I Have Turned All My Trauma into Kinks; Does Trauma Result in Fetishistic Behavior

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Abstract

BDSM stands for Bondage, Domination, Submission, Sadism, and Masochism and has existed in some form since the beginning of human society. While the BDSM community itself is mostly populated by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender individuals, it also serves as an umbrella term that covers the heterosexual community. Membership in these communities has long been a source of social and professional stigma since the end of World War 2. Early in its assimilation into American society, stereotypes began to emerge that involvement or even interest in these sorts of activities was due to the failed resolution of childhood or sex-based trauma. This review seeks to debunk these stereotypes by reviewing current and previous research on the topic and illustrating that BDSM, or fetishistic behavior, is not a result of either but a positive and potentially therapeutic activity engaged in by consenting adults.

Keywords: BDSM, Fetish, Relationship, Disorder, Paraphilia, Trauma, Adverse Childhood Event, ACE, Bondage, Domination, Submission, Sadism, Masochism, LGBTQIA+

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There is a preponderance of incorrect representation of alternative lifestyles in the media, specifically revolving around those in the Bondage, Dominance and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism(BDSM) communities. Television shows like Law & Order, Sons of Anarchy, or movies like Se7en, 50 Shades of Grey, and the Hellraiser Series all illustrate that being involved in the BDSM lifestyle means that any practitioner is mentally unwell, perverted, predatory, or some form of nebulous evil. These types of popular media tend to paint participation in BDSM as somehow deviant and, in the case of Sons of Anarchy, the result of some sort of childhood trauma or psychopathology. Social media has followed similar trends, and in the instance of the application known as TikTok, there are even semi-viral trends musically proclaiming, “I have turned all my trauma into kinks.”(@youcancallmelinds, 2024).

This begs the question: Does participation in BDSM present as the consequence of a Childhood Adverse Event (ACE), or is participation in this particular lifestyle a signifier of healthy coping mechanisms? What are the implications for social reform surrounding involvement in alternative lifestyles such as BDSM?

Definition of BDSM

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, version 4(American Psychiatric Association, 2000), BDSM was categorized under Paraphilias, defined as

1) Sexual Sadism: Deriving sexual arousal from inflicting pain, suffering, or humiliation on another person that results in distress or impairment of an individual's life or another person.

2) Sexual Masochism: Deriving sexual pleasure from being humiliated, beaten, or made to suffer. Similar to the definition of sexual sadism, it was labeled a disorder if it caused distress or impairment in a person's life.

This definition was continuously referenced in court proceedings where there was the question of child custody before the release of the newer Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), which defines the same as,

1) Sexual Sadism Disorder: Deriving sexual pleasure from the physical or psychological suffering of another person when it causes significant distress or impairment in the functioning of the individual or another person or involves non-consenting individuals.
2) Sexual Masochism Disorder: Deriving sexual pleasure from being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer, which results in impairment of either the individual or another person or is acted out on non-consenting individuals

A broader and more inclusive definition was presented by Kaitlyn Wahl (2024), where she defined BDSM as

> an overarching abbreviation of bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism. It refers to a physical, psychological, and sexual roleplay involving power exchange between consensual participants. This abbreviation

encompasses a wide range of practices and interests, including power dynamics, physical restraint, and various forms of stimulation and orders.

While this definition is succinct, it doesn't fully encompass the complexity of the lifestyle itself. For instance, there is significant evidence to support that while BDSM can involve a sexual element, it is not required to engage in these activities. However, in the following text, the term BDSM should be assumed to reference this definition in whole or in part.

Definition of ACE

Traumatic childhood experiences are a significant risk factor that could result in the development of a physical illness or a mental disorder. Canatan et al.,(2024) define this circumstance as

a large array of negative experiences may include sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and neglect to which the individual is exposed before the age of 18, as well as experiences involving the loss of parents, separation from parents, divorce, migration, witnessing violence, accidents, and natural disasters.

The above list is not exhaustive; however, this definition will suffice for simplicity when referring to ACE as a cause of trauma.

Brief History of BDSM

As you review the current research, several common threads begin to make manifest. Participation in the BDSM Community always tends to come with the warning of "

If my (Insert public or private institution) ever found out my life could be ruined." or "Always use a scene name so it can never get back to…." usually followed by a listing of job, family, kids, school, church, parents, etc… The list, at times, appears endless, but upon further scrutiny, it appears the start of this, and countless other communities, issues begins as it always does in the United States: the church.

To understand the beginning, one would have to venture back to the 1920s and prohibition. Before the advent of mainstream media or social media, there were bars; before those became a mainstay in America, there were speakeasies. Prohibition officially began at midnight on January 17.1919, in the United States (Library of Congress, n.d.), which banned the sale of liquor in the continental United States. This ban, as most bans do, gave rise to black market sales of liquor, which primarily came from the Mafia. Fast forward to 1953, a man named Vito Genevese, the leader of the Genovese crime family, purchased the Rainbow Inn, which had a reputation with New York City police as a frequently raided speakeasy (Adapted from Helget, 2022). The Rainbow Inn would quickly gain traction due to a woman named Anna Genovese, a lesbian who would serve as the prime mover as it gained a footing in the homosexual underground in Greenwich Village (Adapted from Helget, 2022). The mafia began to buy up more and more real estate in the area, and more real estate meant more opportunities for crime, which is the point that the Judicial system took notice.

Mafia activity and the judicial system's response to it have been well documented, with characters like Elliott Ness or Al Capone eliciting imagery of Thompson submachine guns, expensive suits, and decadent women. The Rainbow Inn was certainly no stranger to these, but

historically, the LGBTQIA+ Community didn't make a severe splash until June 28, 1969 (Library of Congress, n.d.) during the riots following the police raid of The Stonewall Inn in 1969.

Post World War 2, America saw a boom in technology and business as men returned from defending the world against the threat of the Nazis. They brought a blend of ideas and cultures due to exposure to their European counterparts in the war; they also brought leather and motorcycles.

The military used motorcycles during the wars, and upon returning home, some soldiers didn't want to relinquish the freedom riding a motorcycle afforded them. However, they needed something to protect them from the elements that came in the form of leather.

Leather has been used for centuries as armor, and it was used by the military for bomber jackets to protect their bombardiers from harsh conditions at altitude. Influenced by motorcycle culture and the rigid hierarchy of their previous military service, the gay leather scene would evolve into what we now consider BDSM culture after the Stonewall riots and the passive genocide of the queer community in the 1980s.

The growth and assimilation of different ideas and cultures and its tacit attachment to the mafia, as well as the underground liquor market, angered the religious and conservative population in the United States. They became increasingly vocal about their discontent, and in 1946, mainline Protestantism published a revised standard version of the bible, equating homosexuality to a vice that has been opposed since Sodom (Adapted from White, 2015).

As time progressed, laws were made to make being part of the LGBTQIA+ community illegal. As the social climate shifted, the early 20th century saw a

growing stigma against being a homosexual. This fire was, more frequently than not, fueled by the medical and psychological community's pathologization of same-sex attraction that anti-sodomy laws were passed. Combined with the Lavender Scare in the '70s and '80s, a quarter-century assault by the federal government on gay men and lesbians— known as the Lavender Scare (Valocchi, S. 2005).

With laws being passed outlawing queer people, the leather community wasn't far behind, and in the late 1960s, the police targeted and raided the Stonewall Inn. Riots ensued, and in the aftermath, the LGBTQIA+ community gained a significant foothold in its fight for acceptance. The damage, however, had already been done, and the American Psychiatric Association wouldn't declassify homosexuality as a mental disorder until 1973. Anti-gay and same-sex marriage laws would and still do continue to emerge in current history.

Is BDSM a Maladaptive Behavior

During the period from the 20s until the 1980s, the queer community operated heavily underground to avoid harassment, and the culture of the BDSM community followed. During this time, a multitude of research sprang forth, equating the participation in fetishistic behavior to be a mental illness. According to the DSM (APA, 1994), the most common fetishes involve women's undergarments and shoes. (Wiederman, 2003) to be chief among these behaviors. It requires no major leap in cognition to surmise that this was used to target drag performers who primarily existed in gay establishments, which meant that they were targeted as well.

Once targeted, the medical and psychological communities began searching for a reason as to why these behaviors occurred and began to propagate the notion that participation in BDSM, as well as other forms of non-traditional, alternative sexual

practices (e.g., fetishism, collectively, "kink"), was the result of childhood abuse (Adapted from Cascalheira, 2023). Childhood abuse is a severe Adverse Childhood Event (ACE), and ACEs are associated with risky behaviors such as drug use, smoking, depression, anxiety, and violence. Additionally, ACEs can disrupt healthy brain development in childhood, leading to long-term negative consequences. (Wahl, 2024). It is an understandable conclusion to draw that anyone with that sort of background history may not be someone who is safe to be among the general population in society.

The notion that BDSM practitioners may be psychologically damaged and even dangerous (Wismeijer & Assen, 2013) became prevalent as imagery and equipment associated with the BDSM community were utilized in popular media. Sensational accounts of serial murderers with industrial dungeons or overpaid executives having affairs with salacious women clad in leather all became stereotypes in the court of public opinion. These stereotypes were not insular to drama or horror. Comedy films such as the Police Academy series (Mendel & Mazur, 1984), where Proctor and Commandant Lassard stumble into a leather bar, The Blue Oyster Club.

The fact that BDSM practices have been reported to be more common among LGBTQIA2S+ identified people (Strizzi et al., 2021) also served as a nail in the metaphorical coffin, as this was yet another reason to treat the community with disdain.

Another popular misconception is regarding attachment and BDSM. It is posited that the preference for BDSM activities is likely the result of having a history of traumatic (sexual) experiences or being generally insecurely attached [9]. (adapted from Wismeijer & Assen, 2013). Due to this misconception, the APA and, by default, the DSM became involved. In the

first edition of the DSM (APA, 1952), the diagnostic category was listed as "sexual deviation." Five particular forms of sexual deviation were noted: homosexuality, transvestism, pedophilia, fetishism, and sexual sadism (Wiederman, 2003).

This would continue through the 60s as the second edition of the DSM (APA, 1968) retained the designation "deviant sexuality" but now specified the following: "This category is for individuals whose sexual interests are directed primarily toward objects other than people of the opposite sex, toward sexual acts not usually associated with coitus, or toward coitus performed under bizarre circumstances" (Wiederman, 2003)

Finally, the third edition of the DSM (APA, 1980) included the term paraphilia and emphasized that a defining characteristic was that the "unusual or bizarre imagery or acts are necessary for sexual excitement" (Wiederman, 2003). The language utilized in these first three iterations was weaponized by the legal and medical system, including the psychology community. Queer men and women were hospitalized or outright arrested, utilizing legal and medical precedent formed by these events. Research done by Cascalheira et al. (2023) stated that scholars contend that the social and professional stigma against BDSM and kink are reminiscent of the pathologizing of homosexuality.

Professional and social stigma is not insular to the LGBTQIA+ community; family court judges often removed child custody or visitation rights from adults who practiced BDSM or other non-traditional sexual behaviors"(Wahl, 2024).

BDSM as an Adaptive or Therapeutic Behavior

The social and psychological landscape in the United States is in a period of fluctuation. As the United States has grown

and matured as a society, the research around the kink community and the LGBTQIA+ community has matured and evolved as well. Studies by Wismeijer & Assen (2013) posit that although most people think of BDSM as a form of erotic behavior, most BDSM practitioners participate in BDSM activities for sensory pleasure and not so much for erotic pleasure.

The research goes further to say that,

These findings suggest that BDSM practitioners are characterized by greater psychological and interpersonal strength and autonomy rather than by psychological maladaptive characteristics (Wismeijer & Assen, 2013)

This means that individuals who participate in BDSM and other fetish behaviors are doing this for a myriad of sensory or psychological reasons, not due to some preconceived fault in their character.

There is also a mounting body of evidence that suggests that people who do participate in BDSM may have healthier and more fulfilling relationships. According to research, BDSM behaviors may take place within romantic relationships characterized by trust and satisfaction, two factors that are often assumed to indicate a healthy relationship (Strizzi et al., 2022).

Additionally, research has posited that participation in BDSM activities and culture may be an expression of self-expansion theory, which explains individuals' inner motivation that influences cognition, affection, and behavior in intimate

relationships between people (Lee et al.,2109).

Finally, Wahl's (2024) research gives the most succinct reason for participation in kink and BDSM but leaves a warning: kink can be a recovery tool from ACEs. It is important to note that these guidelines highlight that an inclination towards kink is not indicative of trauma. Finally, it should not be assumed that certain kinks (degradation, for example) are only prevalent because someone has experienced abuse in their life.

Implications for Social Justice Advocacy

The path of a counselor as a social justice advocate is not an easy one. It is fraught with risks to health and financial security; however, it is a necessary symbiotic part of the counseling field. Counselors are akin to demon hunters; we are exposed to all of life's grandeur but also its shortcomings, and our clients come to us to help them deal with those shortcomings or to help them rid themselves of the damage they have caused. By understanding that clients who also happen to be kinky are not presenting with a mental illness by default, we can better understand them from a human perspective. The profession also calls on counselors to embrace multiculturalism, but we must remember that culture isn't produced by skin color or geographic location; it is people.

Additionally, BDSM and the kink community as a whole are majority LGBTQIA+ and by acknowledging and advocating for people, regardless of how they express love and affection intimately or interpersonally, we, as a profession, act as the driving force for real societal change.

Implications for Counseling

Disorders present due to a myriad of reasons and for people in all walks of life. The understanding that people who participate in BDSM practices are not, by default, sick or

some contrived horror movie villain, we better prepare ourselves to serve their needs. Ideally, there will come a point where there are no alternative lifestyles; instead, there will only be people living their best lives. Additionally, there has been some preliminary theory that states that some people with the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may seek out these types of practices due to a stim-response referred to as pain-seeking. These individuals may seek out some forms of pain, from mild to severe, in order to help themselves neurologically regulate. While the theory is brand new, it does beg the question; if kink and BDSM can help regulate a nervous system, what other experiences could be helped?

Conclusion

Plainly, kink and participation in fetishistic or BDSM-associated behaviors is not a direct result of Adverse Childhood Events, nor is it related to some sort of sexual trauma or deviancy. More appropriately, research has shown that having a tendency towards those behaviors means that a person is highly intelligent, well-adjusted, open to new experiences, and shares a heightened level of trust with potential partners. While it may be fun and edgy to refer to oneself as depraved, perverted, or twisted, or that you have magically "solved all of your traumas by turning them into kinks," it must also be understood that those adjectives are an attempt to reclaim speech, concepts and very real stigmas that have been leveled at people throughout the history of the United States.

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