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Cover Page Footnote

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Sadomasochism: Appropriate, Inappropriate, or Somewhere in Between?

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Abstract

Sadomasochism—sexual pleasure derived from giving and/or receiving pain and humiliation that includes elements of dominance and submission—is a controversial topic in the realms of relationships and psychology alike. A major question that is asked in regard to sadomasochism is the following: is a sadomasochistic relationship an appropriate one? The goal of this paper is to attempt to answer this question by reviewing a variety of information about sadomasochism. Specifically, this paper reviews what actually constitutes an inappropriate relationship. A more detailed explanation of sadomasochism is given, along with a look at the changing views of sadomasochism. Last, some evidence indicative of the quality of a sadomasochistic relationship is reviewed in order to make a determination on the appropriateness of this type of relationship. Overall, it is determined that sadomasochism most resembles an unconventional relationship. However, while still considered unconventional, it is also determined that many benefits come out of sadomasochism and that most of the issues present were the result of other factors or past experiences rather than sadomasochism itself.

What Is an Inappropriate Relationship?

The purpose of this paper is to explore whether or not sadomasochism is an inappropriate relationship. In order to do this, it is necessary to first classify what an inappropriate relationship is defined as. To begin with, it is important to note that there does not seem to be an empirical or scientific way to define a relationship as appropriate or inappropriate. Rather, these relationships do and don'ts are guided by factors such as outside observers, social rules, and cultural factors. For example, what may seem completely normal in one culture may be considered outright repulsive in another. However, for the purposes of this paper, general guidelines for an inappropriate relationship should be given.

Cramer and Goodwin (2002) discuss that there are three central types of inappropriate relationships: unconventional, disapproved, and forbidden. Unconventional relationships may be considered out of the norm and can instigate unpleasant looks and remarks from others, but they do not break any written societal rules. For example, this could include age discrepant relationships or marrying for money rather than love (Cramer & Goodwin, 2002). Moving into more inappropriate territory, disapproved relationships can either (1) be noteworthy and looked down upon but not necessarily ruin one's reputation or (2) injure one's social reputation because the relationship goes against known roles. This category of inappropriate relationships could include marrying a friend's fiancé (Cramer & Goodwin, 2002). Last, forbidden relationships are seen as completely inexcusable because they are taboo, illegal, and can likely lead to official punishment. Examples include incest and stalking (Cramer & Goodwin, 2002). Cramer and Goodwin (2002) also mention that some of the criteria that people use to classify these relationships include equity (such as between different ages), duty and obligation between partners, and instrumentality (such as power differences between boss and employee).

As can be seen within the information presented, a relationship is not simply deemed inappropriate. Instead, there are blurred lines of what is acceptable and what isn't, how acceptable it is, and who accepts it and who doesn't accept it. This is significant to keep in mind as sadomasochism is explored to determine its (possible) inappropriateness.

Taxonomy of Sadomasochism

For the purposes of this paper, sadomasochism and BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism) will be considered to be the same, as the articles examined either discuss sadomasochism or BDSM as their main topic. Sadomasochism is essentially a subset of BDSM, but both have similar definitions and are comprised of relatively the same elements. While there does not seem to be one universal verbatim definition for sadomasochism, researchers' definitions/descriptions are fundamentally congruent. Sandnabba, Santtila, Alison, and Nordling (2002) identify six characteristics that are typically a part of sadomasochism: (1) dominance and submission, (2) pain caused by one partner that is experienced as pleasurable for both partners, (3) role play and/or fantasy, (4) humiliation of submissive partner, (5) elements that are fetishes, and (6) ritualistic activities. Guidroz (2008) adds that sadomasochism may also consist of humiliation and other forms of degradation such as name-calling. Lawrence and Love-Crowell (2007) define BDSM as sexual relations between consenting individuals that entail inflicting pain, restraining one of the partners, or having a power exchange between partners. Ambler et al. (2016) include similar/the same elements in their definition of BDSM, as they suggest BDSM activities include physical restriction (such as bondage), infliction of pain (such as spanking), humiliation, and hypermasculinity (such as the use of dildos). In addition, Ambler et al. (2016) note that some of those who engage in BDSM

also include either oral sex or sexual intercourse into their BDSM activities, though this is not true for all BDSM practitioners.

In terms of frequency, a noteworthy minority of adults in the United States partake in BDSM activities on a regular basis (Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2007). In addition, it has been approximated that about 10 percent of the adults in the United States participate in some form of sadomasochist activities (Guidroz, 2008).

In terms of extensive history, Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin, and Matuszewich (2009) suggest that historical records show evidence of humans using elements such as bondage, pain, and power exchange as a part of their normal sexual activities for thousands of years. However, Guidroz (2008) posits that there is little proof that shows the presence of sadomasochism in pre-modern cultures. Thus, more extensive research on historical records is likely necessary to determine the existence/frequency of sadomasochistic practices in the past few hundred or thousand years.

The practitioners of sadomasochism and their preferences can also be specifically examined. One study found that sadomasochism practitioners commonly use flagellation and bondage as some of their preferred activities (Sandnabba et al., 2002). Sandnabba et al. (2002) additionally found that males who are sadistic more frequently partake in sadomasochism sex than males who are masochistic and that sadomasochism practitioners in general usually want to engage in about six sadomasochism sessions per month. Guidroz (2008) also determined that sadomasochism practitioners seem to become cognizant of their desire to participate in sadomasochistic activities in their early 20s. Furthermore, a few studies have suggested that sadomasochism practitioners tend to be of higher social classes and more educated (Guidroz, 2008).

Changing Perspectives

The changing perspectives of sadomasochism is also important to review in order to determine the appropriateness of this particular relationship. To begin with, Ambler et al. (2016) mention that it was just 150 years ago that the words sadism and masochism were used scientifically. They were used by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, a psychoanalyst and sex researcher who believed that sadism and masochism were sexual perversions (Ambler et al., 2016). Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud also shared his thoughts on sadomasochism. In 1905, Freud wrote that sadomasochism was deviance from normal sexual development (Kaplinsky & Geller, 2015). Freud also explained that sadomasochists' love for pleasure and beating along with humiliation is a representation of the love that they felt as a child for their father that was buried under the pain of being beaten (Kaplinsky & Geller, 2015). Guidroz (2008) further explained Freud's viewpoint of sadomasochism, stating that he believed it to be a pathology and a perversion of typical sexual tendencies. Sagarin et al. (2009) also reference early theorists as classifying sadomasochism to be a symptom of pathology. Even as recent as the 2000 edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), sadomasochism was considered to be a mental disorder (although, this was only if the relationship/activities caused distress or disability) (Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2007).

Moving into more modern times brought a more accepting view of sadomasochism, especially as more research on its effects was conducted. For example, Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin, and Matuszewich (2009) also suggest that modern researchers put sadomasochism in a less negative light, claiming that it can actually be a healthy social practice. These researchers also note that people who practice sadomasochism are well educated and

display positive views about themselves. Ambler et al. (2016) similarly notes that researchers are regarding BDSM to simply be a sexual preference rather than a pathology.

Despite an increase in acceptance of sadomasochism by researchers and society alike, there still seems to be an overall stigma toward sadomasochism. For example, Lawrence and Love-Crowell (2007) mention that some therapists have been found to treat BDSM activities as a pathology and that therapists are much more uneasy dealing with BDSM clients than same-sex clients. Kaplinsky and Geller (2015) also suggest that because sadomasochism is presented to be a complex topic that is rarely explained or talked about, the negative stigma associated with it is reinforced. Overall, it is evident that sadomasochism is still coupled with an undesirable connotation (Kaplinsky & Geller, 2015).

Positive and Negative Aspects of Sadomasochism

Having discussed the taxonomy of sadomasochism and changing perspectives of it, it is also significant to examine any adverse or positive effects that accompany sadomasochism in order to determine its inappropriateness. First, the negative aspects that have found to be associated with sadomasochism will be assessed. In a study that reviewed psychotherapists' experience with BDSM clients, Lawrence and Love-Crowell (2007) found that shame and guilt are common feelings that BDSM clients express, regardless of the presenting reason behind these feelings. The therapists mentioned that the reason for the feelings of shame and guilt might be because of the pathologization of BDSM. However, it is important to note that these reports of shame and guilt are coming only from BDSM practitioners who go to therapy. Therefore, these feelings might not be representative of all BDSM practitioners. It was also found that problems with relationships are frequent issues with BDSM clients and that BDSM is a backburner issue in therapy compared to being the main issue (Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2007). Relationship

issues seemed to be ascribed to the disparity of interest in BDSM within couples. Sandnabba, Santtila, Alison, and Nordling (2002) also found a similar trend, as they associated practicing sadomasochist activities with having difficulty in forming permanent relationships due to the issue of finding someone with similar sexual interests. The therapists interviewed in this study also noticed that past physical and/or sexual abuse were commonly brought up by BDSM clients, although past abuse was common among other clientele as well. Some of the therapists proposed that BDSM activities might be considered an inappropriate modeling of past instances of abuse (Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2007).

Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin, and Matuszewich (2009) found in their study on hormonal changes in people participating in sadomasochist activities that relationship closeness decreased in sadist and masochist couples whose sex scenes went poorly. However, more extensive research would have to be explored in order to determine if decline in relationship closeness could possibly be the result of uncomfortable/poor sadomasochist experiences. The study conducted by Sandnabba, Santtila, Alison, and Nordling (2002) looks more extensively at how previous abuse plays a role in sadomasochists' lives. For example, their study examined at how sadomasochist women who were abused as children may possibly link violence and domination by their partners to sexuality. This could potentially cause them to look for relationships surrounding punishment (Sandnabba, Santtila, Alison, & Nordling, 2002). In contrast, sexual abuse experienced by younger boys can be translated into sexual aggression when they are adults. As a result, females are more likely to be masochistic and males are more likely to be sadistic. Sandnabba, Santtila, Alison, and Nordling (2002) also noted that sadomasochist participants who were abused in the past are more likely to attempt suicide and be more sexually neurotic. Another significant finding to mention is that abused sadomasochist

practitioners went to the doctor for sadomasochist-sex related injuries more often, suggesting that abused respondents had a tougher time creating boundaries and limits to their sadomasochist activities (Sandnabba, Santtila, Alison, & Nordling, 2002).

After reviewing the negative aspects that researchers have found relating to sadomasochism, the positive aspects can be scrutinized. Going back to Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin, and Matuszewich's (2009) study on hormonal changes, it was discovered that caring and affectionate displays between partners engaging in sadomasochist activities were common and that they related to more closeness within the relationship. The conclusion was made that consensual sadomasochism can actually promote intimacy between partners (Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin, & Matuszewich, 2009). Other studies have also shown evidence of sadomasochists being generally socially well-adjusted (Sandnabba, Santtila, Alison, & Nordling, 2002). Ambler et al. (2016) explored if BDSM practitioners participate in BDSM activities because they lead to an enjoyable altered state of consciousness. Based on the study, the verdict was that engaging in BDSM activities is associated with a decrease in psychological stress and negative affect and an increase in sexual arousal (Ambler et al., 2016). Ambler et al. (2016) also cite several other studies that suggest psychological release is a benefit of BDSM and engaging in BDSM activities results in lower levels of reported sexual dysfunction. Last, Guidroz (2008) explored the experiences of tops and bottoms (sadists and masochists, respectively) while engaging in sadomasochist activities. Overall, sadomasochist practitioners described sadomasochism as pleasurable and erotic and claimed that sadomasochism adds to emotional and sexual intensity. Sadomasochists also commonly referred to their sexual scenes as a safe space, within which they were comfortable exploring issues with their partner (Guidroz, 2008).

Determination: Appropriate or Inappropriate?

Based on all of the information presented in this paper, sadomasochism most resembles an unconventional relationship. As a reminder, an unconventional relationship is one that may be out of the norm and may instigate remarks and looks from others, but it does not actually break any written societal rules (Cramer & Goodwin, 2002). Although modern views of sadomasochism are more accepting, there is still a deviance that many people associate with it, making sadomasochism relatively out of the norm. The elements of dominance and submission, administering pain to a partner, and humiliating a partner, although pleasurable for the sadomasochist, causes non-sadomasochists to think negatively about that type of relationship. However, despite people's judgments based on personal preferences and ideology, sadomasochism does not seem to break any societal codes. Essentially, it is simply consensual people coming together and using different methods of sexual activity that are pleasurable to them. As discussed, sadomasochists consistently mentioned several beneficial outcomes of sadomasochism, such as release of psychological stress, increase in partner intimacy, a pleasurable altered state of mind, and an enjoyable sexual experience.

While negative aspects of sadomasochism are present, they either do not seem to stem from sadomasochism directly or they are common issues in many types of relationships. For example, one common issue presented with being sadomasochist is the inability to develop and retain close relationships due to the frequent disparity between sexual desires. While this problem may be a result of sadomasochism, there are a variety of factors in non-sadomasochists that also prevent them from obtaining close relationships (such as personality quirks or social factors), showing that this issue is not solely a sadomasochist one. In addition, some people in sadomasochist relationships went to the doctor frequently for sadomasochist-related injuries,

likely due to an inability to set boundaries in the relationship. While some may say that this is a result of sadomasochism itself, it can really be traced back to underlying issues, such as past abuse. Even though the results of the past abusive relationships manifested through the sadomasochist relationship, it still seems to be the result of the abuse and not the sadomasochism.

Overall, while sadomasochism may be considered an inappropriate relationship due to its unconventional nature, it can still bring positive aspects to sadomasochists' lives if done consensually. Based on the information examined in this paper, sadomasochism does not seem to embody any type of horrid, inexcusable relationship, nor does it seem notably harmful to its participants. Just like with a typical relationship, issues brought up in sadomasochism were caused by other factors and past experiences rather than the sadomasochist relationship itself. As a result, researchers seem to be moving toward a more accepting view of sadomasochism and although unconventional, sadomasochism seems to do more good than harm.

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