“If Someone Finds Out You’re a Perv”:
The Experience and Management of Stigma in the BDSM Subculture

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Toni O. L. Brown
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This thesis titled

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The Experience and Management of Stigma in the BDSM Subculture

by

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ABSTRACT

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Apart from a few studies, relatively little sociological attention has been accorded the BDSM subculture. Past literature on this subculture has been limited in focus and previous studies have implemented less than well rounded sampling. Drawing on data collected through an ethnographic approach across eleven states, this study examines the lived experiences of BDSM participants. Specifically, attention is focused on how BDSM participants experience stigma in four distinct manners, including negative public portrayal, value diminishment, mockery and shunning and discrimination or prejudice. Attention then turns to the stigma management strategies BDSM participants employ, including concealment, disclosure or collective action, reappropriation of negative labeling and disengagement from mainstream society. Consistent with previous research surrounding stigma management, this study reveals that BDSM participants, like other deviant groups, take an active role in defining their identity and controlling their social interactions.

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To Damion
for being wholly authentic, no matter what.

To Ronald H. Brown Sr. (1944-2007) and to Dixie Ann
who taught me to keep my head in the clouds, and my feet on the ground.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Prologue

I settled down into my seat; a fold-out metal chair in line with several others, situated into rows, filling the majority of the hotel conference room, all of them with backs facing the door. It reminded me of being at an academic conference more than a kinky sex convention. The man seated next to me reminded me of a drill sergeant. His graying hair was buzzed short. His sleeveless muscle shirt revealed numerous tattoos. A set of tags hung on a metal bead necklace around his neck. I introduced myself as we waited for the rest of the room to fill.

“Hi.” He shook my hand with a firm grip. “I’m Master Buck.” He paused to look for a symbol of ownership on me; a ring, a collar, a lock, anything. “Or just Buck.”

I fumbled through my papers, a combination of today’s agenda in the Sin-sational event schedule book, business cards from the vendors in the hallway, and field-notes for my research. “I want to make sure I’m in the right class. This is the branding session?”

Buck shrugged. “I don’t know. I just stay in the same room all day. I pick a room instead of a topic or instructor to follow. I don’t like to move around the hotel much. I’m always afraid I’ll run into someone I know.”

“Are you from the local area?” I asked. Most people didn’t seem to be. That was typical for a BDSM convention. Everyone went to conventions outside of their home towns. The majority of attendees were always from out-of-town. I had better chances of finding someone local three states away.
“No. No. Hell no.” Buck laughed slightly under his breath. “I’m from clear up in Northern Michigan. But I come here every year. Don’t change anything though. I’m still scared to death I’ll walk down the hall and see my boss, or my ex-wife, or one of my daughters. Better safe than sorry ya know.”

“Would that be a bad thing? If you saw them in the hallway at a hotel?”

“Here? Yeah. Bad ain’t the word for it. Try horrific.” He wiped his hands on his pants as if his palms were sweaty at the mere thought. “Boss would fire me. Ex-wife would financially rape me all over again. Daughters would never speak to me. I can’t think of one damn thing good that would happen if I ran into someone I knew at a big kinky sextravaganza.”

He paused and looked across the room at the window covered in black tarp.

“Yeah. Plenty of bad shit can happen if someone finds out you’re a perv, but nothing good ever happens unless they’re a perv too.”

The word pervert denotes corruption. Webster defines “pervert” as “to cause to turn aside or away from what is good or true or morally right… or what is generally done or accepted…. to divert to a wrong end or purpose” (2010). More importantly though is the connotation that coincides with the word pervert. It conjures up images of child molesters, “dirty old men,” pedophiles, and peeping toms. Assuming Master Buck was none of these, why then would he use a word like pervert, so full of negative connotation, to describe himself?
Master Buck’s behaviors of traveling out of town to attend a BDSM convention, looking over his shoulder, and avoiding people he knows is common behavior among BDSM participants. It is considered prudent or cautious, and not at all overreacting. It represents self-protection, not paranoia. Master Buck traveled ten hours and over 600 miles to spend a weekend with like-minded individuals when an almost identical convention was being held a week later only two hours from him. No one even thought to question why he invested in so much unnecessary travel. It was taken for granted that he must have had a good reason. For him, as for many others in the BDSM community, that good reason was his boss… his ex-wife… his children, and the chance they would find out he was a “perv.”

An Overview of the Current BDSM Subculture

It is difficult to provide a concise definition of the BDSM subculture because it is so varied, broad, and diverse. BDSM is an acronym that stands for the six words “Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, Sadism, and Masochism.” It is an umbrella term used to encompass several smaller and often overlapping subcultures. It includes those interested in sexual proclivities of various sorts. It contains fetishists and people who define themselves as “kinky.” BDSM is about sexual orientation beyond the typical scope of heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual. It allows room for asexuels, celibates, heteroflexibles, gynephiles and androphiles. It gives space to transgenders, cisgenders, gender variants and non-genders (Weinberg, 2006).
As much room as BDSM affords to sexual orientation, it affords even more room for sexual inclination (Moser and Kleinplatz, 2006). It is a community that embraces physical pleasure, as well as physical pain, and even physical deprivation. It encourages indulgence and welcomes the corporeal (Newmahr, 2010). Fat, thin, short, tall, fit, slovenly, hairy, bald, natural, or modified; every “body” is welcome. It is also about non-sexual fetishism. If one has a fascination with dressing like a panda bear and rolling around in public to be petted, that person can find a place in the BDSM community. If one is inclined to paint portraits in their own blood, worship feet, or try to fit inside a giant balloon, there are subcultures in the BDSM community to satiate and encourage the interest(s).

BDSM is about relationship dynamics and power exchange. It provides models for traditional, non-traditional, and post-modern relationships. Men who enjoy being demeaned and insulted by controlling women sit side-by-side with women who kneel at their husband’s feet. Hierarchies are formed and used to frame interactions. Control is traded for obedience. Responsibility and power are traded for deference and surrender. Grown men asking permission to urinate and grown women standing in the corner are not only welcomed, but also necessary, for the survival of the rank component of the BDSM social structure.

The BDSM community is about subcultures and counter-cultures, some consciously avoiding the mainstream. “Furries” (people who dress as animals), “littles” (adults who role-play children), leather dykes, vampires, bikers, and professional sex workers can all be found breaking bread together at a BDSM convention. People who
share nothing in common regarding their careers, education, and family may come
together as intricate subcultures in the sphere of BDSM. It is about role-play, both in and
outside of the bedroom. People who otherwise don’t meet the definition can experience
roles of teachers, students, clergy, parents, children, animals, prisoners, guards, and
magical beings.

BDSM is also about alternative lifestyles. Constant daily routines, a lifestyle of
secrecy, chore charts, isolation, communes, private economy and dress codes are all
common. Households are centered around concepts derived from erotic literature.
Relationships are founded and developed around concepts of “who’s in charge.”
Manifestos, mission statements, policies, and procedures are written and revised to ensure
adherence to rules, hierarchies of authority and above all else, to guarantee that
everything is consensual among all players.

BDSM communities pepper the globe (Moser and Kleinplatz, 2006). They can be
found in most industrialized countries on most continents. In America, they span from
cost to coast. They can be located in urban metros as well as small rural communities.
Membership may range from three close friends to hundreds of strangers. There are
BDSM groups in all fifty states and thousands of cities (Kleinplatz and Moser 2006). In
America, one need not ever drive more than about four hours to find a BDSM friendly
group. They meet in flashy fetish clubs, calm family restaurants, library basements, and
private homes. Like many subcultures, the BDSM subculture is prevalent almost
everywhere, but typically goes unnoticed.
The Current Study

BDSM groups have the same elements as any other social group, such as shared goals, roles, relationships, norms, and sanctions (Sherif 1956). Most local level groups share a sense of familiarity. They create their own division of labor and establish methods of conflict resolution. Because they possess these same characteristics of most other social groups, they are a ripe ground for sociological investigation.

The current study is a sociological investigation of the BDSM community from an ethnographical point of view. More specifically, it looks at the ways in which BDSM participants are subjected to, feel, live through, and overall experience stigma from the mainstream society; and the ways in which they cope with, handle, and manage that stigma to continue functioning as members of the larger society and members of the BDSM subculture.

First I will review the academic literature surrounding BDSM, demonstrating how it has historically evolved in scholarly literature from novel, to psychopathological, to a sociological phenomenon. I will then review the current themes from social scientific perspectives, emphasizing gaps in empirical investigation. I then provide an overview of the social scientific literature surrounding stigma and stigma management, with an emphasis on Goffman’s symbolic interactionist perspective and Falk’s social psychological perspective. I also provide several examples of sociological investigation into other subculture’s techniques of stigma management.

After building an understanding of the academic literature that clarifies where BDSM is situated in current studies, how it came to that place, and how it relates to the
arena of stigma and stigma management, I will address the methodological considerations of the current study. I will explain how I gathered data through my unique research role as a participant observer in a wide range of BDSM environments and then complemented that data through interviews, focus groups, and supplemental data. I will explain how I analyzed the data by means of open and focused coding techniques.

I will then move on to show my findings from the data. The two primary findings were how BDSM participants experienced stigma and how they managed that stigma. Participants revealed that they experience stigma in four main distinct ways: value diminishment, negative public portrayal, mockery and shunning, and discrimination or prejudice. They deal with this stigma through four strategies of stigma management: information control, total disclosure and collective action, reappropriating negative portrayal, and total disengagement from larger society. After explaining the ways in which BDSM participants experience and manage their stigma I will conclude by briefly discussing scholarly implications of the study and making recommendations for future research.

Social Roles in the BDSM Community

The BDSM culture has a very colorful and descriptive argot that they in describing their roles, relationships, and activities. This can be confusing to outsiders who are not familiar with this subculture’s particular jargon. To assist the reader in making sense of these idioms, I have attempted to clarify in two ways. First, I have provided a glossary of key terms in Appendix A. Second, I have provided the following
excerpt which serves as an introduction to several terms. This passage is from a focus group from this study. The question presented to the group was about social roles and their meanings to those who use those labels to describe themselves and others.

**Moderator:** “What is meant by titles like master, mistress, dominant, submissive, and switch?”

**Cheyenne:** “Oh that’s an easy one. master, mistress and dominants are tops. Submissives are bottoms. Switches are both.”

**Sparky:** “No. I disagree. It’s not easy Cheyenne, and furthermore, what you said is not always the case either.”

**Cheetah:** “Both of you wait and let’s back up a second. First, you have to understand there are two aspects of the lifestyle. There is the physical side: pain, sensory input—“

**Sparky:** “Or sensory deprivation.”

**Cheetah:** “Yes that too. The physical side of the lifestyle. Things like whipping, flogging, paddling, and on and on... Then there’s also the emotional side of the lifestyle. Things like power exchange and role playing.”

**Griffin:** “And people can be into one, or the other, or both.”

**Cheyenne:** “Mistress and I are into both. We have a power exchange relationship where she holds the power and we also do the physical play side when she beats me.”

**Sparky:** “In general, I think terms like mistress and master are for the power exchange.”

**Griffin:** “They can be. Or they can be for a specific scene for a night.”

**Cheetah:** “When it comes to vanillas [non-BDSMers] trying to understand, it’s easiest to just keep it simple. A lot of it is common sense if you just think about the meanings of words. Like the word ‘dominant’. It kind of makes sense that a dominant is someone who dominates.”

**Sparky:** “I like to think of it in terms of positions of power. Master, mistress, dominant, and top are all the positions of power. They either have the power in a power exchange relationship or they have the power in a scene to deliver pain. And then there are submissives, slaves, and bottoms... the people who don’t have the power.”

**Cheyenne:** “And people like me who are switches might sometimes deliver the pain and might sometimes receive the pain.”

**Griffin:** “And people like me who are just plain ‘kinksters’ or ‘fetishists’ don’t really engage in power exchange and power trading. We just play with people who share our particular fetish.”

**Cheetah:** “Yeah, that’s probably the easiest way to remember it.”

Discussing all the particular social roles and identities available to BDSM participants is beyond the scope of this paper, but as the excerpt above shows, there are
some basic roles that determine interactions among BDSM community members. As I quote participants throughout the course of this paper, I will refer to participants by the roles they have used to identify themselves.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Here I discuss the academic literature surrounding BDSM. I have taken a tri-fold approach to this review of literature. First, I reveal the roots of BDSM in novel form and how it became disgraced from printed form by early psychopathological analysis. As much of that literature will reveal, BDSM activities have a history of being stigmatized. Then I demonstrate how the more recent behavioral sciences have begun investigating BDSM as a relevant social issue, pointing out the gaps in empirical investigation.

Once the literature on BDSM has been discussed, I then turn attention to the broader sociological literature on stigma and stigma management, providing concrete examples of how various other subcultures have used stigma management techniques. The goal of this literary review is to demonstrate how the stigma of BDSM participants has transitioned from psychopathological to a sociological issue of study.

Section 1: The Historical Review of BDSM Literature

The different activities involved in the practice of BDSM probably date back as far as human history and certainly predate the organized field of Sociology. Most social science literature reviews of BDSM concentrate intensively on a few icons, namely Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, and Freud, summarizing their works as all-encompassing and representative of the historical production of what BDSM is today. This review is slightly broader revealing that these authors were simply a few of many prominent characters in the development of BDSM academic literature. It is important to move beyond the
terminology and restraints imposed upon the social sciences by these prominent characters, and move forward to discussing modern instances and meanings of BDSM as they apply in contemporary settings and situations.

*Libertines.*

Classic French libertines of the 18th and 19th century are left out of the social science reviews of BDSM. This gap in literary review is a disservice to the BDSM community because many participants’ practices are based on these novels. To leave out the mention of these novels is to miss the point of the psychological and psychiatric literature that defines the actions in these novels as mental illness and deviance. Those same definitions are applied as labels to the BDSM participants and hence the underpinning of much of their real, perceived, and anticipated stigma. I offer here a glimpse of a few of these libertine novels that represent the works of the era. These examples will provide a broad view of libertine works that led to academic commentary.

Laclos’s *Dangerous Liaisons* was published in 1782. It touches on themes that were, and remain, important to BDSM participants, specifically the emotional sadism of using sex to humiliate and degrade others to bring pleasure to the self. The topics of humiliation, degradation, objectification, role playing, and the challenge of seduction are all prominent in the book. In addition, *Dangerous Liaisons* speaks to leisure time, and points out that those with more wealth have more idle time to fill with sexual experimentation and the commodity of desire.
Another of the Libertine novels that warrants mention is Diderot’s *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, written in 1773. One of the most profound associations between *Jacques* and BDSM is the examination of theoretical concepts of free will, power exchange, and the owner/owned roles in unequal relationships. In the novel, Jacques and his master demonstrate that ownership is determined by possession, thus empowering he who is possessed. One more important contribution *Jacques* offers is combining the complexity of sexuality with wit and humor.

The most famous of the Libertine novels are those of The Marquis de Sade. One of his earliest and most well-known works was *120 Days of Sodom* (1785). Much of the sexual violence described in *120 Days* replicates criminal atrocities of the era. The Marquis de Sade is a prominent figure in the BDSM community and his writings are legendary among some participants. His quotes have been incorporated into relationship and household protocols and manifestos. His characters are imitated and used as role models.

Rétif, author of *Anti-Justine* (1793), combined social realism with sexual fantasy and favored sexual communes. It was after Rétif that shoe fetishism (retifism) was named. These important aspects of BDSM, such as fetishism and sexual communism, are often overlooked by modern scholars, hence, important contributors such as Rétif often go unmentioned.

The second most famous of the BDSM fictional works came nearly a century later in Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus In Furs* (1870). *Venus* speaks to the masochistic side of the “torture coin” in Sacher-Masoch’s portrayal of the main character as a man who desires
torture, pain, and humiliation from his lover. It also touches on themes which remain important to the BDSM community such as fetishism with particular materials, gender roles, consensual servitude, degradation, and unequal power relations. Twelve years later in Italy, Boito published *Senso* (1882) which was a gender reversal on Venus. This Victorian era of “suprasexuality” was carefully and deliberately hidden by the authoritarian shadow of sexual repression.

These novels are more than simple stories of days gone by. They serve as maps by which subdivisions of the BDSM community structure their worlds, and they are the very writings upon which psychoanalytic negative pathological views have been built. The hidden aristocratic scandals of the libertine novels are directly mirrored by the underground disreputable actions of many of the more affluent sects of the contemporary BDSM community. This subculture reenacts what social scientists have overlooked. If they find these stories meaningful enough to recreate and experience, they are certainly meaningful enough to mention.

Even though these Libertines are hundreds of years old, they still serve an important function. They provide archetypes for modern roles and behaviors for those in the BDSM subculture. As the novel as a form of literature evolved, this genre of novel developed and for the first time widely disseminated representations of these sorts of activities. Even though they were portrayals in novels rather than accurate depictions of real life, they nonetheless served as a basis for the first cultural representation of BDSM. This became a topic of broad public fascination which gave way to unease about such subjects.
Psychopathologizing.

One way in which the Libertines had an impact beyond their own era was the role they played in the development of psychology and psychiatry. Subsequent authors and doctors used that literature to develop an understanding of sexual psychopathology. The Libertines delighted in the stories and used them as entertainment. Later however, they served as the basis for the definition of the “sick mind.” The first wave of such psychoanalytic definition was Krafft-Ebing.

In the late 1800’s we find the beginnings of BDSM psychopathologizing in Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), in which he discusses several types of “perversions” to diagnose “sexual degenerates.” He dedicates sections to sadism, masochism, and fetishism. It has been said that he coined the term “sadism.” However, this credits Krafft-Ebing with a term which he may have merely used in relation to psychiatry and medicine rather than art. The terms “sadism” and “sadistic” may have been originally used to refer to a genre of literature rather than a perversion and the term “sadistic” may have simply distinguished de Sade’s particular genre from other popular erotic writings of the era. In either case, no one disputes that the term “sadism” came from the name of de Sade, and the term “masochism” came from the name of Sacher-Masoch. Krafft-Ebing used both to describe perversions of a sexual nature.

Regarding sadism, Krafft-Ebing associates lust and cruelty. For him, sadism is a form of intensified male instinct. He equates Sadistic urge with libido, making mention of issues such as consciousness, impotence, victimology, shame, symbolic meanings, “sadistic comedy” (81), arousal from punishment, and fantasy. However, he fails to
expand on any of these concepts as they are all mentioned simply in the exemplars of sadism. Krafft-Ebing's writings on sadism are positioned in case studies including crime files and mental patient reports which reflect issues such as cannibalism, child abduction, pedophilia, mutilation, necrophilia, rape, torture, bloodshed, animal cruelty, suffering, and general non-consent and victimization. He makes it clear that he believes those who engage in sadism lack normative sexual interests, desires and sensibilities.

In his discussion of masochism, which he defines as “the opposite of sadism… the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force” (89), he brings up topics of gender roles, the divide between fantasy and reality, writing and drawing fantasy, codependence and “sexual bondage” (141) of an emotional and physical nature. Commonly for the masochist, the pain is symbolic of the humiliation. In that respect, pain is sought out for its symbolic value only as an expression of submission. In Krafft-Ebing's parallelism of sadism and masochism, he sees them as opposites. He designates the sadist as the active role and the masochist as the passive role, but points out that both can arise in the same individual.

Immediately following these sections, Krafft-Ebing has one more vital section that relates to BDSM, but often remains overlooked: fetishism. This is important because fetishism is visibly prominent, important and meaningful to many BDSM participants. Krafft-Ebing defines fetishism as the association of lust with certain body parts or particular attire. Fetishism is not an “extra” thing that excites one sexually, but rather the absence of sexual excitement except for the object of fetish. The fetishist has a narrowed
focus and only finds sex fulfilling with the implementation of the fetish object either in
the act or in fantasy.

In contrast to Krafft-Ebing’s belief that sadism and masochism are opposites,
sexologist Havelock Ellis argues that there is no clear distinction between sadism and
masochism, and calls them complementary emotional states (1903, 1906). Ellis tries to
make the case that sadism and masochism are focused on physical pain and its
association to sexual pleasure, as opposed to cruelty. He spoke strictly of sadism and
masochism in the context of erotic pain for pleasure and pain inflicted and accepted “in
love” (Ellis 1942:160). There is no distinction in terminology that differentiates the sadist
who inflicts pain lovingly for the sake of mutual enjoyment and a sadist who inflicts pain
on a non-consenting victim for the sake of cruelty. Whereas Krafft-Ebing spoke of one,
Ellis spoke of the other, but they both used the catch-all term “sadist.”

Ellis touches on topics important to the BDSM community, such as sexual
symbolism, arousal, the human body, the flesh and its excrements and fluids. He
discusses zoophilias, exhibitionism, body worship and sexual health. He also offers
discourse on some of the social issues that are important and current to BDSM
participants such as social acceptance of certain practices and rejection of others,
selection processes and artistic expression.

Sigmund Freud, a psychoanalyst and critic of Krafft-Ebing, had a tremendous
impact on the BDSM subculture and how it was perceived. He noted that both sadism and
masochism were often found in the same individuals. He combined the two concepts into
what he termed “sadomasochism” (1906, 1938). It is upon this term that the majority of
BDSM literature has hinged. This combining of the two concepts had the immense power of altering how psychology viewed the “sexual deviants,” and directly changed how certain subdivisions of the BDSM subculture referred to themselves. The few social scientists of the era also picked up the Freudian hinged “sadomasochism” term and began using “SM” as an all-encompassing term to describe BDSM participants, even though the term did not accurately apply to many of them.

Beyond the authority of Freud to rename and stereotype all sexual deviation under the SM term, he also had significant influence in furthering the stigmatization Krafft-Ebing had begun through psychoanalysis of BDSM participation. He continuously used pejorative terms such as “perversion” and “aberration,” and made his own personal distinctions about when particular activities could be defined as “pathological.” Many of Freud’s works, used judgmental catch-phrases like “morbid manifestation” and “degenerate.” He offered no substantial “degrees” of deviation. Either one was a sexual “normal” or an aberration.

Around the mid-twentieth century researchers took a relativistic approach to studies that involved elements of BDSM (Kinsey 1948, 1953; Masters and Johnson 1966, 1970). The combination of pathologizing and then bringing deviant sexual practices to the forefront of research conversation, contributed to the codification of BDSM practices in medical cannons. In the first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), (1952), there was virtually no mention of sex, sexuality, or sexual practices. By the third edition in 1980 however, sexual dysfunctions included sadism, masochism, fetishism, and a plethora of paraphilias. The most current edition has an entire section
dedicated to Sexual and Gender Identity Disorders. Even more recently, the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10, 2004) has dedicated a specific section (Codes F65) to “Disorders of Sexual Preference.” This has allowed, and in some instances even required BDSM practices to become stigmatized by the global mental health and medical communities.

Here then we have a chronological map of the progression of BDSM literature from pathologizing to a social science research interest. From Libertines, to those who analyzed them, BDSM transformed from a source of entertainment of the affluent to a source of definition for psychopathology. This secured a stigmatized position for BDSM in medical cannons, where it still remains. Philosophers of social science then showed us the need for empirical study of deviant sexuality rather than theory based on novels. It is from this springboard that the social sciences began to delve into the practical study of the BDSM subculture.

Section 2: The Review of Social Science Literature on BDSM

Behavioral sciences have engaged in empirical study of the BDSM subculture in moderation over the past two or three decades (Weinberg, 2006). Few researchers have delved into the study of this particular group, thus the behavioral science literature on this topic has focused fairly narrowly. Four to five general themes recur in the research, defined and developed from a very limited and biased perspective and based disproportionately on gay male and urban populations.
Common themes that stand out as the focus of the existing research include general overviews describing the subculture and participant demographics, psychological investigations, suggestions for working with BDSM clientele, and issues related to privacy and legal discrimination. Other recurring themes that receive a bit less focus include identity work, feminist views, media portrayal, and formulation and expression of roles (Weinberg, 2006).

Overviews.

Basic social science literature surrounding BDSM has been in the form of descriptive overviews. For example, Guidroz recently published “Are You a Top or a Bottom? : Social Science Answers for Everyday Questions about Sadomasochism (2008). The article was designed to provide answers to basic social questions about the population of people who engage in BDSM, their behaviors, and beliefs. Guidroz found that there is no profile of an SM practitioner. Guidroz points out that BDSM participants comprise a subculture which “remains a topic of curiosity for academics” (Guidroz 2008:1766). Another example is Taylor and Ussher’s (2001) article about making sense of S&M.

Extremely advantageous in this area have been the seminal reviews provided by Thomas Weinberg (1987, 1994). He has been writing these reviews of BDSM academic literature since 1978. His most recent, in 2006, specifically focuses on sociological and social psychological academic literature and summarizes popular research methodology being used to investigate this population. He recapitulates contemporary research
findings on BDSM characteristics, identities and subcultures. He has found the majority
of research has been performed through surveys, questions the categorization of BDSM
as a mental disorder and critiques legal decisions.

Some have tried to explain the perspectives of sadomasochism (Cross and
Matheson 2006). Others have attempted to pinpoint the demographics of those who
participate in BDSM. Most of these studies are limited to small geographical areas,
recruit through a specific venue (such as metropolitan fetish night clubs), or target a
specific subset of participants (such as gay males). The most inclusive demographic study
of BDSM is Richter’s (2008) national survey in Australia which encompassed a
representative sample of over 19,000 respondents randomly chosen for telephone
interviews. This study revealed that less than two percent of sexually active people
participate in BDSM.

The most recent collection of essays and articles related to BDSM was published
simultaneously as both the book Sadomasochism: Powerful Pleasures, and as Journal of
Homosexuality (2006). The book is a compilation of articles by pioneering, new, and
seasoned authors of “SM” study. The book comprehensively represents the current (and
popular) social science perspective on BDSM, specifically that it is jointed with the
LGBT community, is characterized by casual encounters, and is highly sexualized. The
sixteen articles incorporate the themes I discuss here (general overviews, psychological
investigations, BDSM clientele, and discrimination) as well as other BDSM topics.

The introduction, titled The State of Our Knowledge on SM (Moser and Kleinplatz
2006) acknowledges the difficulty of even defining the concept of sadomasochism, much
less its practitioners or ethos. The authors stress the importance of social science contributors carefully defining terms related to a subculture so complicated and understudied.

Current descriptive overviews have been somewhat inconclusive. Key findings can be summarized in three statements. An unknown number of people engage in BDSM. Of this population, only a small percentage has been studied empirically and the BDSM community is difficult to define. These key findings lead to the natural conclusion that the BDSM subculture is understudied.

*Psychological Investigations.*

Many behavioral sciences are concerned with the successful treatment of psychopathology that manifests in the form of BDSM activities. Other social scientists wish to debunk traditional theories that inherently bind BDSM involvement with psychological dysfunction. In order to do so, recent studies have been conducted to provide empirical evidence about the psychological functioning of those who engage in BDSM. The findings have been controversial.

Some researchers claim to have found correlations between psychopathology and BDSM involvement (Leiblum 2006). Many of these studies are based on time-honored Freudian concepts. Such literature generally focuses on the most effective behavioral treatments to help clients overcome their involvement in particular BDSM activities. Novick and Novick (1996) delve deeply into psychoanalytic examination of sadomasochism in their compilation *Fearful Symmetry*, published as a reference in
treating sadomasochistic patients. They clearly refer to these patients as “very disturbed” and claim that sadomasochism is “an integral part of all pathology” (Novick and Novick 1996: xiv).

Other research that refers to a correlation between BDSM and psychological dysfunction draw on reports and studies of criminals who engage in various BDSM activities (Myers et al. 2008). Sadism has been equated with pathologic sexual interest and crime (Meloy 1997; Fedoroff and Paul 2008) and a strong relationship has been shown to exist between murder and paraphilia (Myers 2007).

Separate research automatically assumes psychological dysfunction of BDSM participants and sets out to determine underlying causes and the best methods of treatment. Blum (1977) assumes masochism as a developmental dimension of female character. Baumeister (1991) however, assumes masochism as a form of escapism from one’s self. Santtila (2002) has investigated how one’s attachment to their mother influences their sadomasochistic positioning. Southern (2002) classifies sadomasochism with addictive disorders as a result of life trauma and offers suggestions for treatment with psychotherapy.

As was the case with descriptive overviews, some of the more current research on BDSM populations is being performed to find out if there even exists a correlation between psychological functioning and BDSM involvement. For instance, studies have been conducted to determine if there is a correlation between past abuse and BDSM (Sandnabba 2002). More recent studies are showing results that conclude there is no more
of a correlation between BDSM participants and psychological dysfunction than the general population (Connolly 2006).

*BDSM Clientele.*

A psychological/psychiatric patient may seek out counseling and/or therapy because of their involvement in BDSM, or they may just coincidentally be a BDSM practitioner who seeks out counseling/therapy for another reason. Either way, professionals in the mental health sector are faced with the additional challenges brought about by servicing clientele who also happen to be BDSM participants. This has led to an increased academic interest in literature that investigates differing solutions to working with this “challenging” population of clients. Therefore, the next prevalent theme in social science literature of BDSM is that of the challenges of “treating kinky clients.”

Over the past five to ten years scholars have begun identifying problems that arise from working with BDSM oriented clients. These can include counter transference, significant others and differentiating abuse from play (Nichols 2006). Another social problem is that BDSM practitioners themselves feel that they receive bias care from mental health professionals (Kolmes, Stock, and Moser 2006) which can lead to further damage or resistance to seek out care.

Nichols and Shernoff (2006) encourage clinicians to suspend preconceived notions of sexual normality to become more accepting of clients who are sexually atypical and sexual minorities. They also encourage therapists to abandon pathologizing sexuality, to become aware of activist organizations and movements that celebrate sexual
diversity, and to seek education about challenges that BDSM practitioners face and bring to therapy.

A common theme that spans across numerous articles about the therapeutic treatment of BDSM clients is the need for knowledgeable clinicians. Researchers have begun to stress the importance of not only competence in the field of counseling and therapy but also the importance of clinicians having a working knowledge of the BDSM subculture (Lawrence and Love-Crowell 2008; Garrott 2008; Weitzman 2006). Hoff and Sprott (2009) emphasize understanding BDSM well enough to communicate with clients in their own terms and seeing the clients and their BDSM involvement as bigger than just their sexuality.

Researchers offer suggestions beyond familiarity with the BDSM identified client’s subculture. Barker, Iantaffi, and Gupta (2007) suggest challenging mainstream assumptions, showing acceptance and implementing “kink-aware” curriculum into graduate training for therapists. Powers (2007) even goes so far as to establish “Twelve Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Clients Who Engage in BDSM” that mental health professionals can use to be more culturally sensitive.

One last additional topic researchers have discussed regarding BDSM clients is that of therapist/client boundaries. Sometimes there are boundary issues prevalent in value conflict, as in the case when a therapist must balance issues of neutrality and prevention of harm (Garrott 2008) or issues of privacy. More commonly a boundary issue occurs when the mental health professional is him or herself a BDSM practitioner
(Bettinger 2003; Lawrence 2008). This can create an entirely new set of challenges in servicing kinky clients.

**Privacy/Legal Discrimination.**

The final most prevalent theme occurring in BDSM social science literature is that of privacy and legal discrimination. Most academic literature regarding BDSM and privacy rights centers around the Spanner case of 1990. The “Spanner trials” as they have come to be known, involved the prosecution and conviction of sixteen gay men in the UK for their engagement in consensual BDSM. The “tops” were found guilty of assault and the “bottoms” were found guilty of aiding and abetting assault upon themselves. The BDSM community immediately experienced the implications and fallout from the prosecution and the Spanner Trust was formed which advocates and lobbies to change UK law to decriminalize consensual sadomasochism and to educate the public and legislative bodies about sadomasochism (White 2006).

The Spanner trials received a great deal of media attention, spurring an academic interest in issues regarding privacy rights and legal discrimination based on sexual proclivity rather than sexual orientation. Richard Green (2001) tracks the entire case and discusses the “right to privacy” debate.

White (2006) reflects on the Spanner trials in his discussion of consent and privacy issues leaking to activism and discussion of public health. White as well as others take an additional angle of referencing the Spanner trials in comparisons of gay versus straight prosecutions (Horne and Lewis 1996). Others use the Spanner trials as a
springboard to investigate privacy issues such as citizenship (Bell 1995) homophobia (Binnie 1999) and sexual classism (Storr 2001).

Though the Spanner case is one of the most famous, it is not the only incident to have spawned academic interest in the relationship between BDSM and discrimination. The Max Mosley case, involving the former Formula One president’s engagement in BDSM brought issues of private behavior, public interest, and responsible free speech journalism to the forefront of academic discussion (Daniels 2008).

Privacy has not been the only legal issue to arise within the BDSM community. It is in fact only one of numerous topics of law and discrimination. Other legal issues include sexual freedom, child custody, domestic violence, and employment discrimination (Ridinger 2006). Some have presented case studies exemplifying how the family court is biased against BDSM practitioners, and how the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and the ICD are misused to both persecute and prosecute sexual minorities (Klein and Moser 2006; Reiersøl, and Skeid 2006).

Weiss (2008) details how the BDSM community experiences enough discrimination and legal challenges to warrant the formation of advocacy and lobbying groups to represent them. One such group, the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF), reports having responded to incidents that included abuse, domestic violence, employment discrimination, child custody, divorce, and unemployment discrimination, among others (NCSF 2010). Similar organizations include the Sexual Freedom Coalition (SFC), the Woodhull Freedom Foundation (WFF), and the National Leather Association (NLA).
Susan Wright of the NCSF published an article in 2006 outlining how SM-identified individuals are discriminated against not only in the legal realm, but also in academia as well. Wright discusses how SM participant scholars have less of a voice than popular feminist scholars. She also writes about violence against BDSM practitioners and how they are refused access, opportunity, and advancement socially, politically, and educationally. Issues of privacy rights, legal challenges, and discrimination continue to move to the forefront of academic discussion of BDSM.

Because the quantity of BDSM literature is limited, many topics have only been investigated a few times or only by a select number of scholars. Some of these topics include identity work (Langdridge 2004; Wilson 2005; Mosher 2006), gender (Damon 2002; Donnelly 1998), feminism (Deckha 2007; Saxe 1992; Hopkins 1994; Lynch 2003), media and pop culture (Weiss 2006; Wilkinson 2009), and social roles (Dancer 2006).

Two conclusions can be drawn from the current body of social science literature on BDSM. First, the need for additional research is apparent from the lack of both quantity and diversity of topics. Second, due to the nature of topics unearthed in the course of BDSM study, we can see this subculture as a marginalized group. As such, additional investigation is warranted regarding stigmatization and the management thereof.

Section 3: An Overview of the Literature on Stigma and Stigma Management

Over the past few decades, scholars have begun to investigate the relationship between BDSM involvement and stigmatization. However, relatively no studies have
delved into the lived experience of BDSM practitioners themselves or the techniques they use to manage such experiences. Here I will discuss briefly the broader sociological literature on stigma and stigma management. I provide a condensed overview of two important contributors to the area of stigma literature: Erving Goffman and Gerhard Falk. This will assist readers in understanding what stigma is and how it leads to the need for management. I then move on to literature that specifically addresses how particular deviant groups experience stigma, and the techniques they use to manage their social interactions.

Stigma has been concisely defined as a negative response to those who are different from the norm (Goar 2009; Jones 1984). The word is rooted in the ancient Greek practice of tattooing slaves with a mark which was referred to as a “stigma.” Stigmatization then can be seen as a social mechanism of sorting outsiders from insiders, and includes elements of labeling and stereotyping.

Sociologist Gerhard Falk discusses these elements in his book *Stigma: How We Treat Outsiders* (2001). After providing an explanation of how stigma is socially produced by groups of individuals who share commonality, Falk moves on to discuss the social function of stigma. Reflecting back to Durkheim, he points out that uniting against deviance promotes solidarity, social order and enforces group morality (Durkheim 1964). There are two types of stigma people experience Falk writes: “existential” stigma, which one did not create or over which one has little control, and “achieved” stigma, which the stigmatized person earns via their conduct or contribution. As examples of existential stigma he describes groups such as the mentally ill, the handicapped, and
Native Americans. As an example of achieved stigma he draws upon groups like prostitutes and criminals.

Falk focuses on stigmatized groups in America, explaining how the Weberian concept of the Protestant Ethic can serve as a basis for stigmatization in Western society. In addition to referencing Durkheim and Weber to make sense of why stigma happens, Falk also references the works of Erving Goffman to make sense of how stigma is experienced.

Goffman discusses stigma in terms of what he calls “spoiled identity” (Goffman 1963). By this he means that a person has become disqualified from full social acceptance. The stigmatized person’s character becomes suspect and he or she is in essence viewed by others as less than human. Goffman divides stigmatized people into two groups: the discredited and the discreditable. The discredited are those whose stigma is known or apparent to others. Examples would include those who have an obvious disability or a criminal whose conviction has been made known. The discreditable are those whose differentness has not been revealed nor is immediately perceivable.

According to Goffman, this spoiled identity surfaces in the form of problematic social interactions. He puts these problems in the context of reduced life chances. He uses examples such as social and professional opportunities being limited, reputation being compromised, the lack of respect and acceptance, or the need to hide and conceal, which can lead to self-isolation and feelings of inferiority.

Therefore, the discredited are attempting to handle stigma by managing the tension that arises during problematic social interactions with others. The discreditable
attempt to deal with stigma by controlling information about identity. The efforts used to accomplish such goals can be referred to as “stigma management strategies” which is the focus of Goffman’s *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963).

Goffman makes a distinction in these strategies by referring to “in-group” and “out-group” techniques. “In-group” techniques are those used by the stigmatized person in conjunction with peers who share the same stigma. “Out-group” techniques are used by the stigmatized person in his or her encounters with non-stigmatized others.

Sociologists have long used Goffman as a springboard to study how various deviant groups experience stigma and the techniques they use to manage their identities and social interactions. Many of these parallel Sykes and Matza’s (1957) techniques of neutralization. Denying responsibility, injury, and victim, as well as condemnation of out-groups and appealing to higher loyalties, are all acts that both neutralize deviance by deflecting social normative expectation, and work hand-in-hand to exemplify Goffman’s concepts of stigma management. Several scholars have gained insight about stigma through research into particular deviant groups. Lemert (1951) divided deviance into two types of deviance: primary and secondary. He describes secondary deviation as one’s acceptance of self as deviant based on societal reaction. In essence, the deviant accepts the stigma and adjusts to his role as a deviant actor.

Kitsuse (1980) expands on this concept even more by adding what he calls tertiary deviance, in his study of those who challenge their deviant label and the stigma attached to it. Tertiary deviance describes the act of demanding one’s rights despite the negative label and stigma, as they confront the societal reactions. Kitsuse puts an active
face on deviants rather than the traditional face of a passive recipient of labeling. It is through this tertiary deviance that many of the stigma management techniques (such as advocacy, education and social movements) are formed.

Some focus on the management of identity and image (Nelsen 2005). Petrunik and Shearing (1983) demonstrate how stutterers use techniques such as speech control to ease their interactions. This is an example of an interactive stigma management strategy that integrates both tension control in interaction and presentation control in identity and image.

A few prominent scholars have expounded on the topic of stigma management techniques. Thorne and Anderson (2006) applied stigma management to personal bankruptcy. They revealed how bankrupt debtors use concealment, avoidance and deviance avowal as strategies to manage stigma. Anderson, Snow and Cress (1994) discuss stigma management strategies among the homeless, a group with little ability to shield themselves from stigmatization. Anderson et al. found that this population uses both in-group and out-group strategies. Their in-group strategies included activities among themselves such as drinking, cheap entertainment, hanging out and identity work. Their out-group strategies to cope with stigmatized interactions with domiciled others included passing, covering, defiance and collective action. This particular piece of work is a perfect example of Goffman’s in-group and out-group strategies.

Galinsky et al. (2003), hone in on a particular type of stigma management: the re-appropriation of stigmatizing labels. This is a technique in which a stigmatized group reveals an externally imposed negative label, such as “queer” or “geek,” by self-
consciously referring to itself in terms of that label. This is similar to the delabeling and relabeling process used by alcoholics (Trice and Roman 1970).

Another expert on stigma management is Nancy Herman (1987), who studies the stigma bestowed on ex-psychiatric patients. This particular subculture uses a great deal of in-group strategies including informal networking and using one another for camaraderie and support. Herman goes on nearly a decade later to explore how ex-psychiatric patients use stigma management strategies to reintegrate into society. Herman’s research, like Anderson’s is another prime application and extension of Goffman’s original works on stigma.

When stigma is discussed in the context of sexual identity, most sociologists focus on the stigma associated with sexual orientation (for example, see Welch 2000 or Herek 1998, 2007) or the stigma associated with those who have contracted sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS (for example, see Fielden 2006 or Campbell 2006 or Brimlow, Cook and Seaton 2003).

Kenneth Plummer provides sociological justification for the study of human sexuality in his interactionist discussion on the topic (1975). He points out that the stigma one receives for their sexual choices, along with political social order of sexuality demonstrates the social nature of sexuality. He intersects sexual deviance with the sociological interactionist perspective to demonstrate how homosexuals experience stigma.

Beyond the two primary foci of sexual orientation and sexually transmitted disease, two other areas of sexual stigma occasionally surface: stigma attached to sex
offenders and stigma attached to sex workers. The management of stigma is discussed in Scully and Marolla’s (1984) study of how rapists use a vocabulary of motive. Tomura’s (2009) study of how prostitutes experience stigma and shame is one of the most in-depth views of sexual stigma to emerge in contemporary social science publications.

Despite these studies into deviant sexuality, the specific subculture of BDSM and how its participants deal with stigma still remains unexplored. Many of the studies performed on BDSM fall into the category of investigative information gathering. What is it? Who does it? How prevalent is it? These investigative studies began in the 1980’s with Moser and Levitt (1987), but have failed to progress significantly enough to reflect the capabilities of social scientific research or the social demand for policy implication. Even some of the more recent studies still distance researcher from subject and focus only on BDSM as it exists linguistically and virtually, on the internet (Langdridge and Butt 2004; Palandri and Green 2000).

In 2008, Goode and Vail added the practice of S&M to their textbook *Extreme Deviance*. They make mention that the reality of S&M practice is widely separated from the public understanding of S&M. S&M activity is often viewed as nonconsensual, a paradigm for the acceptance of violence, and abnormal behavior. They outline seven reasons why this public understanding is a misconception and point out how stereotyping of S&M activity “flattens” participants into misleadingly homogeneous consistency, and how participants face stigma in the form of rejection, and must hide their activities.

Other authors have attempted to refute Freudian thinking as well as assert that S&M is no longer pathological, pointing out that many scholars still refer to S&M using
mental illness overtones (Apostolides 1999). They refer to BDSM participants who face stigma and stereotypes that claim they are addicts, incapable of love or sufferers of childhood abuse. Many of them however, go on to demonstrate that pathology still exists in the BDSM community, as the subculture is not immune to mental illness. This in turn, further inflates the stereotypes that BDSM equates to pathology. Hoff and Sprott (2009) shift therapeutic frames of BDSM practitioners from pathological to subcultural standards upheld by the participants themselves.

Authors who have specifically concentrated on scholarly investigation of BDSM practices and practitioners have only touched sparingly on the stigma that encapsulates BDSMers. It is often assumed that those who engage in BDSM activities experience stigma, but it is rarely investigated in depth to show how they experience stigma and in what ways they try to manage it. This study attempts to begin such an investigation using Goffman’s *Stigma* as a springboard.

What the majority of stigma management studies have in common is moving the stigmatized individual from passive recipient to active social player. Anderson brings the homeless from an assumed asocial position to one of aware, responsive individuals. Herman brings ex-psychiatric patients from “looney” and “nuts” to strategists and negotiators playing active roles in their own identities. My hope with the current study is to do the same for BDSM participants, bringing them from their labeled categories of perverts and perpetrators to socially interactive participants in society.

As this literature review has shown, there are a few key repeating themes in the existing literature of BDSM. The most historical is the negative psychologizing of those
who participate in BDSM activities. Also, the limited more recent empirical sociological studies show the need for more ethnographic work. This would allow a perspective of the BDSM participants point of view linked to sociological analyses. This is what I seek to do in this study.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The current study seeks to investigate an understudied and marginalized subculture population. This section describes the sample of this subculture I observed and interviewed and the procedures I used to obtain data from this sample. I describe here my role as a researcher and the settings and venues I accessed. I explain the extra measures taken to assure confidentiality to a sensitive group and give a demographic overviews of the subjects. I then concisely summarize my data analysis process.

Researcher Role

I penetrated the BDSM community a decade or more prior to having begun this particular study, as an undergraduate writing a paper on BDSM. For my current research, I called upon members I had met and befriended at that time. Most of them had left the area, the group, or the lifestyle, but referred me to others who might be willing to assist with my studies. This time, my approach to the community was different because I knew “the ways of the lifestyle,” but did not know the specific group of people. It was much easier to gain trust and build rapport because I “knew the basics.”

By this time, though years would sometimes lapse between contacts, the long-term members of the group welcomed me with friendly open arms. I re-established contacts for the first few meetings, letting everyone (especially people who did not previously know me) know that I was not a threat. Again, it was easier for the group to trust me, not only because I was “in the know” about the lifestyle, but also because
seasoned members were willing to vouch for me. Within only a few weeks, I was included in group invitations as “member of” a particular group.

As I mentioned my research goals and requested interviews or referral for interviews, group members were quite willing and very excited for the opportunity to share their story and “set the record straight.” This group did not view me as “a researcher who engages in the lifestyle to learn,” but rather as “group member asking for help doing her homework.” When I reminded group members that I was a graduate student researching BDSM, they would respond with what they considered equally casual conversation, such as “That’s great. I’m a Nurse.” If I was taking notes at a munch and someone asked why, other group members would quickly dismiss it as “Just part of her homework. She’s studying sexuality or poly relationships or something.”

Over the course of eleven months, I logged over five-hundred hours of participant observation in the BDSM community. I attended ten munches, seven house parties (three of which were open invitations, three of which I received private invitations, and one I attended as another person’s guest), six spontaneous after-munch play parties, two statewide weekend events, one informal social, three private dungeon parties, several nights at a BDSM night club, and spent four days and three nights on a “compound” which serves as the private home to a loosely organized, closed “commune” of nine polyamorous BDSM participants.

I played dual roles in the field. I was an established and trusted acquaintance as well as a participant observer and researcher. The group however, preferred to situate me among them as someone more personally involved. A tactic the group used often was to
“convince” me of my personal level of involvement and commitment to the lifestyle. If I introduced myself as “vanilla” (a term used to describe non-lifestyle/mainstream people), who was just observing, another member of the group was always quick to ascribe to me a more lifestyle appropriate title. One woman consistently referred to me as a “nerd.” She assumed that I was as dedicated to the group as I was to my studies. By doing research on BDSM, the group assumed more dedication to BDSM. Because I was willing to participate in nearly any activity from which I could learn, I was often told that I was “in denial” about being a “lifestylist.”

I was never directly asked if I had a genuine interest in the BDSM lifestyle outside of academia. It was simply assumed that I must or else I would not have been there. This was a characteristic assumption by a group who had come to accept an “us or them” mentality. If someone was present in BDSM realm it was either to enjoy the lifestyle, or to cause trouble. There was no other reason. Curiosity seekers typically kept their inquisitiveness to an internet, magazine or media level. Once someone “took the step” to “make it happen” or “make it real” by attending a munch, it showed sincerity to being involved. If someone, like myself, repeatedly attended, over the course of years, there was no other label available except “one of us.”

This caused a bit of a dilemma in articulating my role in the field. The research role in which I saw myself and conveyed to the group, was not the role they were willing to accept. “Researcher” is a threat word. It typically would describe someone eager to pathologize group members. Hence, typically “researchers” are denied access in the first place. I entered the subculture years prior as a “curiosity seeker” and became a
“researcher” only recently. Even if my primary role to myself was researcher, in the group’s opinion I was nothing less than kith who also happened to be researching that of which I was a member.

Of the Adlers’ (1987) three research roles of peripheral, active, and complete membership, my research role fell somewhere between active and complete member. Not only was my participation more than marginal, but the level of rapport, trust, and communication with group members grew to a more invested level than that reserved for academic authority. Delving deeper than a peripheral, marginal membership allowed me to experience a deeper sense of involvement, in what the Adlers define as “being swept up in the experiences of members and develop a deeper awareness of how members think and feel” (Adler and Adler, 1987:64.)

Snow, Benford and Anderson (1986) also discuss fieldwork position, dividing them into four roles: controlled skeptic, ardent activist, buddy-researcher, and credentialed expert. I did not aim for a particular role in the community, but rather let my research role develop and mature as guided by the subculture participants themselves. In alignment with Snow et al.’s roles then, mine fell somewhere between controlled skeptic and ardent activist. I used controlled eliciting (Black and Metzger 1969; Tyler 1969) to gain meaningful insight, with only enough skepticism to justify questioning. At the same time though, the longevity of my loyalty and my permitted access to backstage operations assumed that I had unquestioningly embraced BDSM ideology and rhetoric.

At times I was forced to choose between allegiance to the group and allegiance to research. This became especially evident as I transitioned from a “newbie” into a more
seasoned member. As other “newbies” entered the lifestyle, it was not unusual for them to make numerous “mistakes” before they learned all the proper protocol, safety and norms of the lifestyle. Taking a peripheral research role would have enabled me to fully document these experiences. However, a more active and complete membership role imposed on me a dynamic responsibility to prevent certain mistakes from happening in the first place.

Over time, I began to reiterate my requests for interviews, emphasizing that I had deadlines I needed to meet. The more strongly I stressed my role as researcher, the less inclined group members seemed willing to cooperate. Although members had been initially enthusiastic about telling their story and setting the record straight and despite the fact that they had eagerly agreed to interviews, when I tried to pin down an exact time or place, they were hesitant to commit. As I stressed my research role, it forced members to consider that perhaps I was a threat. The change in my status from a curious participant to a “professional scholar” eventually led to the need for me to completely re-prove myself.

This re-proving happened much more quickly than in my previous entrance into the community. I was challenged to prove my loyalty to the group in various ways, including “we need to talk” sessions, if/then contingency questions, and “testing” me in various ways to see if I was loyal or a threat (because I must have been one or the other.) For example, at a party I attended, the doorman was handing out fake money to each person who entered. This fake money was to be used later in an auction in which various “services,” sometimes of a sexual nature, would be sold. Because the doorman did not
personally know me, he charged me a dollar to get in to the party, calling it a “newbie fee.” Later, after the auction, when I discussed the newbie fee with the hostess, she explained that the dollar charge was for the fake money. The group assumed if I had been a law enforcement officer, I would not have been allowed to exchange money. She said it was “just the doorman’s way of protecting everyone by testing the newcomers.”

Within a few weeks group members realized I was no more of a threat now than I had ever been. I was permitted to resume my “denial” position of “group member who’s coincidentally working on her homework.” My transition across groups was relatively easy because I continually had someone willing to vouch for me as I met additional groups’ members.

The re-proving process, though an inconvenience and an interruption to my pace of gathering data, served an important function for the group. It protected them. If I had shown that I was a threat, the group leaders would have quickly dispelled me from the group. The process also strengthened the solidarity of the group because they had reaffirmed to themselves that they all “had each other’s back” and would do what it takes to protect one another from harm. I was not a threat and could now resume my role as “kinky nerd doing her homework.”

This unique role of participant observation to a depth of enmeshment is controversial, but in no way new to field work. From my colleagues, I myself experienced the (dis)courtesy stigma that Mattley (1997) describes in her researcher of sex workers. Such an intense level of the field researcher enmeshing into the participant role is new to this particular subculture. At the same time I was in the field, other
scholars, such as Newmahr (2008) were also contributing to breaking this ground, by entrenching themselves in the BDSM community for the purpose of published sociological research.

Participant Observation Settings

The following settings are described based on information obtained in the course of this study from both observation and respondent comments. BDSM social groups are formed at the local level, voluntarily, discreetly and often through word-of-mouth or inconspicuous media sources (such as coded ads in magazine personals or private entrance groups on the internet). These groups generally meet publicly in “back rooms” of restaurants to get to know one another. They refer to these meetings as “Munches” or “Meet and Greets.” Munches are the primary means of access into meeting other BDSM participants face-to-face, and the social scientist’s primary means of gaining access to ground-level BDSM subcultures.

Once they have built trust and rapport with one another, they may start having private gatherings at one another’s homes. These are generally referred to as “Play Parties.” These parties vary greatly from group to group. They may casually occur spontaneously after a munch. It is not uncommon for a member at a munch to nonchalantly invite the group over to their home after dining for “play time.” Another common type of play party is the “Home Party” or “House Party,” which tends to be planned ahead of time and is often limited to a particular group, specific individuals, or “by invitation only.” The most elaborate form of party is a “Dungeon Party.” Dungeon
parties are usually hosted by the more elite members and/or leaders of groups who have enough wealth to secure a private facility which serves as a “Dungeon.” Dungeon parties are more permanent based, specifically designed for “play,” and usually entail much more elaborate rules, as well as being more difficult to attain access to. The exception to this is the “Pay For Play” dungeon, which is more prevalent in highly populated metropolitan areas and requires little more to access than proof of age and an entry fee.

If enough local groups manage to sustain a regular attendance and keep in contact with one another, they tend to start having larger cooperative gatherings, often at a statewide level. These are typically geared toward educational purposes, and are referred to as “Events.” Events can become so popular and well-known that BDSM participants will travel across state, across country, and even across seas to attend their favorite events. They are the most highly organized of all BDSM social gatherings, with planning for the subsequent year typically beginning at the close of the current event. Events often carry over an entire weekend or an entire week and are segmented into classes, demonstrations (“demos”), seminars/discussion groups, orientations, book signings, workshops, vending, meal times, play times and physical labor.

There are numerous other settings within the BDSM community as well. In addition to the Pay for Play Dungeon named above, there are numerous nightclubs and swinger’s clubs with “fetish rooms” or “BDSM rooms.” “Events” may veer from the educationally organized hotel gathering and take place in the form of a camping retreat, role-playing for a weekend in an abandoned institutional setting, or a specific fetish convention. Smaller groups (sometimes as little as three people) may gather at a bar or
restaurant for an “informal get-together” or “social” on a weeknight. BDSM also happens in the private sector. Not only do consensual couples engage in BDSM in the privacy of their own homes, but also polyamorous relationships and communes will often have pansexual or power exchange undertones that carry from one encounter to the next. In addition, much of the surface exploration of the BDSM lifestyle conducted by curious onlookers, occurs on the internet. However, the three main areas of BDSM social activity as experienced by groups occurs at munches, play parties, and events.

My research began in two cities in West Virginia and grew to over fifty cities in eleven states. Settings included BDSM social gatherings (munches, meet and greets, events, seminars, workshops, demos, and parties). Venues included restaurants, lobbies, hotels, motels, parking lots, vehicles, clubs, single family homes, apartment complexes, bars, warehouses, and a corn field.

A Word about Confidentiality

All names in this study have been changed to protect the confidentiality of participants. Because this is a study of stigma among participants in a sensitive community, special care was taken to assure confidentiality. Most participants in this community already address themselves by nicknames. I do not use any real names of any participants. As an added measure of anonymity, I have replaced nicknames with pseudonym as well. A few participants asked that their real names be used as they wanted proper credit for their statements and words. After careful consideration, I decided against using any real names or nicknames on the off chance that by using one person’s
real name, their locality, group, organization, or other participants’ identities may be revealed by association. When possible, I asked the participants if I could use their statements with a pseudonym instead. Most agreed. If they did not agree, I did not use their statements.

All of the data collected was collected over the geographical span of eleven states including Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Michigan, as well as Washington D.C. I use these state names interchangeably and sometimes deliberately name a particular state when in actuality I am referring to a different one. I do this to further shield the identity of participants and the misrepresentation of any particular geographical area does not signify a misrepresentation of any of the data.

Interviews

In addition to participant observation, I conducted and took field notes on dozens of informal conversational interviews and I recorded and transcribed sixteen in-depth interviews. I recruited interviewees in several ways. In person, at munches, parties and events, I asked participants if they would be willing to interview at a time and place convenient for them. I also made announcements, or someone would announce on my behalf, that I was interviewing and if anyone was interested to please contact me in person, by phone or via email. I also posted a written announcement at a few events on “kinky bulletin boards”. Finally, as a method of recruiting interviewees, I posted an announcement on an internet social networking site for the kink community.
Of the sixteen structured interviews, there were six females, eight males and two transgenders. Six identified themselves as dominant, six identified as switches, and four as submissives (with two of the submissives self-identifying as “slaves”). Two of the interviewees were married to spouses who also participated in the lifestyle. Five were involved in polyamorous but not state-sanctioned marriages. One male was married to a spouse who was not involved in the lifestyle, but was aware of her husband’s involvement. One man was married to a spouse who was not involved in the lifestyle and was not aware of her husband’s involvement.

The interviewees’ ages ranged from twenty-two to sixty-one, with the majority in their late thirties to late forties. Six identified themselves as bisexual, two as gay or lesbian, six as heterosexual, and two as asexual. Fifteen were Caucasian; one was African-American. The interviews lasted anywhere from forty-five minutes to three and one half hours, with the average lasting about two hours.

The interview guide, though somewhat loosely structured, concentrated on matters of entry into and experiences in the BDSM community, personal descriptions of self, stigmatization (both experiences and management strategies), and the subculture itself. (The stigma section of the interview schedule is located in Appendix B.) Much of the structure of the interview guide was generated as the result of participant observation and informal conversational interviewing.

Most of my informal conversational interviews took place at munches, play parties, and in vehicles during road trips. Although most conversational interviews were embedded into transcribed field notes, I would estimate that I conducted at least 1 during
each field visit, totally approximately fifty informal interviews. I usually prompted informal interviews with a sentence similar to “Can I ask you a few questions about your involvement in the lifestyle?” I did not use a schedule for informal interviewing and allowed the participants to bring up topics they felt were important.

I conducted nine interviews via email and the internet. For email interviews, I used the qualitative in-depth interview guide as a schedule and asked participants to answer as comprehensively and exhaustively as possible. Interviewees had a full month to think about and formulate responses, type them on the interview sheet, revise as they wished, and email back to me.

I moderated a total of 6 focus groups which were adapted and modified from Krueger and Casey’s Guide (2000). To avoid the possibility of influence of authority in a subculture robust with power dynamics, and to help ensure homogeneity, participants were divided into a particular group based on their position in the BDSM hierarchy. The six groups consisted of 1) owned slaves, 2) submissives, 3) switches, 4) dominants, 5) non-power exchange kinksters/fetishists, and 6) BDSM professionals. The group sizes were respectively six, twelve, seven, eight, ten and four, for a total of forty-seven focus group participants.

Focus group participants were recruited via convenience sampling at other BDSM events and settings. They voluntarily participated and were not compensated for their involvement. A focus group guide was generated as an abbreviated version of the interview guide. However, questions varied slightly depending on the particular group. The two most relevant questions pertaining to stigma were “Do you feel like you are a
stigmatized community? If so, in what way?” and “How are you treated differently due to being BDSM participants?”

Focus groups were conducted in secluded areas such as private rooms in restaurants and libraries, at agreed upon times by the group (generally around 3:00-5:00 a.m., after a scheduled party when the restaurant had few customers and a small number of wait-staff. Others occurred during “down times” at events in an empty hotel conference room. The focus groups ranged from ninety minutes to four hours, with the average lasting slightly over two hours. All focus groups were recorded and later transcribed.

Supplemental Data

Compared to the data collected via fieldwork and interviews, I collected very little supplemental data. This shortage was for a few reasons. First, because the lifestyle is so loosely organized, there are no universal doctrines, procedures, or even codified definitions which universally apply across time and space. Even when books (both erotic fantasy as well as “how-to”) are published, there isn’t any one considered to be more authoritative than others. In the BDSM subcultures, most structure and organization happens at the lowest levels, and lasts only for a temporary time period. Because of the lack of universal rules, definitions, interests, and commitments, there is little created that actually circulates outside the home or perhaps a tight-knit local group. Therefore, written supplemental data rarely exists.
Second, because pansexuality and relationships founded on norm violating exchange of power are often stigmatized, BDSM participants are reluctant to create any tangible proof of their involvement in the lifestyle. If revealed publicly, their activities, choices, and character easily become target to protest, degradation, discrimination, and violence. Because of this, groups avoid organizing at formal levels, disallow a great deal of video recording or picture taking, and are disinclined to share secret codes. So, when the supplemental data does exist, it is hidden and well guarded.

The written data I did access was either at the most private level or the most public level, but rarely anywhere between. More widespread data included books and websites. There are two prominent types of literature in the BDSM community: “how to”/DIY books that teach the basic skills and techniques of BDSM participation (such as how to tie a bondage knot, how to train a slave, and do-it-yourself dungeon construction), and fantasy literature, such as the libertines discussed previously and modern erotic fantasy novels written specifically for the BDSM genre.

Websites have become an anonymous and confidential method in which BDSM participants can disseminate information and share with other BDSM participants, but even here, information is limited due to outsiders having access to, and thus the ability to criticize and shame BDSM participants. Most BDSM websites are outdated, locally owned announcement pages for small neighborhood groups. Some of the websites I perused had not been updated for nearly eight years. Other websites were specifically designed to advertise, promote, and sell tickets for larger events.
More private data I was permitted to view and discuss, but not duplicate or take with me. These included artwork, journals, “daily charts” of household chores and duties, and the sacred “Manifesto” (a book of declaration, vow, and responsibility created between some masters/mistresses and their slaves). Of these, the most common was the submissive journal, often kept as a mandatory condition of the relationship, and released to me by the dominant partner usually during house parties.

To even further supplement previously collected data, I accessed case law for cases that made mention of BDSM or the words for which the acronym stands. My searches were limited to Federal case law, Ohio case law, and a somewhat limited search of state case law in Ohio’s surrounding states. I also consulted with an Ohio licensed attorney and a public official who worked for the Deputy Attorney General in Illinois, regarding current legal opinions and decisions pertaining to BDSM.

In total, I gathered 841 single-spaced pages of data. This included field notes (which sometimes included verbatim transcription of conversations) and transcripts from individual interviews and focus groups. Table 3.1 gives a visual representation of the data collected for this study.
Table 3.1

Research Data Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I.</th>
<th>509 hours of Participant Observation Fieldnotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 Munches</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13 Play Parties</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 private dungeon parties</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6 Nights at Dungeons/Clubs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>11 Spontaneous Gatherings and Informal Get-togethers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2 Weekend Events</td>
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<td></td>
<td>8 Road Trips</td>
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<tr>
<th>II.</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Approximately 50 Informal Conversational Interview Transcripts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16 In-depth Interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6 Focus Group Transcripts</td>
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<td>9 email interviews</td>
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<tr>
<th>III.</th>
<th>Internet Data</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10-20 Educational Sites</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25-30 Geographically Based Group Sites</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6 Events’ Informational Sites</td>
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<td></td>
<td>13 Personally Owned/Personal Journey Sites</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3 Social Networking Sites</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5 Chatrooms/Forums</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Emails with 67 people</td>
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<tr>
<th>IV.</th>
<th>Literature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 How-to/DIY Guides and Manuals, Workbooks</td>
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<td></td>
<td>7 Modern Erotic Fantasy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5-10 Miscellaneous Fandom</td>
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<tr>
<th>V.</th>
<th>Supplemental Data (Hardcopy or in the form of field-notes)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 Magazines and Personal Ads</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2 pieces of artwork</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19 Journals/Diaries</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3 Domestic Charts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9 Event pamphlets, itineraries, schedules and brochures</td>
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<td></td>
<td>15 Lists of Party/Dungeon Rules</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Liability Waivers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 Manifestos and Relationship Contracts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Several Case law and court opinions</td>
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</tbody>
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Data Analysis

After returning home from fieldwork, I would enter notes or transcribe recordings into computer files. In the process, I added analytical and methodological notes.

I used inductive coding techniques modeled after Lofland (2006) to analyze the data, examining it line-by-line for recurring patterns. The open coding process rendered 469 categories. 212 of these pertained to either physical risk (123) or social risk (eighty-nine). Of the eighty-nine social risk categories, sixty-seven were the social risk of stigma. Other social risk categories included drug and alcohol use and compromised eligibility status of polyamorous individuals in committed relationships. The sixty-seven stigma categories were used for focused coding. Analytic focused coding was then performed.

The coding and memo process happened consecutively with the data collection process. As field note coding produced more data relevant to stigma, I began to develop interview and focus group schedules to include more questions pertinent to these categories. The actual coding process was performed using old fashioned manual filing and simple word processing software to preserve overarching concepts and meaning.

The two substantive chapters to come focus on the experiences of stigma and the strategies implemented to manage that stigma, with concentration on the prevalent themes mentioned. I will demonstrate through narratives, comments, and observation how those in the BDSM community and subculture experience and deal with the stigma brought on by their sexual proclivities and relationship power dynamics.
Research Participants’ Descriptive Characteristics

The BDSM subculture, though often accepting and inclusive, appeals more to specific populations. During my eleven months immersed in this subculture, certain demographic trends became evident. Regarding race, approximately ninety percent of the participants I witnessed appeared Caucasian. Occasionally I saw a few African-Americans.

Most participants were middle to upper class, or entrepreneurs. Class was evidenced by the expensive fetish clothing, toys, ability to rent facilities, high-priced tickets to events, extensive travel, and ample leisure time. Age ranges were a bit more varied with participants anywhere from young adult to elderly, but the majority seemed to be in their thirties to forties.

As religion and politics were discussed often, they too became thematic. Most self-identified as Christian or Pagan. Political affiliation was polarized, with participants identifying not only as “left” or “right” but often as “radical” or “extreme” left or right. Another theme that stood out was body type. It seemed as if nearly three fourths of participants were obese and nearly all engaged in extensive body hair removal.

A more difficult demographic to pinpoint was gender distribution. The BDSM community is welcoming to gender ambiguity and it clearly shows in face-to-face encounters. Not only is gender not assumed based on social cues, it is sometimes considered unimportant altogether. Upon first glance the BDSM community looks like a potpourri of diversity. To some extent, it is. However, upon closer consideration, certain demographic trends are observable.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE BDSM PRACTITIONER’S EXPERIENCE OF STIGMA

As Goffman (1963) wrote, part of the experience of stigma is that one is treated as less than human and has their life chances reduced. This couldn’t have been more true in the lives of those I interviewed and spent time with during the course of my fieldwork. My findings revealed that BDSM participants experience stigma in four distinct ways: value diminishment, negative public portrayal, mockery and/or shunning, and discrimination/prejudice.

Negative Public Portrayal

The acronym BDSM is rarely used in the public realm. Perhaps because it is an acronym which encompasses a wide variety of activities, in the public sphere, particular BDSM activities are referred to more narrowly. The most common of which are the components of sadism and masochism. In the past decade, the media has embraced sadomasochism as a prevalent theme in crime-drama and medical drama. Prime time television shows, such as CSI, Law & Order, and nip/tuck have begun adding sadomasochistic themes and characters to their episodes with more frequency. Margot Weiss (2006) has said that BDSM is represented through popular media through the two mechanisms of acceptance via normalization and understanding via pathologizing.

Some would say that media exposure to this closeted subculture is a positive advancement because it brings a face to a grouping of people who have felt they need to hide their lifestyle and interests. The problem with this exposure though is that like most prime time television, it is an inaccurate portrayal of the group it supposedly represents.
Because the BDSM subculture only receives the spotlight in limited quantity, where it is portrayed is as important as how it is portrayed. Where it is featured is generally limited to crime drama, so realistically, sadomasochism is equated with criminal activity, and more specifically, severe index crimes such as murder and rape. This is a prime example of what Reinarman’s (1995) “routinization of caricature.” Hollywood producers have rhetorically re-crafted worst case scenarios into typical cases, which overwhelmingly distorts BDSM participants into predators and lunatics for the sake of drama.

Frequently, the plot encourages further S&M correlation in the audience’s mind with drug abuse, irrational behavior, infidelity, and domestic violence. S&M characters are portrayed as promiscuous, lacking in judgment and moral boundaries, self-absorbed, and generally wanton. In addition to the inaccurate portrayal of BDSM participants as criminalistic sex hounds, Hollywood adds its famous touch of also portraying them as extremely wealthy, healthy, beautiful, intelligent and well finished.

Some movies that have focused on BDSM for the primary plot, such as The Secretary (Shainberg, 2002) and The Pet (Stevens, 2006), air in theaters and can be seen by the public at large. The most recent trend in these movies is to portray the activities of BDSM more accurately, but to keep the Hollywood glamour of inaccuracy and instead add back stories of mental illness. For example, in The Secretary, the main character and her boss are involved in a BDSM relationship that entails some authentic BDSM activities. However, there is still poor judgment, infidelity, and shameless promiscuity. In addition, the main character is apparently recovering from mental illness that caused her inpatient psychiatric treatment, self mutilation and additional poor judgment. The
dichotomy is that while BDSM practitioners are portrayed as assertive and smart, when it comes to being sexually deviant, they are out of control.

News reporting media takes a similar approach in their coverage of any current event that has a hint of sadomasochism. From pedophilia to rape to illegal possession of pornographic material, current events become larger than life if there is an element of S&M present. Newscasters also like to make comedy out of S&M encounters “gone bad,” such as mishaps with erotic asphyxiation that lead to coma or bondage that leads to the need for rescue workers. If a celebrity or famous icon is caught engaging in BDSM activities, they are sure to make headlines.

For example, Max Mosley, former president of FIA (Formula One racing), had his reputation ruined by the media when his private encounters were publicized. Mosley is currently bringing the suit Mosley v. United Kingdom to the European Court of Human Rights regarding privacy and attempting to curtail the media in the UK.

I witnessed the media coverage of a BDSM event during my time in the field, and the impact on the BDSM participants. An annual weekend BDSM event was taking place in a Midwestern city at a national chain hotel. The event sponsors had booked the entire hotel. A local church had heard about the event and arranged a protest, informing the police, health department and local news media. I spent time in the parking lot of the hotel observing the dynamics among the BDSM participants arriving for the event, the protesters, and the media. Once, as I approached the building, one of the protesters asked me if I was there “for the pig orgy.”
The event was advertised by those hosting it as a “convention,” an “event,” and a “gathering.” When they described themselves to the media, they used the phrase “a growing pansexual, polyamorous BDSM/Kink fun group.” The media, on the other hand used more antagonistic terminology in their coverage. One radio station called it "a freakish sadomasochistic perversion-fest.” A television station called it a “deviant sex event” and a newspaper quoted someone calling it “anti-family and socially unacceptable that places people at harm’s risk.” On the internet news source sites it was referred to as anything from a “controversial sex festival” to a “public contamination station.”

Primetime television, movies on the big screen, books, magazines, local news coverage, and the internet… these are all sources the media uses to display their interpretation of the BDSM subculture. Not only do they display the subculture, but they also portray the subculture in the most dramatic light possible through the routinization of caricature. This is the image of BDSM participants sold to the public at large, thus, the media portrayal becomes a sort of representation of “what BDSM is.” It is on this representation that many people base their opinions and stereotypes about BDSM and those who participate in it.

Value Diminishment

By far, the most prevalent manner in which BDSM participants felt stigmatized was through having their value diminished. More than half of my respondents expressed that once they revealed their BDSM involvement, they were no longer taken seriously. Their value as patients in health care settings was diminished as their concerns were
disregarded. Their value as students was diminished if they wanted to reflect on their BDSM experiences in application to their studies. They felt that they weren’t taken seriously in a variety of purposeful encounters such as sports and religion, as well as in personal relationships.

This happened primarily in health care settings by primary care physicians, emergency room doctors, OB/GYNs, nurse practitioners, dentists, chiropractors, and pharmacists. Findings revealed the theme over and over again about how participants tried to open a dialogue with health care professionals, only to have the subject changed, be stonewalled or laughed at.

A thirty-eight year old, male, bottom Timon went to his family doctor to complain of joint pain in his knee.

Early onset rheumatoid arthritis runs in my family, so I wanted to talk to my doctor about this knee pain. But Rhea [his Topping partner] has been doing deeper needle play on my thighs, so there was the chance the joint pain was maybe an infection or nerve damage… That’s what I was going to the doctor to find out, if it was the RA or the needle play or something else. When I started trying to explain the needle play on my thighs he chuckled and started writing in my chart… He was laughing at me when I was really concerned.

A nineteen year old, female, switch Melissa conveyed a similar upsetting event with her physical therapist.

I do sports medicine therapy. I don’t even tell my PT about lifestyle injuries anymore. I tried once to tell her I thought I pulled a muscle flogging someone. She started laughing hysterically and asked me if I could keep her husband in line. Totally unprofessional and not funny when your patient is in pain… I’ve learned to change the story. Like say I pulled a muscle dancing instead of flogging. I learned to lie by having her laugh at me.

An assortment of participants retold various accounts of health care professionals engaging in the act of diminishing value of participants lived experiences. Auntie-M
(forty-one, female, dominant), during a gynecological exam, continuously tried to bring up her concern about a blood clot, only to be interrupted by the OBGYN’s sterile rehearsed questions of “Does it hurt when I press here?” Bricea’s (twenty-six, female, slave) dentist shoved cotton in her mouth when she tried to explain that her tooth had been broken during a play rape. Barney (fifty-six, male, slave) skipped his colonoscopy because he “got tired of the doc never listening. Every time I brought up BDSM, he started talking about sports, so I quit going [to the doctor] altogether.”

Participants also seemed to feel “stuck” with the health care providers they had. When asked why they didn’t change to a health care provider more sensitive to their BDSM involvement, the typical answer was that there wasn’t one available. Sheila, a thirty-two year old switch, summed it up by saying:

I just really can’t afford the whole trade off. I have a decent doctor, within twenty miles of my home. He accepts my insurance, and he already knows my family history. That’s a heck of a lot more than most Americans have. I’d be a fool to give him up for some unknown amateur two states away just because they happen to be kink-friendly.

From these comments it is evident that Sheila didn’t feel she had the option of seeing both health care providers.

Health care professionals were not the only group participants felt engaged in diminishing value. Participants also felt educators frequently engaged in similar behaviors. Mistress Devika (twenty-three, female, dominatrix) recalls being told to stay “focused” and “on topic” when she tried to incorporate her BDSM experiences into her gender studies class. Kitteck (twenty-one, female, submissive) was encouraged by her academic advisor when she said she wanted to specialize in human sexuality, but laughed
at when she said she wanted to survey people at her S&M club. “She told me I should concentrate on something *real*. I still don’t know what the hell that means. She was laughing too hard to explain herself.”

Little Ralphie described his experience of having his value as a student diminished.

I was working on my MA in Psychology. I was the head of the class for almost a year. I got on well with the professors, went to all the social networking functions, rubbed elbows with the ones who mattered, made a good name for myself. On pre-thesis presentation day I did my presentation on the challenges of counseling kinky clients. My implications sections addressed how I planned to specialize in kink friendly counseling services and I thought I would do well because I had come to terms with my own kinky identity. I expected a few snickers from the profs in the audience, but I never dreamed it would close my avenues. Not once after that did I receive invitations to the cocktail parties. No more drinks after late classes. No more advanced notice of scholarships. No more opportunities. No offers of recommendations. I really shot myself in the foot that day.

This was a prevalent theme with participants enrolled in community colleges, universities, and graduate studies, as well as less formal but still purposeful learning environments, such as by coaches and spiritual educators. Smarty (twenty-two, male, fetishist) was interrupted and talked over so much by his coach when he tried to discuss cross dressing and athletic cups that he quit his local softball team. Pretty polly and her Master Jay quit labor breathing classes because the childbirth educator refused to acknowledge their presence once she learned of their relationship. “When we explained that Jay was going to make all major decisions during the labor, she was really rude.” said Polly, then seven months pregnant with their second child.

She [the instructor] said that ‘gender role bullshit’ only led to abuse and domestic violence. We tried to explain our relationship to her, but she just pretended to hear us and smiled real smug like... After that she never called on us in class or even
acted like we were there, to tell us if we were doing it right or not. So we quit going.

Mockery and Shunning

BDSM participants often spoke about mockery and shunning as forms of stigma they experienced. These two forms of stigma seemed to have similar affect of guilt and shame. The two often went hand-in-hand, as one would experience a certain amount of mockery or ridicule, followed by shunning. Bucky, a fifty-six year old, male submissive, explained how his family treated him shortly after they met his fiancé and dominant partner Mercedes.

My brother called me a pussy, a wuss, a sissy-boy, a nancy… you name it. Every time I saw him for the next few months all I heard was name-calling, attacks on my manhood, how I was a wimp… Then he would top it off with how I ‘probably liked being called those names anyway’ so it was no big deal to insult me… After a few months, he quit calling. He quit coming to cook-outs. He stayed in touch with the rest of the family, but he hasn’t really said much to me for almost two years now.

The mockery experienced by participants came in three primary forms. They were teased because of an attribute they had, one they lacked, or one they were presumed to have based on one they already had, each of which is described in the following.

BDSM practitioners often experienced ridicule and insult based on characteristics or interests they also attributed to themselves. They were regularly called names like “kinky” or “perverted.” The participants themselves agreed that they were kinky or perverted, but the context of who was doing the name-calling, when and why, made the title relevant as stigma. Looking at Bucky’s statements above, he felt insulted and experienced the shame of having his masculinity attacked by his brother when he was
called a sissy-boy. However, Bucky goes on to say “…when Mercedes calls me her sissy-boy, it’s special, like a pet name. When my brother says it, it’s just slur and insult.”

Here we can see that the social construction of the situation determines the emotional outcome of whether or not the target interprets the situation as one that is stigmatizing. Bucky was called the exact same name by both his dominatrix and his brother. They may have even both used the same tone of voice, or likely, his dominatrix used an even more harsh tone of voice whereas his brother may have done the name calling in a more jovial manner. However, Bucky’s experience of shame and guilt came to pass with his brother because whereas his dominatrix approves of and accepts his submission, his brother was showing disapproval and censure.

BDSM participants were assumed to be lacking in some attribute based on their interest in BDSM. They were disparaged based on the assumption that they could not “live up to” a particular set of morals as a kinky person. They most commonly encountered this assumption if their BDSM interest was made known in their religious circle or at their job. It was also commonly encountered in relation to their status as a parent, spouse, or friend.

In religious circles, when one’s interest in BDSM came up, participants frequently received the most drastic of all condemnation. They were told that due to their interest, they had sacrificed their security in a peaceful afterlife. Many were told they were sinful and needed to confess, renounce the interest, or request salvation. Some were told they were doomed to burn eternally in hell. Some were told they would not reincarnate to a prominent level. Some were told they could be saved or healed of their “affliction.”
Regardless of the particulars, the message participants received was that they could not fully be religious or spiritual people *because* they were kinky people.

The same concept came into play occupationally. If BDSM practitioners were “found out” at work, their position was usually effected. A forty-four year old postman, who also happened to be a nylon stocking fetishist, told how he was verbally reprimanded at his job. “My boss said if he had known I was depraved he wouldn’t have hired me. He said it would look bad if people found out I was going door-to-door, around to people’s homes, like I was stalking women.” It was assumed that because he was a fetishist, he lacked moral restraint and was not capable of performing his tasks as a mail carrier.

Dags, a twenty-six year old female slave, worked as an intake worker at a battered women’s shelter. When one of her co-workers found out about her involvement in a master/slave relationship, she was reported to her boss. “I was told to keep my relationship a secret from the clients and not to mention anything about my personal life at work because we could lose funding if anyone found out I wasn’t able to sympathize with the women.” It was assumed that since Dags voluntarily engaged in an unbalanced power exchange relationship at home that she would be unable to express sympathy toward abuse victims.

One of the most devastating examples of disparagement based on the assumption that they lack ability as a kinky person, was the instance of parents assumed unable to properly rear children. Thirty-four year old submissive female Romper, spent hours in an
interview discussing her feelings of shame and guilt over having her children taken by protective services:

I was going through a lot and at first they were helping me. I had to move and they came to help us pack… She [a social worker] saw a box in my room full of whips and floggers and handcuffs. Her tone changed. She called her supervisor or something. It happened so fast… Next thing I know, I’m in court fighting to get my kids back. They thought since I was into S&M, I was a bad mom. Maybe it’s true.

The assumption here was that because Romper possessed the attribute of enjoying consensual adult sadomasochism in her bedroom, that she lacked the ability to perform her duties and responsibilities as a parent. The same kind of compartmentalizing happens when a spouse finds out about the other’s interest in S&M and assumes an inability to be loyal or faithful.

BDSM participants were presumed to have a separate and negative attribute, based on their interest in BDSM. This presumption rears its head often in the media as well as real life. Because their interest in relationships and sexuality with their partner(s) deviates from the cultural norm, it is assumed that they also deviate from the norm when it comes to other topics. It is implied that they are also child molesters, domestic abusers, brainwashed cult members, mentally ill, sex workers, or numerous other negatively equated subgroups.

The most common scenario is when a BDSM participant’s interests become known and it is assumed that they are also a child molester. Many BDSM interviewees stated that once their private interests were revealed, they were no longer permitted to babysit. Sometimes their families would no longer allow them to be alone in the same room as kids. They were asked to no longer participate in playgroups for kids or to resign
their volunteer positions. Some overheard their friends or colleagues saying they should be “kept away from the kids” or to not let them near the children.

The most common subset to have the “domestic abuser” label attached was dominant men. As one participant explained it:

It’s a woman’s world now. I go against what’s popular and trendy by maintaining my status as head of the household, provider, and protector of my women. I make the rules and I mete out the punishments when those rules are broken… In 1962, that made me a good father and a good husband. In 2009, that makes me abusive, chauvinistic and sexist.
(Mr. Mulberry, fifty-eight, male dominant.)

What Mr. Mulberry points out is the change in social perception and how domestic violence and sexism are defined socially. Albane, a dominant male charged with domestic violence despite his wife’s denial of any non-consent, formed an internet group to support BDSM practitioners falsely accused of domestic violence. He asserts that all of his joiners were dominants except two switches and that over ninety percent of those who joined were male dominants. “It makes sense in today’s political climate. The law is quick to crack down on men who hit women and laughs at women who hit men… The real crime is the police presence in the home.”

The two most common subsets to have the “mentally ill” label attached were submissive women and cross-dressing men. Cross-dressing men were quickly equated with psychosis and criminal activity. Mae, a forty-one year old, male “sissy” (man who enjoys dressing in frilly, lacey feminine styles) commented that when his internet friends discovered his cross-dressing interests, they nicknamed him “Billy,” to equate him with the cross-dressing serial killer character Buffalo Bill in the film Silence of the Lambs.
Name calling is a form of stigma with a long history. It is a powerful and effective manner of quickly shaming someone (Smythe and Seidman 1957).

Little Petie, a twenty-two year old male cross-dresser, did not face name-calling, but still felt stigmatized as “mentally ill” when he shared his cross-dressing interests with his Aunt when he was seventeen:

She immediately told my Mother and they put me in counseling at the local counseling center. I was stuck seeing a therapist every week until I turned nineteen and moved away to college… I assumed that I must have been crazy. Only crazy people see therapists. Right?… I’m still ashamed of it. I only do it alone or in front of my Mistress. Not even at parties.

Submissive women were accused of having a different kind of mental illness. The specific mental illness they were assumed to have was co-dependent personality disorder, or more loosely, they were simply referred to as “codependent.” Thirty-nine year old Tawny continuously has a difficult time reconciling her need to serve her master and husband Sir Gregory, and her desire to be socially accepted.

It’s a constant struggle every day. Out in the world, I’m expected to be aggressive and a ‘go-getter.’ At home, I’m supposed to be passive and acquiescent… Our entire household is run on the basic premise of male superiority. To stay true to that philosophy, I can’t have jobs that put me in charge of men… I’m considered a nutcase by some people.”

Twenty-four year old Fawn had become estranged from her family due to her cohesion with her master.

They said I was codependent and needed psychiatric intervention… I won’t go out of the house unless I am with Master or if Master sends me out for something. If he told me to go work a forty hour job, I would. I get his permission on what to eat, what to wear, everything. I am subservient to him in all things and he makes the decisions… They [her family] couldn’t accept that… They said something was wrong with me, that I was codependent and he was taking advantage of it. They said he wasn’t welcome at their houses. I don’t go places where my Master is rejected.
Beyond being accused of being abusive, criminalistic or mentally ill, BDSM practitioners are also sometimes accused of being brainwashed or cult members. The most common subsets to endure this accusation were those who openly engaged in polyamorous relationships and those who had broken off the dependence on vanilla society. Even within the BDSM community, participants “warn” one another about cult activity. The Erotic Power Exchange Information Center (1996) posted on their website that “Due to the mindset of erotic power exchange people, who may be very receptive to rituals and symbols, there is a risk such people may be easy targets for cults and (semi)religious sects. This is especially true for women with submissive emotions, seeking protection and understanding in a ritual-based environment.” Several websites are dedicated to warning BDSM participants of how to spot cult behavior and the developing attraction to cults.

This may be because the formation of what BDSM practitioners refer to as “Houses.” Houses are roughly modeled after aristocracies and royal monarchies of Great Britain. They generally have a precise hierarchy, a Manifesto (or codified rules and philosophy), a single spiritual belief system, distinct daily rituals and duties, a vast and extensive library collection, curriculums, and possibly a coat of arms. Most of the people in the household consider themselves family, and many, if not all of them, may be involved in romantic relationships with one another. Houses vary in dwelling structure from farms to make-shift castles. Some members of a House may live separately, but still retain membership in the “House.”
In my research, I spent a week at the House of Kaam. The Kaamites consist of nine people who are involved in webbed polyamorous relationships. They refer to their House as a commune, but as one told me “We don’t care if someone calls us a cult instead of a commune. In fact, go ahead. Cults are not a bad thing always. Now if the rest of the world would catch on.” The Kaamites have cut themselves off as much as possible from mainstream society. They are self sustaining for most necessities. Most of them agree that long before they cut themselves off from their friends and family, the people in their lives began cutting them off. Ghulam, a twenty-six year old female slave told the story of how after moving onto the compound at age twenty-three, she went to visit her family. They told her she either needed to go through deprogramming and move in with them or they were taking control of her trust fund. “I told them to have the trust fund. They thought I was in a cult that would take all my money. I gave them [her parents] the money instead… There. Now you can see I’m not being brainwashed by a cult for money.”

The Kaamites are only one of several self-sustaining BDSM “Houses” that have converted to intentional communities. Some are as small as three or four people and still rely heavily on the mainstream society. Others are as large as fifty to 100 people and are as cut off as possible from vanilla society. These Houses and intentional communities face persecution not only from the vanilla friends and family, but from the BDSM community at large. Interaction with the main subculture is somewhat limited and mainly in the form of internet communication. More mainstream BDSM participants will caution
against getting involved with Houses and communes, often calling them “wackos,” “psycho cults” or “bat shit crazies.”

In addition to mockery, BDSM participants often find themselves shunned. This shunning appeared to happen on two different levels. Participants were not solely shunned due to their explicit involvement in sexual deviance and voluntarily unbalanced power exchange. They were also shunned for their eccentricity, idiosyncrasies and nonconformity to mainstream society. Many were shunned from other social circles because they were socially awkward, obese, or “nerdish.” Many have a style of dress that is out-dated, unorthodox and unpopular. Their interests depart from common social circles. They may be divergent thinkers, overly shy, overly pretentious, or may even come across as mentally ill. For some, this was one of the main reasons they sought out and became members of the BDSM subculture. It was a place in which they felt acceptance. Such social awkwardness was a theme which Newmahr (2008, 2010) writes extensively about in her exploration of BDSM participant’s identity formation.

Discrimination and Prejudice

Discrimination, the acting out of prejudice attitude, is a typical reaction to minority groups (Devine 1989). BDSM participants have had their fair share of discrimination. The four main ways in which they seem to experience discrimination is 1) legal discrimination, 2) denial of services, 3) stereotyping, and 4) scapegoating.
Legal Discrimination

Because BDSM encompasses the globe, legal statutes prohibiting discrimination vary from state, providence, and country. Some cases are starting to arise, such as Barker v. Hayes in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, to determine whether or not BDSM should even be considered a sexual orientation that should be covered under discrimination laws. Cases such as these have gone before a range of courts in various nations.

BDSM practitioners themselves cannot agree on whether or not their participation in BDSM should be considered a sexual orientation. As one participant mentioned during a focus group: “If you allow BDSM as a sexual orientation, what’s next? Is bestiality a protected class? Are pedophiles protected?” Other participants however see it differently. “People should not be discriminated against based on their sexuality, even if that sexuality is unpopular. BDSM is among consenting adults and is not a crime.”

Despite the legal lag in keeping up with social notions and interests, BDSM participants can and do experience legal discrimination based on their sexuality and sexual identity (Wright 2006; Newmahr 2010). Participants have actually been arrested for their consensual participation in BDSM activities. Albane, a twenty-seven year old dominant male, had his home raided during a BDSM party and was arrested for assault and domestic violence, despite his wife’s insistence that she was a consensual partner. Adult novelty shop owners have found their businesses shut down after adding BDSM inventory. Participants are arrested for obscenity laws, health code violations, brought up
on pornography charges, have their liquor licensing yanked, or are booked for soliciting, when their BDSM interests are made known.

Others face legal discrimination in the courtroom when their BDSM interests are used to defame their character in totally unrelated cases. Spouses in divorce cases have been disadvantaged when their soon-to-be-ex brings forth evidence of BDSM interest or activity. Parents have lost custody rights when their BDSM inclinations are revealed in court.

Like other forms of discrimination, the party being discriminated against cannot necessarily prove there was legal discrimination. Numerous BDSM participants spoke to me about being denied jobs, promotions, or leadership positions in college or community settings, after someone showed disapproval of their sexual proclivities. Stella, a twenty-six year old graduate student and dominatrix put it like this: “Just like no one is going to come right out and say ‘You didn’t get promoted because you’re black,’ they’re also not going to come right out and say ‘You didn’t get promoted because you’re a sadomasochist.’ Reality doesn’t work that way.”

Ironically, it’s because of this discreet form of discrimination that the parties being discriminated against cannot defend themselves. If they bring up the possibility that they were discriminated against based on their sexuality, they are the ones “outing” themselves. Furthermore, the person performing the discriminatory act can claim they were completely unaware of the sexual proclivity and the rejection was based on lack of merit.
Denial of services

Most discrimination against BDSM practitioners never comes before a court. In fact, most never even comes in front of a prosecutor. The majority of discrimination that takes place against BDSM practitioners is social discrimination that happens on a social stage rather than a legal setting. The most common type of discrimination the BDSM community experienced came in the form of denial of services, goods and accommodations. This was similar to the denial of services the handicapped and disabled experience (e.g. Bordieri and Drehmer 1986; Webber and Orcutt 1984).

During my field work, I attended a statewide BDSM convention that was being held in a hotel. There was a group protesting the convention who had taken the steps to call in law enforcement, the health department, and several city councilmen. I spoke to and interviewed several of the people attending the event. Count Darius, a thirty-four year old switch male, commented that this type of protest was not uncommon.

It happens all the time in lots of states. Usually the hotel caves to the pressure and shuts down the event. Sometimes they [the hotel] gives a gift certificate for a free night to everyone who was registered. Sometimes they go ahead and have the event but then never host to us again… What usually happens is they just cancel the event. We’re used to it, but it’s unfair every single time.

Denial of hotel accommodations was a reoccurring theme voiced by participants across eleven states. This shows how denial of services is a type of institutional discrimination woven into the fabric of society that affects an entire subculture.

On a more individualized level, another common type of service denied to BDSM participants was clergy’s denial to perform marriages. This most frequently occurred in cases where the engaged couple presented themselves as master/mistress and slave, or in
instances where the couple made known their desire for one party to surrender all
decision making authority to the other. Ravenclaw, a twenty-seven year old male, and his
female slave Princesa, twenty-two, recall their experience with two churches.

I never even dreamed there would be an issue. I kind of thought, well…
Christians are into old fashioned households, so it would be an O.K. thing to bring
up… After I said I would be making all of the decisions about Princesa’s school
and work, the preacher said we’d have to go to equality training classes before
he’d marry us. (Ravenclaw)

When we went to the second church, the preacher there just flat out said no… He
said we were young and didn’t understand marital vows… He said Domestic
Discipline was just a sinner’s way of feeling like their transgressions aren’t
sinful… We finally said ‘forget it’ and went to the justice at the courthouse to get
married. (Princesa)

Other denial of services included the lapse in healthcare, in which BDSM
participants were given only basic healthcare but denied any services above and beyond
the basics. This happened even when they offered to pay in full. For instance, Majestik, a
forty-three year old transgendered top found a gynecologist who was willing to perform
an elective hysterectomy until finding out Majestik wanted the hysterectomy to feel more
androgynous.

Denial of services came in all shapes and forms. Some participants spoke about
being denied access on domestic flights because their BDSM toys were considered
weapons. Others spoke about being denied access to research opportunities because of
the sexual content. Participants mentioned everything from denial of using the restroom
that best represented their gender to denial of childcare, and from being denied visitations
in hospitals and prisons to denial of mental health services.
Stereotyping

Stereotyping as a type of discrimination and prejudice is prevalent, and almost necessary for stigma to exist (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa and Major 1998). BDSM participants endure stereotyping even if they themselves have not been outed or admitted to their own personal involvement in BDSM. If they are in the company of others who are speaking about BDSM in a prejudicial and negative manner, they may feel the stigmatizing effects even though the comments weren’t aimed directly at them.

Amnesty, a 38 year old female Switch said:

Anytime the topic of S&M comes up, I cringe a little on the inside. I think to myself ‘Oh God, here we go.’ and I prepare for the litany of horse crap that’s about to flow from the mouths of everyone around me… It’s difficult to bite my tongue and not stand up for myself and my friends.

When I asked in interviews and focus groups, “What types of stereotypes do you hear about BDSM participants?” answers ranged in harshness. Participants commented that “Kinky people are considered a little ‘out there’ or ‘peculiar.’” One man commented “They think we’re dangerous. They think we’re criminals. They think we’re perverts.” Followed by another man who added “Don’t forget molesters, psychotic chicken-fuckers, and minions of Satan.”

Some participants disagreed with such severity. As a forty year old fetishist put it:

I don’t think the general public really cares as long as we keep to ourselves. Lots of people try a bit of ‘spank and tickle’ in the bedroom from time-to-time and they aren’t going to get on others for the same. We take it a bit farther, so the opinion goes a bit farther. We’re considered perverts. A bit immoral, but really no danger.
The media inclusion of BDSM discussed earlier has contributed to another type of prejudicial attitude toward BDSM participants; that of positive prejudice. Madame Meesha is a thirty-nine year old professional dominatrix whose finances have been directly affected by positive prejudice.

Television makes us out to be unrealistic, like comic book characters. Look at the pro dommes [professional dominatrices] on TV. They are all twenty-five years old, 125 pounds, buxom, six foot tall, skinny, long legs, long black hair, clad in a full-body leather cat suit and eight inch stiletto boots, calling out obscenities and cracking a whip… Men believe it. That’s what they have in their head when they contact me. At first it works to my benefit because that stereotype brings in business… But then they show up and see the real me. I’m a gorgeous assertive woman, but I’m 5’4,” 185 pounds, and usually clad in something a bit more exotic and modest like a kimono or a velvet queen’s robe… So the stereotype brings a lot of “first timers” business my way, but on the other hand, if a man believes the media stereotype, he generally doesn’t come back as a repeat client.

The prevalence of stereotypes about BDSM is so common recently, that in 2008, certain members of the subculture took it upon themselves to develop a short student film entitled *BDSM: It’s Not What You Think!* which, in their own words “confronts stigma and stereotype.” Screenings span from its home in San Francisco, to Florida, New York, and across seas to Germany, Greece, and France. The film addresses misconceptions about BDSM and confronts prejudice. It has not however been widely accepted by the BDSM subculture. One participant called it “Just another attempt at someone exploiting uncommon sexuality as a way to make money.” Others apathetically responded “What film?”

Stereotypes surrounding BDSM range in diversity as well as severity. From mental illness, criminal behavior, and child molestation to super models and omnipotent shrews with bullwhips, the stereotypes abound. Participants are placed in inflexible
categories and viewed as BDSMers who participate in society, rather than society members who participate in BDSM.

Scapegoating

The least common, yet still significant, type of discrimination and prejudice that arose in field research was that of scapegoating. At first this was a difficult theme to pinpoint, and probably would have gone uncategorized and overlooked if it had not been for a participant actually naming the behavior in an interview. Heinz, a forty-eight year old, male, rope and bondage enthusiast, used the term in his description of unfair treatment.

I’m out about my lifestyle. I always have been, and I’m not ashamed of it. But for some reason, people like to use my interest in bondage to explain everything else that goes wrong in my life… I got a divorce, well it must have been because I wanted to tie up my wife. My account is overdrawn at the bank, well, it must be because I spent money I didn’t have on expensive rope and sex toys… Like my interest in bondage is a scapegoat for everything that goes wrong in my life.

After speaking in depth with Heinz, I began to notice the same sort of blame shifting stories from others as well. Miranda, a thirty-one year old, female graduate student got to the point where she felt uncomfortable sharing even the smallest conflict of her home life with her colleagues because once they found out she was polyamorous, they would respond that she “created her own drama.” She shared:

It’s a shame. They could still talk about their little disputes with their lovers or roommates, but if I brought up something even as simple as a quarrel about room temperatures in my home, they would say stuff like ‘well, you brought it on yourself with three people sharing a bed.’ Like, somehow even normal household conflicts were because I have both a boyfriend and a girlfriend.
Several BDSM practitioners who were students often had their academic setbacks blamed on their sexuality. If they turned in a paper late, they were teased and accused of being “tied up” all weekend and unable to complete the assignment. If they brought up any sort of sexual topic in class, even in classes such as gender studies or human sexuality, they received comments such as “You would bring that up.” or were accused of having a one-track mind.

If BDSM parents lost custody of their children, they were often told they did not deserve the kids anyway or they had it coming because of “that perverted stuff.” If a BDSM participant’s house was a mess, their guests might make comments about how they would have time to clean the kitchen if they weren’t so busy in the bedroom. If they were absent from an event, rumors might circulate that they were embarrassed to show up because of the bruises from the last party. Even normative daily struggles that the majority of people confront on a regular basis were reduced to the level of sexuality and blamed on the participants being involved in BDSM.

For this type of scapegoating to take place though, the participant must be “out” about their BDSM interests and proclivities. Some in the BDSM community commented that although the scapegoating was still unfair and prejudicial, it was the participant’s own fault for being “out.” One master commented, “You have to use discretion. If you’re going to blab to the world about what you do in private, the world is going to find a way to blame your problems on your lifestyle.”

Other participants disagreed. One countered “It shows how shallow minded vanillas are. We’d never blame someone’s daily troubles on the fact they were a
particular race or religion. It’s nothing less than primitive bigotry to blame someone’s troubles on their sexual and relationship preferences.”

Those involved in BDSM and the BDSM subculture showed and recalled how they experienced stigma in four predominant manners; value diminishment, negative public portrayal, mockery and/or shunning, and discrimination/prejudice. These were not the only manners in which they experienced stigma, but rather the most prevalent based on my research with them. They also mentioned stigma experienced at various levels within their families, when taking on new lovers and partners, when meeting new dates and forming new friendships, and with various others. They spoke of the stigma in institutions and on the internet.

They also shared the emotions they experienced due to the stigma to which they were subjected. The primary emotions they shared were those of guilt and shame. Many of them were living everyday wondering if they were going to hell, if they had caused pain in a loved one’s life, if they had somehow betrayed their spouses, parents, or children, or if they were being dishonest. They shared that the stigma left them feeling abandoned, alone, excluded, and unwanted. They were often ostracized and left out. They shared that the stigma left them feeling angry and annoyed, resentful, uncertain, confused, and frustrated or helpless. In the end though, it was the stigma aimed at them by others, more than their involvement itself, which brought on the plethora of negative and unwanted emotions. Most participants dealt with these feelings by confronting the stigma itself. We now turn our attention to how BDSM participants manage the stigma to which they are subjected.
CHAPTER FIVE: STIGMA MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF BDSM PARTICIPANTS

BDSM participants used a myriad of stigma management strategies. Participants fell into both of Goffman’s (1963) categories of discredited or “out of the dungeon,” and discreditable or what the community members themselves referred to as “discreet” or “not out.” Therefore, strategies included both information control and tension control. They also used both of Goffman’s in-group strategies with other BDSM practitioners and out-group strategies with “vanillas.” The most recurring stigma management strategies used by BDSM participants were concealment, disclosure and collective action, reappropriation of the negative, and disengagement.

Concealment

Concealment is a technique used to control information about social identity, by making stigma less known or less visible. Goffman writes that concealment is a strategy in which the stigmatized “obliterates signs that have come to be stigma symbols” (Goffman 1963:92). He provides examples of concealment, such as drug users injecting themselves in less visible areas of the body, the avoidance or rejection of the use of medical equipment by the handicapped and name-changing.

BDSM participants used various methods of concealment. They were especially apt to use the name-changing technique. Most community members implemented the use of pseudonyms or “scene names.” They were also likely to cover visible signs that could signify their involvement in BDSM activities. For instance, Julietta, a twenty-two year
old who engages in erotic-asphyxiation, uses hooded sweatshirts, turtlenecks and decorative scarves to conceal the stigma symbol of neck bruises.

Another method of concealment used by BDSM participants was to come across as ignorant when the topic of sadomasochism or kinky sex came up in conversation with vanillas. For example:

A lot of times TV shows get it all wrong. I’ll be watching a crime show with my roommate and they’ll say that all people who are into S&M enjoy getting spanked. That’s not true. I know it’s not true, but I can’t say anything. If I said ‘Not all of them,’ or something, my roommate would wonder how I know… Then, he’d tease me.
(Jack Russell, twenty-nine, male, switch)

Handy Mandy, a 20 year old submissive rubber fetishist used the same tactic at school.

It’s frustrating having to play dumb. I’m in this psych class with all these women who are such man haters. Every time BDSM comes up, it turns into a bitch-fest about patriarchy. I can’t stand up for kinksters. I can’t stand up for myself or stand up for my Dom. I just have to act ignorant…If they found out I take part in it they’ll start hating on me too.

Some participants used Goffman’s in-group strategy of mutual aid or cooperation to assist in one another’s public concealment. Chance encounters between dungeon party guests may go unacknowledged in a grocery store. Miss Tia, a professional dominatrix said “I don’t acknowledge a client if I see him in the store. I pretend he’s just like every other person in the produce aisle. I have no idea if he might be there with his wife.”

For others, mutual discretion was determined by risk. Sparky, a thirty-three year old kinkster feels no need to use discretion with certain other BDSM community members. “I’ve known Romper for over ten years. I know her well enough if I see her in
the library with a stranger I can still say hi to her. If it’s someone who doesn’t approve of how I met her, it’s probably not going to come up in casual conversation anyway.” In this case there is almost an unspoken agreement between the two who share the stigma, that the one most at-risk will control the concealment process.

Much like Thorne and Anderson’s bankruptcy debtors (2006), BDSM participants made a particular effort to minimize disclosure to people who they felt presented risk, like parents, employers and co-workers. In addition they also sometimes concealed from teachers, healthcare professionals, children, spouses, and social peers. This is also similar to Mattley’s (1997) discovery of stigma found among phone sex workers.

Devout Dom, a thirty-eight year old whip Master conveyed this sentiment in his statement: “Really, the only people who know I play are the people I play with. I’m not ashamed of it but other people would make a big deal. It’s just not anyone’s business. It’s private,” but later added “I guess I am a little bit ashamed.”

Not all participants hid their BDSM participation from everyone though. In alignment with other studies on deviant groups (Bell and Weinberg 1978; Veevers 1980) my research also revealed that participants used selective concealment. Herman defines selective concealment as “the selective withholding or disclosure of information about the self perceived as discreditable in cases where secrecy is the major stratagem for handling information about an attribute” (1993:307). In other words, the stigmatized actively choose what to disclose, to whom, when, and under what circumstances. Commonly, this is done in an open and honest fashion.
Pawnographic, a twenty-nine year old masochist said: “I’m out to my sister. She’s vanilla, but we’re real close. We tell each other everything. My parents have no clue though… My best friend from class, she probably knows. My friends from work don’t know at all… And only four out of nine boyfriends knew.”

One method of selective concealment that seems somewhat unique to the BDSM community was the use of protocol. Some participants involved in full-time power exchange relationships had certain structures in place to maintain their distinct roles as master/mistress and slave (Dancer 2006). One such structure is the use of protocol. In the BDSM community, protocol refers to the behavioral enactment of power exchange and hierarchy, when in the company of others who share the same rules.

In an attempt to explain, Miriam, a forty-three year old mistress described the protocol with her slave: “He has certain rules. In my home he is not permitted to sit on the furniture. He sits on the floor at my feet. He must ask permission for all things. He asks to watch TV, to eat, to go to the bathroom. Everything must be phrased ‘Mistress, may I?’ That’s our level of protocol at home.”

Many other BDSM participants had similar forms of protocol. Some considered themselves 24/7 owner and slave, whereas others may have only implemented protocol during time limited to role play sessions. Some of the protocol was more universal, such as the use of honorifics (such as ‘Ma’am’ or “Sir”). Others had protocol that reflected the uniqueness of their relationship, such as a particular manner of physically handling an item of clothing.
Where selective concealment comes into play is when this protocol changes based on the environment. Due to the company, the protocol is only altered, not dismissed entirely. Those “in the know” are well aware that the protocol is still being enacted, but it is not apparent to outsiders. To demonstrate, Miriam continues:

Our protocol changes depending on whose company we keep. At home he calls me ‘mistress.’ At family’s house he calls me ‘ma’am.’ Around co-workers he calls me Miriam. Three different levels of protocol high, medium, and low… Of course he wouldn’t ask me to use the bathroom in front of his family. Instead, he says something like ‘Can I get anyone a drink while I’m up?’ and I will nod to give him permission.

This form of masked communication is indistinguishable from Goffman’s “team collusion” (176:1959). It can also be seen as a form of selective concealment in four ways: the level of protocol depends on the circumstances; the stigmatized person actively chooses whether the protocol will withhold or disclose their involvement; the protocol may be used to test reaction and gauge acceptance; and finally, the use of protocol allows disclosure to potential BDSM-aware individuals in the setting, without disclosure to vanillas.

Disclosure and Collective Action

This leads to the second stigma management technique BDSM participants used: total disclosure or “being out.” The concept of “coming out” is long studied and generally applied to homosexuals or bisexuals choosing to not conceal their sexual orientation. Similarly, BDSM participants who are “out” have chosen not to conceal their sexual proclivity or relationship power imbalance. I will discuss two methods by which BDSM practitioners engage in total disclosure: individually and collectively.
Individually, many participants chose to not conceal their BDSM involvement. Pink Panthress, a fifty-three year old switch, gives her reason why:

Hiding this aspect of my life, this aspect of myself, just would not be prudent. My medical doctors and nurses need to know why my body is in the condition it’s in. My monthly therapist needs to know why I made certain choices in and about my relationships... I want my relationships based on truth in the first place.

This statement provides a few examples of people whom BDSMers come out to (doctors, therapists, new relationships.) Others included spouses, parents, children, and friends. Dragon’s Phyre, a thirty-eight year old dominant transgender said “I’m out to all my social circles and my neighbors. I want friendships that are real and that means they really know me.”

Others disagreed somewhat about what disclosure meant. Ramps, a forty-one year old submissive male felt that total disclosure didn’t need to include everyone. “I don’t see a reason to go knock on my neighbor’s door and tell them I’m a masochist. I’m not hiding it from anyone. It’s a need-to-know basis.” Most participants defined being “out” as not hiding or denying their lifestyle but also not flaunting it.

On a collective level, disclosure meant more than honesty in relationships. It became a social movement through a process known as tertiary deviance (Kitsuse 1980). Tertiary deviance happens when a deviant group mobilizes to affirm themselves as deserving of the same rights, privilege and protections as others. BDSM participants have done this in numerous ways.

One such collective action they have taken is the formation of organizations established to protect or promote sexual and relationship freedom. Organizations like the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF) and Woodhull couldn’t operate if it
weren’t for the collective action of the participants that view themselves as underdogs or minorities. This is in direct alignment with Kitsuse’s discovery that deviants attempt to control their own identities.

Collective pride statements are abundant in the BDSM community. NCSF’s website is loaded full of acceptance terms, such as “normal,” “healthy,” and “open-minded” (NCSF 2010). In a pride march, the GLBT participants held a banner that read “Not ashamed of who we love.” A few steps behind them, the BDSM participants held a banner that read “And not ashamed of how we love.” Group pamphlets include in their introductions “A welcoming organization for the enlightened, courageous and adventurous.”

BDSM participants use collective action as stigma management in other ways besides the formation of organizations. They also come together to put on these convention-style events. Such events are similar to professional conferences in that they offer keynote speakers, classes, presentations and workshops. The evenings however are filled with feasting, dungeon parties, role playing, and shared experiences of group sadomasochism. In the case of these group events, the disclosure is on the part of those sponsoring and coordinating the event.

Disclosure can be performed on either an individual basis, as in the case of “coming out,” or as a collective action, as in the case of leather pride marches. Disclosure is also a fluid action. A participant who does not deny BDSM involvement, may feel they have engaged in disclosure just as much as a participant serving on the board of directors of an organization, coordinating an event, or marching in a pride parade.
Reappropriation of Negative Labels

It is defeating to one’s self esteem to embrace negative labeling. This link between labeling and self-esteem is consistent with Cooley’s “looking-glass self” (1902) and Mead’s “reflected appraisals” (1934). To meet the end of still belonging to a stigmatized group without the damaging effects of labeling to self-esteem, deviant groups have developed the technique of reappropriation of negative labeling (Galinskey et al. 2003).

Reappropriation of stigmatizing labels is “the phenomenon whereby an ostracized group revalues an externally imposed negative label or symbol by self-consciously referring to itself in terms of that label or symbol” (Galinskey et al. 2003:231). Galinskey et al. uses the examples of African-Americans referring to themselves and other African-Americans using the word “nigger” and proud gay men and lesbians taking ownership of the word “queer” and the pink triangle.

In the case of BDSM participants, reappropriation took place in the form of the label “pervert.” The subculture at large has taken ownership of the word pervert. Like Master Buck, the man in the introduction, numerous people in the BDSM community refer to themselves and others with this term, with no negative connotation intended. An example stands out from a week-end event I attended. The event itself was referred to in publicity materials as the “Perversion Excursion.” One of the speakers at the event stated that the attendees were one of the “friendliest group of perverts to spend a weekend with.”
At a dungeon party I attended, before opening the play space for the evening, the owner made an announcement that started in this way:

Good evening perverts and pervettes! [audience cheers] Welcome and thank-you all for attending such a wonderful and kink-filled evening... We have lots of new toys for everyone to try and plenty of food to go around. We hope each and every one of you get the chance to explore and play out your unique perversions tonight.

At every turn one can find examples in the BDSM community of ownership of the word “pervert.” They host events such as “Annual Pervfests” and “Perv-Con.” They call their homemade toys “pervertables.” Online chat-rooms target specific audiences such as “pervs and nerds” or “perverty and flirty singles.” Even personal identities are formed in the shape of nicknames such as “pervy little puppy” and “Merv the Perv.”

Galinskey et al. points out that the use of label reappropriation is strictly an in-group strategy. Group members use the term only with others who share the stigma. If a vanilla person refers to a BDSM practitioner as a pervert, it is taken as insult. Likewise, group members do not refer to themselves as perverts in mixed company with vanillas, lest they be misunderstood.

Although reappropriation is similar to deviance avowal discussed by Turner (1972), Thorne and Anderson (2006) and others, it is different in an important way. BDSM participants are not making a separation between a wrongful act and a tainted identity. Through reappropriation they are asserting that the act is not wrongful in the first place. In addition to reappropriating labels, the BDSM subculture reappropriates broader concepts like love, sex, and pain.
Disengagement

The last technique of stigma management that resurfaced over and over again in my data was disengagement, a form of withdrawal, segregation, or avoidance with vanillas. Goffman names those who choose this tactic “disaffiliates.” They have chosen to “openly accept the social place accorded them, and who act irregularly and somewhat rebelliously in connection with our basic institutions” (Goffman, 1963:143).

Such withdrawal runs the spectrum from slight to absolute. Goffman illustrated such a spectrum in his writings. At one end he writes about stigmatized persons who “avoid normals.” At the other end he writes about cultists. I found various examples of disengagement from mainstream society, at all levels of the spectrum.

At the lowest level of disengagement, participants structured BDSM into everyday free time rather than using that time on other hobbies and interests. Shaymus, a twenty-six year old, transgendered switch, provides an example:

I used to spend quite a bit of time checking forums and message boards online. I was a member of a bunch of gender bender sites, some BDSM sites, vegans, animal fights, skaters…I don’t check many anymore. I just pretty much stick with BDSM forums now. Less politics. Less back-stabbing. Less fakery… I really like my BDSM online buds, so I don’t mind sacrificing the other forums to have more time for the BDSM ones.

At a more intermediate (and much more common) level of disengagement, BDSM participants structured their social lives around the BDSM community. This was more than just “filling free time throughout the day with BDSM activities.” Members had traded in their vanilla social lives for one filled with other BDSM participants. This point is illustrated through three of the people I interviewed and observed.
Mojo, a sixty-one year old woman I shadowed and observed for a cumulative total of fifty hours over the course of two months, dedicated almost all of her social time to the BDSM community. She traveled between three cities within twenty minutes of one another in a tri-state hub. This way she could attend the functions of three local groups, yielding her an array of social activities each month including three munches, a weekly brunch, a BDSM bingo night, two play parties, and a monthly BDSM book club meeting. Mojo never had to go more than forty-eight hours without a BDSM community event.

In an in-depth interview with Sub-marine, an eighteen year old submissive, he spoke extensively about the BDSM community life filling his time.

The kink community is the staple of my social diet. I spend Sunday afternoon with my family. I don’t hang out with the guys from the service and I don’t hang out with people at college… My close friends are kinky. We just chill together; grab dinner. We don’t wait on a party. We go shopping, talk on the phone, text each other, lift weights; whatever. Whatever friends do.

In a focus group, I brought up the concept of the BDSM community replacing vanilla social life. Sir Nick, a thirty-four year old Dominant commented.

It’s not that I wasn’t happy with my vanilla friends. I was OK with them. I just felt fake all the time, like I couldn’t really just relax and be myself. I can completely submerge myself in the BDSM scene and feel completely accepted. Now my life is completely surrounded by my BDSM friends and I’m happier.

This concept of disconnecting from mainstream society to “submerge,” as Sir Nick put it, is a phenomenon discussed by Newmahr (2010) in her ethnographical study of an SM community in New England. She points out how BDSM participants frequently, easily and successfully arrange their lives around BDSM community events and activities. This complete immersion Newmahr writes, is in part possible due to
unconventional careers, dwindling relationships with vanillas, status attached to BDSM community involvement, and personal validation.

My findings regarding disengagement from mainstream society are consistent with Newmahr’s. In fact, unconventional means of income was one of the key themes that recurred in my data regarding disengagement. Under an encompassing umbrella I labeled “Re-creation of social institutions,” I discovered how the next level of disengagement is possible.

The less involved (and thereby more disengaged) BDSM participants become with mainstream society, the more they must be able to meet societal functions on their own. Through the re-creation of social institutions, BDSM participants can disengage from a society that stigmatizes and marginalizes them, but still function on their own. At this level of disengagement more than just social life is replaced.

They used their own learned skill sets to re-create social institutions. They created an economic system through barter and trade. They developed an educational system through homeschooling co-ops. They produced their own medical system through home health care, natural remedies, and first aid training. They created religious systems through drum circles, meditation and spiritual seminars. All these self-sustaining small scale social institutions they reproduced shelter them from stigma in mainstream society via avoidance of mainstream society.

The final and most extreme case of disengagement I found among BDSM participants was that of households (referred to as “Houses”) and communes that set themselves apart from not only mainstream society, but often from the BDSM
community as well. In the course of my research I spent several days and nights at a BDSM commune. They had established the self-sustaining social institutions above, in addition to a few more. When I questioned them about stigma, I received varying responses. Vennite, a twenty-one year old, submissive expressed that she had never experienced stigma or shame. “I’m insulated out here. I don’t go into town unless I’m told to…I suppose if I have to choose between feeling ashamed in public or feeling isolated in private, I’ll be isolated.”

Memnite, a forty-nine year old submissive had a different perspective. “I’ve been out in the real world. I got sick of being put in a box. I was called promiscuous because I was liberated enough for group marriage and I was a prude for my traditional gender role. Now people just call me a nut for being in a ‘cult,’ but at least they quit worrying about my relationships.”

Tamire, one of the leaders at the commune, gave the official stance of the group.

Be clear on this. We are not in any way ashamed of who we are, or what we do, or how we do it. The more society tells us that we are wrong, the more we will continue to seclude ourselves. It’s a win-win situation if you think about it. Society won’t have to put up with us and we won’t have to put up with them.

This sort of total disengagement is somewhat rare, but nonetheless speaks to the stigma experienced by some BDSM participants, to the extent that they separate themselves from mainstream society.

I have shown here various ways in which BDSM participants use stigma management strategies to control their personal identities and social interactions. They engage in concealment and selective concealment to have power over information about
themselves. For some, concealment is not a preferred option and they choose disclosure instead, often in the form of collective action. In many ways, participants reappropriated the negative, taking ownership of certain labels. Finally, members removed themselves from vanilla, society at various degrees of disengagement.

As a marginalized group, the BDSM community can be compared with other stigmatized groups. The techniques they use to control stigma are similar to techniques used by bankruptcy debtors (Thorne and Anderson 2006), racial minorities (Galinskey et al. 2003), and other sexual minorities (Kitsuse 1980). Through these tactics, those involved in BDSM can control information about themselves or the tension that arises in their interactions. Just like the homeless street people studied by Anderson et al. (1993) and Herman’s (1993) ex-psychiatric patients, my findings suggest that certain stigmatized groups can and often do take an active role as managers of their social status, rather than a passive role as victims of their stigma.

However, the BDSM community is unique in several ways in their stigma management. One especially significant difference is their playful use of language. Another strategy that sets them apart is their masked communication in the form of differing levels of protocol in mixed company. These distinctive differences from other stigmatized groups set the BDSM community apart as a unique subculture that experience and manage stigma in unique ways in contemporary society.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Over the past few decades, the social and behavioral sciences have studied various aspects of select sadomasochistic subcultures. These studies have primarily focused on exclusive populations such as males, homosexuals, urban dwellers, and those who frequent night clubs (Newmahr 2008, 2010; Weinberg 2006). In addition, much attention has been accorded to demographic overviews and psychological functioning. However, relatively little attention has been accorded to individual and group tactics of BDSM participants to manage the stigma they experience. The current study was designed to do just that.

To render the most well rounded sample possible, I submerged myself in a range of American BDSM subcultures, across eleven states, for eleven months. I made a deliberate point of delving deeply enough into the subculture that I could turn up a wide-ranging purposive sample to capture considerable variation in the study population. Previous research in this area has yielded more limited samples due to restricted location (urban cities), restricted venues (for-profit nightclubs), and targeted populations (gay males). My sample yielded people from those above, as well as: suburban and rural participants, those who do not frequent nightclubs, women, transgenders, bisexuals, asexual and heterosexuals.

Following the example of Staci Newmahr (2008, 2010), I took a participant observer role to more fully know and understand the lived experiences of my participants. For well-rounded and more inclusive data, I also conducted interviews, moderated focus groups and reviewed supplemental data. Using inductive line-by-line coding, I discovered
recurring patterns of social risk and used these categories to develop more in-depth data collection and analysis. Throughout this process I took extra measures to assure confidentiality.

After careful analysis, my findings revealed that those involved in BDSM activities and the BDSM community experience stigma in ways similar to the stigma experienced by other groups considered to be deviant. I discovered four distinct ways in which BDSM participants experience stigma.

First, the media, through movies, television and news coverage, portrays BDSM in a negative light. Second, participants felt that their value was diminished when they were not taken seriously in academic and healthcare settings due to their BDSM involvement. Third they experienced mockery and shunning from non-BDSM family and acquaintances. Finally, they were the targets of discrimination and prejudice.

Findings revealed that BDSM participants dealt with these experiences in various manners. Four prevalent themes emerged regarding how BDSM participants manage their stigma. First, they used strategies of concealment to hide stigma symbols, and selective concealment in making choices about what information they were willing to share, with whom and in what manner. Second, community members opted for disclosure or used collective action. Third, they used the tactic of reappropriating negative labels. Finally, they often engaged in various levels of disengagement from mainstream society.

These four experiences of stigma and four management strategies are neither synchronized nor respective. Participants may experience stigma in one or more of the manners discussed, a different manner altogether, or not at all. There are other
experiences and management strategies used by BDSM participants that are not discussed here. These four experiences and four management strategies are only the most prevalent that surfaced in this particular study.

My findings about how BDSM participants manage the stigma they experience is consistent with previous research findings in the area of stigma management. Like Anderson and colleagues’ (1994) homeless population, BDSM participants also used both in-group strategies to strengthen solidarity and out-group strategies such as covering. They used Kitsuse’s (1980) tertiary deviance techniques through organization, pride statements and collective action. They use strategies similar to Thorne and Anderson’s (2006) bankruptcy debtor’s concealment and Herman’s (1993) selective concealment. BDSM community members’ use of reappropriation of negative labeling is in alignment with Galinsky and his colleagues (2003).

What all of these studies (including this one) share in common is a sample population that experiences stigmatization from the larger society and develops strategies to manage that stigma. They also serve to demonstrate how marginalized groups are not passive recipients of stigma but rather they take an active role as strategists and negotiators of their social identities and their social interactions.

The current study contributes to the larger body of knowledge about stigma experiences and stigma management strategies. The more the social sciences explore marginalized groups from a ground level, the better understanding develops of how these groups interact. It also provides both a broader and a deeper look at a misunderstood, misrepresented, and understudied portion of our society. If Richter’s (2008) moderate
estimate is correct that even two percent of the population engages in BDSM in America alone, this could represent a marginalized group of over six million people. Because this is an understudied population, there is ample room for further academic research of the BDSM subculture.

While the current study has been limited in terms of its methodology and analytic focus, the research reported here suggests several topics for further investigation. As this study has suggested, BDSM culture is rich with creative improvisation in terms of social roles. These social roles are also one of the most vital aspects of the BDSM subculture as one’s placement in the social structure determines behavioral and relational expectations.

Future researchers may also find it sociologically valuable to examine social linguistics among BDSM practitioners. I have touched briefly in this study on various ways in which the BDSM community uses language, including reappropriation, playfulness and honorifics. The use of language as a symbol of communication may be of interest especially to interactionist studies. Other forms of symbolism are also prevalent in BDSM communities, such as symbols of ownership, role, status, and proclivity or lifestyle interest. Symbolic interactionists would find an abundance of rich data by exploring language and symbols among BDSM participants.

In addition, future research would benefit from investigation of deviant identity formation and the social organization of the BDSM community. Following Best and Luckenbill (1981, 1993) and Pfuhl and Henry (1993), those involved in deviant behavior go through a learning process of integration and move to other positions in deviant
grouping. This process of deviant identity formation and positioning in the BDSM community warrants exploration from academic scholars.

Researchers may also want to implement additional methodological considerations. Case studies of BDSM participants could provide insight into other areas of life influencing and influenced by BDSM involvement. Meta-analyses of internet sites, journals and other supplemental data may reveal themes that have thus far remained unidentified. Studies such as Newmahr’s (2010) and my own have yielded new results via ethnographic exploration that have gone overlooked by previous survey studies. Additional ethnographic investigation is needed to provide rich, in-depth data that reveal the lived experiences of BDSM participants.
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APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF BDSM TERMS USED IN THIS STUDY

(As defined by the participants in this study via group discussions and focus groups.)

**Bondage:** Physically or mentally restraining someone for the sake of pleasure.

**Bottom:** The one who takes the passive, obedient or receiving role.

**Celibate:** Refraining from sexual activity.

**Collar:** Worn around the neck to symbolize one is owned (permanently or for a scene).

**Discipline:** The use of rules and punishment to control someone’s behavior.

**Dominance:** Having others submit to your will.

**Dominant:** The person in control of another’s will.

**Dominatrix:** A female dominant, but generally refers to a professional.

**Domme:** A female dominant.

**Fetish:** A fixation or obsession with a particular thing.

**Fetishist:** The person with the fixation or obsession.

**Furry:** A person who dresses up like an animal.

**Kinkster:** A kinky person, but probably not someone into dominance and submission.

**Lifestyle (The Lifestyle):** Being into BDSM and hanging out with other people into BDSM.

**Little:** A person who role plays a child.

**Manifesto:** A written declaration of a household or relationship morals, stances, and rules.

**Masochist:** A person who likes receiving pain.
**Master:** The dominant partner (male) in a relationship. Usually applies to 24/7 owner/slave.

**Mistress:** The dominant partner (female) in a relationship. Usually applies to 24/7 owner/slave.

**Pansexual:** As a sexual orientation… the attraction to people regardless of gender or sex. As a proclivity/inclination… someone open to sexual activities of many varieties.

**Play:** The acting out of BDSM.

**Play Partner:** One who acts out BDSM with you.

**Play time:** Certain times set aside for acting out BDSM.

**Power Exchange:** The act of giving and receiving will and control between partners.

**Pro Domme:** A professional dominatrix.

**Role Play:** Acting out non-scripted roles (like teacher and student).

**Sadist:** One who enjoys inflicting pain or seeing someone experience pain.

**Sadomasochist:** Someone who engages in both sadism and masochism.

**Slave:** A 24/7 owned submissive.

**Submission:** Yielding to the will of another.

**Submissive:** One who yields to another’s will.

**Top:** The one who takes the active or controlling role.

**Vanilla:** People who don’t get into BDSM.
APPENDIX B: PARTIAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Section Three: Stigma

1. Do you ever feel that you are stigmatized for your involvement in BDSM? If so:
   How? (Specifically, in what ways?)
   By whom?
   Please describe a specific experience or experiences in which you felt stigmatized for your participation in BDSM.

2. Have you ever felt like you were discriminated against due to your involvement in BDSM? If so, please specify.

3. How comfortable do you feel discussing your involvement in BDSM with each of the following: close friends, family, significant other, casual dates, co-workers and people at work, other students, teachers or guidance counselors, siblings, professionals (such as health care providers and clergy)?
   (If there are others you would like to include, please do so.)

4. How have you made decisions regarding your choice of disclosure or discretion?

5. If you have chosen discretion, how do you think you would be treated if you had chosen disclosure instead or if you decided now to come out of the dungeon?
   What would need to change (if anything) for you to choose disclosure?

6. If you have ever felt stigmatized due to your involvement in BDSM, how have you dealt with those situations?
   (Within yourself? Existentially? Interactions with others? Political/legal action?)
   Have you dealt with different groups of people in different ways?
   (Such as parents versus spouse.)

7. How do you think vanillas perceive BDSM and its participants?

8. If you ever felt stigmatized due to your involvement in BDSM, what could have been done differently (by the person stigmatizing you) to prevent that feeling of stigmatization?

9. Is there anything else you would like to say about BDSM and stigma/shame?