

THE NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL OF DOMINANT AND SUBMISSIVE ROLES IN BDSM RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

Sexualities of all kinds are a huge topic of discussion in today's society. Part of this is due to the multiple celebrities coming out to the public, like Miley Cyrus recently coming out as pansexual along with the countless other celebrities who have recently identified as gay or lesbian. Although I would cautiously say that most of these sexualities are moving towards being accepted by the public, there is one sexuality that is still very much contested by the majority. That sexuality is BDSM, Bondage/dominant/submissive/sadomasochism. As shown by the recent comments by people after the recent release of *50 Shades of Grey*, people truly do not understand these types of relationships and therefore misread them as abusive. One of the main reasons that BDSM is so contested is due to the people participating in these relationships either being a dominant or a submissive and that relationship having a poor portrayal by the media throughout the years. This paper digs deep into the history of BDSM, specifically the dominant and submissive roles of BDSM, some characteristics of these relationships, and how the media has portrayed them, which has led to this sexuality being negatively perceived by the public.

In today's society, one sexuality can be seen as having the dominant power, forcing all the others to hide in the shadows. That sexuality is heterosexuality between white people. It is between a man and a woman and is meant to be full of love, having little fluidity in what is allowed to happen when they have sex. This sexuality has been given the title of 'vanilla', due to how bland it is supposed to be. The list of accepted sexualities after that then gets lost because there are so many that are contested. These people who act in these "contested" sexualities are forced to feel shame for how they are because they do not fit in with the norm. Arlene Stein, in her book *Shameless: Sexual Dissidence in American Culture*, defines what shame is and how it is more intense than guilt.

“Shame is a judgment against the self, a feeling that one is bad, defective, incompetent, inadequate, weak, unlovable, or disgusting. Guilt, like shame, is rooted in negative judgment, but is limited to a particular act. Guilt arises from a thought or an act that goes against a moral code of values. A guilty person can express remorse, make amends, ask for forgiveness, or receive punishment. Shame in contrast, arises from the failure to live up to an internal image of one's self, from seeing one's self negatively from an imaginary point of view from others (6)”.

From this Stein is saying that shame is very deeply rooted and is based on how one believes the outside world is viewing them, that they look at

the person acting in their sexuality in disgust. Most of these sexualities are only contested because there is a misunderstanding between the practitioners and the heteronormative people. One of the most misunderstood sexualities today would have to be BDSM or bondage and discipline (BD), domination and submission (also known as tops or bottoms), (DS), and SM or sadomasochism (Weiss, viii). Typically, BDSM is referred to as a game, the sessions are called scenes, and the people who identify in this sexual behavior are typically known as the players (Weiss, 2011) (Faccio et. al., 2014) (Castleman, 2012). Although this sexuality encompasses four different aspects to it, I will be focusing specifically on the dominant and submissive roles these people play in their scenes. The dominant and submissive roles of BDSM practitioners are a contested sexuality because they play out scenes that are controversial in what is “supposed to be” an act of love (sex), one partner dominates the other, and ultimately it is due to the sexuality having negative portrayal in the media.

First, it would be useful to define just exactly what it means to be a dominant or a submissive. “Dominance and submission represents a set of customs and rituals relating to the giving and accepting of control between partners (Faccio et. al., 2014)”. In her book, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*, Margot Weiss explains these roles as “ the explicit exchange of power (ix)”. The first aspect of this sexuality that makes it so contested by society is that it is misunderstood as one person having dominant power over the other player of the game. In reality this is just not the case. What people do not understand is that

being a dominant is not about controlling the sub to the point where they no longer have a say in what is going on. In fact, one may be surprised to find out that that the sub is the one with more power. In their article, *Forbidden games: the construction of sexuality and sexual pleasure by BDSM 'players'*, Faccio, Casini & Cipolleta explain the four criteria that make up these two roles; “ (1) consensuality- whomever plays the submissive role makes the choice to play it and can withdraw his or her consent at any time, (2) the use of a ‘safe word’- the withdrawal of consent is generally done using a word or gesture previously agreed upon by the participants, (3) flexibility of roles- all participants have the option of being both dominant and submissive, and (4) reciprocity of satisfaction- pleasure has to be bidirectional, but it does not have to be specifically sexual, rather, it may stem from power: total power for the dominant, no power for the dominated (753)”. In other words, the dominant is only the dominant because both players agreed on the roles each would play. The roles are however fluid and could easily be switched so long as both participants are getting what they want. An interesting aspect that people do not actually know is that “Subs have the power, doms have the control” (Hebert & Weaver, 2015). This is due to the fact that the submissives are the ones who set the boundaries of the game. They allow the doms to do what they please to a certain extent. The dom can only go as far as the submissive allows. If the sub ever drops the safe word during a scene, it ends immediately. If they do not, they are ostracized from the community (Castleman, 2012). The control aspect however is held by the dominant role. They have an

important job. They are required to perform many different emotional roles like being displeased or being indifferent, but they must also know how to nurture and to care-take (Pinsky & Levey, 2015). When performing an act that could cause emotional harm to the submissive, due to a traumatic experience that happened in the past, the dominant is indirectly in charge of caring for that person through the ‘therapy’ process of acting it out (Weiss, 2011). What people are so misguided about when it comes to this particular sexuality is that they do not see it as intimate. They see it as an abusive relationship. “Relationship authorities define intimacy as clear, frank, self-revealing emotional communication. But many people equate ‘intimacy’ and sex’. Only it isn’t” (Castleman, 2014). Intimacy comes with open communication, and that is what happens during the game of BDSM. These players openly discuss who will take on which role, when “the game” will end, what they want to experience and feel, and what they do or do not like. Hebert & Weaver note, “the submissives greatly valued having their dominants encourage them and care about all the little things” (2015). This is more than most “vanilla” or heteronormative couples can say about each other. This dominant submissive relationship has more intimacy in one scene than most couple experience throughout their entire marriage. This is not an abusive relationship between the two people, but rather it is “the most loving, nurturing, intimate form of human contact and play” (Castleman, 2014).

Another source that continues to keep this sexuality contested is the way entertainment sources portray it. E.L James’s *50 Shades of Grey*

is a perfect example. To summarize, the movie portrays a very successful man, Christian Grey, who wants to turn a young woman named Anastasia into his submissive. The directors of the film do a great job of portraying the power exchange as she reads through his list of toys he wants to use on her, along with the acts he wants to do with her, picking and choosing what she will and will not allow. However, near the end of the film the viewers find out that he really feels the need to inflict pain on her because of a bad experience of abuse in the past. This portrayal is inaccurate and only fuels the fire of keeping this sexuality out of the norm and very contested by those outside of the scene.

50 Shades of Grey is not the only time that a movie has portrayed a person who plays BDSM as having a horrible past, that being the reason why they play. This can be shown a lot through the portrayal of the professional dominatrix in past films. The dominatrix is known as a woman who is playing the dominant role in BDSM. A professional dominatrix is a woman who is paid, typically by men but not always, to act out the role of the dom. She is different from most other sex workers “who must often feign interest and act flirtatious in order to make clients feel desired, the dominatrix is asked, at times, to express emotional displays such as indifference or displeasure” (Pinsky & Levey, 2015). Her portrayal in the film usually starts off as a pretty realistic one but it always ends up taking a turn for heteronormativity. In *Crimes of Passion*, the main character Joanna is a professional dominatrix and performs sexual acts throughout the movie. Eventually, she breaks down from acting as a dominant resulting in one of

her clients treating her with disgust for what she did to him. She eventually falls in love with a man who “saves her” from the sex work she has been performing and they end up happy together in their heteronormative, vanilla relationship (Khan, 2009). This movie’s moral statement is basically that (1) nobody can be truly happy doing sex work like this, (2) a woman in a dominant role will end up feeling anxiety towards it and break down, and (3) true happiness comes from having a normal, vanilla relationship. This is not the only example of a poor professional dominatrix representation. In *Exit to Eden*, there is an island dedicated to the people of the SM portion of BDSM. The owner expresses freedom of choice and the people can be as kinky as they please. This starts out very positive until the story of the main character Lisa is told: she was once a submissive of a different master until the master taught her to become a dominatrix as a defense mechanism for her previous victimization of male mistreatment. By the end of the film the man she has fallen in love with, Elliot, lays her down and tells her to relax as he performs sex on top of her. There are no toys, no whips, no roles, just two heterosexual people performing vanilla sex. This movie portrays that this form of sex between two people is the only way happiness is achieved, and it places the man back on top in the dominant role (Khan, 2009). There are more portrayals of this sexuality out in the entertainment world, but the point is pretty much clear. People have a very misconstrued idea of what BDSM is and get nervous at the fact that it could be anything flavor other than vanilla.

Whenever people are exposed to a new way to have sex, although

the general population hardly accepts it as normal, it generally intrigues people. This can be shown in Amy Steinbugler's book, *Beyond Loving: Intimate Racework in Lesbian, Gay, and Straight Interracial Relationships* (2012), when she talks about the rise of hiring an African American to sleep with them so they could experience the erotic culture of the blacks (8). This culture was new to the whites and they wanted to get a taste of what it would be like. Although this does not directly show an example of how this relates to BDSM, it does show that people are fascinated by new sexual experiences, but perform them in secret to hide.

This leads into the next section about these dominant and submissive players and the new way to find a partner, the Internet. This is a very interesting aspect about this culture because it shows how doms and subs look for one another, what they are looking for specifically, and how they advertise themselves so that they are selected. Palandri & Green note that "the Internet has offered the BDSM chatter a conduit for exposing the darker of their personality in a relatively 'no blame-no shame' environment" (2000). People can both find partners and express how they truly feel in these online profiles and forums. One of the first things people see when they are looking for a partner to act out a scene with is their profile picture. Denney & Tewksbury found that the profiles, or personal ads, that were most successful in getting peoples attention had the following requirements: the profile picture that was very sexually explicit of a very large male genitalia, and their profile included whether they were a dominant or not (2012). They also found that user names were also a very

important aspect to this initial attraction. “This is due to the user-name serving as the first representation of one’s identity in an on-line community that can summarize their looks, personality, and/or desires/requests in one succinct word...it says what role they are willing to play” (2012). Some examples of these user names are 4uruse2011, your1slave2, 2bpaddled for submissives and for dominants some included dick4kinkbtms, phukmaster73, OneTopMan (Denery & Tewskbury, 2012). From the research that has been done using these online communities, it shows the very sexual side to this sexuality. When it is usually discussed in other resources, it is usually discussed as a loving relationship. When it comes to these online communities however, Denney & Tewksbury report, “most users are not seeking a relationship, but only seeking or offering sexual and/or fetish-based services” (2012). This may contribute to people’s beliefs surrounding this sexuality and what helps make it contested, but this is no different than dating sites where people are looking for sex. Every sexuality, even heterosexuality, has their romantic side and their “perverted” side. This just shows how the BDSM community goes about finding their hookups and what they look for when doing so.

This next section will be focused around what attracts people to this sexuality and what characteristics these people all have in common. Like other reports from people in various sexualities, most people report that it is just who they are. This is also the case for people in the BDSM community. Yost & Hunter (2012) found “ external influences initially brought them to BDSM, but these interests were then experienced as an

essential part of themselves”. The people who act in these roles, if not from the beginning, end up having epiphanies that this is who they are and always have been. An interesting finding when it comes to the dominant and submissive roles are that generally, people wish to be dominated. Faccio et. al., 2014 found that more women were employed as a dominatrix and more practitioners reported that they wanted to be dominated. This shows that both men and women feel the want to be dominated. This is unexpected because typically one would believe that the man would always want to be the dominant in these scenarios. This can also be shown in Weiss (2011) chapter four with the various interviews of how heterosexual men feel uncomfortable having to play these dominant, oppressive roles, but cannot be a submissive for risk of looking weak. This may be why the dominatrix is so popular amongst men, because she may not be directly involved in the community and can secretly dominate these men who are afraid to let the word get out about their want to be a submissive. Another reason why so many people may be attracted to the submissive role in the BDSM world is that “people in positions of power often assume the ‘sub’ or ‘bottom’ role because they crave respite from the pressures of being in charge” (Berliet, 2014). Basically, being in control all of the time comes with a lot of stress and unwanted pressure. Maybe these people go for these roles so that they can finally let go of the pressure and let somebody else take charge for once. In agreement with this theory, Rios et. al., 2015 theorizes that the reason why dominant people act in these submissive roles is to downplay their power and reduce their distinctiveness. The last

reason why people are so attracted to this sexuality is that it is simply fun (Hebert & Weaver, 2015). They get to explore new ways of having sex, act in roles and scenarios they normally would not, and use toys. How could it not be fun?

The final portion of this research is on the way BDSM benefits people. Since this sexuality is so contested by the majority, could these people really report being happier? The answer should come as no surprise since up until now I have been discussing the intimacy, love, care, excitement, and trust that accompany this sexuality. Wismeijer & Van Assen (2013) completed several questionnaires for people, both apart of the scene and people in “normal” relationships, to analyze their ratings on neuroticism, extroversion, openness to new experiences, conscientious, rejection sensitive, and agreeableness. What they found was that overall, the people in the BDSM community rated better on every positive aspect than the people in the “vanilla” category. They are less neurotic, more extroverted, more open to new experiences, more conscientious, less agreeable, and less rejection sensitive (Wismeijer & Van Assen, 2013). They found that the overall well being of the people in the BDSM lifestyle was higher than that of the people who were “normal”, or in this case, the control group. Berliet analyzes this in her piece when she quotes sexologist, Dr. James Cantor saying, “more interestingly, perhaps, is how few difference and how small the differences were between the groups” (2014). This shows that there were no significant differences between the two groups except for the fact that one group participated in BDSM and the other group did

not. This goes to show that the research is there that BDSM possesses way more benefits than that of the vanilla sexuality.

In conclusion, from the research and topics that have been shown, the dominant and submissive roles are simply a way to exchange power between the players. The game is all about trust and control of the situation, and if need be, can be stopped at any moment. The submissives are the players in the relationship who hold the power, while the dominants are in control of the situation. Generally, the people who participate in these roles report having a higher well being over their counterparts who participate only in the heteronormative sexual roles. I believe that the main reason this is such a contested sexuality is due to the fact that the entertainment world has falsely accused, and consistently portrays, those who participate in dominant roles of BDSM relationships as doing so as a consequence of traumatization from past experiences of being victims of abuse, who now dominate their partners as a defense mechanism. Until this research can fully surface to the top of our news feeds, and these players get portrayed as having the loving aspects they express in their relationships, this will always be a contested sexuality. The only hope is that maybe these portrayals of BDSM will get people curious about the topic and they will research it for themselves. Maybe once they see how safe and secure it really is, they will want to experiment with the sexuality themselves. If they do that, we might see a decrease in divorce rates due to better communication and added trust, higher reports of satisfaction since people are trying new things, and a higher acceptance not only for BDSM

players, but also for people of different sexualities all over the globe. Sexuality is not about rebelling against the patriarchy or fighting the norms, it is all about loving whom you want to love and being able to express that love in any form you please. The sexuality we should be contesting is that in which keeps us locked inside our thoughts and drives a fear of trying new things.

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