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Adventures of Pleasure: Conceptualising consensual bondage, discipline, dominance & submission, and sadism & masochism (BDSM) as a form of adult play

This paper will illustrate how the consensual sexual practice of bondage, discipline, dominance & submission, and sadism & masochism (BDSM) can be interpreted as a form of adult play.

Terminology and language used by BDSM practitioners frequently draws upon imagery of play, fun and games, and narratives around BDSM related activities are reflective of this.

Drawing upon empirical data along with various psychological and sociological theoretical perspectives, this paper will explore the conceptualisation of consensual BDSM as a form of adult erotic play. Vygotsky proposed that fantasy play is a tool used by children for the purpose of liberating themselves from situational constraints, thus enabling them to explore thoughts, behaviours and emotions that would not otherwise be possible. The current paper argues that this function of fantasy can be applied to adult practitioners of BDSM, and advances this argument by theorising that consensual BDSM is a form of socio-dramatic play for adults, which serves an erotic and/or pleasurable purpose. Play enables experimentation with creativity, language, physical nuances and social roles and conventions; this paper argues that engaging in BDSM allows similar experimentation with gender, social non-conventions and physical and psychological sensations, and proposes that this kind of adult play is signified by an erotic element. Taken from a wider study into the lived experience of consensual BDSM, data were collected via nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with self-identified BDSM practitioners in the United Kingdom recruited using a snowball sample, and analysed using the template approach within an interpretive phenomenological framework, as described by Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962). The participant experiences elicited in the research reveal commonalities between their engagement as adults in BDSM and typical features of socio-dramatic play in children, such as the role of imagination, the creation and maintenance of a separate reality and a sense of fun.

Key words: play, BDSM, adulthood, phenomenology, Vygotsky, socio-dramatic

Introduction

BDSM refers to bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism and is an umbrella term for a range of erotic and/or sexual activities that can be considered unconventional or 'kinky'. BDSM consists of a diverse set of consensual practices that usually involve the eroticised exchange of power and the application or receipt of intense

sensory stimulation (Barker, Iantaffi & Gupta, 2007). The range of sexual and/or erotic practices that can be considered as BDSM are diverse and particularly subjective (Turley, 2012), and it should be noted that BDSM practitioners are not a homogenous group.

Typically, individuals exchange power during BDSM through the adoption of roles; broadly either as dominant or submissive, while some switch between these roles depending on the BDSM scene being enacted. BDSM occurs usually within a 'scene', which is a formal or informal space where activities take place. Some examples of practices that can be defined as BDSM include; spanking or caning, bondage using handcuffs, or ropes, verbal humiliation, and the application of intense physical sensations such as heat or pain (Langdrige & Barker, 2007).

There are limited studies estimating the prevalence of BDSM related interests among Western populations, and estimates range from 10 to 22 percent (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006, Masters, Johnson & Kolodny, 1995, Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin and Gebhard, 1953), indicating that interest in BDSM is relatively common. BDSM practitioners typically place safety and consent as central to participation, and the slogans 'safe, sane and consensual' (SSC) and 'risk aware consensual kink' (RACK) express this clearly (Langdrige & Barker, 2007).

Research evidence illustrates that individuals who engage in consensual BDSM are no more likely to be dangerous than other individuals (Denman 2004, Dietz, 1990), and there is no link between engaging in consensual BDSM and psychopathology (Connelly, 2006, Cross & Matheson, 2006). In fact, BDSM is considered to be enjoyable, fun and meaningful by those that participate (Faccio, Casini & Cipolletta, 2014, Turley, 2012). The current paper will explore the conceptualisation of consensual BDSM as a form of play in adulthood.

BDSM and play

Van Vleet and Feeney (2015: 632) define play as ‘an activity that is carried out for the purpose of amusement and fun, that is approached with enthusiastic and in-the-moment attitude, that is highly interactive’. Although limited, there is an emerging literature investigating play and playfulness in adulthood, and current research situates play as a range of behaviours or activities, and playfulness as a personality trait or disposition (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015, Proyer, 2014a). Research in this area tends to focus on play and playfulness in the context of work (Yu, Wu, Chen & Lin, 2007), personality (Chick, Yarnal & Purrington, 2012), relationships (Proyer, 2014b) and coping mechanisms (Magnuson & Barnett, 2013), but there is a paucity of work examining play in adulthood for pleasure and enjoyment. Van Vleet and Feeney (2015) argue that play is less socially acceptable in adults than children and not perceived as a productive use of time, and Solnit (1998) adds that adults are often critical of play. Guitard, Ferland and Dutil (2005) claim that there is insufficient understanding of what play and playfulness means in adulthood, and the various ways it can manifest. This paper aims to examine one possible manifestation, the positioning of consensual BDSM as a type of adult play. Following Attwood (2006), understanding BDSM in this way allows for a consideration of the diversity and range of practices and activities beyond the traditional medical and pathologising models, and within the broader context of society as well as acknowledging the recreational elements of BDSM (Attwood & Smith, 2013).

BDSM is a ‘practice of pleasure’ (Weiss, 2006: 233), and practitioners frequently use language and terminology related to play, including ‘players’, ‘toys’, ‘parties’ and often add the word ‘play’ to descriptions of their activities, for example ‘puppy play’, ‘role play’ and ‘wax play’ (Turley, 2012, Weiss, 2011). However, although practitioners name and describe their experiences in these terms, this does not imply that BDSM play is not taken seriously. Participants are serious about developing the skills required to practice effective and safe BDSM, and significant amounts of time, energy and money are devoted to this pursuit

(Weiss, 2011). Weiss (2006) posits that a distinction between play and seriousness is not necessary, and theorises ‘deep play’ as being challenging, profound and serious. Other examples of deep play might include chess, cribbage and board games such as Pandemic and Diplomacy. During BDSM, practitioners are not simply acting or playing out a role, the erotic play is more integrated, involved and continually evolving (Turley, 2012), which is reflective of the deep play described by Weiss. Play enables experimentation with creativity, language, physical nuances and social roles and conventions; the following sections of this paper will illustrate how engaging in BDSM allows similar experimentation with gender, social non-conventions and physical and psychological sensations, and will illustrate how consensual BDSM can be conceptualised as a form of play in adulthood.

The study

The original study from which the data were taken was an exploration of the lived experience of consensual BDSM. The study was approved by The University of Huddersfield’s ethics committee. Nine participants were interviewed using face to face, in-depth, semi structured interviews, within the interpretive phenomenological tradition. All data were anonymised, and participants provided informed consent for extracts of their interviews to be published. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique, using a gatekeeper who was a BDSM activist to inform potential participants about the study [at various formal and informal BDSM meetings, events and club nights](#), and consisted of five women and four men with ages ranging from mid-twenties to mid-forties. The selection criteria were that individuals should have regular, lived experiences of participating in consensual BDSM and must have done so for at least six months, for the purpose of enjoyment. A range of sexualities, gender expressions and BDSM role preferences from across the spectrum were sought, in order to reflect the diverse nature of BDSM practitioners (see table 1: Participant demographics) (insert table 1 about here) . Data were collected using a phenomenological

technique known as imaginative variation; asking participants to imaginatively vary aspects of their lived experiences to tease out the salient erotic nuances (see Turley, Monro & King, 2016).

Data were analysed by the first author using template analysis (King, 2012) within an interpretive phenomenological framework based on the work on Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962). The approach is a method of hierarchically analysing data and organising themes and subthemes into a template in terms of their breadth and/or salience (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley & King, 2015). The analysis involved the preliminary coding of all interview transcripts in order to produce an initial template, this was then modified by applying it to each interview transcript while attaching new themes to segments of text, and modifying existing themes encompass new insights into the material (Turley, 2016). The final template was not considered complete until it provided comprehensive coverage of the data, with no relevant aspects of experience uncoded. As this paper is focusing on the conceptualisation of BDSM as a form of adult play, only the themes of most relevance to this issue will be presented.

Findings

The analytical findings arising from this study are presented in the following section, and specifically convey salient themes for this group of participants.

Imagination

It is necessary that imagination is implicitly present and actively engaged throughout a BDSM experience enabled through the participants' imaginative engagement with the sexual scene. Only through the power of imagination is it possible for a sexual scene to be formulated at an embryonic stage, progressing to creating scenes and developing characters,

finally forming an engaging and erotic lived sexual experience. The presence of the erotic imagination is fundamental to enable participants to create a bubble of fantasy and to suspend all knowledge of the 'real' world. Maintaining this unspoken pretence of the BDSM scene is dependent upon the imaginative ability to craft a new and exciting world of sexual possibility, where the only limits are those of the imagination. Imagination becomes embodied through BDSM participation, because the BDSM serves as the experiential area where imagination can be acted out. BDSM practitioners can imaginatively live their own fantasies, entering a world of sexual freedom and fun. Joe's words capture this aspect,

'I think that imagination is so important when you do SM, it can be quite difficult to imagine you have complete control over another human being because you don't, you never can. If you can *really* imagine though, that's when it becomes a really great experience.'

BDSM play can allow participants to experience sexual engagement with someone of another gender, even though there is no sexual desire to do so outside of the fantasy world. This was a particularly salient theme in Kim's interview, as the excerpt below illustrates. Through BDSM she was able to experience erotic feelings towards the other sex, despite identifying as a lesbian, as a result of the co-created fantasy world the scene was occurring in. Again, it is the imaginative fantasy that enables Kim to interpret the scene as erotic, the reality of sexual engagement with a man does not arouse her in any way, but through imagination and co-created fantasy, her partner Katy, can assume the role of a man.

'As a gay woman, I've never had experience with men, ever. [...] it's not that I'm attracted to men or want to have sex with a man or anything to do with that...it's another way to be, another way to change [...] it's amazing that you can take on, not just a new persona, but also a new gender. I find it very much to be about exploration. I'm exploring another

gender through Katy. It lets me get even further away from myself when I do SM and further into the realm of living through or living as someone else.’

Experiences of playing with gender were within the context of emotionally safe fantasies and this was also the case for risk and danger. Participants were clear that risk and danger should remain within the fantasy as pretence, whereas outside of the fantasy bubble it is safety that is important, and participants can return to reality if feeling unsafe at any time. This should be discreetly managed in order to maintain the eroticism of the scene. Submissive participants needed this subtle, almost subconscious, awareness in order to have a successful BDSM session and to be able to relinquish control to the dominant partner. Participants differentiated between physical safety (referring exclusively to the use of bondage, restraints, breath control, and during corporal punishment), and emotional safety during humiliation, domination & discipline.

Creation of the alternative sexual reality

It is necessary for the individuals involved in the BDSM experience to formulate an alternative sexual reality, where usual rules pertaining to sex, gender and possibility no longer apply. This creates the realm of an alternative reality where anything that can be imagined and fantasised is made possible through the separation of the alternative reality from the ‘real world’. This is necessary in order to create the basis from which the BDSM scene can be played out. An important aspect of co-creating this alternative world is that each participant should completely immerse themselves within the fantasy world. The use of imagination is crucial to enable the practitioners to reach total immersion in the fantasy, evoking the metaphor of a bubble; existing within the real world but protected from its impositions. One of the research participants, Kim, relates the way that this immersion occurs,

‘I am the dominant woman and I want everyone to know that. It also helps to get into the role of Miss Baxter, how she speaks, moves and treats her students. She is a strict, severe and impenetrable woman [...] I can really *become* Miss Baxter, really live through her.’

Our findings suggest that keeping the real world at bay is vital for the eroticism of the scene, as participants should be totally immersed in the fantasy. Without such level of engagement with the fantasy, participants report a metaphorical bursting of the bubble and the intrusion of the ‘real world’, which disrupts the scene and may lead to a loss of eroticism. In order to create and maintain this level of immersion, sexual drama must exist within the fantasies, and this drama must contain exciting sexual practices and acts that are arousing to the participants. The drama must contain actors, dialogue, themes and scenes, however, when coupled with the imaginative immersion, the drama is transformed into a real and visceral experience within the context of the co-created fantasy world, thus becoming an authentic erotic lived experience.

Fun

The enjoyable and fun nature of BDSM is vital the participants, and although the sexual acts and practices may appear to others as distinctly nonsexual, these participants positioned them as highly erotic. The enjoyment referred to by participants includes the sexual, physical and emotional pleasure gained from participating in BDSM, and though this enjoyment is not always instant or apparent, it is essential in order for BDSM to be arousing. Despite containing serious scenes and serious acts, participants are completely aware, on some level, that BDSM is a fun activity. The enjoyable and fun elements of the experience must be apparent to participants, even if this is not reflective of the scene, the motivations in the ‘real’ world are concerned with pleasure and enjoyment.

‘This time, it was very relaxed and very fun. I can do lots of different types of things, be lots of different characters, experience lots of things and have a great time. The point is that we both have lots of fun and have a fantastic time together.’

Vikki’s quote illuminates how fun should feature in BDSM, even if the experience is only coded as fun after the conclusion of the play.

Discussion

Understanding BDSM, fantasy and play

Vygotsky’s (1934/1966) play theory can be used to illustrate the function of make-believe and fantasy in BDSM. Vygotsky proposed that fantasy play is a tool used by children for the purpose of liberating themselves from situational constraints, and enabling them to explore thoughts and emotions that would not otherwise be possible. The authors suggest that this function of fantasy can be applied to adult practitioners of BDSM, as the play permits entry into a world of make believe which is only constrained by the limits of imagination.

Imagination was an integral element of BDSM play for this study’s participants; Vygotsky posits that imagination allows children to enter an illusory world in which impossible or unobtainable desires can be achieved through play (1934/1966), and this can be applied to adults’ erotic imaginative BDSM play. According to Vygotsky, the child becomes emancipated from everyday situational constraints through play, because people and objects lose their determining force, therefore allowing different reactions to people and objects to occur. The child can change their relation to reality as the structure of perception changes, and meanings become detached from their usual objects and actions via imaginative play. We argue that this is also the case for adult play through BDSM. The analytical findings of this

research indicated that engaging in BDSM enabled the participants to become emancipated from their own psychological, gendered and bodily constraints as they were able to experience the ‘impossible’ through imaginative fantasy play.

Following Vygotsky, Zittoun & Cerchia (2013) view imagination as a means of expanding what is otherwise possible in an existing set of socio-cultural and historical constraints; an expansion of experience. They conceptualise imagination as stemming from a deliberate or accidental rupture in an individual’s understanding of their reality, and as a result engage in an imaginary event (e.g. a BDSM scene, a daydream etc). At the conclusion of this event, the individual returns to their reality, having gained something from the event. BDSM fantasy play can be understood as the deliberate creation of a disjunction between the players usual understandings of the world, and the novel and exploratory understandings constructed within a BDSM scene. Imaginative play includes processes that re-open established forms of knowledge into new combinations and the chance to play with ‘diverse elements of experience’ (Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013, p.312), a concept we argue, can be applied to the roles, characters, themes and plots of BDSM play.

Developmental theories of play can be utilised to understand how the BDSM fantasy is managed. Deunk, Bernest & De Glopper (2008) note that engaging in socio-dramatic play allows children to adopt various roles and experience the outcome of different scenarios. We propose that a similar process takes place with BDSM participation; BDSM is a form of adult socio-dramatic play for the purpose of pleasure. Goffman (1974) examined children’s socio-dramatic play, arguing that ‘keys’ are used to provide an alternative meaning to an event. A ‘key’ is conceptualised as ‘a set of conventions by which an activity is transformed into something that is patterned like the original activity but is interpreted as something else’ (Deunk et al, 2008:617). Keys are used during make-believe play (categorised by playfulness, fantasy and dramatic scripting) in order to transform an activity, person or object into

something else for the purpose of the play. All participants must be aware that a transformation of meaning has occurred for the play to be successful (Deunk et al, 2008). We suggest that keying occurs within BDSM play also, in order to transform the seemingly unpleasant or unconventional situations into activities that adopt an erotic atmosphere and are fun and enjoyable for the participants. Goffman (1974) argues that each transformation of meaning via a key adds a new layer to the activity; the outer layer reflects the status of the activity in the real world i.e. as BDSM participation, while the inner layer represents the most direct meaning of the make-believe event, for example a mistress disciplining her slave.

Stear (2009) contends that participating in BDSM scenes is akin to engaging with fictions, and the analytic findings support this concept. Stear applied Walton's (1990) theory of make-believe, prominent in the philosophy of art, to BDSM. Walton's theory is based upon the principle of generation, which refers to the prescribed rules that govern what is to be imagined. Walton (1990) also refers to fictional worlds where characters and props combined with the principle of generation create a fictional realm and within this realm are fictional rules and truths. The rules cannot be disobeyed or the fictional world is damaged. Walton (1990) argues that physiological responses, called 'quasi-emotions', to the fictional world can be experienced, and these enable the experience of different emotional responses in the fictional world than would occur in the world outside of the fiction. Walton (1990) uses the example of 'quasi-fear', which we suggest can be applied to BDSM. Fear is a component of the make-believe fantasy of BDSM for some participants, indeed it featured frequently during the participant interviews. Walton (1990) proposes that despite being part of the make-believe game, participants are not simply pretending to be afraid, nor are they acting. According to Walton (1990), participants will make-believely respond in line with the principle of generation, meaning psychological states respond according to the fictional world that has been created. If the fictional world is unpredictable and frightening, as is commonly

described in submissives' accounts of BDSM, the participants' response will correspond to the atmosphere created in the fantasy world, this is a different emotion however, to those that would be experienced in the same situation occurring outside of a BDSM context. Stear (2009) argues that BDSM can be considered a make-believe game as BDSM scenes involve character and prop oriented fantasy which must be engaged with on a psychological level. Role playing during BDSM enables the participants to experience a range of 'quasi-emotions' that they would not otherwise experience in the real world. The authors concur, and argue that BDSM should be conceptualised as a type of play, exclusive to adulthood. Stear (2009) also notes that despite the make-believedness of BDSM, the sexual pleasure derived from the practice is not pretend; the pleasure is experienced as real, rather than quasi, as a result of the quasi-emotions that are experienced during the play.

Applying theories of adult play to BDSM

Guitard, Ferland and Dutil (2005) aimed to produce a conceptual definition of playfulness in adulthood, and identified five relative components; creativity, curiosity, sense of humour, pleasure and spontaneity. It is clear from the analytic findings that engagement in consensual BDSM contains these components. BDSM practitioners are creative in the way that imagination is used in an original and tangible way in order to experiment with ideas and concepts. Practitioners are curious to try new and exciting experiences to locate sources of pleasure, and they seek visceral responses to sensory stimulation that elicits pleasure. A sense of humour can enable management and enjoyment of unpredictability, and finally, practitioners are spontaneous in terms of freedom of action; the only constraints to fantasies are imaginative constraints. Proyer (2014b) identified seven thematic categories of the perceived functions of play in adulthood, again these can be related to BDSM play. Particularly interesting and relevant is the category of mastery. Mastery involves overcoming challenges and motivating one's self or others, this is pertinent to both the dominant and

submissive roles in BDSM. The dominant partner aims to motivate the submissive to endure the various punishments, tasks or humiliations handed out, and the submissive attempts to overcome the challenges of the scene, for example by overcoming a psychological or physical barrier.

Limitations

Phenomenological research does not seek generalisability but rather to produce a credible account of particular people's first-hand experiences. Thus, though we cannot assume other BDSM practitioners would necessarily experience the phenomenon in the play-like way we describe, there does not seem to be any *prima facie* grounds to see these findings as merely a product of our participants' unique characteristics. Our sample was adequate in size for phenomenological work (Giorgi, 1997) and was diverse in terms of sexuality (whether people self-defined as gay, straight or bi-sexual) and preferred roles in BDSM activity. However, they were all but one white, all able-bodied and either working or voluntarily not employed. Future phenomenological (or other qualitative) work could examine in depth other demographics of BDSM practitioners, while quantitative surveys could examine how widespread such aspects of the phenomenon are.

Concluding thoughts

Despite a growing body of literature that challenges the perceived link between BDSM and pathology, BDSM is still frequently interpreted through the medical or pathologising models. In this paper, we have argued that consensual BDSM should be conceptualised a form of play for adults and have demonstrated using empirical findings the ways that BDSM can be conceptualised as erotic play. BDSM allows practitioners to inhabit the liminal space

between fantasy and reality, and enables them to experiment with aspects of their own world and to explore new worlds through the power of play.

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Table 1: Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Sexuality	Role during BDSM	Approximate age
Tom	Male	Gay	Submissive	Mid 20s
Joe	Male	Gay	Dominant	Mid 40s
Annie	Female	Bisexual	Submissive/Switch	Mid 20s
Steven	Male	Straight	Dominant	Mid 30s
Kim	Female	Lesbian	Dominant	Late 30s
Maria	Female	Straight	Submissive	Early 30s
Lucy	Female	Straight	Switch	Late 40s
Patrick	Male	Bisexual	Submissive	Late 20s
Vikki	Female	Straight	Switch	Late 20s