

Review Research Paper

BDSM: A Sexual Deviance Rather a Sexual Culture An Overview

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Abstract

Since ancient time, sex and sex related aspects have generated controversies in terms of philosophical, medical and criminal point of view. Paraphilias are among the most popular as well as complicated sexual deviances. Their documented prevalence and their actual existence follow the iceberg phenomenon, with the part of ice above water represented by documented prevalence and the part below it by its actual existence. The terms "Sadism and Masochism" are comparatively well known, but as a part of its native term "BDSM" is not that much familiar, as specially in our Medical education. BDSM term is actually pairing of multiple terms like "Bondage with Discipline", "Dominance with Submission" and "Sadism with Masochism". However, its actual origin is unclear. In present era, BDSM has become a sexual culture for their practitioners and for the general population it is still a sexual perversion. This article aims to focus on various terminologies of BDSM along with their historical, legal and psychological aspects.

Key Words: BDSM, Sexual deviance, Paraphilia, Sadism, Masochism

Introduction:

Culture differentiates what should be normal and what should not be. It is fully possible what is meant for us as taboo may be acceptable routine for others. Sex and sex related aspects have more or less similar status.

One of the sex related aspect is sexual deviance, which simply means deviation from ordinary sex. The other related term is paraphilia, which can be defined as a type of sexual deviance in which sexual arousal obtained by atypical objects, urges, behaviour or situations. There is a controversy concerning paraphilia and to define what is normal versus deviant or disordered behaviour. [1]

Types of sexual behaviour traditionally seen as unnatural or perverted or deviant would include homosexuality, sadomasochism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, transvestism, zoophilia, necrophilia, pedophilia etc. [2] There are around hundreds of paraphilias but very few are documented as cases. Neither sexology nor any other discipline has been able to explain how humans develop any particular sexual interest. [3]

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DOR: 01.11.2014 DOA: 05.02.2015
DOI: 10.5958/0974-0848.2015.00019.6

The terms "Sadism and Masochism" are comparatively well known but as a part of its native term "BDSM", which in present era have become a culture, is not that much familiar, as specially in our Medical education.

Historical Aspect of BDSM:

Neither there is any full proof evidence of time of origin nor there is any evidence regarding particular place or specific culture of origin of BDSM. Rather there is possibility that what we know today as BDSM have multiple points of origin.

Approximately 490 B.C. older painting called "The Tomb of Whipping" at Etruscan tomb near Tarquinia, Italy, represents two men canning a woman when they are in erotic situation. [4] In 9th century B.C. whipping ceremonies were organised with the context of sadomasochistic exercises by ancient Sparta.

"Kamasutra" by Vatsayan, In Indian literature known to have mentioned different types of hitting practices to be executed at the time of love making to enhance pleasure, provided acceptance by the partner.

So Kamasutra may be the first documented proof explaining the sadomasochistic practise as well as their limitations and safety regulations.

BDSM Terminologies:

BDSM term is a union of multiple terms like Bondage with Discipline, Dominance with Submission and Sadism with Masochism. However its actual origin is unclear.

Within BDSM communities however these terms refer to consensual erotic practices from which great amount of pleasure and sensation can be derived. [5]

Bondage and Discipline are the practices of restraining. Bondage is related with physical restraining while Discipline is somewhat psychological restraining.

The scene of Bondage is like binding of partner by pieces of cloths, strings, metal chains or leather belts to bed or pillar.

The practice of Discipline involves behavioural control of one over the other. For example, drafting certain rules and breaking those rules will invite punishments. This type of punishments may include caning, slapping and humiliation. These practises may or may not be associated with sexual intercourse.

Dominance and Submission are the practices of certain "Role play" mostly. One is dominating over the other. This kind of play may be limited to certain time period of the day, the duration may vary.

It may be carried out in an erotic manner or in context of day to day lifestyle. For example, "Animal play" or "Pet play" where one participant plays a role of a dog or a horse, submissive to his/her Dominant owner and has to follow the commands given. Sometimes, the plays are going publically. Study by Ernulf and Innala showed that Preference for the dominant role was expressed by 71% of the male heterosexuals and for the submissive role was expressed by 89% by heterosexual females. [6]

Sadism and masochism are the practice of giving and getting pain for sexual gratification. The terms "sadism" and "masochism" came from Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade, a French writer and Leopold Von sacher Masoch, an Austrian novelist accordingly, who had described this terms first time. [7]

Sadism defined as sexual arousal linked to the active infliction of humiliation, subjugation or torture of the sexual partner while Masochism is defined as sexual excitement linked with the passive experience of physical or emotional humiliation, subjugation or torture. [8]

Sadistic practices are more common among men and masochistic practices are more common in women, but not exclusively. [8] In extreme cases of Sadism, there is a frenzy to commit a violent act, such as murder, known as Lust murder. [9] It is said that every sadist is a dormant masochist and vice versa. [10]

There are numerous other terminologies in relation to BDSM practices. For example, "Age play" involves acting like younger or older

person as a part of the play. "Wax play" involves using of melted hot wax over partner's body.

"Medical play" involves, one being a doctor and the other being a patient as a part of BDSM scene. The term "Switch" used to describe switching of the role as a dominant or submissive within a single play or at predefined time. "Edge play" is somewhat more challenging and may cause very serious injuries. This includes the plays involving usage of fire, knife cutting, erotic asphyxiation, firearms etc.

"Cock and ball torture", popularly known as CBT, involves masochistic activities related to male genital organs torture.

The term "Safe words" used to describe various predefined words set by the participants to stop the play immediately when the scene goes beyond tolerance. Ordinary words like "stop" or "no" are generally not used because of unintentional spontaneous usage.

Legal Aspect:

The role and development of paraphilias across cultures is also variable, with cultures defining what is legal or illegal. [11] Consent has significant role whenever the issues of BDSM come across. Mutual understanding of both the partners is utmost importance.

Exposing themselves about what they actually feel and what they actually want will decide the scene of play. Making certain rules of the play and defining certain limits may reduce the chances bizarre complications.

BDSM practices are always invited from either sides except in a very few cases, where they are carried out just to fulfil their partner's physical and/or psychological needs.

Even when there is full agreement, certain situations like injured partner seeking medical treatment and the case may be filed as MLC case by hospital staff on prima facie. The scene may go beyond the limits and the partner may file a complaint. Ending of such relationship may provoke the participant to file false complain for the purpose of revenge.

Consent differentiates BDSM from domestic violence or sexual assault. Sadistic husband may convert the play into domestic violence if wife is not a masochist. There is also a chance of conversion of BDSM practice into a case of Rape. Presence of fresh multiple injuries along with evidence of recent sexual intercourse make the task easy for the prosecution.

However proper examination with special attention to types of injuries, time since injuries, presence of atypical old scars and scene visit may help in investigation. Some practitioners use contracts to be signed by both

partners to prevent any type of legal consequences in western countries.

The similarity in between sexual assault and sexual sadism is that both involve violence, but violence is used for the purpose of executing sex in cases of Rape, while violence is prerequisite of arousing sexual drive in cases of Sadism. Only a small proportion of rapists qualify for the diagnosis of sexual sadism. [12]

Even if the act is totally consensual, question is up to which extent the court will allow these injuries to be placed under section IPC 87.

According to IPC 87, Nothing which is not intended to cause death, or grievous hurt, and which is not known by the doer to be likely to cause death or grievous hurt, is an offence by reason of any harm which it may cause, or be intended by the doer to cause, to any person, above eighteen years of age, who has given consent, whether express or implied, to suffer that harm; or by reason of any harm which it may be known by the doer to be likely to cause to any such person who has consented to take the risk of that harm.

In short, Indian law does not permit the injuries, grievous in nature or which are likely to cause death, even under consent. In other way, it permits rest of the injuries under consent of persons above eighteen years of age.

Current Scenario:

BDSM activities are legal in Germany, Japan, Netherlands, Canada and Austria. They are considered illegal in Switzerland and United Kingdom. United states have different laws for different states related to these practices.

In India, the actual status is unclear. Due to expanding usage of internet and social networking sites, BDSM is gaining popularity day by day. Lots of materials in the form of educational videos, documentaries, discussion forums, dating sites are available online.

Some dating sites are providing BDSM partners and charge accordingly. Mostly they serve by providing Dominating partners for submissive customers.

Such services may not include sexual intercourse at all. BDSM rather became a culture with timely get-together, public plays, clubs activities etc. Folsom street fair is an example of this. It is an annual BDSM street fair held at San Francisco. [13]

Psychological Aspect:

There are multiple believes in society about the mental status of BDSM practitioners. Some consider them mentally ill while some consider them perverted.

According to International Classification of Diseases [ICD-10, (F65.5)], 'sadomasochism' are "Disorder of sexual preference" and described as,

“A preference for sexual activity which involves the infliction of pain or humiliation, or bondage. If the subject prefers to be the recipient of such stimulation this is called masochism; if the provider, sadism. Often an individual obtains sexual excitement from both sadistic and masochistic activities.” [14]

Several studies on BDSM practitioners found them normal as far as their responsibilities toward family, towards society is concerned. To be diagnosed as a mental disorder, diagnostic criteria have been defined. According to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)

The diagnostic criteria for Sexual Sadism are:

1. Over a period of at least 6 months, recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviours involving acts (real, not simulated) in which the psychological or physical suffering (including humiliation) of the victim is sexually exciting to the person.
2. The person has acted on these sexual urges with a non-consenting person, or the sexual urges or fantasies cause marked distress or interpersonal difficulty.” [15]

For Sexual Masochism are:

- Over a period of at least 6 months, recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviours involving the act (real, not simulated) of being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer
- The fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviours cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” [14]

A study found that BDSM enthusiasts scored better on a variety of personality and psychological tests as compared to general population, because of extroverted nature and being less neurotic. [16]

They are not at all psychologically different from general population most of the times. What they want is something that is in addition to normal day to day sex to obtain highest pleasure and intimacy.

Engagement in BDSM was not significantly related to any sexual difficulties rather it is simply a sexual interest and for most participants it is not a pathological symptom of past abuse or difficulty with "normal" sex. [17]

Studies have also been conducted to investigate, how and why do this type of deviations are generated in selected minds, is there any correlation between past child abuse or any specific biochemical derangements in brain or this is in relation to any obvious pathology of brain or endocrine dysfunctions.

Some hypothesis proven wrong and some have proven right. For example, Monoamine hypothesis, which states monoamine mechanisms may be operated in psychopathological variations of sexual behaviour. [18]

There may be an association of brain pathologies with paraphilia e.g. temporal lobe epilepsy, tumors or limbic system dysfunction. [19] Their arrangements for the scene, their usage of predefined "safe words" to stop the on-going play, their respect towards each other, their drafting and following certain rules, all these may illustrate their sincerity and a level of their psychological status towards BDSM culture.

Ice berg phenomenon can be applied in relation to BDSM culture. The part of the ice above water applies to revealed cases and the part below water to hidden cases of BDSM.

It is quoted by Kelsey Chow, "*I wish I could read minds. It's a dangerous superpower, so I'd wish for it to come with a switch where I could turn it off if I wanted to. You'd learn a lot about people, that's for sure!*"

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