of BDSM. We cannot assume that behaviors of one subculture will be the same as behaviors of another. This leads to the assumption that acts performed within one group can be assumed to be performed within other groups. One example is that Domination and submission, or D/s, differs from traditional bondage domination, BD, in that BD tends to involve more bondage and restraint and a system of rewards and punishments, while D/s is based more on the emotional aspects of the sexual acts rather than the physical aspects (Cloud 2004). Members clearly see a difference between SM and BDSM (Newmahr 2009). This is important to note because it also speaks to the argument of why academics, pathologists, or researchers should not attempt to “lump” the practitioners of these subcultures together under a seeming umbrella of BDSM.

Ernulf and Innala’s (1995) analysis of messages on internet bulletin boards demonstrated strong disagreement among participants over categorizing behaviors. Several of the members stated that bondage was a necessary part of SM while an equal number of members stated that it was not. This further shows the degree of disagreement among members of the subcultures over which acts are and are not part of their respective subcultures. If the members themselves are unable to agree on this point, how can researchers decide with any confidence? A striking difference between SM culture and

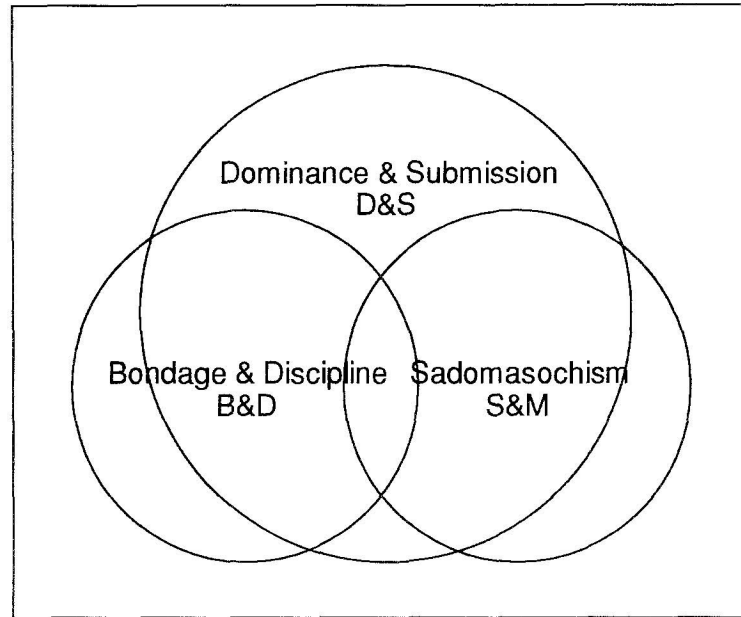
that of the BDSM culture is that SM cannot be performed at home (Newmahr 2009, 2010). She explains that individuals require "...adequate space, equipment, soundproofing, and privacy for SM play" (Newmahr 2010:315). Her finding demonstrates that SM culture cannot be systematically used to generalize to the larger population of BDSM. There are many aspects of the BDSM subculture that are able to be performed at home and do not require parties or public gatherings or public space.

Ernulf and Innala (1995) state that acts such as bondage and discipline are distinguished from other acts such as dominance and submission (DS). If the authors can make this contention, based on their research, and we couple this with other academic findings of a similar nature (e.g., Moser and Levitt 1987; Plante 2006; Newmahr 2009, 2010), then it is plausible to conclude that all subcultures contained within the context of BDSM are largely separate and distinct from one another. While acts, roles, and participation may overlap in some areas of these subcultures, it is not wise to conclude that they are always interchangeable. This is easily illustrated within Figure 1. It should be noted that D/s is commonly utilized to encompass both SM and BD (Ernulf and Innala 1995). Again, the author is stating that there is a systematic "lumping" of dimensions of various subcultures into a single, identifiable subculture. Many of the subjects of Ernulf and Innala's (1995) study voiced strong displeasure when considered together with SM practitioners. Thus, Ernulf and Innala contend that it is necessary and reasonable to treat these groups separately.

Moser and Levitt have argued that although there is substantial literature regarding SM, it is limited to being "...clinical, theoretical, and speculative" (1987:324). This claim is further supported by Sandnabba et al. "No studies have so far empirically

scrutinized the idea of sexual scripts within sm-sex” (2002:40). Furthermore these authors contend that studies conducted within the realm of pathology lack empirical findings to support claims that SM practitioners are somehow not as well adjusted as the general population.

Figure 1. Concepts Central to Sexual Bondage (Ernulf & Innala 1995:633)



As suggested above, SM has commonly been studied as pathology within the medical and psychological fields. This academic research is commonly found within feminist discourse (Newmahr 2009). Newmahr (2009) further contends that, with exception to a few studies (Cross and Matheson 2006; Nordling, Sandnabba, Santtila, and Alison 2006; Dancer, Kleinplatz, and Moser 2006; Moser and Kleinplatz 2006), much of the research on SM participation is not reflective of those who participate in SM. This further supports the findings of Ernulf and Innala (1995).

Much of the research previously conducted on SM participation has relied more on quantitative analyses in building a type of model demographic (Alison *et al.* 2001; Sandnabba *et.al* 2002; Nordling *et al.* 2006) and has resulted in a lack of evidence to

explain socialization into and people's role identification within BDSM. I was able to locate research that focused on the behaviors (Alison *et al.* 2001), demographics (Sandnabba *et al.* 2002), and comparative analysis surrounding hetero- and homosexual participation (Nordling *et al.* 2006) in SM culture specifically. Much of the literature reviewed on BDSM has been limited to various behaviors, demographics, and legal issues surrounding the practice of sadism and masochism (Alison *et al.* 2001; Sandnabba *et al.* 2002; Plante 2006; Moser and Kleinplatz 2006; Cross and Matheson 2006).

According to Newmahr (2010) while a few participant observations studies of SM culture do exist, most are not recent.

There are several misconceptions held by the general populations about SM participants. The misconceptions included beliefs that participants were less educated, had lower incomes, and had a history of childhood sexual abuse. Studies actually found that SM participants did, in fact, have a higher level of education, were in higher income brackets, and were generally well-adjusted members of society when compared to general populations (Brenslow *et al.* 1985; Moser and Levitt 1987; Alison *et al.* 2001; Sandnabba *et al.* 2002). However, the Finnish studies (Alison *et al.* 2001; Sandnabba *et al.* 2002; Nordling *et al.* 2006) raise the question of how misconceptions about BDSM in the United States compare to the reality of it. While the study conducted in Finland looked at participation within the SM subculture, I do not feel that it is appropriate to compare the Finland results to those to be found within the scope of this study. Without the knowledge of the process of socialization, role adaptation, and stigma management of other countries, any attempt to compare across cultures would be speculative only. This is further supported by Moser and Levitt. "Although the similarity between questionnaires

and sampling strategy are remarkable, it is not sound to compare results of two different surveys of different populations from different cultures statistically” (Moser and Levitt 1987:325). However, like Moser and Levitt, I believe the similarities contained within the studies evaluated are worth noting in order to establish a baseline for the current research. There are similarities with regard to how people were socialized, levels of education and income, and also how people manage associated stigmas. For these reasons it is important to evaluate the studies conducted outside the United States.

While most of the studies contained within this review of literature are specific to SM culture, there are similarities between SM and BDSM. It is these similarities, specifically, that this research seeks to understand. I hope to identify those social influences that lead to participation, the factors that play a part in a participant’s choice to continue their participation, and how roles become known and are performed within the broader BDSM community.

Socialization

In any social situation, we learn to behave in ways that are socially acceptable. Yet when it comes to sexual participation, there is less known about the socialization process and the process of learning one’s respective role and behavior with regard to sexual acts. Moser and Kleinplatz (2006) and Weiss (2006) suggest that mainstream media may play a role in how individuals learn about various sexual acts, as well as how they might learn to perform roles associated with those acts. Examples of these agents would be, but not limited to, television, print media, and the internet.

Agents of Socialization

Agents of socialization include such things as family, peer groups, education and religion, and mass media. It is important to identify those agents of socialization most influential in a person's choice to participate in BDSM. Specifically, how do peer association, education, religion, gender, and sexual orientation influence a person's decision to join the BDSM community?

Family and Peer Groups

In the study conducted by Brenslow *et al.* (1985), the male respondents reported their earliest recollections of sexual thoughts primarily were how they became aware of SM. However, among females this was not as high. The authors found that, among the participants who had been divorced and remarried, it was their current spouse who had introduced them to the subculture of SM. In fact, 61.8% reported their first introduction to SM was through another person. This was similar to the findings of Ernulf and Innala (1995) that demonstrate that women are more likely to become members of the subculture while participating in an emotional relationship. Clearly, then, new members often are introduced through close intimate personal contacts.

Socialization into the SM culture may be seen as formalized through regular meetings for newcomers. By attending formal meetings regularly, an individual's status within the SM group can be heightened at a faster rate (Newmahr 2009). Furthermore, Moser (1998) observes that voyeurism is encouraged at SM play parties. SM members may be watching in order to further develop and/or understand their roles by viewing the role behaviors of other members.

While these studies are useful for comparative purposes, it should not be assumed to be a definitive explanation for which factors are most influential in a person's introduction into BDSM. Newmahr's sample consisted of SM members who attended clubs and parties in public space – whether private or otherwise – and who were also not newcomers to SM culture. It is not likely that a new member would be able to simply walk in and participate in an SM party. Previous studies (Newmahr 2009; Ernulf and Innala 1995) have demonstrated that introduction by a third party is generally required before participation is allowed.

Education and Religion

Gonzales and Rolison (2005) determined that a person's attachment to a stricter moral code, regular church attendance, fewer cohabitations, race, gender, and socioeconomic status had a direct impact on their ability or willingness to be socialized into alternative sexual activities. The choice to join a non-normative subculture would speak to how closely each participant was socialized to a moral code (Palandri and Green 2000). It does not seem likely that individuals would simply have an idea to join, and then do so. It seems more likely that there would be a level of hesitation. Brenslow *et al.* (1985) have argued that among the SM participants in their study, both male and females were more highly educated than the general population. Additionally, they found that the men in their study had more education than the women. These findings are further supported by Moser and Levitt (1987) in which both males and females in their sample had higher levels of education and higher levels of income than those of the general population.

Moser and Levitt's 1987 study would also seem to indicate that the lower a person's religious commitment, the greater the likelihood that s/he will participate in non-normative, sexual subcultures. The authors report that 43% of men and 62% of the women in their sample indicated no religious preference. Of those who did indicate a religious preference, 52% of the men and only 28% of the women said they considered themselves part of a mainstream religious group. In addition, other studies have indicated that women tend to have a higher level of religiosity that acts as a mechanism of social control over their sexual activities (e.g., Cubbins and Tanfer 2000:231).

Mass Media

There are those researchers who postulate that we are born with neither an innate knowledge or understanding of the meaning of anything sexual—norms, values, beliefs, etc, nor are we born with any knowledge of male and female sexuality. It is only through the process of growing up that these ideas become differentiated (Diamond 1965). How these ideas are becoming differentiated is of interest. One way might be through mass media exposure. Brenslow *et al.* (1985) seems to suggest media plays some role in their study as 21.3% of males reported first SM learning through reading pornography, while 17.6% of women reported learning SM through pornography. Martin Weinberg (1996) indicates, through his study of *Becoming a Nudist*, that members participating as nudists had not considered participation before their first introduction. His participants held similar stereotypical ideas about nudism and nudists found in the general population. In addition, he found that women were more likely to be introduced to nudist camps by relationships (55%) rather than through mass media, while men were more likely to be introduced to nudist camps through mass media (59%).

Another explanation has been suggested by Cloud (2004)—the prevalence and ease of the internet, not only to find information but also to connect individuals of like minds and attitudes. Adebayo, Udegbe, and Sunmola (2006) studied sexual behaviors as they related to gender and internet use among young Nigerians and discovered that the knowledge of sexual behaviors can be acquired via the internet. When a person is exposed to unconventional behavior, it is possible for that person to adopt those behaviors or to mimic them.

In a dual case study of internet chats surrounding BDSM, Palandri and Green (2000) found just how easy one can enter into the involved world of BDSM online. Through their online participant observation, Palandri and Green were able to identify some reasons as to why their respondents chose to participate in sexual chats. Their first respondent participated as a way to find “like-minded” people. The second joined at the suggestion of a friend. In both cases the respondents were reacting to some level of secondary socialization. What was not clear from the study was how long each respondent debated over whether or not to join. As stated by Pruitt (2005:189) “The Internet has impacted social life in many ways...” It seems logical to deduce that if male prostitution is made more viable from the internet, as Pruitt has indicated, then so should conversations and the satisfaction of curiosities regarding alternative sexual activities such as domination and submission.

A study by Cross and Matheson (2006) sought to determine differences between and similarities among SM practitioners online and SM practitioners in face-to-face interactions.

“...sought to establish that the sexual tastes of real life and virtual sadomasochists are in fact similar...The manipulation of indicators of

power so as to create and maintain an illusion of a power differential in the dyad was clearly demonstrated” (2006:139, 159). However, in contrast to this study Newmahr (2010) contends that SM online is not the same as SM face-to-face. She further delineates between those who consider themselves as real - lifestylers in BDSM, and those who are fake – those who come only for the play and sexual gratification.

To further support the position of Cross and Matheson, Lombard and Jones (2004) argue that while there may be an absence of three empirical senses (taste, smell, and touch) in the virtual realm, the level of interaction is almost equal to that of a face-to-face interaction. The authors’ contention is that through the advancements of technology, such as video and audio chat, participants develop a sense of “perceptual realism” (2004:30). They have defined perceptual realism as a mediated experience that reproduces the same sensory responses as a nonmediated experience. That is, the interactions online are resulting in the same physiological and psychological responses that would be present in a face-to-face interaction. The authors also recognize that whenever the number of sensory responses increases (empirical senses), so does the level of intimacy. In essence, because an interaction is online does not mean it is not intimate. This furthers the argument that, because of advancements in technology, we should not differentiate between online and face-to-face relationships.

Role Identification

Studies have indicated that age, gender, and sexual orientation may affect the identification of roles by participants. It is important to note that many of the studies listed here deal with SM specifically. While we can state that SM is part of the BDSM subculture, we cannot assume that all of BDSM is part of SM (Moser and Levitt 1987;

Cloud 2004; Newmahr 2009). Therefore, while the comparisons shown here indicate similarities of role identification, we are not able to state definitely that role identification among SM practitioners would be the same as role identification among the broader population of BDSM practitioners. This conclusion is further supported by the work of Brenslow *et al.* who state “Since there are numerous theoretical perspectives and variations within each theory, it is impossible to make definitive statements about sadomasochism with any degree of certainty” (1985:304).

There seems to be some level of disagreement among researchers as to what roles are preferred and identified by the participants. Ernulf and Innala (1995) state that previous studies have found that more participants prefer the submissive role to the Dominant role. However, the author also found that some individuals have a preference for versatility or role changing, commonly referred to within BDSM as *switching*. The findings of Moser and Levitt (1987) would seem to contradict Ernulf and Innala as the Moser and Levitt study indicates their sample tended to be “switchable” (1987:328). That is, participants in their study expressed interest in being both Dominant and submissive. Furthermore, in a later study Levitt, Moser, and Jamison clearly argues: “Those who express a clear preference for the Dominant role are a smaller minority” (1994:472). Cloud (2004) points to a study in 2003 by Federoff in which findings suggested that only about 35% of the female participants adopted the Dominant role, while more often they took on the submissive role.

Whatever the chosen role, or the reasons for choosing it, there is a need for validation of the role identified by the newcomer to the subculture. Moser (1998) indicates that SM party participation with others further validates the individual’s chosen

role. This clearly indicates the need for acceptance within the subculture, which supports Becker's (1970) argument that we live up to the roles ascribed to us. While meant in terms of general society and becoming deviant, this also can be applied to BDSM as the member's dominant society.

Influence of Role Identification

While the research evaluated thus far some aspects of gender and orientation differences in role identification, these factors may not be seen as reasons for a participant's choice to become involved in BDSM or their reason for first identifying with a particular role. However, based on socially prescribed gender and sexual orientation roles of the dominant U.S. culture, it might be expected that these factors could influence a participant's role identification.

Age

First identification of SM interests has been found to occur earlier for males than for females (Brenslow *et al.* 1985). This finding is important it corresponds to findings from other studies link age of first sexual experience and later participation in at-risk sexual behavior (e.g., Cubbins and Tanfer 2000). Cubbins and Tanfer contend the earlier a person becomes sexually active, the more likely they are to participate in risky sexual behavior, such as anal sex. Moser and Levitt's (1987) study would seem to support Cubbins and Tanfer's findings. They report that first experience with SM culture was highest between the ages of 20 and 29, and the participants' admission or "coming out" (1987:329) as they put it, was highest in the age range of 30 and older. They further contend that 20 years of age was the average for participants to identify with SM

tendencies. Furthermore, they state that most of their respondents neither became part of SM nor engaged in SM activities until later in life.

Sex/Gender

Previous studies are in agreement that women's level of participation in SM is lower than men's (Brenslow *et al.* 1985). However, other literature seems to indicate that since the Brenslow *et al.* study, the level of female participation has increased or the ability to sample female participants has improved.

Of the studies reviewed, only one indicates a difference in role identification based on gender. Ernulf and Innala (1995) state that preference for dominance by males and submissiveness by females fit the preconceived notions of gender roles. Brenslow *et al.* (1985) found no significant differences for role identification based on gender. These findings are further supported by Newmahr (2009) who found that, within her sample, members deliberately did not show traits of either masculinity or femininity. She reports they did not follow the typical rules of gender identification; rather they performed outside of socially prescribed gender roles.

When looking at role identification and role performance, we must be careful not to project our preconceived social biases onto the participants in sexual subcultures. Moser (1998) cautions that to assume that roles performed cannot be generalized to other social roles. Subjugation of one role by the other, based on gender, is not tolerated within SM culture and both participants are sanctioned as a result.

Sexual Orientation

The majority of the studies I found that try to explain the relationship between sexual orientation and role identification and performance within BDSM suggest that no

clear conclusions that can be drawn. The noted exception to these studies is the 1995 study by Ernulf and Innala. The authors report that 81% of the males in the study identified as heterosexual, 18% identified as homosexual, and 1% identified as bisexual. Of the women who participated, 87% identified as heterosexual, 10% as homosexual, and 3% as bisexual. Of the males who identified as heterosexual, 71% reported that they prefer the Dominant role and 29% preferred the submissive role. With the males who identified as homosexual, 12% preferred the Dominant role and 88% preferred the submissive role. Of the females who identified as heterosexual, 11% preferred the Dominant role and 89% preferred the submissive role. While these findings may indicate role preference based on identified sexual orientation, they do not explain how a participant first identifies his/her role. This relationship can be seen as correlative, but should not be seen as causal. It still is not clear if identified sexual orientation is a factor in first role identification. While the Ernulf and Innala study cautions that the seeming preference of homosexual males for the submissive role is controversial, they further state that role versatility among the gay community and BD and SM is the desired ideal. The authors further contend that the sample was overrepresented by males at 75% and females at 25%. This could also account for the higher correlation of role participation and sexual orientation.

Ernulf and Innala (1995) also indicate that heterosexual participants within SM begin their community membership later in life, while homosexual participants in SM begin their community membership much later than they began their homosexuality. The findings of this study cannot be generalized to the population at large, nor can sampling bias be controlled. The lack of availability of technology for most of the general

population at the time of the study suggests that the sample contained members of higher socioeconomic status (Ernulf and Innala 1995). This study was conducted in 1995 with samples collected in 1990. This was at a time when commercial availability of the internet was not wide-spread for the average consumer. The authors contend that no evidence exists to conclude that among heterosexuals a person's actual social role is indicative of their preferred sexual role (Ernulf and Innala 1995).

Studies have indicated that sexual orientation is developed before any participation in SM, BD, DS, or BDSM (e.g., Ernulf and Innala 1995; Sandnabba, Santtila, and Nordling 1999). However, there was little evidence to support any claim that sexual orientation was a factor in the identification of a participant's role. There is, however, evidence to suggest that sexual orientation is a factor in a person's role participation. Caution should be exercised not to confuse role identification with role participation. Regarding gender and sexual orientation identification, Moser and Levitt (1987) conclude that among their sample, women were more likely than men to identify as bisexual and also considered themselves more submissive than the men. While this study may seem to indicate that female and bisexual orientations are correlated to submissive behavior within SM, this cannot be clearly stated, as the study makes no such claim. As noted above, several studies indicate members' proclivity to *switch* roles.

Stigma and Impression Management

The prevalence of legal sanctions against practitioners can be seen as a result of assuming that BDSM, specifically SM, is violent or abusive. With the lack of understanding of these distinct communities, and the continued lumping together of behaviors, it is easy to see how and why all of BDSM participants might be seen as

violent. Wright (2006) reports acts of “harassment, physical attacks, and discrimination” have occurred against those who identify with BDSM, specifically SM practitioners. Legal precedence for participants in sexual subcultures outside of normal sex raises several serious questions not only for the participants, but for every person engaging in any type of sexual activity regardless of whether it is seemingly normal or abnormal.

“In addition to the question of consent, several other legal issues have become involved in the debate regarding sadomasochism, these being sexual freedom, child custody, employment discrimination, the ‘rough sex’ defense, and the right to privacy” (Ridinger 2006:201-202).

Weinberg (1996) reports that nudists feel that society labels them as being deviant. He further states that while nudists can participate in a stigmatized subculture, they take pride in doing so, suggesting that their isolation may provide a level of shielding from the influence of social controls. The patterns discussed by Weinberg would seem to correspond to the methods used by BDSM participants to maintain a level of secrecy regarding their participation in BDSM. It is primarily because of the associated stigma that participating members choose to practice in isolation and to allow that isolation to act as a shield from social controls.

If participants in the subcultures contained within BDSM are formally and informally sanctioned for their participation, why would they choose to continue? Simply put, members find higher levels of enjoyment through their participation that have not been previously found outside of BDSM participation. In the Moser and Levitt study (1987), 95% of the respondents reported that SM sexual activities were just as satisfying, if not more so, than non SM sexual activities. Furthermore, they reported that over 85% of their respondents believed that people in the general population would not be able to

identify them as participants in SM activities. This further underscores the importance of stigma management in non-normative subcultures such as BDSM.

Stigma by participating members comes not only from outside their respective communities, but it may also occur within the communities of BDSM. Newmahr (2010) acknowledges that while stigma and negative sanctions within the SM community may be less common, they do occur, and they generally involve issues of safety. She further indicates these negative sanctions are verbal and that identity and status management are high priorities for the participants. Further evidence of this within the larger BDSM community is seen in the attempts by participants to distinguish lifestylers from players (or non-lifestylers), since BDSM participants see this difference largely in terms of a safety issue (psychological, emotional; and physical).

Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate in this literature review the need for greater understanding of these subcultures, both to better distinguish one from another as well as to be able to frame my research in a way that is reflective of those who participate. How these subcultures are defined should be determined by the practitioners of these cultures, not by those outside of it (Weinberg 1987). Previous attempts at understanding these subcultures have been limited to the medical-pathological model and do not explain the majority of participants (Weinberg, Williams, and Moser 1984). It is because of our lack of both understanding and of empirical findings that are reflective of participants that this research is important. Weinberg first identified this issue when he stated that participants were "...generally discussed as if he or she were living in a social vacuum" (1987:50). That is, the models used to determine BDSM participation cannot take into account all

the variables that might come into play within the reality of the subculture. It is important to gain a clearer understanding of what the BDSM subculture is and the differences between the roles performed, how stigma and information is managed, as well as the theoretical basis to explain introduction to, participation in, and continuation in the subculture.

Dispelling stereotypes is also important. Members may participate in stigma management based solely on social stigmas and stereotyping. Many misconceptions suggest that participants have lower levels of education and income, and are predominantly homosexual males. Brenslow *et al.* (1985) contend that SM culture defies previous stereotypes as being predominantly homosexual in nature. Their study concludes SM culture is very much heterosexual in nature and that males within the sample were able to seek out and find nonprostitute females who were participating in SM. Brenslow *et al.* further contend that the previous literature surrounding SM culture has been inaccurate because of assumptions that SM culture is dominated by female prostitutes and homosexuals. Furthermore, both groups in the sample were likely to be submissive and both sexes identified SM as “sexual foreplay” (1985:316). The dispelling of these stereotypes is further supported by other studies (e.g., Weinberg 1987; Sandnabba *et al.* 1999, 2002; Alison *et al.* 2001; and Nordling *et al.* 2006).

It is worth noting that we should exercise caution in making broad generalizations about confirming or dispelling stereotypes. As Moser and Levitt (1987) have suggested, those participants who were better educated and held higher socioeconomic status may have been more likely to participate in research, seek SM related support groups, or to identify with SM. Additionally, this correlation may also be a result of the link between

higher education levels and higher socioeconomic status. We know that those who are higher educated are exposed to opportunities and venues that are not accessible to those with a less social capital. In general, we can say that the higher the education, the greater the opportunities, and the higher the person's income level may be. It is these increased opportunities that may allow members to participate in non-normative subcultures.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH METHODS

The initial research began with the identification of keywords for subject matter searches that included, but were not limited to, "getting into and learning about BDSM", "BDSM", "bondage", "domination", "submission", "sadism", "masochism", "BDSM community". The keywords chosen were related to theoretical perspectives that could explain this type of behavior, processes of socialization and resocialization, as well as content specific keywords for BDSM. The keywords and phrases, such as "getting into and learning about BDSM" and "BDSM community," are related to theories on socialization and role attainment. It was hoped these searches would generate a list of relevant studies to help further explain these processes. Other keywords were general keywords used in order to provide me with a broad understanding of the topic.

A qualitative approach was utilized in order to explain better the process and influencing factors of socialization. There was a need to discover how people were introduced to the BDSM subculture, how they identified their roles, and how they kept their participation private. Fifteen months of participation as a new, neutral member of the subculture allowed me to develop a unique insider's perspective while still maintaining a more objective outsider's perspective.

Medium and Participant Selection

I began the participant selection process by identifying an internet website where individuals advertised their desire to date or to meet others for the purpose of engaging in BDSM activities. In the interest of gaining the greatest level of understanding, there were no qualifiers on age, race, gender, or sexual orientation other than all participants had to be 18 years of age or older. The only additional qualifying criterion for inclusion into the sample was that the individuals either were currently or had been participants in the BDSM subculture on some level.

Medium selection

Several sites and mediums were evaluated over the course of 15 months. However, the medium chosen met specific criteria. First, it had a virtual community devoted to participation in and understanding of the BDSM subculture. Second, it allowed the researcher access to all members. Third, the site had to be able to maintain the private information of the participants who are known only to the researcher by their usernames. This was an important extra step to maintain anonymity of the participants.

The medium chosen was Instant Messaging Virtual Universe (IMVU). IMVU was chosen based not only on the above criteria, but also because it allowed for a verbatim chat transcript to be copied from the virtual environment and pasted into an external document for analysis. It also provided for a more relaxed environment for the participants, and it allowed access to a wide range of BDSM participants to which requests for participation could be sent. In spite of the positives that the environment provided, the negatives were the inability to gauge voice inflection and see the facial

expressions of those responding and, at times, it created some technological difficulties during interviews stemming from power and internet interruptions.

Participant Selection

For this research, an initial, purposive sample of five key informants was identified. A snowball method was utilized to acquire additional participants. The initial expectation was to have a sample size of 20 to 30 respondents. This sample was intended to be similar to other qualitative research projects that contained smaller than normal sample sizes (Araujo 2009; Bevier 2009; Abell 2010). Interested participants were directed to an electronic version of the Informed Consent document, included as Appendix A, and were required to clearly state their voluntary participation in the research. Respondents were given the right to refuse to answer any of the interview questions; several respondents exercised that right during the interviews. Respondents were also given the right to not sign their full, legal name, as doing so would have created a paper trail that could have potentially violated the anonymity of the participant and thereby reduced the level of participation.

The final sample consisted of 15 respondents. There were several reasons for the small sample size. First, potential respondents who declined to participate in the interviews cited fear of information leakage. Additionally, it is the norm within the subculture to request participation of a submissive from their respective Dominant. Several of the Dominants did not allow their submissives to participate due to privacy concerns. Second, while general interest in the project was high, the study was limited to U.S. residents only, even though I noticed a higher level of interest from those outside of the United States. Finally, my sample was an intersection group, a cross section of two

primary groups. These two groups were BDSM participants in both real life and online, and BDSM participants who used IMVU.

One of the norms of the subculture is that a person does not openly address an owned submissive. An *owned submissive* is one under the control of, or in a relationship with, a Dominant. It is expected that the Dominant's permission is to be gained first. While there were several submissives who wanted to participate, their respective Dominants did not allow it. Additionally, the Dominants themselves refused participation. The potential respondents, or the potential respondent's Dominant, who declined to answer did so, primarily, for the same reasons—concerns about privacy

During the course of requesting interviews, there were many interested individuals from outside the U.S. Since I am not familiar with the dominant culture and sexual practices of members outside the U.S., I felt that inclusion of these members would not accurately reflect the values of members within the U.S. and they were excluded. However, it is interesting to note that members from within the U.S. had much lower levels of interest to my requests for participation. This led me to the question of how different the dominant cultural values are between the U.S. and the other modern, English speaking countries from which I was getting responses. I have addressed this question in the conclusions as part of the additional research questions.

My primary focus in the research was real life participating members in BDSM; a secondary focus was online participating members in BDSM. The intersection of these groups provided for more of a cross section of values, norms, and ideas regarding BDSM participation. With the exception of two, all respondents participated in the BDSM culture either in real life or in both real life and online. Of the two currently participating

in online only one was seeking information and learning, and the other had just ended a long-term, real life, BDSM relationship and sought only an online BDSM relationship for a time.

Despite a concerted, daily effort to garner participation, I ended up with a smaller sample than I originally intended. For this reason, the interview medium was expanded, based on convenience for the respondents, to include email, and popular chat mediums. The expansion of data collection did not result in any additional participation. However, there were additional requests for participation placed within IMVU forum postings and two posts located within a public fetish and kink lifestyle forum. These additional postings did garner additional responses to my requests for participation. The IMVU forum post resulted in one additional participant who then referred two additional participants. The public fetish and kink forum resulted in four additional participants.

While the sample size for this study is small, to limit participation based on specific, qualifying criteria may have lead to a further decrease in participation as well as biased conclusions about the process of socialization, role learning, and stigma management. I made efforts to gain a more balanced group of participants in regards to gender and identified role without attempting to oversample specific populations. This was unable to be accomplished.

Data Collection and Units of Analysis

Once participation was established, participants were asked to provide days and times they would be available for interviews. All interviews were conducted through an internet chat medium, and verbatim chat transcripts (including respondents' grammar and spelling errors) were saved. A semi-structured interview guide was utilized (see

Appendix B) in order to ensure that each participant was asked the same questions. Additionally, it is important to note that while a semi-structured questionnaire was used, there were times where a technique of "probing" was employed to gain greater insight into a response or to garner more information as it relates to the question asked. The interview guide was broken down into sections as they relate to the research questions asked.

Data Collection

The interview guide was developed after 15 months of extensive observations of the subculture, its members, and their behaviors and interactions with one another, as well as my communications with subculture members. However, none of the observational material acquired was used in my analysis. To do so would have been a covert research endeavor and, while seen as a valid method of collection of data within the field of sociology, members of the culture emphasized to me that previous covert research had resulted in compromising the personal information of several members and are, therefore, treated with suspicion by members. It was for this reason that I felt the need to be overt in each step of the research process.

The interview guide consisted of 82 questions that were sectioned and followed a logical format for probing. Not every respondent answered all 82 questions. Due to the logical flow, some questions were not applicable to the participant's current situation. However, most of the questions were answered by all of the participants. The interviews ranged in length from two and one half hours to four and one half hours each. In one case, there were significant delays of unknown origin between the time questions were asked and the responses given. It was not clear if the respondent was considering the

answer prior to giving it or if there were, other factors involved. This resulted in a longer interview of six hours. The issue of time length per question was not addressed as I did not want the respondents to feel pressured to complete the interview within a specified time period.

Units of Analysis

Upon successful completion of the data collection, data analysis software was utilized to code the transcripts. The coded transcripts were then exported for analysis. The software used was HyperResearch, by ResearchWare. I felt the qualitative aspect of the research would allow for a clearer understanding of how individuals were socialized into these types of activities and what factors influenced the roles and behaviors in which they participated, as well as those influencing factors that allowed continued participation. In addition, every attempt was made to distinguish between behaviors of indoctrination and behaviors of participation, to determine how roles are learned and adapted to, and to determine any methods of stigma management employed by the participants.

The data were analyzed to answer the primary questions of how participants learned about the BDSM subculture and how they became involved with it, what methods were used to learn about the various roles and how they identified and learned their respective role(s), as well as how participants managed information regarding their involvement, if they did so. I felt these questions, along with their subsequent probes, would allow me the greatest level of understanding in terms of how the participants became and remained members of the subculture while keeping their participation known only to those who needed to know. Just as one must learn about roles within the

subculture, one must also learn the jargon of the subculture. A list of pertinent jargon is included as Appendix C.

All participants agreed to the use of a pseudonym. Most participants had a pseudonym assigned to them, but three (Ghostwolf, Sapphire, and Viper) provided their own.

Below is a listing of each respondent who participated in the research. While the areas of the country in which they individually reside are accurate, there is no state or city of residence to avoid the potential of identification. Ages, roles, and length of participation are accurate to the best of my knowledge. It is also important to note that while two of the participants are not in BDSM relationships, their new membership to the community provided a unique insight into how they came to know of the subculture and how they have identified and learned about roles through various means other than interactions.

Margaret is a 40 year old, married, white female who lives in the northern U.S. She identifies herself as a bi-curious submissive and has been participating in BDSM for the last 10 years. Her current Dominant is a male who is not her husband. She participates both in real life and online. Margaret began her BDSM role with a previous boyfriend who had introduced her to it.

Pamela is a 26 year old, single, white female who lives in the northern U.S. She identifies herself as a bisexual submissive and has been participating in BDSM for the last eight years. Her current Dominant is a male with whom she has had a previous relationship online. She has participated both in real life and online. Pamela began her BDSM role while experimenting with a married couple who introduced her to it.

Donna is a 36 year old, single, white female who lives in the northern U.S. She identifies herself as a heterosexual submissive and has just begun her participation in BDSM, online. Donna began her BDSM role through introduction by members of the IMVU community as is currently guided by the friends she has made there.

Timothy is a 39 year old, married, white male who lives in the southern U.S. He identifies himself as a bi-curious Dominant who has been participating in BDSM for the last nine years. His current submissive is a female who is not his wife. He participates both in real life and online. Timothy began his BDSM role from a previous relationship outside of his marriage. He was introduced to BDSM by a close, Dominant friend.

Charles is a 40 year old, married, white male who lives in the southern U.S. He identifies himself as a heterosexual switch who has been participating in BDSM for the last 10 years. His current partner is also his spouse and they alternate their roles with one another and participate in real life only. He first learned of BDSM through the jokes and whispers among friends and chose to explore aspects of the subculture through internet websites containing information about BDSM.

Sherri is a 45 year old, single, white female who lives in the southern U.S. She identifies herself as a heterosexual submissive who has been participating in BDSM for the last 10 years. Her current Dominant is a male with whom she has a relationship. She participates both in real life and online. Sherri began her BDSM role by being introduced to BDSM through online chatting with other members who were active in the subculture.

Matervaria is a 30 year old, married, black female who lives in the western U.S. She identifies herself as bi-curious submissive and has been learning about BDSM for the last year. She is currently not in a BDSM relationship but continues to learn while she is uninvolved. Matervaria first learned of BDSM through a patron where she worked and was introduced to the patron's real life submissive.

Ghostwolf is a 19 year old, single, white female who lives in the eastern U.S. She identifies herself as a bisexual switch and has been participating in BDSM for the last year. She has currently just left a BDSM relationship in which she and her submissive were partners in real life. Ghostwolf indicated that she was first introduced to BDSM by a former boyfriend who introduced her to the bondage aspects of BDSM.

Sapphire is a 27 year old, single, white female who lives in the western U.S. She identifies herself as a pansexual switch and has been participating in BDSM for the last 10 years. She was first introduced to BDSM by her ex-husband.

Lisa is a 30 year old, married, white female, who lives in the southern US. She identifies herself as a bi-curious Dominant and has been participating in BDSM for the last three years. Her current submissive is her husband and they participate in real life only. She was first introduced to BDSM by a Dominant friend in BDSM.

Carl is a 28 year old, married, white male who lives in the southern US. He identifies himself as a heterosexual submissive and has been participating in BDSM for the last three years. His current Dominant is his wife and they participate in real life only. He was first introduced to BDSM by his wife.

Elsie is a 35 year old, married white female who lives in the eastern US. She identifies herself as a bisexual switch and has been participating in BDSM for the last 15 years. Her current partners are her husband and their live-in, domestic submissive. She participates in real life only. She first learned about BDSM originally from a book, *Marquis de Sade* but did not act on information gleaned from the book. She later began learning from a female Dominant she was friends with in college.

Kat is a 47 year old, single, white female who lives in the northern US. She identifies herself as a heterosexual submissive and has been participating in BDSM for the last five years. She participates both in real life and online. She first learned of BDSM from a friend who was already in the community.

Viper is a 31 year old, single, white male living in the southern US. He identifies himself as a heterosexual Dominant and has been participating in BDSM for the last three years. He participates both in real life and online and was introduced to BDSM by his ex-wife.

Marjorie is a 36 year old, single, white female who lives in the eastern US. She identifies herself as a bisexual submissive and has been participating in BDSM for the last two years. She currently participates in both real life and online. She was first introduced to BDSM from a friend.

Eight of my respondents identified as strictly submissive, while four identified as switches, and three identified as strictly Dominant. Eleven women and four men participated in the research. All respondents indicated they were introduced to BDSM through some form of association with the person who introduced them. It is important to note that some of these relationships were stronger than others. The stronger relationships include current or previous intimate relationships, while those not as strong include friendships and acquaintances. Seven of the participants were introduced to BDSM through a current or previous intimate relationship, six indicated they were introduced to BDSM by friends, and two participants were introduced to BDSM through friends they were chatting with online.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSES

The sample of this study (n=15) consisted of four men and 11 women. All respondents reported varying levels of education from GED to college degree, with annual income levels between \$8,100.00 and over \$100,000.00. There was also variation within identified religious affiliation among the respondents. Role identification consisted of eight respondents who identified as submissive, five who identified as switch, and two who identified as Dominant. One possible explanation for the small number of Dominants comes from Levitt *et al.* (1994), who argue that those who identify with the Dominant role constitute a minority within BDSM, generally. This is further substantiated by Ernulf and Innala (1995), who report that participants in their study preferred the submissive role to the Dominant role.

Other studies have found participants of SM culture to have higher levels of education and income (e.g. Brenslow *et al.* 1985; Moser and Levitt 1987; Alison *et al.* 2001; Sandnabba *et al.* 2002) than the general population. The reported levels of education and income were varied in this sample. Therefore, I can make no firm conclusions regarding participation and income.

Only four of my respondents reported a current, mainstream, religious affiliation. All other respondents, both male and female, indicated either no religious affiliation (5) or alternative religious affiliations such as Life Philosophy, Spiritualism, or Naturalism

(6). These findings would seem to be in line with those of Moser and Levitt (1987). In addition, Cubbins and Tanfor (2000:231) indicated that women tend to have a higher level of religiosity that acts as a mechanism of social control over their sexual activities. However, caution should be exercised as to what constitutes a religious commitment. While 11 of my respondents did not indicate a mainstream affiliation, the six who identified with alternative religions did feel that they have high commitment levels.

Based on the literature reviewed, I had no preconceived notions regarding sexual orientation as a means to explain socialization into or involvement in BDSM. Furthermore, I did not feel that race or identified gender played a role in the involvement in the subculture itself. However, I did find that gender might have been an influencing factor in a person's identification with a specific role within the subculture. There was also no expectation that socioeconomic status, race, or education would have a significant impact on participation.

The analysis that follows is divided into three sections: 1) how members both learned and became a part of the BDSM community; 2) how participating members learned about their identified role in BDSM; and 3) how each of the members manages stigma and personal information associated with their participation in BDSM.

How Participants Learned of BDSM

Initially, I expected that increased levels of media exposure to sexual practices would lead to increased levels of participation in alternative sexual behaviors, specifically BDSM. My data, however, did not support the expectation. This expectation was based on previously cited literature indicating that some form of media, such as pornography, had played a role in respondents' learning about the group (Weinberg 1996; Palandri and

Green 2000; Cloud 2004). Brenslow *et al.* (1985) reported 21.3% of their male participants were introduced through pornography while 17.6% of their female respondents were introduced this way. I did not find this to be the case in my data. Only two of the respondents learned of BDSM through some form of media exposure. Donna had heard of BDSM through television and media, but only became more familiar with the culture after joining IMVU. Sherri first became aware of BDSM through internet chats. While Elsie had originally learned of the context through finding *Marquis de Sade*, she was later introduced to BDSM itself from a college friend. Only one of the respondents, Charles, indicated he had learned of BDSM through the jokes and whispers among close friends and associates. He stated that he later went on to explore further the BDSM lifestyle through online references. The remaining 13 informants reported learning about BDSM through some level of peer influence.

Within the subcultures included under the heading of BDSM (including SM), there is contention as to whether or not online participation in BDSM is the same as face-to-face participation in BDSM. While some studies indicate that BDSM online is easier to gain membership in (e.g., Palandri and Green 2000), my respondents did not report that one environment was easier than another was. In my sample, three of the respondents participate in BDSM exclusively online, four participate in BDSM exclusively face-to-face, six participate in BDSM through both online and face-to-face, and two were not able to answer, citing they were not currently in a BDSM relationship.

There is apparent disagreement between those who feel online interactions are similar to face-to-face and those who feel it is not. Newmahr (2010) contends that SM online is not the same as face-to-face. Yet, with developments in technology that allow

for audio and video chat, the sense of “perceptual realism” (Lombard and Jones 2004:30) has to be acknowledged within the context of BDSM as a viable means of participation.

While I did not initially consider the influence of peer association in introduction to the subculture, my analysis of the data suggests that peer association is the primary means for socialization into BDSM. This finding is not consistent with results reported by Moser and Kleinplatz (2006) suggest that alternative sexual practices are more widespread by media because of commoditization. There could also be a gender effect at work, as Weinberg (1996) has reported that the majority of women in his sample (55%) were introduced to nudist camps through a relationship, while the majority of men (59%) were introduced through mass media. While my sample contained only two men, both of whom were introduced by another person, the majority of women in my sample were introduced by means other than mass media.

The results presented in Table 1 demonstrate that respondents were more likely to have learned about BDSM through various peer associations, whether through previous or current, intimate relationships or by friends.

Table 1. Methods of BDSM Introduction

How they learned of BDSM	N/15
Previous Relationship	5
Current Relationship	2
Friends	6
Other (internet/media)	2

As I continued to develop the analysis, a picture of how peer influence was operating began to emerge. Not only were 13 of the respondents introduced to BDSM by partners

or friends, but it also became apparent that respondents were more likely to be introduced by a male peer.

While this simply may be attributable to the high percentage of women in my sample, it is worth noting that, of the 13 respondents who were introduced by others, 10 of them were introduced by a male and the remaining three were introduced by a female. There did not seem to be an identifiable pattern to indicate whether a new member would be introduced by either a male or a female peer, based on the new member's anticipated role.

My results indicate that most of the respondents were involved in a previously established or current relationship. During the normal course of the relationship, the male partner approached the subject of BDSM participation. The noted exceptions to this were Carl, who was introduced by his current wife, Viper, who was introduced by his ex-wife, and Elsie, who was introduced by a female college friend. Timothy and Matervaria also indicated that a male friend introduced each of them to a female submissive in the friend's established relationship. It was the submissive that then helped them to learn about BDSM. These findings are consistent with those reported by Brenslow *et al.* (1985). Timothy, though a male Dominant, learned about BDSM from a friend who he stated was a male Dominant as well.

Friend of mine was telling me about this chick he was dating and how he would order her to do things, refer to him in a certain way, stuff like that. Made me curious can't really remember, I think it came up when he first introduced me to the girl he was dating.
(Timothy, 39, male Dominant)

Matervaria indicated her introduction was through a patron of the establishment where she previously worked.

Through a man who would shop at the store I worked at. We talked off and on and one day (full moon) I happened to say I wish I could find my Alpha. And after he picked his jaw off the floor he asked if I knew about BDSM course I said no and he introduced me to his “submissive” and we became good friends till he and she moved.
(Matervaria, 30, female submissive)

While male peer influence was seen in most of the cases, the noted exception to this was Pamela who was initially taken to a BDSM party by a heterosexual couple. When asked about how she learned of BDSM, Pamela had this to say:

at age 18 while i was spending time with some swingers i knew at one of the parties they took me to a group of D/s party goers, peaked my intrigue and by the end of the night they had shown me so much, and it wanted me to learn more. a Domme that was attending the party who could tell i was interested.(Pamela, 26, female switch)

Pamela’s account is unique in that she was not introduced to BDSM by a single former lover or friend. She was actively participating as a third with a swinging couple when she was taken to a BDSM party. This was her first introduction to the culture. While there, a female Dominant (Domme) noticed her interest in the culture. Pamela stated that with her interest piqued, she continued to pursue her interests in BDSM even after ending the relationship with the couple.

Linking Findings to Socialization Literature

None of the respondents indicated that they had sought out BDSM strictly on their own, save for Charles, who initiated his own information search after hearing jokes and comments. In each case, there was a specifically identified peer associated with their introduction. With the exceptions of the two participants who were online chatting about topics that are not socially acceptable to speak about in public, six respondents were informed of BDSM by a friend and six respondents were introduced by a previous or

current partner. The introduction to the subculture by peers is similar to other studies (e.g. Brenslow *et al.* 1985; Weinberg 1996). In each case, these behaviors have allowed the participant to continue to seek out others within the same venue. Accordingly, Becker's argument "...instead of the deviant motives leading to the deviant behavior, it is the other way around; the deviant behavior in time produces the deviant motivation" (1963b:42), would seem to be accurate.

Peer association would seem to be the primary means through which individuals are introduced to subcultures. It is largely through peer association that we begin to learn both normative and non-normative behaviors. Peer association is commonly used within the context of Criminology, often to explain peer delinquency and delinquent behavior. It is also applicable here. It helps to support Becker's (1970) contention that socialization is more than a rearrangement of previously learned behaviors. Had they previously had knowledge of common behaviors in the subculture, new members would not have needed to seek out others for introduction to the lifestyle.

Socially, we tend to associate with those with whom we are most similar. Within the context of BDSM, this situation is no different. New members are seeking a sense of belonging and fitting in. They may have already experienced a sense of nonnormative behavior when viewed from the lens of the greater society. In having a member of their social network who is already a member of the BDSM community, the new member now has an opportunity to immediately be introduced to the core values and norms of the subculture. It also provides them with the means by which to increase their levels of association with others they deem to be more like themselves.

Members of any social group will strive to remain a part of the group so long as they can still perceive benefit from membership. In doing so, they modify and tailor their behaviors based on the behaviors of the larger group through a referencing process (Shibutani 1972). These reference groups serve to reinforce positive behaviors and to deter negative behaviors. Thus, members of the BDSM community utilize one another as reference others.

Because new members have a reference group within which to evaluate and modify behaviors, they are able to determine which social control mechanisms will continue to be controlling. This allows the new member to show they have prevented social controls of the dominant culture from influencing their participation and forcing their conformity to the dominant culture. When a person has been introduced to the subculture, and becomes a new member, the next step in the process is for him/her to both identify with a specific role and learn to perform that role effectively.

Role Identification

In addition to the role that reference groups play in socialization into the subculture, they also serve to indoctrinate a new participant into his/her role within BDSM. Within the BDSM community, there is a strong tendency for a member to reference his/her role with that of others. In general, this allows the person to gauge actual role fulfillment with the perceived role fulfillment. Many of the members of the community utilize one another as reference points. "Reference groups arise through the internalization of norms; they constitute the structure of expectations imputed to some audience for whom one organizes his conduct" (Shibutani 1972:165). This is one way in which new members learn the various roles and expected behaviors. Moreover, Timothy

and Matervaria were both introduced to a submissive that helped them to identify their role and to begin the learning process. Table 2 presents my respondents' roles within the subculture.

Table 2. Roles of Respondents

Identified Roles	N/15
Dominant	3
Switch	4
Submissive	8

Another method through which new members learn and adapt to their role, and through which established members continue to reinforce their role, is through contracts, protocols, and methods of reinforcement (rewards and/or punishments).

Contracts are documents that explicitly lay out the terms and conditions of the relationship. Protocols are those acts or activities negotiated and agreed upon that will be performed by those involved. It is important to note that not all respondents chose to participate in a system of contracts and protocols. Only five of my respondents stated they either had participated or currently were participating in contracts and protocols.

Reinforcements come in the form of rewards and punishments. That rewards and punishments are used as reinforcement is not a new concept, having been well established within Psychology and Sociology in discussions of both operant conditioning and exchange theory. This level of operant conditioning further helps the new member to learn their role and to perform the expected behaviors. Twelve of my respondents indicated that they either have participated in or currently participate in a system of rewards and punishments.

Proper role identification is consistent with the explanations that Bishop (2005:462) gives regarding the delivery of stimulus by one party, the receiving of stimulus by the second party, and subsequent redelivery of a new stimulus back to the first party. In this exchange, the partners base their activities--both perceived and real--on pleasures they give to and receive from the other. In order for the stimulus/response cycle to be initiated and to continue, participating members must correctly identify their role and the behaviors associated with that role. This allows the stimulus/response to be facilitated for the greatest benefit to those involved.

My respondents generally described their identified roles as something they "felt." None of my respondents indicated that they simply picked a role to perform. While most felt they *were* the role they performed, the most interesting responses came from the five individuals who identified as switches. A switch is a person who is capable of being a Dominant or a submissive. The role adopted for a switch is dependent upon the partner and context of the scene being performed. Charles identified as a switch and explained why this role is best suited for him. When asked why being a switch was more of a suitable role for him:

Because it allows me to determine which role either I'm in or my wife is in at the time we're intimate. It would depend on which role I'm in at the time but it would either be dominant or submissive. Depends on the mood I'm in To ensure that both my wife and I enjoy the activities.
(Charles, 40, male switch)

Also of interest was Ghostwolf's reason for switching. She explained that she switches because she has only found one other partner capable of dominating her. She feels that she must go out and find what she is seeking since others are not able to fulfill her needs.

because there has only been one man who can dominate me, so if I want something, I have to go get it. I enjoy being submissive, guided and directed but too many just don't know how to handle me. So I can switch and be dominant so I can tell them what I want done and how. I prefer to be a sub, but a girl has to get what she can where she can, right? Lol. (Ghostwolf, 19, female switch)

An interesting pattern began to emerge when I looked at the identified role by sex—Table 3. The women were more likely to be submissive than men, and men were more likely to be Dominant. Table 3 contains the information of roles based on informant-identified sex.

Table 3. Roles by Sex

<u>Identified Roles by Sex</u>	<u>N/15</u>	
	Male	Female
Dominant	2	1
Switch	1	4
Submissive	1	6

This was not an altogether surprising finding because of dominant, cultural socialization. Within the U.S. culture, women have been taught to be the more submissive gender and males to be the more dominant (Moser 1998; Levitt *et al.* 1994).

One potential explanation for the high percentage of female submissives may connect to the reading of romance novels. Patricia H. Hawley and William A. Hensley (2009:569) argue that some women hold fantasies of being taken by men and not being able to refuse or escape. This raises the question of whether or not the role is actually “learned” or if it is a sense of being “guided” along fantasy lines.

When I looked at emerging patterns in the data, nothing suggested that the identified role indicated a specific level of participation. For this research, participation

was defined as light, moderate, or extreme. Two of the respondents were unable to answer this question, as they were not in a BDSM relationship at the time of this study. Of the remaining 13, six reported light participation, six describe moderate participation, and one indicated extreme participation. The pattern that did emerge was that the submissives were more likely to engage in light to moderate participation, while the switches's participation was moderate. Of the two Dominant respondents, one engaged in light participation and the other in extreme participation. The difference between the two Dominants is their length of time in BDSM. The Dominant exhibiting light participation has been involved in the BDSM culture for two years; the Dominant displaying extreme participation has been involved for 9 years. All six submissives in my data reported a need to be controlled and/or guided in some way. They stated that they find enjoyment and fulfillment from being directed and coached, as if they were in a learning environment. Therefore, for them, this may still be a system of role learning.

basically to do as He requests, when, where and how instructed.
(Margaret, 40, female submissive)

i find my role as a sub extremely enjoyable i love submitting to my Dom's will, and servicing his needs or wants of me (Pamela, 26, female submissive)

I would have to say,I have always been a follower.Or someone who takes commands from somebody else. (Donna, 36, female submissive)

i like rules and structure. to obey (Sherri, 45 female submissive)

Additional factors to consider in identification may be the age of the participant. Cubbins and Tanfer (2000:232) have indicated that the earlier a person becomes sexually active, the more likely they are to participate in risky, even alternative, forms of sexual activity. While questions regarding first sexual participation were not asked, the current

findings of this study, based on relative age of beginning BDSM, would suggest that the practice of BDSM for most of the respondents began later in life.

Margaret (age 40), Timothy (age 39), Charles (age 40), and Sherri (age 46) reported that they have been participating for 10 years: all beginning participation in their early 30's. Viper (age 31), Lisa (age 30), Carl (age 28), and Marjorie (age 36) have been participating for the last two to three years, adding that they began their participation in their late 20's to early 30's. Donna (age 36), Matervaria (age 30), while participating less than two years, also fall within the same beginning age range of the previously mentioned respondents. There are five cases of particular interest to note. The first is Elsie (age 35), who indicates she has been participating for the last 15 years, reporting that her participation began around age 20. Pamela (age 26) had been participating for eight years, indicating she started at age 18. Third is Ghostwolf (age 19), who also began her participation at age 18. Then there is Sapphire (age 27), who began at age 17. Finally, was Kat (age 47), who has been participating since age 42. While 11 of the respondents began participation between the ages of 28 and 32, there are three examples of participation beginning much earlier and one beginning much later. Table 4 shows the current age range of the respective respondents.

The estimation of first BDSM participation was made with the available data by subtracting the respondents reported time in BDSM from their current age. While four respondents have been estimated to have begun at an earlier age, the other 11 participants began at a later age.

Table 4. Roles by Current Age

Identified Roles by Sex	N/15		
	18-28	29-38	39-48
Dominant	0	2	1
Switch	2	1	1
Submissive	2	3	3

My findings would seem not to support those reported by other studies that hold first identification of these tendencies was around 20 years of age (Moser and Levitt 1987). Table 5 shows the estimated age of first BDSM participation based on the ages reported by the informants and the length of time reported to have been in the BDSM community. A final observation of interest is in each case of those entering into BDSM in the age range of 17 – 24, all four identify as a switch and are female.

Table 5. Roles by Estimated Age Entered

Identified Roles by Estimated Age Range of Entering	N/15		
	17-24	25-34	35-45
Dominant	0	3	0
Switch	4	1	0
Submissive	0	4	3

The data show a stronger male presence in introducing new members to the subculture. This pattern, in combination with the fantasy held by some females of being dominated by a man, could be an indicator that role learning and adaptation within BDSM may not solely be the choice of the submissive. Instead, the submissive may be influenced by the Dominant partner or a Dominant friend. Additionally, there are also fantasies held by some men to be Dominated by a stronger female (Hawley and Hensley

2009). This particular fantasy could also help to explain why some males choose to be submissive. Even Matervaria explained that, while submissive, it would still take the right partner in order for her to be submissive to another. She indicates that she is a stronger willed, caring individual towards others.

I have the ability to be submissive to someone who earns the right to rule me. However it's not a quality that shows to just anyone and when around other subs I tend to play mother hen. Everyone need a place to land, somewhere safe. Subs often get thrown away or abused. I felt honored that so many trusted me enough to allow me to help in their time of need, jealous of their experience and drained by their constant crisscross of flying high to debts of despair.
(Matervaria, 30, female submissive)

While she identified her role as a submissive, she also explained that even while performing as a submissive, she is capable of performing the role of protector to other submissives. Since the role of protector would normally be associated with that of a Dominant, this would seem to be a contradiction to her role performance. However, within the submissive role, there is a status known as an *alpha submissive*. Generally, this either is the first, or higher ranked, submissive among a group controlled by a Dom, or it can be the strongest or highest ranking submissive in a group.

When discussing how they learn the expectations of their respective roles, my respondents all agree that much of the learning comes from communication with their partners. It is through this communication that boundaries and limits are set. Partners compare their likes and dislikes with one another, and arrive at a mutually agreeable point of compromise regarding what will transpire between them. All have indicated that no two relationships are created equal.

Additionally, all my respondents seem to agree that trust is among the highest priorities, due largely to the performance requirements of some scenes.

A lot of the “play” or disciplines can be dangerous if not acted out in a professional manner. (Matervaria, 30, female submissive)

It should be a concern for all. ...making sure boundries aren't pushed that may cause personal distress, pain or emotional issues. Some people have different tolerences then others and it makes the same situation with different people have different outcomes (Margaret, 30 female submissive)

...because i don't want to get hurt in a bad or possibly irreparable way (Pamela, 26, female switch)

...beause the cardinal rule for any BDSM, or other, relationship should be SSC which is safe, sane, and consensual. If you aren't doing that, you're a fucking idiot and you're going to get hurt or worse. Peole need to know their limits. (Timothy, 39, male, Dominant)

These excerpts show that my respondents clearly feel an intense need for safety within the community itself. Based upon the level of activity, both perceived and real, safety and clear thinking are paramount concerns. This finding corresponds to the findings of Dancer *et al.* in the study of the Master/slave relationship within the SM community. They also found that these relationships were based on a “...deep level of trust and respect...” (2006:96).

One of the most interesting and agreed upon points is that the comparison of kinks between parties helps to define further the roles each person will fulfill. While the submissives feel it is important to “serve and fulfill” the pleasures of another, this further defines their role as a submissive. Of the two Dominants who participated, Timothy indicates he recognizes the needs of the submissive and will tailor situations so both will

derive pleasure. In doing so, the submissive is able to fulfill their role thereby validating the role.

In the case of each participant, when a new level of participation is reached, a different set of stimuli and responses are measured. When found to be pleasurable, the participants may choose to continue and/or to escalate to a new level, or discontinue the specific behavior all together. These findings are in line with Bishop's "complimentary differentiation" (2005:462). That is, behaviors that are mutually beneficial are different but appropriate.

i can't base judgement without experience for alot of the things
so i reserve the option to try 3 times (Matervaria, 30, female submissive)

All respondents reported they had some measure of *soft limitation* with regard to activities in which they are willing to participate. Soft limits are those activities one is likely to participate in under the right circumstances as well as with the right partner.

well, as an example, I'd never really been into erotic exfixiation but I can see the appeal to it. It doesn't mean I'll do it, but I'd at least consider the possibility. I'm ok with it because I know that if things change it's because it's what I want (Timothy, 39, male Dominant)

maybe something a Dom i'm with is interesting in and wishes to explore, they will already know i'm hesitant but willing to work through any discomfort ushing the limit might bring (Pamela, 26, female submissive)

Once i'm comfortable, i'm good. i may hold off on something because of the inexperience of someone, but i will eventually let it happen. (Sapphire, 28, female switch)

Each participant also has a *hard limitation* with regard to activities they will not participate in under any circumstances. Examples of these hard limits, as identified by Ghostwolf, Matervaria, and Pamela indicate a strong, definitive stance that neither would be involved in these activities under any circumstances.

only 1, no exploitation of children. Other than that, most anything goes.
(Ghostwolf, 19, female switch)

no beasts, no cutting, no urine/fecal matter, and i won't be shared
(Matervaria, 30, female submissive)

well i'm clostorphobic so i can't be restrained in any small containing
devices like closets, or such (Pamela, 26, female submissive)

It is interesting that within a non-normative subculture, those activities deemed unacceptable to the individual are also in line with activities considered deviant by the larger society, as indicated by the above examples of hard limits. This suggests that even within subcultures, the values and norms of the dominant culture still exist. This is to be expected, as the subculture is not considered a counterculture.

Our Knowledge of Role Learning

How we learn our roles within the broader social context comes largely from cultural scripts. Yet according to Gagnon and Simon, how we learn roles regarding sexual behaviors are also a part of scripting (Gagnon and Simon 1973). Janice Irvine (2003) explains the concepts of Gagnon and Simon's three levels of sexual scripting as cultural scripts, intrapsychic scripts, and interpersonal scripts. We are most familiar with cultural scenarios. These guide our sexual behaviors with regard to socially both proscribed and prescribed expectations relating to goals, behaviors, and relationships. The intrapsychic relates to our desires and fantasies. Nevertheless, the interpersonal is of greatest interest for the purpose of this study.

The interpersonal scripts, in this case, would be the use of a modified version of the cultural script, combined with that of the intrapsychic script. This allows the individual to tailor specifically their role within the BDSM subculture. If the cultural script of male dominance is applied to the intrapsychic script of being Dominant over

another person, then the individual has modified the script and thereby become a sort of scriptwriter. When additional experience is developed with a script, it can be adjusted to become more detailed and more involved (Rose and Frieze 1989).

While the process described above can be applied to all roles within BDSM, switching is a role in which a person is more often rewriting the script in which they follow with regard to their position with a partner. With Dominants, the script is written and rewritten from the Dominant's perspective: the activities they want the submissive to perform. The following excerpt, from Timothy, explains how both parties via the script he has worked out for each situation gain satisfaction.

you also risk not being fully satisfied That's why I like being a Dom. If my sub does what she's told, when and how, then I make sure she is fully satisfied. To me, that is important. It's my responsibility to make sure that I don't hurt my partner. I have to know how to push boundaries without compromising them. (Timothy, 39, male Dominant)

The submissive's script is more likely to be one based on adaptation of the Dominant's script to ensure they provide the Dominant with what is being sought. Margaret indicates that she is adapting her script to that of her Dominant in order for both to gain satisfaction.

basically to do as He requests, when, where and how instructed. I prefer to be given directions. I have to work to give directions to someone. The learning per say is learning what my Dom likes and how he does things. (Margaret, 40, female submissive)

However, the switch needs to both adapt the script if in a submissive role, and create a new script for the submissive if they are in a Dominant role. Ghostwolf explains the difficulty in her adapting her script as a submissive to gain satisfaction. Yet she is able to *switch* and become Dominant to create a script in which she does gain satisfaction.

I enjoy being submissive, guided and directed but too many just don't know how to handle me. So I can switch and be dominant so I can tell them what I want done and how. I prefer to be a sub... (Ghostwolf, 19, female switch)

Learning one's role, language, and expected behaviors is only part of the BDSM subculture. One important aspect of the community is that of information control, both within the community as well as outside it.

Stigma and Information Management

Within the BDSM subculture there is disagreement over role performance and meanings of specified roles. There is also an internal stigma associated with those who do not appear to be *real* (Newmahr 2010). Information surrounding roles, and BDSM itself, seems to be contradictory among the participating members. While conversations with members of the subculture indicate a high level of participation in BDSM, the problem lies with how the members see one another in terms of participation.

a person may be a submissive to "X" and still have "Y" as their own submissive type. So their role could be a Switch. However, personally i don't think it can be done well because while they are submitting, they are not also dominating or vice versa... someone loses out. (Marjorie, 36, female submissive)

From the perspective of a submissive, we see the disagreement over a person's ability to perform more than one role within BDSM. However, from the perspective of the switch, this is certainly possible.

It would depend on which role I'm in at the time but it would either be dominant or submissive...Because it allows me to determine which role either I'm in or my wife is in at the time we're intimate (Charles, 40, male switch)

A switch is able to identify with both roles, not simultaneously, but as needed based on the demands of the situation. Charles reported that he is able to switch to ensure both his own pleasure and that of his partner.

One of the primary issues for participants is role learning. As the community members see it, many participants attempt to join merely for sexual gratification. Again, this is likely due to the lack of available information on BDSM. Those who participate regularly see their participation as a lifestyle choice. Those they perceive as joining for only sexual gratification are typically ostracized and labeled as “fakers,” or “wanna bes” (want to be). Consequently, new members are finding difficulty in locating appropriate resources from which to learn.

i don't think there is enough, so many uneducated people that claim to be part of the lifestyle, and know nothing about ti...i'm not sure really. i'mt no sure if people think its trendy or just wake up one day and say i wanna be a Dom/sub i don't know how though, eh i'll just wing it (Pamela, 26, female submissive)

Because it's such a secrete. There are so many within the community as a whole, that keep it private to some extent. Understandable of course. But, there should be classes, discussions, etc.. offered for those vanilla to learn what it is, and what it isn't. (Sapphire, 28, female switch)

Few learning resources are made public, apparently due to the stigma associated with BDSM practices and the lack of understanding of the subculture by the larger society. When I initiated this research, I was hard pressed to find a local, participating group within my geographic area. When one was identified, communication with the group became even more of a difficult task. This led me to believe that the difficulties lie not only with public stigma and other issues, but also with the issue of trust from within the community itself. However, there are those respondents of this study who do

participate in local groups and activities. The questions of current and past participation in local groups or communities were asked. All respondents answered these questions citing answers that were categorized as going to parties, going to parties with others, attending groups for learning, and not attending. It should be noted that among those responding with not attending there were three primary reasons given: shyness, discomfort, and uncertainty with affiliation. These reasons were categorized as fears. Among the respondents, the largest response group was those who indicated no and citing fears as their reason (n=8). Three of the members indicated they went to local parties with two of the respondents stating they were taken to parties by others. Three of the respondents stated they attended local gatherings to learn. This is also found within the study conducted by Newmahr (2009). Only one respondent indicated they did not attend and did not give a reason when prompted. It should be noted that attendance at parties and workshops also serves to validate the role of the participant (Moser 1998).

While some members, such as Charles, are not concerned with how the larger society would view their participation, “I don't care how society views my participation” (Charles, 40, male switch), they are still careful to control what they talk about and with whom they talk about it. The following excerpts express the emotions of several respondents when asked if they make their personal information public.

Hell no. . . that's just stupid to release to strangers. I will not put my home in danger I don't know I can over come. (Matervaria, 30, female submissive)

no, I've shared photos and videos with those I trust, but not openly with everyone. personal choice for safety and so I don't end up losing my job. (Timothy, 39, male Dominant)

oh hell no...seriously? You're actually asking me that? Ok, well that calls attention to what I do. There is nothing that can be kept private on the

internet so I just don't do it. It's too great of a risk to post information like that, and pictures...no way. My husband is the only one who get to see me like that. (Lisa, 33, female Dominant)

There appear to be two primary reasons for the control of information: controlling information given to society and personal safety. Controlling what the larger society knows of a member's participation is important to prevent levels of stigma and sanctioning. Timothy points out that if his participation were known, he could face the loss of his employment. Personal safety is the second reason for controlling information. Matervaria points out the dangers in exposing herself and her family to potential hardships. While Lisa does not indicate what specific risks are associated with sharing her information, she does clearly indicate the risk is great.

The lack of verifiable trust with one's information was the primary reason for lack of participation with this research. As stated previously, of the individuals who refused to participate, all gave the same reason—protection of their, or their partner's, information. This was further clarified when talking to Ghostwolf. She said, "I was disowned by my family." Her participation in BDSM became publicly known to her family, and as a result, she experienced severe repercussions.

My respondents agreed that the larger society would see their involvement in BDSM as wrong, or taboo. Yet many continue, despite the potential for social stigma. When asked why, most have agreed that it has allowed them greater flexibility in discovering their true sexual nature (Ghostwolf, Timothy, Matervaria, and Elsie).

it's let me openly explore my kinks and fetishes (Ghostwolf, 19, female switch)

I think it's been enriched. I've gotten exposed to many things that I find very interesting and fun to do, I meet like minded people, etc. (Timothy, 39, male Dominant)

I'm a stronger female for my academic knowledge of BDSM. the knowledge has made me acutely aware of myself as a feminine energy in a crowd of males. The inner strain to be noticed is no longer a clawing pain as I know no male fails to notice a female even it's briefly to ensure she does not suit his tastes and vice versa. (Matervaria, 30, female submissive)

it is an incredible positive in my life. It is a release.. it helps me cope with some of my negative feelings about myself in a variety of ways. It has certainly effected my relationships. I learned how to meditate through a BDSM scene which was beautiful. It was amazing.. A few days later I meditated myself into an intensely sexual state hovering near orgasm for hours without any touching at all. it was wild. (Elise, 35, female switch)

Two of my respondents had concerns over their families becoming aware of their participation. If Ghostwolf's experience is an indicator, it is then easy to see why they feel this way "I was disowned by my family." They all take certain precautions to limit the amount of information revealed about their participation. Some of the methods they have indicated they employ are not speaking openly about it to people who would not understand, not posting identifiable information on the internet (such as email, photos, etc.), controlling who they trust with information, and attempting to ensure the potential partner is real and genuine.

I'm fairly quiet about it. mostly by not talking about it or calling attention to what I do. (Lisa, 33, female Dominant)

Hide it, dont discuss it, be careful of what and when things are done.(Margaret, 40, female submissive)

Sapphire indicated that several of her family members were already aware of her participation and this had no impact on her participation.

They love it, because i found out they too were in the community.
(Sapphire, 28, female submissive)

With Elsie, her situation is unique to those who participated in this research. Elsie remains in a committed relationship with her husband but is also able to maintain a polyamorous household, which includes another submissive.

Interestingly, respondents did not seem to be too concerned with respective employers learning of their BDSM activities. That is not to say there was no concern. Timothy felt he would lose his job if his participation were known, while Margaret stated that she felt it would be illegal for her employer to take action against her. When asked about her professional life being impacted, Pamela stated “i don't think it would, i'm sure there are freakier people at my work than me.”

The need for information control and privacy is not limited to only that of the greater society. There is much sharing of selective information among the BDSM community members as well. I discovered this while discussing with my respondents the need for additional information to be shared with the public. BDSM lifestylers segregate themselves from non-lifestylers. Newmahr (2010) reports the SM culture is organized, formal and provides informational meetings. BDSM lifestylers also participate in informational meetings and recognize one another in this way. These meetings and workshops validate the roles of the participant in the same way as attending parties. This is primarily where the levels of information control within the subculture are at their greatest.

if you ask the average person what they think when you say BDSM....it's something about violence....beating, whipping, the woman doesn't know enough to leave to save herself.....and that isn't the general BDSM population, that's the extreme fringe (Kat, 47, female submissive)

Most that i come across, that have an understanding of BDSM only actually know about the kink of the lifestyle. There is so much more than just the kink. (Marjorie, 36, female submissive)

Those who claim BDSM as a lifestyle choice do not feel it is appropriate for others to come simply to play. Newmahr (2010) also delineates between lifestylers and those who are fake, within SM culture. It is their opinion that this brings a negative light to the BDSM community and treats it much in the same way as any other casual sex relationship found within the context of the larger society. Even those who live within polyamorous households are adamant about the fact that their lifestyle is much more than just casual sex.

I resent the implication that being poly means I am less committed. WE are totally committed. We are raising 2 kids together. Well, I would say married raising kids together is as committed as it gets. (Elise, 35, female switch)

Management of Stigma and Impressions

The levels of mediation of information between those who are entitled to know and those who are not are clear indications of impression management. The two methods of “face-work,” as identified by Goffman (1967) are avoidance and corrective behaviors. Avoidance appears to be the primary method of controlling the access of information between the larger society and members of the BDSM subculture.

The respondents all appear to be practicing some level of impression management as described by Goffman (1963a). While activities such as premarital and extramarital sex may be seen as somewhat normative by certain groups within society, these still carry a level of associated stigma from the larger context of society. These are examples of what Gagnon refers to as “normal sexual deviance” (Gagnon 1968:111). While on the one hand these may be understood as “normal,” they are still carrying the associated label of

“sexual deviance.” Two of the informants of this research indicate they would be fearful of losing employment.

I'd lose my job for one and probably would not be able to ever work in my chosen profession again. because people freak out about things they don't understand or don't know about. (Timothy, 39, male Dominant)

i would more than likely be fired, or forced to quit. Rumors would be started, not just about me, but of those i work with. And it would impact my community life as well. Because i know it's true. People love to talk at my work. They love to gossip about others. And, because of what i do, if word got out i was in the Ls, there may be some who wouldn't want their child around me. Even though i'm professional. (Sapphire, 28, female submissive)

Others fear social and familiar reprisals, such as in the case of Ghostwolf “I was disowned by my family.” It is for these reasons that these participating members of BDSM are cautious about their information.

With Pamela stating “i don't think it would, i'm sure there are freakier people at my work than me.” She appears to be using the *condemnation of the condemners* justification found in Scott and Lyman's discussion of *accounts* (1968). By stating that she perceives her coworkers as more deviant, it appears she would be showing how their actions are equally as socially unacceptable as hers are and thereby discrediting their claim against her through mediated hypocrisy.

Charles, on the other hand did not seem to be concerned with how his actions were viewed socially. “I don't care how society views my participation.” The fact that some members of the community do not have concerns with the opinions of society is an indicator of one of two things. Either they choose to live up to the labels ascribed to them by society, or they do not see themselves as deviant but instead see the actions of the

larger society as deviant for attempting to disallow these types of behaviors (Becker 1963b).

Additionally, there seems to be a level of justification, *self-fulfillment*, used to justify levels of current and continued participation. By respondents expressing their increased awareness of their sexuality, as noted previously in this section, they are attempting to show that their continued participation helps them to become more self-aware. This level of self-awareness helps them to gain a higher level of enjoyment from the acts performed that they would not otherwise be able to experience outside the context of the BDSM subculture.

Of the six techniques of justification identified by Scott and Lyman (1968), three were used by my respondents: condemnation of the condemners, sad tales, and self-fulfillment. After systematic review of the data, I determined that excuses were not used to explain a person's participation. Of the accounts given, all were justifications. This could indicate a higher level of commitment on the part of the respondents. This higher level of commitment allows us to identify lifestylers as a "true believers" (Hoffer 1951: 10). All respondents of this sample were identified as lifestylers. Furthermore, it could be expected that those participants who join solely for play would have a lower level of commitment to participation and would provide excuses to explain participation.

One important note regarding the use of accounts is the argument put forth by Becker (1963a) concerning commitment. Becker argues that commitment is the most important variable that affects all levels of adult socialization. This is important to note because within BDSM, if a person is less committed there is an expectation that a lower level of commitment, the more likely they will use excuses to explain participation.

However the higher a member's commitment, it is more likely we will see justifications used to explain participation. In essence, the less committed a person is to an act, the more likely they are to use excuses while the more committed a person is to an act, the more likely they are to use justifications. However, the amount of time that a respondent had been participating in BDSM did not seem to be a factor in their choice to use either an excuse or a justification. Instead, it seemed simply their level of commitment was the dominant factor.

The following comments from respondents indicate a level of enrichment in their lives by participation in BDSM. However, they also recognize the need to maintain privacy to avoid stigma while continuing participation.

i still do what i have to get through life. so the only way i can say it's influenced my life is it's shown me what i want and crave for...honestly with how society is today? i think they would accept it, but still see it as taboo i think...i believe it suits me and i thoroughly enjoy my role and participation in the BDSM lifestyle (Pamela, 26, female submissive)

I think it's been enriched. I've gotten exposed to many things that I find very interesting and fun to do, I meet like minded people, etc....they see it as wrong, something to be punished or ridiculed for... because people fear what they don't understand, that and the religious freaks believe it's somehow sinful. How can something natural that feels good be a sin? lol...I think it's healthy...it gives me an outlet of expression, fun, and I really enjoy it. well, I mean for those who know about me and BDSM it's opened up the possibilities for new partners, new experiences. At the same time, I have to be careful who knows what or I do risk losing friends and stuff. (Timothy, 39, male Dominant)

One additional point of interest is the relationship between those who identified their role as something they "felt" and use of the self-fulfillment justification (6). In each of the six cases, two Dominant and four submissive, the role identification and self-fulfillment were both internalized feelings that have been identified externally. The

respondents indicate a process beyond identifying with a role and then receiving benefit as a result. In each case, the respondents are indicating that their experiences and lives have further validated their role. Because of this, we could see the level of commitment increasing.

While the respondents all agree that there is still stigma largely associated with participation in BDSM, most regard it as a minimal risk that the benefits of participation outweigh. As with all social interactions we perform routinely, there are levels of cost-benefit analysis that accompany both the participation in BDSM and information control regarding participation.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

It was necessary to conduct this research to better understand those techniques of impression and stigma management that are used by members of the BDSM subculture. I discovered factors that aid in socializing members into the BDSM subculture, learned how behaviors and roles are identified and adapted to, and discovered those methods employed to manage stigma to avoid both formal and informal sanctions.

BDSM is a unique subculture that, while holding to some mainstream values and norms, contains an inherent set of values and norms that are different from those of the larger society. The process of becoming a member of the subculture, role identification within the subculture, and information management of the subculture are generally no different than those performed with any normative activity within the dominant culture.

Becoming a member of the BDSM subculture is accomplished primarily through peer association; that is, a potential member is introduced to the environment by someone who is already a member. In the case of this research, all participants were introduced either directly or indirectly by one or more persons who already held some membership level in BDSM. While peer association is commonly associated with how individuals become delinquent, it can be as much a positive result as a negative one.

Complimentary differentiation explains how members of BDSM are reinforcing their identified roles. In addition, for those who have explored additional roles,

complimentary differentiation further aids in how members determine which role they are specifically suited for. If one is submissive, satisfaction may be gained through guidance, structure, and control by another. If one is Dominant, satisfaction may be gained through the guidance, structure, and control of another. With a switch, one can determine their needs at the current time and is able to adapt to that given role in order to gain satisfaction either from another or by giving to another.

Socialization into the BDSM community is largely similar to socialization within mainstream society. Many of the same processes are operating in order for new, prospective members to be initially introduced and then to make the subsequent decision to continue to participate or not. Once introduced to the subculture, it is then a matter of identifying the respective role one will perform, learning the role, as well as learning the values and norms of the subculture to ensure that the new member's behavior will continue to be seen as normative. If the new member's behavior is not seen as normative, he or she will run the risk of being labeled, stigmatized, and even ostracized by the community for not being a genuine member and for risking the safety of those involved.

While role identification was reported to be more of an internalized sensation by the participants of this research, I feel it is when we evaluate ourselves to the reference group that we are then able to understand and identify the specific roles as they relate to the internalized sensations; that is, we learn what we feel. It is through this process of referencing that members of BDSM learn to identify their role based on a comparison between the qualities they feel they possess and those characteristics of specific roles. In the case of the six who "felt" their role and provided self-fulfillment as a justification, this would seem to indicate their level of commitment would continue to increase over

time. Since there is a high level of incongruity among the BDSM participants, it is important that the new member identify a reference group that exhibits those qualities that are closer to their own. In doing so, the member begins to learn the expectations and performances associated with the specific role identified. It is important to note that new members do not enter and simply “pick” a role to perform. The new member is evaluated through various means, whether by interview or through casual conversation, in order to help them determine which role is best suited for them. This is an additional level of peer association to help the new member integrate into the community better as well as to begin explaining the expected norms and behaviors of both the role and community.

While the reference group serves as a system of checks and balances to ensure the member has identified the correct role and performs accordingly. Complimentary differentiation serves as one method of reinforcement, to the individual and their respective partner, of the choice made. Reinforcement may also come in the form of rewards and/or punishments. It is through daily interactions between the identified partnering that these reinforcements are made. These reinforcements may come in the form of contracts and/or protocols that specifically outline the expected behaviors of all roles involved.

While some of the values, norms, and actions within the BDSM subculture may mirror that of the larger society, there are some aspects that will be performed or adhered to in a stricter manner, such as partnering. While the larger society holds that a monogamous pairing, or marriage, is the accepted norm, the members of the BDSM community also hold appropriate partnering in high regard. An example of this would be how society may see a wedding band as symbolic representation of this union, BDSM

participants utilize a method to indicate belonging or ownership of one to another, real and perceived. The contrast to the larger society is that BDSM participants tend to put more symbolism into the collar than they feel marriage partners put into a wedding band.

While many aspects of BDSM do mirror that of the dominant society, there is still a level of social intolerance of BDSM participation by the larger society. It is for this reason that members remain private and secretive about their participation and exercise a system of information control. These methods are accomplished through systematic face-work and by the use of various techniques of accounts, specifically condemnation of the condemners, sad tales, and self-fulfillment. In addition, there are members who do not concern themselves with the opinions of the larger society. This shows a level of either acceptance of a socially applied label, or it may show that the member does not see their actions as deviant, but rather holds the larger society as deviant for their attempt to repress certain acts. This speaks to the level of commitment of each individual. Those who are more committed to BDSM have been seen to employ justifications to explain behavior. This level of commitment did not seem to be influenced by the amount of time a participant had been in the community.

Limitations of the Current Research

I stress that the information gathered for this research cannot be used to generalize to the larger population of BDSM participants. The identified methods of socialization, role learning, and stigma management, while consistent among the participants, may not be the same for all BDSM participants.

With a high level of ambiguity regarding definition of the subculture, the lumping of acts performed into a sort of “catch all” for public understanding and the preferred

method(s) of participation by members of the community leads to decentralization of public information. While most participants appear to follow the norms and values of the group they primarily associate with, there may be variations in the norms and values of other groups within BDSM.

My sample was not as heterogeneous with regards to both roles and gender as I would have liked. The present study was based on a sample that was comprised mostly of women who identified as submissives. Other studies have also documented a strong preference for the submissive role (Ernulf and Innala 1995; Levitt *et al.* 1994) among SM participants. There was a high level of interest for participating in my study by submissives who were not allowed to participate by their respective Dominants. As permission of the Dominant is a norm within the community, this norm was respected and I made no further attempts to get those individuals to participate.

I asked participants to provide their state of U.S. residence but not their specific city. Had the question of city of residence been included, this could have provided additional insight as to how prevalent the BDSM community is within those areas. Larger cities tend to have higher instances of non-normative subcultures. Smaller cities, especially those located within the southern portions of the United States, are not as likely to have publicized organizations and groups due to a higher level of religiosity found within that region of the country.

The expansion of requests for participation did result in the identification of six additional participants. These respondents aided in increasing the final sample size and in strengthening the subsequent analysis. One additional measure, discovered only at the closing of this portion of the research that could have increased the participation level,

was that of the Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities (CARAS). The specific resource that could have been utilized is the Research Advisory Committee (RAC). The CARAS RAC serves as a liaison between the alternative sexuality communities and both professional and academic research in order to align participants with respective research projects. Knowing of this resource ahead of time could have resulted in additional participation.

A question regarding role participation was to try and determine if there was a difference between behaviors of indoctrination and behaviors of participation. There was no indication these behaviors were different. However, it is important to note that during indoctrination, while the same behaviors are exhibited during participation, the behaviors are less frequently performed, and less strictly monitored. As the new member moves into a higher level of participation, these initial behaviors become more frequently performed and more strictly monitored. Thus, I cannot definitively state whether or not there are difference between behaviors of indoctrination and behaviors of participation.

Additional Questions and Further Research

Every research project generates important questions that can only be addressed through refinement of sampling and analytical techniques, and additional research. I identify and discuss a set of such questions in the sections below.

Additional Questions

Several questions arose during the course of this research in each of its respective stages. First, during the request for participation, there were questions regarding the norms and values of the subculture itself. The specific question was about the norm that before an owned or controlled submissive was allowed to participate in this research the

permission of the respective Dominant had to be acquired. I had to determine how to handle the situation in which a Dominant refused to allow their submissive to participate. I determined that the best course of action was to eliminate the potential participant in order to maintain a good working relationship within the community. This is interesting to understand simply because it could allow researchers to gain a better understanding and insight into those norms and values that are unique to this subculture specifically.

The second question that arose during the request for participation was that of a higher level of interest in participation by those outside of the U.S. The response rates for participation were much lower from members within the U.S. when compared with those from other countries. This would be interesting to look at in terms of how sexuality and sex are viewed by other cultures, specifically at what is considered normative for these respective cultures. Additional questions regarding how members of other countries are socialized in comparison to members of the U.S., both in general as well as into BDSM could be evaluated.

A third question of interest arose while discussing how members of the community maintain information in a confidential manner. Since there is disagreement over what aspects of BDSM are considered normative within the community, there are those who ostracize and shun other members that participate in what could be considered non-normative behavior(s). What behaviors are considered deviant among the group? What are the specific mechanisms that address deviance?

While there were no data gathered on the specific acts of participation members perform, particularly “scenes”, there was information revealed during the course of the interviews that led to additional questions. Based on acts, either revealed or eluded to, the

question arose of how members of any culture come to learn of these various acts. Is there a level of media influence, or some other agent, that is providing a reference to various sexual acts to be performed? Are these portrayals realistic or are they idealized fantasy that people attempt to make real?

Future Research

One area for future research to investigate is the question of how members of the BDSM community learn their respective roles. Specifically, how do members learn the acts and activities within a specified role? Do members of BDSM perform their roles in the same ways or is there a difference in how roles are performed? This may be a question of role negotiation between performing partners.

Another area for future research is that of gender dynamics. How large of a role does gender play in the performance of a person's identified role? Can we expect the same ideologies from the dominant culture to carry over to that of the BDSM subculture with respect to socially prescribed gender roles? The limitations of this study prevented a more in-depth look into the significance of gender on role identification and subsequent performance.

Additionally, Cubbins and Tanfer (2000) indicate that the earlier a person's involvement in sexual activity begins, the more likely they are to participate in risky sexual behaviors. An area of study would be to determine BDSM participants' first sexual encounters and their subsequent start into BDSM to determine if these findings will continue to hold true. It can be expected that if BDSM is identified as risky sexual behavior then an earlier start into sexual exploration may also explain participation into BDSM.

APPENDIX A (if necessary)

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: "Socialization, Role Attainment, and Stigma Management in BDSM"

Investigator: Ronald Hopper, Department of Sociology,
ronald.hopper734@topper.wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted as part of graduate coursework for the completion of a Master's Thesis at Western Kentucky University.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask him any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please indicate your agreement to voluntary participation in the project. Additionally, your continued participation in the research implies your express, continued, informed consent.

Nature and Purpose of the Project:

The research seeks to determine how individuals are socialized into, learn the involved roles of, and manage stigma associated with alternative sexual practices, specifically the subculture of BDSM (bondage, domination, sadism and masochism). It is of interest to the researcher to determine the factors involved in the individuals decision to seek out, participate in, and either continue or discontinue alternative sexual activities.

Discomfort and Risks:

The risks associated with this project may include, but are not limited to, embarrassment, decreased social standing, social stigma, loss of employment, and/or legal sanctions in areas where participation may be a violation of local ordinance or law. While these risks are not exhaustive, the researcher will provide every means possible to alleviate any and all risks associated with this project to include NO collection of personally identifiable information that could pose a risk of harm, legal sanctions, or public humiliation of the participants.

Benefits:

It is intended that this research will provide a better understanding of the process of socialization into an alternative sexual subculture, how members learn of and adapt to the various roles of the subgroup, and challenges (such as stigma management) faced by the participants of this study. It is the intention that information discovered from this study may be used to gain a better understanding of what the participants face as a result of their lifestyle choices. It is also the intention to provide the participants, and other members, the opportunity to read the research and gain a better understanding of others in their subculture.

Confidentiality:

Participants will be known to the researcher only by their created chat handles. Unless an actual name is used in the creation of a chat handle, the researcher will have no possible means to identify the participants. Additionally, pseudonyms will be created using a software package called FakeName Generator. Once the interviews have been completed, all references of the username, in the transcripts, will immediately be replaced with the generated pseudonym for the purpose of anonymity and confidentiality. No research will be conducted outside of the chat medium in order to prevent any possible means of personal data collection. There will be NO collection or recording of usernames, participant's geographic locations, email addresses, IP addresses, or other identifiable information.

Refusal/Withdrawal:

Participation is completely voluntary and any refusal to participate in, or withdrawal from this study, will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty. Refusal to participate in, or withdrawal from, this study will not preclude you from participating in future research. In addition, you have the right to "decline to answer" any question you are not comfortable in answering. This will neither impact your participation in the current research nor impact your participation in future research.

I understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and I believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks. I further agree that, in lieu of a signature, my continued participation in this research implies my express informed consent.

Please state, at the beginning of the interview process your reading, understanding, and acceptance of this document, if applicable. Your participation, or continued participation, in this research implies your current, or continued, consent and voluntary participation.

Researcher's Information
Ronald Hopper
Western Kentucky University
ronald.hopper734@topper.wku.edu

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD
HS12-063, September 23, 2011

Paul Mooney, Compliance Manager TELEPHONE: (270) 745-4652

APPENDIX B

Qualitative Interview Guide

Research and Informed Consent

1. Did you receive the informed consent?
2. Do you have any questions regarding the research or your participation?
3. Are you aware that participation is completely voluntary?
4. Do you agree to participate?
5. Please state your full date of birth (MM/DD/YYYY) for verification to ensure that you are at least 18 years of age or older.
6. Would you like to provide a pseudonym (fake name) or have one provided for you?

Demographics of Participant

7. What is your race/ethnicity?
8. What is your sex?
9. What is your identified Gender?
10. What is your highest level of education?
11. What is your current occupational status (i.e. full-time, part-time, etc)?
12. What is your estimated annual household income?
13. What is your current U.S. state of residence?
14. Do you have a current religious affiliation?
15. What was your religious affiliation during childhood?
16. Do you currently have a political affiliation?
17. What is your parent's current marital status?
18. What is your sexual orientation?
19. Are you currently in a relationship?
 - Is your relationship emotionally satisfying?
 - How so?
 - Why do you feel it is satisfying?
 - Is your relationship physically satisfying?
 - How so?
 - Why do you feel it is satisfying?

20. At what age did you become aware of your sexual needs?

Socialization into and within BDSM

21. How did you first learn about BDSM?

- How was the subject approached?
- Who initially brought it up?

22. Do you currently participate in local BDSM groups or activities?

- (If no) Have you ever participated in local BDSM groups or activities?
- Why or Why not?
- How did you learn of local groups and activities?

23. How long have you been in the BDSM community?

- (Or) At what age did you begin participating in BDSM?

24. How many BDSM relationships have you had?

25. Are you currently in a BDSM relationship?

- How often do you participate in your current BDSM relationship (24/7, selective times, bedroom only)?
 - Why?

26. Is your relationship online, in real life or both?

- Why?

27. Do you currently live with your BDSM partner?

28. How long have you been in your current BDSM relationship?

29. How would you define the current commitment level between you and your BDSM partner? (monogamous, polyamorous, or something else)

30. Is your current role sexual, non sexual, or both?

- Why?

31. Is there anything specific that you look for in your BDSM partner?

- Why?

32. What steps, if any, have you taken to seek out a BDSM partner?

- Why?

33. What influence, if any, did your parents/guardians have on your sexuality?

- How do you feel about that?
 - Why?

34. What influence, if any, did/does your religious affiliation have on your sexuality?

- How do you feel about that?
 - Why?

35. Do you feel your childhood has impacted your view of your own sexuality?

- How so?
- Why do you feel this way?

36. Do you feel that your sex/gender has influenced your sexuality?

- How so?
- Why do you feel this way?

Role Learning and Adaptation

37. What is your current identified role in BDSM?
- Why?
 - In your own words, how would you define your role as a... (Master/Dom/Daddy/sub/slave/baby girl(boy)/switch/top/bottom)?
 - What is a switch?
 - What is a top?
 - Is a power top different from a top?
 - If so, how?
 - What is a bottom?
 - Is a power bottom different from a bottom?
 - If so, how?
38. Do you feel you have always been (insert role)?
39. What are the various roles you have performed in BDSM?
- How do you feel about these?
 - Why?
 - Do you feel there is another role you may identify with better?
 - Why?
40. How did you learn your current role?
41. Are their defined boundaries to your role?
- Like what, for instance?
 - Why?
 - How do you feel about these boundaries?
42. Do you have hard limits?
- Are these limits negotiated?
 - Why?
 - How do you feel about these limits?
 - Have your hard limits changed over time?
 - Do you expect them to?
 - How?
 - How do you feel about this?
43. Do you have soft limits also?
- Were these negotiated limits?
 - Why?
 - How do you feel about these limits?
 - Have your soft limits changed over time?
 - Do you expect them to?
 - How?
 - How do you feel about this?
44. Was there any negotiation regarding your role participation with others?

- Why/why not?
- 45. Do you participate in established protocols or contracts?
 - Why/why not?
- 46. Does a contract or protocols impact the requests you are given?
 - How so?
- 47. Do you participate in a system of rewards and punishments?
 - How are your rewards defined?
 - How are your punishments defined?
- 48. Can a person hold more than one role in BDSM?
 - How so?
- 49. How would you describe your level of participation in BDSM? (light, moderate, heavy, etc.)
- 50. Is personal safety in BDSM participation a concern for you?
 - Why?
- 51. How do you get to know a potential partner?
 - Why?
 - What things do you do to ensure honest answers?
- 52. How long before you choose to meet a new partner, physically?
 - Why?
- 53. Have you ever lived with a partner?
 - Why or why not?
- 54. Were you raised in mainstream US culture/society or another?
 - Which one?
- 55. Do you think your culture and/or society influenced your sexuality and your views of sexuality? (may need further explanation during interview)
 - Why?
 - How so?
- 56. How has your life been influenced by BDSM?
 - Why?
- 57. Have others in the BDSM community influenced your role or your participation in BDSM?
 - In what ways have they influenced you?
 - Why?
- 58. Have you helped or influenced others into BDSM?
 - How?
 - Why?
- 59. Have you helped to influenced someone's role in BDSM?
 - How?
 - Why?
- 60. What BDSM resources to you subscribe to or utilize?

- Why?

Stigma Management

61. How do you feel society would view your participation in BDSM?
 - Why?
62. How do you view your participation in BDSM?
 - Why?
63. Do you feel that your participation in BDSM has impacted your social life?
 - How?
 - Why?
64. Has this been a positive or a negative impact?
 - How?
 - Why?
65. How has your BDSM participation impacted your sexuality?
66. Are there any of your family who are aware of your participation?
 - How do they (or how would they) react to you if they knew?
67. Are there any of your friends who are aware of your participation?
 - How do they (or how would they) react to you if they knew?
68. Of those who know of your participation, how do they treat you?
 - Why do you feel this is the case?
69. Are you open or secretive regarding your lifestyle in BDSM?
 - Why?
 - How do you hide your participation?
70. Would your participation impact your professional life, if it were known?
 - How?
 - Why?
71. Would your participation impact your social or family life, if it were known?
 - How?
 - Why?
72. What do you tell others, in general, about your relationship?
 - Why?
73. Do your friends/family know that you're in a relationship or seeing someone?
 - Why or why not?
 - How do you explain your relationships to friends/family?
 - Why do you explain it this way?
74. What are the measures you take to ensure your lifestyle remains private?
 - Why?
75. Do you ever post open information on the internet or BDSM sites such as identifiable photos, email address, IM username, etc...?
 - Why or why not?

Final Questions

76. Do you feel there is enough public understanding of BDSM?
○ Why or why not?
77. What would you tell someone interested in BDSM?
○ Why?
78. Can you think of anything I haven't asked that you would like to tell me?
79. May I contact you later if additional questions arise?
80. Do you know of anyone else who would be willing to participate?
81. Would you like to be contacted to view the results of the research?
How do you wish to be contacted?

APPENDIX C

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

24/7 – Related to a total power exchange situation. See also Power Exchange and Total Power Exchange

ALPHA SUB – Generally the first, or strongest, submissive in a group or under the control of a Dominant.

BDSM – An amalgamation of Bondage, Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism. A generalized term to encompass a wide range of acts and activities.

BONDAGE – The act of restraining one person by another while using any variety of items such as ropes, chains, tapes, cuffs, or various types of leathers.

BOTTOM – The person on the receiving end of a given stimulus or scene. Generally considered to be the assumed position of a submissive.

COLLAR: An item worn around the neck, sometimes equipped with a locking device to prevent its removal, and often worn as a symbol of submission. *Also, verb* To put a collar on, often as part of a ceremony indicating a committed relationship between a Dominant and a submissive.

COLLARED: An engagement in a committed, long-term relationship to a Dominant.

COLLARING CEREMONY: A formal ceremony between a Dominant and a submissive, typically during which a physical or symbolic collar is placed around the submissive's neck.

D/s: Dominance and submission.

DOMINA: A female Dominant.

DOMINANT: A person who assumes a role of power or authority in a power exchange relationship; *see also* top, switch.

DOMINATE: To assume a role of power or authority in a power exchange relationship

DOM: A Dominant.

DOMINATRIX: A Dominant, usually female and often a ProDomme.

DOMME: A female Dominant.

FETISH: 1. *Psychology* a non-sexual object whose presence is required for sexual arousal or climax; informally. 2. Any non sexual item or act that sexually arouses a person. 3. Relating to BDSM in general. 4. Items, practices, or apparel in BDSM.

HARD LIMIT: A limitation considered to be absolute and non-negotiable.

LIFESTYLE: Indicator relating to one's choice to participate in BDSM regularly.

LIMIT: A boundary specifying a point when activity is to cease.

MASTER: A Dominant, usually in a TPE relationship and usually male.

MUNCH: An informal gathering of people interested in BDSM to meet with others of like minds to socializing.

POWER EXCHANGE: The act performed by two or more people who consensually agree that one or more people will assume authority over another.

PROTOCOL: A set of defined behaviors that govern all parties involved.

SAFE, SANE, AND CONSENSUAL (SSC): A concept and belief that holds activities are acceptable with the understanding they are performed in a safe manner, with sane and rational thought, and that participation is voluntary and consensual among all involved.

SAFWORD: A defined and mutually agreed upon word to be used in order to halt all activity in the case of safety or discomfort.

SERVICE D/S: A particular type of Domination and submission involving the submissive serving the Dominant in practical ways.

SOFT LIMIT: A flexible limit that may change over time.

SUBMISSIVE: Someone who participates and performs under the direction and guidance of a Dominant, or a switch in the Dominant role.

SWITCH: Someone capable of changing roles to be either Dominant or submissive.

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