

DELVING INTO DISCOURSE: DEVELOPING KNOWLEDGE OF BDSM

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ABSTRACT

Delving into discourse: Developing knowledge of BDSM

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The marginalization and oppression of the BDSM community is an ongoing issue, both in how they function as a community, and in how they are interpreted by people outside of the group. They face ongoing marginalization as a result of the lack of acceptance for non-normative sexuality. Through a post structural, qualitative inquiry, individuals who participate in BDSM were asked how they feel they are understood by society at large, how their sexualities are constructed and understood by themselves, and how do these concepts influence interpretations of BDSM as abusive. Data was then analyzed using critical discourse analysis, and categorized into two broad concepts: representations of dominance, and voices of resistance. The data found that dominant discourses related to BDSM result in issues of avoidance, othering, discrimination and essentialism, while resistance was focused on the creation of community, sex positivity and discourses of consent.

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My three pillars of support:

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented explosion of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2012), a romantic trilogy in which a wealthy dominant man seeks to engage a young woman in a BDSM relationship, thrust BDSM (a form of non-normative sexuality often including but not limited to, bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism) into the forefront of popular culture. Inevitably it has encouraged conversations and exchanges about relationship dynamics, consent and the giving and receiving of pain. These conversations have predominantly happened within the established perceptions of BDSM, ultimately increasing the visibility of ongoing, existing theories and discourses surrounding this form of non-normative sexuality. At the same time, academic literature has advanced albeit at a slower pace than public discussions. While there is still very little research conducted within the BDSM community, the research that has been produced approaches the topic from many different avenues. The disciplines of psychology, sociology, law, and anthropology have all applied their own lenses to the development of knowledge surrounding BDSM. These approaches often seek to understand this sexual behaviour by applying their already existing theoretical frameworks and approaches to this complex community. There has been very little research attempting to understand the ways in which dominant discourses around concepts of appropriate sexuality reinforce the already overwhelming marginalization and discrimination about this community.

A systemic source of negative outcomes for the BDSM community has been founded in the way in which members are viewed by the legal systems in our society. Examples of the legal system, including criminal courts, family courts, and human rights courts, being used to prosecute people who willingly engage in consensual BDSM are rampant (Chatterjee, 2012; Klein & Moser, 2006; Ridinger, 2008; White, 2006; Wright, 2006). This becomes a significant

source of stress for members of the community fearing conviction on the basis of misunderstanding or prejudice as in the case of police, prosecutors, and judges, who have stated “it is a matter of common knowledge that a normal person in full possession of his mental faculties does not freely consent to the use, upon himself, of force likely to produce great bodily injury” (Lence, 1995, p. 10). However, as there is limited information related to current experiences of discrimination, the legal discussion is largely absent in this project. While it is inevitable that discourses of oppression and representations of dominance course throughout the legal system and exert power and marginalization on the BDSM community, this is a topic that can best be reserved for a project that has the breadth and depth to explore the legal system sufficiently.

This project aims to resist the stereotypes that surround non-normative sexual practices that often result in the oppression, marginalization and pathologization of the people who desire to or participate in them. This study seeks to create space in which it is possible to develop knowledge of BDSM, specifically the consensual exchange of power and/or pain. Through a qualitative inquiry, individuals who participate in BDSM were asked to provide insight into their experiences in society, their experiences with service providers, and to provide their understanding of how BDSM is different than domestic violence. To accomplish this, interviews have been conducted with individuals who wanted to participate in research and who identify as part of the BDSM community. These interviews were then examined through a critical discourse analysis. Through this, the following questions have been explored: how do these members of the BDSM community feel they are understood by society at large, how are sexualities involving BDSM constructed and understood by these members of the BDSM community, and how does this influence interpretations of BDSM as abusive. This research fills a gap in existing

knowledge related to non-normative sexualities and BDSM, and it contributes to the body of knowledge surrounding sexuality in Social Work. It also allowed participants to have a small voice in the way in which they are constructed in an academic setting, albeit only for one study.

CHAPTER 2: Background

While it is pertinent to give background information related to the BDSM community, and to provide the necessary context for understanding the results and conclusions of this research, there is also an undeniable need to resist and caution against the essentialism of the BDSM participant. While this section will attempt to offer a glimpse into the dynamics of, and roles within, the BDSM community, it is by no means intended to be exhaustive. Particularly when discussing the roles and labels that appear to directly contrast each other, each of them exists on a spectrum and they are not mutually exclusive. Each individual is entitled to conduct their behaviour and form their identity in whichever way they feel best fits.

BDSM is an umbrella term that encompasses six different concepts within it. 'BD' represents Bondage and Discipline, 'DS' signifies Dominance and Submission, and the 'SM' refers to Sadism and Masochism or sadomasochism. These pairings are the three main tenants of BDSM although they do not necessarily need to be combined in any particular way. For example, the ancient Japanese art of Shibari can involve bondage of one participant with rope with no dominance and submission or infliction of pain. Similarly, an exchange of dominance and submission can exist without any influence of the other aspects of BDSM. Power exchange is a phrase generally used to refer to the consensual exchange of power between two or more individuals, where one individual has the ability to exert power and control over the other. This exchange of power can encompass any length of time and any type of activities, including a power exchange relationship in which the Dominant has complete control at all times, seven days a week (24/7 total power exchange), providing both parties have consented to the particulars of their relationship. There is a fine line in differentiating between dominance and submission and power exchange; often they are found together, although this is not necessarily

the case. There can for example be physical submission within very specific limits without offering power to another party. Warren and Warren (2008) offer an exceptionally appropriate metaphor, suggesting that BDSM is akin to a large Chinese buffet, in which you can pick and choose your desired items from a complex, seemingly never-ending array of options.

There are simply no hard and fast statistics that demonstrate the rate of prevalence of BDSM. Best estimates available place the number of people in the population who engage in BDSM behaviour sits at approximately ten percent (Hoff & Sprott, 2009). However, there is a significantly higher percentage of the population who disclose having aspects of BDSM included in their fantasy or desire. Approximately twelve to thirty three percent of women and twenty to fifty percent of men engage in this form of fantasy, at least on some occasions (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; Arndt, Foehl, & Good, 1985).

There are countless identities within the BDSM community each differing in its interpretation based on the person using them. However, there are three central roles upon which the BDSM community is structured: the Dominant, the submissive and the switch. The Dominant (also known as Dom, Domme, Dominatrix, Top, Master, Mistress, Sadist) is the person who exerts control. They are the person in charge or the one who delivers the pain. It is an established community practice to capitalize the first letter of the chosen title of any Dominant individual as a mark of respect for the position they hold; this community convention will be upheld throughout this paper. The submissive (also known as sub, slave, masochist, bottom) is the person who receives control. They are the person who offers their control to the Dominant or receives the pain. The switch on the other hand, engages with BDSM from both the Dominant and the submissive roles. They may be Dominant one day or even hour and submissive the next, or Dominant with one partner and submissive with another. Finally, there is

also the label of ‘kinky’, or a person who is engaged in kink, a term used to refer to sexual behaviour that encompasses BDSM, fetish, fantasy, role play, sex games and any other “outside the box” versions of sexuality (Bettinger, 2002; Taormino, 2014). The label of kink allows one entry into the BDSM subculture without requiring the adoption of a BDSM specific identity, role or label. There are also some other umbrella terms used by the BDSM community. Kink and kinky both refer to the practice of sexuality or sexual behaviour that is outside the established norm of behaviour; it fundamentally also includes fetishes or fetishistic activity. Within the context of this project, BDSM and kink will be used interchangeably. Vanilla, on the other hand, is a term used to refer to those who are decidedly not included in the kink or BDSM community. Anyone who does not incorporate kinky flavour, so to speak, into their sexual practices can be colloquially labelled vanilla.

Brame, Brame and Jacobs (1993) add the idea of sensuality into their definitions of BDSM, power exchange, Dominant and submissive. This inherent incorporation of sex or sensuality in BDSM behaviour is not necessarily accurate. While many people in the BDSM community do engage in sex or sensuality throughout their BDSM play, others note that BDSM can be more than sexuality (Guidroz, 2008; Prior & Williams, 2015). Masters (2008) offers that this one-dimensional view of BDSM is unfortunate and sensationalized. Instead he suggests that BDSM can take the role of stress relief or spiritual journey. BDSM relationships and encounters can, and do, exist outside of a sexual context, either by choice or other reasons, such as gay Masters with female submissives. Throughout this paper BDSM will be referred to within the context of sexuality and sexual practices, as this was the context and frame of reference from the participants.

The final piece of background that is important to grasp prior to discussions of BDSM is a basic understanding of the safety frameworks present within the community. While not every member of the BDSM community ascribes to one of these philosophies, there are two predominant approaches to engaging in BDSM: Safe Sane and Consensual (SSC) and Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK) (Barker, 2013). SSC concerns itself with three things, as its title suggests. Safe dictates that the acts are done in the safest way possible and leave no significant, irreparable, lasting damage. Sane is a more complex concept, for which there is no clear definition. It generally refers to the idea that the parties involved in an encounter both ultimately experience pleasure (Brame, Brame & Jacobs, 1993). Consent demands that any participant involved wants to be involved and has overtly consented to their participation in some form. RACK on the other hand, developed to refute many of the issues that people had with the credo of SSC. Ultimately, safety and sanity are subjective; what is safe and sane to one person may be the opposite for another and is generally left to unreliable “experts” in the BDSM community to dictate, often depending on their personal preferences for kink. RACK instead, shifts away from this model and encourages personal responsibility and risk awareness. Using this framework, each individual is responsible for understanding the risks of their intended or desired behaviour and creating their own risk profile to determine what risks they are willing to take (Cross, 2010).

CHAPTER 3: Subjectivity

The business of social work research cannot be separated from the individual identity of the people who are engaged in the research, particularly when engaging in conversations about power, normativity and dominant discourses. One's own perspectives and biases infiltrate the research process at every stage, thus knowledge and information produced as a result of the research process is ultimately filtered through the lens of the researcher. Mandell (2007) asserts that social work needs to integrate both individual, micro level practice "with a critical analysis of one's role as a social worker in the relations of power that constitute our practice" (p.15). Within a research context, this joining of micro level practice and critical analysis requires acknowledgement of power structures and inherent biases held by the researcher. To this end, it is essential for researchers to acknowledge their own social location and to inform their audience of the assumptions and presuppositions to facilitate the knowledge being viewed in an appropriate context. Research and knowledge production are inherently political, strategic and powerful; acknowledging subjectivity and social location is a means to acknowledge this.

With this in mind, it is ultimately necessary for me to provide some context for why I come to this area of interest and the investment I have in the political nature of my research. My identity, for the most part, comes with a large amount of privilege. I am white and I come from a lower middle class background. I am able bodied, yet have aspects of my physicality that are frequently shamed and marginalized by the general population. I have had exceptional access to sources of education and have been able to obtain qualifications that allow me entry into privileged spaces within my career. I am a social worker, an activist, and vehement supporter of queer rights. In many ways, I am a representation of privilege and dominant discourses that course through the veins of society. Due to this, I have attempted to put effort into heeding the

call of Clare (2003), and into dismantling the sources of privilege and luxury that I occupy and rebuilding them to offer allyship and safety to queer communities. Yet this politicization of my identity is not altruistic, as I have sources of oppression as well. Most significant of these within the context of queer activism, is my own sexual orientation.

While I do not ascribe to traditional binary conceptualizations of gender or sexuality, generally preferring the concepts of fluidity and spectrums, my patterns of behaviour and attraction do ultimately fall in line with cis gender femininity and heterosexuality. My sexuality however, cannot be simply defined as straight; I am kinky, a slut, and a masochistic submissive. I have strong ties to the BDSM world both sexually and socially. My relationship model and sexuality are comprised of non-normative behaviours and structures that are often discriminated against. Part of my fight for queer rights, then, is a reflection of my desire to see my own sexual behaviours, overt sexuality and polyamorous relationships accepted in mainstream society. I believe that advancing the queer rights movement and forcing recognition and equal acceptance of this community is a means to advance the acceptance of my own sources of sexual oppression.

CHAPTER 4: Literature Review

There is very limited research available regarding BDSM, non-normative sexualities, or even general discussions of sexuality in social work. This makes work of completing a literature review surrounding this topic complex. The available literature for this topic generally stems from the disciplines of law, psychology, sociology, and anthropology; with each discipline taking its own approach to understanding and theorizing this community. Though the disciplines involved are diverse, there are ultimately several clear and distinct themes that have been developed in the available literature: the theories explanations developed to explain BDSM have not held up to scrutiny; there are significant issues with the provision of therapeutic services to people who engage in BDSM; the BDSM community experience marginalization, stigma and discrimination; abuse and domestic violence are different from BDSM; and fundamentally BDSM is meaningful to those who participate in it.

Previously Applied Theories

Overwhelmingly the explanations, approaches and perspectives used to theorize and understand BDSM behaviour have been produced, considered and then ultimately dismissed as understanding of this aspect of sexuality has developed. Cross and Matheson (2006) reviewed four theoretical approaches: psychoanalytic model and medical model which both view BDSM as a symptom of mental illness; the radical feminist view which posits BDSM is a sexual behaviour entrenched in patriarchy and misogyny; and the escape-from-self model argues masochism provides an avenue to escape from self-awareness similar to experiences of drug or alcohol intoxication. After reviewing their data Cross and Matheson discounted each theory in turn after they concluded that there was no evidence to support the claims of each perspective. The medical model view of BDSM was also taken up by Connolly (2006) who examined a

sample of the BDSM community for indicators of pathologization such as anxiety and depression, psychological sadism and masochism, obsessive-compulsion and posttraumatic stress disorder. Both Connolly (2006) and Glyde (2015) stated there are no significant differences between the levels of these mental illnesses in the BDSM community as compared to the general population. Separate from the medical model, there is a construction of those who engage in BDSM as bad people, people who are ultimately damaged and in need of clinical intervention, or at worst, fundamentally dangerous and requiring regulation. Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich and Smith (2008) approached this construction and dismissed it, concluding that “BDSM is simply a sexual interest or subculture attractive to a minority, and that for most participants, BDSM activities are not a pathological symptom of past abuse or difficulty with “normal” sex” (p.1667). BDSM and those involved in it, are typically constructed as deviant, or deficient in some way, yet this view is simply not supported by the available research. This understanding is ultimately “overgeneralized, essentialistic, and atomistic” (Weinberg, Williams & Moser, 1984, p.388), and encompasses a lack of genuine understanding of the realities of the diversity of sexual behaviour and desire.

Provision of Services

The tendency to view BDSM through the medical model has shifted the dominant discourses surrounding non-normative sexuality, which in turn has led to significant issues with service provision when individuals engaged in differing forms of BDSM seek therapeutic support or help. In spite of the knowledge that relatively few members of the BDSM community are seeking out therapeutic services for issues directly related to their involvement with BDSM (Kolmes, Stock & Moser, 2006; Nichols, 2006), they still face significant experiences of marginalization, discrimination and ignorance from their therapists. Service providers often hold

views that impede their ability to effectively support their BDSM clients, including understanding it as an unhealthy practice, conflating BDSM with abuse or domestic violence, assuming or asserting that BDSM interests are a result of previous experiences of abuse, and overstating their knowledge and acceptance of BDSM (Kolmes, Stock & Moser, 2006). Nichols (2006) suggests that these issues are often the result of countertransference, after clinicians experience feelings of revulsion, shock, and disgust when first exposed to BDSM practices. “When this countertransference is intellectualized, the therapist may experience a deeply felt conviction that the client’s behaviour is self-destructive but have little more than vague abstractions to justify the firmness of the conviction” (Nichols, 2006, p.286). As a result of this, clients are often subjected to overt discrimination via termination of the therapeutic relationship (Hoff & Sprott, 2009) or unreasonable demands to cease their involvement in BDSM (Kolmes, Stock & Moser, 2006).

A further issue with service provision to BDSM clientele is the ethics and boundaries surrounding therapists or helping professionals who are kinky, and who share the same social space as their clients. Bettinger (2002) explores this issue, both from an LGBTQ and a kink perspective. While he offers no hard and fast solutions for this complex issue, he raises it for further conversation in the broader ethical conversation linked to self-disclosure and exposure of a therapist’s personal self.

Stigma, Discrimination and Marginalization

The BDSM community also regularly faces stigma, discrimination and marginalization from the broader society in which they exist (Bezreh, Weinberg, & Edgar, 2012; Stiles & Clark, 2011). While individuals have experienced differing levels of acceptance, the available research shows significant stigma towards this community, most often communicated through “negative

framing of BDSM, invisibility and marginalization of BDSM, and taboos regarding speaking about BDSM” (Bezreh, Weinberg, & Edgar, 2012, p.54). The reality of engaging in BDSM is that there are some spaces in which discussion about your personal life is simply not permissible to a larger extent than experienced by the general population, such as with parents or employers. Additionally, dating or seeking relationships, outside of the BDSM community becomes fraught with rejection and marginalization (Bezreh, Weinberg & Edgar, 2012). The result of this ongoing stigma is that the BDSM community primarily lives in secrecy, employing tactics of concealment (Stiles & Clark, 2011). Some members of the community find the concealment game to be amusing, or fulfilling, as though they are members of a secret club that offers shared experiences, solidarity and reinforced bonds; yet, for others it becomes a source of anxiety, fear and concern.

[C]oncealment . . . means that something about one’s identity is disfavored or stigmatized in society and that things could go badly if others found out. So concealment is viewed as necessary, if one is to fit into mainstream society, but at the same time, the detrimental effects of concealment are such that doing so prevents many individuals from fully experiencing authenticity in their relationships. Furthermore, many still yearn for “acceptance” of an identity that they know violates the normative expectations of mainstream society (Stiles & Clark, 2011, p.186).

BDSM Differs from Domestic Violence

The available research also provides a clear stance that sadomasochistic behaviour is not equal to or related to abuse, or domestic violence. Kolmes, Stock and Moser (2006) clearly state that reform is needed in order to provide clinicians with education to assist them in understanding the difference between these two concepts. Comber (2008), who produced work related to domestic violence scales in relation to BDSM relationships, identifies that BDSM behaviour can appear similar to intimate partner violence or domestic violence on a surface level, yet not be abusive or damaging. She makes a specific distinction that domestic violence scales

can adequately detect abuse in BDSM relationships if the individual's understanding of abuse, consent, and fear are taken into consideration within the scale. Cunningham (2010) offers an amusing analogy on this topic, comparing the similarities of peanut butter and jelly both being spreadable and tasty to the similarities between BDSM and abuse. She then elaborates to differentiate in a more specific way,

[a] victim who lives in fear of what will happen next is not living under the benefit of “positive intent” that a Dominant brings to a healthy kink relationship. Submissives are not primarily motivated by fear; victims are. For a victim of abuse, the highest goal is to get through the day unscathed, always fearing what the abuser might do. For a submissive in a healthy kink relationship, the goal is to provide her highest level of service, and be as good as she can be, because she knows there is no pleasure like the one she gets from being a “good girl.” The healthy submissive is motivated by pleasure, the giving and the seeking of it, while the victim is motivated by fear. (Cunningham, 2010, p.138)

BDSM as a Source of Meaningfulness

As evidenced above, BDSM no longer fits into the frameworks and perspectives that have been used to understand the practice, leaving a gap in knowledge for how individuals, practitioners, and academics can conceptualize the behaviour. More recent theories in the field have hypothesized that BDSM is fundamentally meaningful for those who participate in it, shifting its understanding from a symptom of psychopathology to one of leisure (Prior & Williams, 2015; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Through this lens, BDSM becomes the means to feelings of empowerment, efficacy and accomplishment (Newmahr, 2010). When acting in a Dominant role, feelings of efficacy can result from having a physical impact, such as creating a bruise, or observing bound and suspended submissive, or from an emotional or psychological change derived from when a submissive partner does something he/she/they would not normally have done (Newmahr, 2010). “Among people who bottom, submission in particular is frequently experienced as a source of efficacy. Submissive-identified participants, or bottoms, who

suddenly “feel submissive” in scene sometimes cast their physical experience as being necessary for the top. In this way they view themselves as effecting a change in the mental or emotional state of the top” (Newmahr, 2010, p.324).

The BDSM community itself is also a source of significant meaningfulness to both its current, and perspective members. While the majority of Bauer’s (2008) work is focused on the dyke BDSM community and its ability to be transgressive and transformative, she nonetheless attributes some of the positive qualities of her relatively small community to the larger group. “BDSM in general encourages a playful, sexually charged, embodied engagement with power, social roles, and cultural stereotypes. Furthermore, BDSM combines elements of power exchange and role-play that stress the performative character of gender and sexual identities” (Bauer, 2008, p.248). This can be a powerful environment for queer people to explore different gender roles within a safe environment and to engage with their sexuality in a way that is removed from the gender binary and ascribed behavioural norms. Similar themes of exploration and acceptance course through the intersection of BDSM and disability, allowing BDSM to become an avenue of empowerment and sexual exploration for people with disabilities within a community that accommodates the limitations, alternatives and bodies of others. Sadomasochism “plays with the unstable boundaries between pain and pleasure, an issue that affects many people with disabilities, particularly those living with chronic pain” (Reynolds, 2007, p.40). The established norm of body acceptance in the BDSM community stretches farther than the members who have disabilities, also heavily influencing each member of the community. The unrealistic, unattainable, unhealthy standards of beauty set in western culture, reinforced by mass media and dominant discourses in society, primarily take a back seat to acceptance at community events that embrace every physicality as beautiful. “[C]onsensual sadomasochism offers

participants an environment partially free of the negative consequences resulting from Western beauty ideals” (Martinez, 2015, p.1).

The prevalence of research linked between BDSM and social work is minimal, with only one predominant article in the field. Primarily, Williams (2013) seeks to have social workers empower individuals with non-traditional identities, such as BDSM and vampirism, while at the same time advising caution against the mainstream rhetoric that comes as the visibility and popularity of such identities. “[S]ocial workers should remember that increased visibility does not mean that these topics are accurately and justly represented; specific stereotypes can often be unintentionally reinforced” (Williams, 2013, p.18). This encouragement of social workers to enter the field of discussing sexuality, however, is not limited to Williams. Dunk (2007) argues that sexuality is a fundamental part of the human experience and as such, social work needs to explore this avenue of individual well-being. She specifically argues that sexuality requires formal attention in direct practice with clients, and in social work education. “Sexuality has been positioned as a central dimension of the self and the notion of everyday sexuality has been argued to be a way to conceptualize the needs of all clients as opposed to particular populations or client settings” (Dunk, 2007, p.140).

The available literature offers merely a glimpse into the complex, dynamic and intriguing area of BDSM. The prevalent themes assert that the ways in which BDSM has traditionally been understood and theorized are insufficient, and new themes around the meaningfulness of BDSM as a form of leisure, and the differences between BDSM and abuse have been introduced. The research also advises that the BDSM community is significantly marginalized and discriminated against, through issues with services provision and therapy and stigma and discrimination from the general public. Furthermore, the BDSM community is now being conceptualized as not

harmful or 'deviant', but instead as an accepting community that can have positive benefits for its members, including the queer population and members with disabilities. However, the research does have significant gaps, including a dearth of any literature that challenges the perception of normative sexuality. Each of the available studies seems to accept the notion that there is a normal version of sexuality in which BDSM does not fit, and establishes this community as a small, different subculture. Even if they are advocating for acceptance and agency for the BDSM community, they still do so in a way that clearly establishes us as 'other'. Dominant discourses around normal sexual practices are ultimately reinforced.

CHAPTER 5: Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach being applied to the study of BDSM in this research is a varied composite of several different frameworks. Building from a foundation of anti-oppressive practice and research, the foundational concept utilized was post structuralism, within which queer theory will be incorporated. Finally, the philosophy of sex positivity will underlie the theoretical approach.

Potts and Brown (2005) assert that research can bring about social change if it is constructed and completed within the framework of anti-oppressive practice (AOP). AOP can be understood as a heading within which other critical theories lie, or “an umbrella term for a number of social justice-oriented approaches to social work, including feminist, Marxist, postmodernist, Indigenous, poststructuralist, critical constructionist, anti-colonial and anti-racist” (Baines, 2011, p.4). The fundamental belief of AOP is the understanding that knowledge does not, and simply cannot, exist outside of those who construct it. “Rather, it is produced through the interactions of people, and as all people are socially located (in their race, gender, ability, class identity, and so on) with biases, privileges, and differing power relations, so too is the creation of knowledge socially located” (Potts and Brown, 2005, p.261). The creation of knowledge is inherently linked to power; those who hold power are able to construct knowledge that ultimately reinforces their power and privilege. Research seeking to bring about social change then, seeks to “construct emancipatory, liberatory knowledge that can be acted on, by, and in the interests of the marginalized and oppressed. Henry (2007) holds a similar understanding of power, namely that it is socially constructed. Within her framework however, rather than power being held by the knowing researcher or participant, power is a fluid and changing concept that flows and dances between the researcher and the research participant.

This becomes particularly salient when conducting research in a community where the researcher is both an insider, and an outsider (Humphrey, 2007).

The theoretical framework from which I completed the bulk of my research is post structuralism. Post structuralism offers criticism of the modernist construction of knowledge, instead understanding that power is inseparable from concepts of knowledge and language (Foucault, 2010). Foucault posited that much of society could be understood through discourses and that discourses can be used to create divisions in society in particular ways (Foucault, 2010). He also made the clear distinction that power is not just negative; it is not just a force enacted on an individual, rather power also has to be positive. To be effective, power requires ongoing enactment between different individuals and groups in society (Foucault, 2010). Foucault asserts that power, knowledge, and discourse are inevitably linked (Foucault, 1980). As with most social behaviour, Foucault discusses sexuality as something that is developed through discourse instead of something inherently natural (Foucault, 1990). He also looks to the influences of the Victorian time period to understand its influences on modern discourses of sexuality that emphasize repression (Foucault, 1990). This repression appears strongly in relation to discussion of BDSM, as categories of perversion, and sexual deviance simply did not exist prior to the influence of repressive Victorian puritanism (Clarke, 2011).

While Foucault did not intend for his work to be used to advance the liberation of any specific group, undoubtedly his work has been found at the forefront of the LGBTQ hunt for social justice.

The political implications of Foucault's discursive approach to sexuality have not been lost on lesbians and gay men, who for too long have been the objects rather than the subjects of expert discourses of sexuality – who have been the objects, in particular, of murderously pathologizing, criminalizing and moralizing discourses, one of whose comparatively minor effects has been to deauthorize our subjective experiences and to

delegitimate ... [their] claims to be able to speak knowledgably about ... [their] own lives. (Halperin, 1995, p.42)

Foucault's understanding of the fluidity of power similarly becomes a catalyst for the resistance to these discourses, as activists understand that resistance comes from holding one's own position of power. "Resistance to power takes place from within power; it is part of the total relations of power" (Halperin, 1995, p.17). In addition to building a foundation for resistance and activism, Foucault's theoretical perspective was also the impetus for other frameworks, including the work of Butler (1990; 1993) and the development of queer theory.

Butler, in her primary writings that develop the concept of queer theory, develops Foucault's perspectives on sexuality by introducing notions of performativity where a discourse is enacted in society, and therefore the product of the discourse is created (Butler, 1990). She suggests that performativity, sexuality, sexual power, gender and gender identity are inseparably linked (Butler 1990; Butler 1993). Butler asserts that the way identity is socially constructed is inevitably linked with discourse and power. The incorporation of queer theory in this project allows for a more targeted type of analysis, and political reform, namely one that resists both heteronormativity and homonormativity. That is to say that queer theory allows for resistance against discourses that demand heteronormative orientation and sexual behaviour, while at the same time refusing the discourses that ask the non-normative out-group other to strive for inclusion in heteronormative spaces. Discourses of acceptance of the non-normative broadly held in society require marginalized groups to conform to societal ideals as closely as possible. It is this form of pseudo-acceptance that seeks to embrace the homonormative element. The monogamous queer couple who seek to build a traditional nuclear family, or the monogamous kinky couple who do not speak of their BDSM behaviour, are somewhat accepted while simultaneously, the remainders of the non-normative groups who do not conform to these

societal values are forced further to the margins of society. In a sense, acceptance is reserved for those who seek equality through the established norms and processes of society.

“Homonormativity sees queer subjects positioning themselves as no longer a threat to the nation but rather, as seekers of equality through traditional legal means, a move that inevitably results in other groups deemed less desirable to be excluded and further marginalized” (Smith, 2013, p.468).

The final addition to the theoretical framework used in this study is that of sex positivity. Born from the work of Bullough (1976), and discussed at length through the feminist sex wars fought between second and third wave feminism (Glick, 2000), sex positivity has found footing as a grassroots theory emerging from the field of sex educators. The basic premise of sex positivity is simple; sex is positive and the constructs and discourses that tell us differently are deeply rooted, strongly held convictions, and are fundamentally wrong (Glickman, 2000). “A sex-positive approach recognizes the tremendous cultural diversity in sexual practices, while also acknowledging substantial variation in personal meanings and preferences” (Williams, Prior, & Wegner, 2013). That is not to say that sex is necessary, or universally desired, but rather that each person is entitled to view sex and sexual behaviour in whichever way is meaningful and good for them.

This combination of anti-oppression, post structuralism, queer theory, and sex positivity combine to build a strong foundation from which an exploration of the dominant discourses of BDSM is possible. These frameworks contribute to identifying the dominant discourses, and experiences of the BDSM community, as expressed by the small sample available.

CHAPTER 6: Methodology

The methodology surrounding this project sought to utilize the voices of members of the BDSM community, combined with postmodern theoretical approaches to develop knowledge of the power structures and systems surrounding non-normative sexuality endemic to modern society. The study was designed as qualitative and with narrative interviewing in order to allow the voices of the participants to be highlighted, and ultimately used as the primary source of information. Data collection consisted of interviewing conducted on the phone. Finally, critical discourse analysis was used in order to analyze and interpret the data.

The recruitment process sought to identify three to four members of the BDSM community who wanted to participate in the project. Participants were required to speak English and be involved in BDSM. Individuals under the age of eighteen were excluded from participation in this research due to the sexual nature of the discussion. The 'over eighteen' stipulation of the research was maintained by the interviewer asking for the participants age prior to scheduling an interview and confirming again prior to the interview taking place. There were no geographical limitations to this study. Participants could be located anywhere, although the majority of the recruits were from Canada and the United States due to the way recruitment was completed. This geographical flexibility has been built into the study design in order to combat the inherently small size of the BDSM community in any given specific geographical location.

Once potential participants were identified, a snowball sampling method was used in order to recruit additional participants. The researcher initially sent out an email with a recruitment flyer to her own informal, personal networks and contacts seeking participants and asked those people to forward the recruitment email to people within their own networks to whom they believed met the criteria and may be interested in participation. In addition,

participants in the study were specifically asked to provide the researcher's contact information to any other individuals they feel might be interested in participating, providing recruitment was still necessary.

The researcher has existing friendships, connections and relationships within the BDSM community in multiple locations throughout Canada and recruitment was primarily done using personal networks. As such, there was significant potential for undue influence. It is entirely possible that the researcher's friends or acquaintances could have felt obligated to participate. In order to combat this, the researcher informed potential participants that there will be no repercussions on existing or future relationships should they decide not to participate at any point throughout the research process.

The data collection phase of this research consisted of recorded telephone interviews lasting approximately sixty minutes and at maximum, ninety minutes. The interviews were semi structured, with a list of guiding questions available to the researcher, but allowing the flexibility to discuss what is important, or significant, to the participant. A narrative approach to interviewing was used in order to facilitate an understanding of how individuals comprehend their experiences, through discussion of concrete, specific life stories (Chase, 2003).

Many people within the BDSM community intentionally keep their sexual preferences and involvement in BDSM private. As such, participating in the research study comes with inherent risk of being exposed. This risk was mediated in this study by not requiring participants to disclose their identity or enter the public sphere or any specific physical space. There was also the potential for additional risk due to the nature of some of the questions being asked and subject matter being discussed. In the interviews there was a possibility that individuals will be reminded of, or triggered by, their experiences of abuse. In addition, they may have also

experienced discomfort due to the emotional nature of the research topic and conversation, such as experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and stigmatization. Risk was kept minimal by allowing participants to determine what they would and would not share as well as by employing qualitative interviewing techniques which allow for wrap-up and closure after difficult discussion. In addition, the researcher compiled a list of resources specifically with telephone and Internet resources for one on one support. Participants were also told at the beginning of their interviews that although the researcher would be asking many questions, they would be under no obligation to answer every one and that should they not want to respond to any questions they only needed to indicate as such.

For participants who were not already known to the researcher, anonymity was ensured wherever possible, as the researcher did not seek information about their identity. The researcher had access only to their email and the information they shared. The confidentiality of all participants' identity was maintained, as the data used in the production of the results of the study did not include reference to any information shared about their identity. Their information was stored in a secure manner. In addition, once transcripts were completed, individuals were assigned code names to ensure their confidentiality in the unlikely event the data is somehow accessible to others. All steps were taken to ensure participant's confidentiality throughout the research process to minimize risks of exposure.

Once the interviews and transcriptions were complete, a critical discourse analysis was completed. This method of analysis fits well with the purpose of this research as it offers a means to examine a demanding social issue, while at the same time establishing a clear, meaningful sociopolitical perspective (van Dijk, 1993) and advancing a political agenda. Critical discourse analysis allows for the researcher to "spell out their point of view, perspective, principles and

aims, both within their discipline and within society at large” (van Dijk, 1993, p.252). By using critical discourse analysis to examine the perspectives offered by members of the BDSM community, insight was offered into the central role of discourse in the ways inequality and dominance are reproduced (van Dijk, 1993). “Discourses include representations of how things are and have been, as well as imaginaries – representations of how things might or could or should be” (Fairclough, 2001, p.3).

Among the descriptive, explanatory and practical aims of CDA-studies is the attempt to uncover, reveal or disclose what is implicit, hidden or otherwise not immediately obvious in relations of discursively enacted dominance or their underlying ideologies. That is, CDA specifically focuses on the strategies of manipulation, legitimation and manufacture of consent and other discursive ways to influence the minds (and indirectly the actions) of people in the interest of the powerful (van Dijk, 1995, p.18).

The process of completing CDA in this project began with open coding to extract stories, expressions of feelings and experiences from the participant interviews. These pieces of data were then broadly grouped together under broad themes to allow for further analysis. Axial coding was then completed, combing through the transcriptions and already established themes, and cross referencing them to discover the representations of power embedded within the data. Using CDA on the collected data then allowed for the underlying discourses that reinforce the normative sexual behaviour, and subjugate BDSM to the fringes of acceptability to be understood. Employing CDA in my exploration of BDSM fits exceptionally well with the post-structural and post-modernist theoretical framework. It allowed for a thorough analysis of the discourses, hierarchies and distributions of power that are referenced both covertly and overtly in the research.

CHAPTER 7: Participants

Within the small sample used for this study, there was a remarkable amount of variation in the way people disclose their interest in BDSM and kink. Participants ranged from living their kink in full view of the public, to expressing frustration both with the public visibility of BDSM and the BDSM community seeking mainstream acceptance. As analysis of the theme of disclosure proceeded, it became clear that there was very little opportunity to present any combination of unified themes that can really encompass the disclosure preferences of these different individuals. Instead, the combination of the narrative interviewing and the diversity of the sample lend themselves more significantly to an individual discussion for each of them.

Darcy – The queer submissive

Darcy is undoubtedly the most obvious of the participants about her interest in BDSM. This perhaps can be exemplified simply by her identification as an exhibitionist. She is not shy to enthusiastically embrace and enjoy her submissive desires, and she has engaged in conversations regarding aspects of her sexual interest with her family and several of her friends. In the past, Darcy has allowed her sexual preference to be visible in the public sphere. She attends events such as the Fetish Ball and other public and private kink related parties, and expresses that she takes pleasure in being out in public spaces wearing her fetish clothing.

I used to subway to events in my kink outfit. For me, it was absolutely about more than being at the event. It was the whole process of putting on the persona... the important part of experiencing that to me was leaving my house like that and going to the event like that, and being seen like that by society. And part of that was people looking at me like 'who is that lunatic?'

Darcy has also allowed this aspect of her life to flood into her online space, as she has previously posted images of herself dressed for kink events to her social media sites, easily visible to her friends and family.

In terms of social media, I had a bit of a tendency of flaunting it. Not in terms of obvious overt references to the practices I was engaging in, but certainly in terms of lots of pictures and fetish type outfits, although again only to a certain extent because social media only allows that. And I think I had a tendency to sort of flaunt it a little bit.

While Darcy has had to severely limit her public engagement with kink in recent years as she began to pursue her intended career, she continues to disclose her BDSM behaviour in radical ways within spaces she believes will not impact her current or future employment. She offers several examples of conversations she has had with her mother in which her kink is openly discussed, albeit received with some discomfort.

I have certainly been asked by my mom about them [bruises and marks]. She's been like 'ok you shouldn't show up to work with hickeys'. And I'll be like 'if only it was a hickey'. And she'll be like 'I don't want to hear about what you're doing behind closed doors'. Or she'll see like finger marks on my arm or three bruises on my arm, and she'll be like 'did you have an attack and grab yourself', and I'll be like 'I wasn't the one doing the grabbing', stuff like that.

Darcy, both currently and in the past, uses disclosure as a means to shock the people around her, and as a radical form of resistance to the dominant discourses of silence that permeate the general public's engagement with BDSM. She stakes her claim and asserts her right to discuss these aspects of her sexuality with an attitude bordering on rebellion.

Sage – The Dominant, sadistic, educator

Sage engages with disclosure in a somewhat similar way to Darcy, although without the exhibitionist flare. He is intentional in his desire to live his kink and explore his sexuality in a congruent way and does not shy away from allowing people to see this part of himself. This openness extends to his friends and family, where Sage is open not only about his Dominant persona, and his sadistic tendencies, but also about his polyamorous relationship formation. He and his multiple partners often attend family events together, further displaying his willingness to

be open about his non-normative lifestyle choices. In large part, Sage attributes his willingness to disclose his BDSM activity to the environments that he surrounds himself with.

The majority of my friends and family are very accepting of lifestyle choices, or they are part of that lifestyle as well. So I tend to be around those people and a lot of the workplaces I have been in have been very liberal. So they do, they tend to be a little more accepting of those things, or at least willing to listen, and I think that is the main thing... So I tend to be in environments where people are willing to listen, and understand the perspective that I come from.

However, Sage also takes his willingness to disclose to further depths, by being open and engaged with those who might have questions about his sexuality, role or activities.

Me, personally, I'm very open about what I do, so if anyone has questions, like what you're doing right now [conducting research], I'll tell them, you know, answer all their questions in the best way that I can.

In this way, Sage significantly differentiates himself from the other participants. While Darcy is rebellious, Sage shows patience and engagement. He uses his disclosure as a tool to shift public perception. He is actively engrossed and strategic in his willingness to participate in conversations as a means to shift the discourse. He is not only prepared, but also genuinely enthusiastic to educate people to advance the understanding of BDSM.

Max – The switch, sadistic, superhero

While Darcy and Sage make efforts to be open about their sexuality, Max lives his kink in a secluded way. Max does not typically attend BDSM parties or social events so there is very little opportunity for his engagement with kink to encounter the general public. He does not disclose to his family under any circumstance and this desire for privacy spreads to more than just his participation in BDSM. He is fundamentally private about both his role as a switch, and his sadistic desires unless he has a sense of knowledge or intuition that the friends he is talking to

are open to hearing about the topic. Phrased another way, Max does not discuss his sexual preferences with anyone who is vanilla.

For the most part I generally don't talk about it with vanilla folk. Again, I hide most of my proclivities from my family. They don't know I play Dungeons and Dragons! I just generally avoid the subject when I don't know the leanings of the person to whom I am speaking.

Instead, Max will either wait for other people to broach the topic of BDSM with him or will approach it in such a way that he is able to gauge their reactions without making himself vulnerable to criticism or opposition.

I will bring it up in a joking fashion and then gauge reactions. Like somebody will, say, make a joke about slapping somebody on the ass, and I'll say, "You know, some people pay good money for that sort of thing", to see if the reactions are laughter.

Similar to Sage, he is strategic in his use of disclosure. Max simply only discloses his BDSM participation to people where he feels he is sure he will receive a positive reaction. To a certain extent, he views the kink world as a club with selective membership, and only allows himself to become vulnerable when he knows he is dealing with another suspected member.

I am used to hanging out with weirdoes and being accepted as one of the pack, as opposed to hanging out with normal people and, you know, dressing in my normal people clothes... In a way, it kind of has me chuckling up my sleeve at everybody because it feels like I have a really weird superhero identity... There is this whole other side of me that is incredibly empowering (and involves a costume change) that most folks just don't get to know about.

Fundamentally, Max uses his form of disclosure as a way to empower himself and feel a sense of belonging within the context of broader discourses of exclusion.

Riley – The switch, privacy seeker

The similarities in disclosure between Max and Riley are striking. Riley is comparably strategic about his use of disclosure and is intentional in his desire to live his kink in an

ultimately private way. He categorically separates his life into two spheres, the vanilla and the kink; and as much as possible, does not allow them to mix. His family is aware of his participation in BDSM, but this was due to a disclosure made by one of his significant partners maliciously. With friends, he will also engage in the ‘testing the water’ method of making jokes and gauging response before disclosing his interest in BDSM or his switch role.

Well, I just, I don't wear a t-shirt, you know? ... Most of life is vanilla and you're going about things every day... I'm not that out. I will make jokes from time to time if I think that someone is possibly – a vanilla person might possibly be interested or have the taste for it. You know, that sort of thing like 'well I didn't really mean that'. So yeah, I'll test the waters, and it's basically to see who else is in the club. I'm not doing it to sort of just be out.

Where Riley differs from Max is in his motivation for being selective in his disclosure. Max does so in an attempt to keep himself safe, while Riley believes it is a matter of consent. He believes that conversations that touch on kink and BDSM should be used only in spaces that are primarily kinky and wants others in the BDSM community to do the same.

I am very concerned about consent... I have a hard time initiating a conversation with someone who might be vanilla, because of the topic. Is that an acceptable topic to them? They are already not consenting... Not in front of the children, and the children are not only minors, but also the vanillas. You know, the Muggles... Not in front of minors, not in front of non-consenting people. Do not talk about it to people who are averse to it... We pretend not to do this. The world pretends this is not going on, right? It is going on. Deal with it realistically because it is a reality, don't get all shocked, don't get all zealous.

Riley has accepted and constructed his kink identity within the confines of the dominant discourse. To an extent he has internalized the social order that places BDSM and kink on the outskirts of society, and resists the idea that kink activists should challenge this construction.

CHAPTER 8: Analysis

The findings can broadly be broken down into two significant groups. The first set relates to the ways in which the dominant discourses prevalent in society influence, impact and affect people who participate in BDSM. It deals with the experiences of feeling influenced by the perceptions and beliefs of society, and the way this impacts people within the BDSM community and in society at large. The second grouping explores the ways in which participants and the broader BDSM community take up resistance and seek change. It discusses how this community are not represented by the dominant discourses, and how they feel they should be understood.

Representations of Dominance

The dominant discourses surrounding the kink community have a drastic impact on the experiences of the participants in this research. Avoidance was represented in multiple ways, including avoiding having BDSM take up space in some relationships and in public spaces, the way loved ones avoid discussing BDSM, and the avoidance of disclosure entirely. The concept of othering was another repetitive concept, with representations both inside and outside of the kink community being significant, as well as some interpretations of othering as both empowering and disempowering. Identity and the essentialism of identities was another significant topic throughout the data, as was disclosure to service providers who frequently responded to such disclosure within the framework of the dominant discourse.

The opposite of acceptance, its avoidance

The most impactful representation of avoidance within the data was how, for some participants, loved ones who were aware of their sexual preferences simply avoided discussing them. A partner who maliciously disclosed Riley's choices, made his family aware of his interest in BDSM, and therefore he has experienced this sense of avoidance first hand. Following

initially expressing their displeasure with his sexual activity they have since avoided discussing it, though they did not hesitate to show their disapproval using non-verbal communication.

Family are the best people to party with because they distinctly know what topics not to discuss. So I mean a lot of it was distance and sort of wary looks and so on. There wasn't a lot of talk.

Darcy had similar experiences, although her family's desire to avoid the topic is far more overt. Her father, specifically, seeks to have the topic eliminated entirely from their conversations, aside from when he is using it to make a point about her 'inappropriate' behaviour, during which time he uses veiled euphemisms. She is quick to note that her father does not indicate that she should refrain from the behaviour, simply just avoid discussing it.

Anytime you include any talk of my sexuality and who I am, he's referring to things that he will never name... I don't think he gives a shit what I do. He gives a shit what I say... Don't ask, don't tell... He was saying, "We aren't objecting to what you do, just be quiet about it, and that's acceptance"... Just shut up about it; we don't want to hear about it.

Family is not the only sphere of social engagement in which avoidance of BDSM appears. Friendships and work relationships are further spaces in which discussion of kink is severely limited. While Darcy engages in exhibitionist style behaviour in many aspects of her life, there are two areas in which she tempers her desire to shock others. Instead, with her vanilla friends and/or colleagues, she feels that she is forced to avoid the topic to keep safe from being pathologized and/or the termination of her employment.

If I ever told them that I am into rape play that would be so crossing the line that wouldn't even fly. I don't even have very many friends that I would tell that to. Like one of my best friends is Christian, and she kind of gets the queer part of it, but she doesn't get the "I like to be strangled and thrown really hard against the wall" part. I think if I ever told her I wanted someone to wrap their hands around my neck and squeeze she would tell me I have psychological problems. I guess [I fear] being ostracized any further than I already am from my other eccentric/rebellious tendencies. I've already been socially ostracized for a number of them, and I don't have a desire for that.

Furthermore, Darcy is also quick to discuss how this avoidance is a barrier to her creating significant and lasting relationships with some of her less accepting friends.

I think there is never going to be to the kind of closeness with people I can't share that part of my life with. Because... it is part of my self-identity, and if I can't be comfortable with people talking about it, at least making occasional jokes about it, because that's how I operate, the friendship is only going to get me so far.

Max also experiences this type of avoidance. He has some friends who do not engage in kink behaviour who are somewhat aware of his sexual preferences, but who do not talk about it with him.

Avoidance is also represented as an intentional lack of disclosure. Both Max and Riley, as discussed previously, are intentional about their desire to not make others aware of their interest in BDSM, either due to fear of rejection or a belief that BDSM should not be discussed with anyone outside of the kink community. However, this also becomes a way in which their kink identity is relegated to the sidelines of their own relationships and encounters.

There is a dearth of literature available on the concept of avoidance in relation to topics of BDSM. There is some available literature that reinforces the idea of intentional silence as a form of regulating behaviour. Koudenburg, Postmes and Gordijn (2013) suggest that individuals who have a desire to belong can be sensitive to the processes of silence in conversation, and that silence can function as a form of signal of social exclusion for the speaker. Through this lens, the avoidance of the topic of BDSM becomes an overt representation of the dominant discourse surrounding non-normative sexuality.

Pulling the card out of the normal stack and sticking it in the weirdo stack

The participants were unanimous about feeling that the dominant vanilla population often views the BDSM community as an established other or something different than normal, creating a clear division with the majority of the population on the opposite side, distinct and separate

from the “freaks” and “weirdoes”. To its core, this divide is attributed to the idea that kinky people are in some way deficient or defective. Max provides a superb illustration of this othering process when he recounts what he can visualize happening inside the mind of someone who finds out about his engagement in BDSM.

It's like I can almost see them in their mental card file systems, pulling the card out of the normal stack and sticking it in the weirdo stack.

Riley echoes this sense of being interpreted as different and attributes his sense of loneliness and isolation to the way he is perceived, while Sage speaks of his encounters with the vanilla population as creating a physical space in which he experiences being othered.

There is a lot of intolerance to alternative sexual practices, and it makes you feel alone.

People tend to give odd glances and sometimes people even will say things or assume things, and so that tends to be a very big clash when it comes to what kind of attitudes are acceptable in the mainstream versus what is acceptable in BDSM.

In reaction to her exhibitionistic tendencies, Darcy has also experienced this idea of her BDSM behaviour creating a divide between her and the outside world. This is also something that her family picked up on and used as a tool to try to rein in her public displays. She also feels this division has the potential to significantly impact her employment status.

I've also had my dad and his previous wife be like, “You need to get that shit off social media. Do you know what that's going to do to your image? You'll never get into university”... If I were to do what I wanted to do publicly on stage when I was 17, or 18, or 19, I would be fired. If they found out I was having sex at The Grand Manor for a sex party in front of 100 people, I would 100% be fired.

Darcy also links this feeling of being to othered to different aspects of her life. However, she makes the distinction that she is careful to disclose only one of her “undesirable” behaviours or experiences at a time in order to prevent even further dismissal or stereotyping.

The perception about what BDSM means is so great, and I think specifically within a context where I have disclosed a past or a history that involves trauma and/or abuse

and/or self-harm, I can't also bring up my interest in something that other people see as self-harm. With most people in the conventional world, I'm going to tell someone I want them to hit me, they'd see that as self-harm, I see that as freedom.

Interestingly, while everyone who participates in BDSM lives in some way on the “wrong side” of the dominant discourse, there are differing levels of impact as a result. Darcy makes a clear distinction between the display of gender and the perceptions of others.

The women get more lascivious looks and whatnot and inappropriate comments. The men I think were judged much more harshly than the women... They were looked at as dangerous and probably crazy. And I don't use the word crazy lightly.

Sage offers a differentiation in the experiences of othering based on role within the community. He posits that while Dominants are seen as unacceptable, it is the submissive who experiences the greatest sense of division and othering.

People tend to pathologize the ones who are receiving the pain, because as a bottom, you're enjoying things that the majority of people would consider to not be enjoyable. So they perceive that there is something wrong with that, that there is something inherently wrong that... On the Top side too it's like getting pleasure out of whipping somebody and that's also something that is not generally accepted, but at the same time there is nothing happening to them that could be considered damaging.

However, the experience of being an other is not necessarily always as disempowering as the experiences above would suggest. Instead, some individuals might experience this as a sense of inclusion or superiority compared to the vanilla population. Max, for example, feels that his participation in an activity that is not engaged in by the majority of society gives him a special status. In addition to the perception of having a superhero identity discussed above, he also views participation in kink as a secret or as being included in a club with select membership.

The impact of media on public perception of kink cannot be understated, as this is where there have been significant and pervasive stereotypes that reinforce the idea of BDSM as

inherently other. Yet, this perception in mainstream media has shifted recently with more emphasis on understanding, as Sage explains:

I think there have been certain things lately that have caused people who otherwise wouldn't be talking about it, to talk about it. And so certain things like Fifty Shades of Grey, for example, was a good one. It wasn't exactly the best representation of BDSM, but it caused people to have a conversation about it in the mainstream. The media would talk about it, and media would say, "Well this is what BDSM is really about", and then people sort of saying, "Well that is just two things that consenting adults do with each other". And that was the general idea of people. When people started not having an ick factor about it anymore, that they started seeing it a little more positively. "Oh, well this is just stuff people do, and it's either none of my business or it's not as bad as I thought it was".

However, these new understandings and perceptions of BDSM are still significantly problematic, with strong emphasis on the perpetuation of existing stereotypes and mainstream values and beliefs (Downing, 2013). While media is increasingly offering surface level acceptance of BDSM, they ultimately maintain and reinforce the othering.

Discussions of othering regarding the kink population would be remiss without including experiences of the similar process that happens within the BDSM community itself. As a group of individuals, this community is subject to experiences of group dynamics and divides, much the same as any established group. In essence, the BDSM community is simply a microcosm of broader society, both with more and less acceptable types of behaviour. Riley and Max both express this sentiment. Max discusses broader themes of othering.

There are certain subsets that look down at other subsets and think, "oh god, what's wrong with them?" ... There are people I know, who are involved in kink, who think of scat play and watersports and they think, "Jesus Christ what is wrong with you that you want to get pissed on?", completely ignoring the fact that, "half an hour ago weren't you tied up with clothespins on your nipples? What's wrong with you, man?"

Riley discusses often feeling like a creep or feeling perceived as someone who ogles women based on his experiences as a single man at public kink events, and his experiences of being rejected due to some of his kinks and fetishes.

The ogler. I sometimes get the sense that people think that of me, in the community, and that's an unpleasant place to be... I have a wide range of interests, and if I were to be frank about all of them with a potential partner then some of those [interests] they may have an aversion to.

Again, there is little available research tackling the concept of othering or otherness within the BDSM community, however there is a plethora of research that discuss the processes and effects of othering as a means of establishing power (Said, 1978; Foucault, 1990). Othering, or the creation of the other, is a process enacted by the dominant in-group, who convert the difference between them and the dominated out-group to create the divide between the in and out; the acceptable and the unacceptable (Staszak, 2008). This process perfectly fits the experiences of othering, and the results of the process as it is enacted on the BDSM community. However, the value of this form of othering has towards the dominant group is also undeniable. By its very existence, the BDSM community creates the boundaries of acceptability and normativity that the dominant group exists within. It is only by the creation and exclusion of the out-group that the in-group is formed and solidified. The vanilla population is not vanilla without the BDSM community, as the spice of kink is where the limits of vanilla are defined.

It's not the sum total of who they are

The majority of the participants also discussed the way in which they feel others understood their kink identity, explaining them as stereotypes of the widely held understanding of their sexuality. The idea of BDSM as being the sum of one's identity was represented, as were the idea of the "Domly Dom", the victim, the perpetual Sadist and the "slut". Max was vehement

in his desire to communicate that kink and BDSM are not the only aspect of his personality that are significant.

It doesn't automatically colour every perception and attitude that we have. Not everything is seen through a kink lens... It's not the sum total of who they are. That's who they are with their loved ones... [Kinky people are] perfectly capable of being around your kids without beating them.

He echoes this sentiment when discussing the stereotype of the “Domly Dom”, a well-known stereotypical figure inside of the kink community, but also a commonly held perception of a Dominant by the general population. A “Domly Dom”, Max explains, is the hyper masculine caricature of the male Dominant.

Embracing their role as Dominant and Sadist to the point of, I would go as far as to say, full on misogyny... The automatic belief or assumption that any woman who identifies as a sub is there to serve you, and you can go ahead and greet her with, “suck my dick little bitch”... The assumption that anybody who engages in that sort of play, can't engage sexually or romantically with a person on a normal level, that it has to be some kind of over compensation, if you will, for a perceived lack of power.

This perceived identity also fits well with experiences from Sage, who discussed the way he feels others construct his identity once they know he is both a Dominant and a Sadist.

Because I am very open about everything, all of my friends kind of know like that I am into BDSM, and I've actually asked people out on dates and they've said things like, “oh I'm not that type of person”, so there tends to be a lot of stereotyping, and I'm like “just because I'm into BDSM doesn't mean I need to do BDSM with you” and they tend to get these ideas of what you know, what a Dominant is... people think that Sadists enjoy pain, giving pain to all people, like a lot of the media in particular where a sadist is a person who is going out there deliberately torturing people without their consent.... So tending to think, “oh you want to try to punish me or to try and hurt me” is sometimes someone's initial reaction when you tell them that you are sadistic.

Sage, in his dialogues with vanilla people about BDSM, has also encountered the idea of the submissive participant in BDSM being stereotyped as weak and as the perpetual victim.

One of the big stereotypes that I get is, particularly on the submissive side, that submissives are submissive in their job or in everything. That's not really the case... People who are submissive are submissive in a particular environment or with a particular person, and not with their job. A lot of people can be really, really active in their job and be a leader in their job, and that has nothing to do with their sort of sexual or BDSM experiences... I do want to emphasize that bottoms aren't victims, but they are perceived as victims.

Darcy's experience with stereotyped identity is somewhat distinct from the experiences of the male participants, as she encounters the traditionally held discourses that feminine sexuality should be demure, timid, and private (Montemurro, Bartasavich, & Wintermute, 2015). Instead, as a person who views herself as sexually empowered and who enjoys sex, she is stereotyped negatively.

I have been stereotyped in terms of my sexual preference in the fact that I engaged in sex positive behaviour, so I will probably talk about my sex, sexuality or sexual experience. I think [with] my friends and particularly family, [that] consciousness has been perceived as my identifying as what they would call a slut or a whore, or somebody who lets whoever they want to fuck her in any way they want to. That is not at all how I see what I engage in.

These discussions of the stereotyped and caricatured BDSM identities fit well with the concepts of essentialism and the essentialized identity. Essentialism suggests that for any one concept of a specific kind, there is a group of features, characteristics, appearances or behaviours that entity must have; that must form a part of that thing's quintessence (hooks, 1992). Related to identity, then, essentialism becomes about members of any specific group (race, gender, sexual orientation) displaying physical or behavioural characteristics considered essential to that group. It becomes a standard assumption that anyone within that group possesses those traits. "Clearly, the problems are not merely semantic but ones which can damage lives, for such discourses inform, and are objectified in, practices which institutionalise and often pathologize particular groups or behaviours" (Sayer, 1997, p.460).

This is to a person who is providing my psychiatric meds, which I depend on to function

The participants involved in this research each had somewhat different experiences when disclosing their interest and participation in BDSM to service providers (therapist, counsellor, social worker, doctor, psychiatrist, etc), similar to their differing experiences with disclosure in general. Sage identifies a general lack of desire within the BDSM community to disclose due to hearing of others experiences of stigma and discrimination.

There are a lot of people who have had some really negative experiences... There is a friend of mine who had therapy for a while and they tried to convince them not to practice BDSM because they thought that it was harmful to them.

This fear and commonly experienced discrimination is heavily saturated in the literature regarding therapy within the BDSM community (Kolmes, Stock & Moser, 2006; Nichols, 2006; Hoff & Sprott, 2009). Sage however, has interpreted his experiences with his service providers in a predominantly positive way, aside from the need to provide education to his therapist during sessions he has paid for.

There are some people who don't understand exactly... but I think for the most part, they've at least been willing to listen which is good. And that's not necessarily the standard that I have heard from a lot of other people with their experiences with therapy... Sometimes it can take up an entire session. Trying to talk about it... where I am on the clock and they are charging me. ... But I'm happy to educate people. I am happy to tell people what exactly it is that is going on, and do all that stuff. For me personally, I am delighted to educate people about it. But also, I don't like the fact that someone who is a professional in the field is essentially charging me to educate them.

Darcy's approach to dealing with service providers is simply to refrain from disclosing to them, as a means to ensure she does not face marginalization or discrimination, or any other potential negative consequences for her sexual practices.

There is confidentiality [with service providers] but this is to a person who is providing my psychiatric meds, which I depend on to function like a normal human being. This is a person who is potentially going to sign medical documents that are going to enable me to

access certain things in society. I am not comfortable telling them certain things that I feel are societally discriminated against... I've never been able to engage with therapists or service providers long enough to feel they would know me well enough to get that I am going into this consciously and smartly, and that they aren't going to confuse it with talking about my self harm.

Through exploration of the themes of avoidance, othering, and essentialized identities were all represented throughout the data, from the participants. These themes form the foundation of the way the BDSM community engage with the world and are perceived by others. They both build and reinforce the dominant discourses prevalent throughout society.

Voices of Resistance

While the dominant discourses are constantly seeking to break down those who engage in BDSM, kinky individuals and the broader kink community are actively, continuously, seeking to resist. While they struggle to achieve acceptance in society at large, the kink community has become an effective environment of acceptance that those on the margins of society can use to find a sense of acceptance and community. The kink community has also adopted the broader sex positivity movement, becoming sex activists seeking a shift in the discourses that surround sexuality in all its forms. The BDSM community is also strategic and active in their intention to differentiate BDSM from domestic violence, both through frameworks of practice, and established norms of consent.

There is a certain level of comfort... specifically where kink is already assumed

While participation in kink has the tendency to create exclusion and divide from the broader population, it also has remarkable potential to build community, friendship, and family. Being a part of the kink community allows and promotes the building of relationships with others who are likeminded, and this becomes a piece of individual members resiliency. Sage, in

his discussion of his social environment, touches on this concept when he talks about friendships with other kinky people and creating environments where he feels accepted.

The majority of my friends and family are very accepting of lifestyle choices, or they are part of that lifestyle as well. So I tend to be in environments where people are willing to listen and understand the perspective that I come from.

Riley echoes this sentiment, discussing the sense of acceptance and comfort that he experiences at kink focused social events that he attends called munches.

There is certain level of comfort at the munches, specifically wherein kink is already assumed, and you can talk about the weather or aging parents or films or hockey or whatever. You know, the same conversation you have with neighbours at the coffee shop or what have you, with so much less tension. Where it doesn't matter what their kink is, where it's out of the way. So that's quite a feeling of acceptance that is not the same as having coffee with your neighbours.

Max, who expresses the relief he feels when meeting someone else from the kink community, offers a similar perspective.

It can be a huge relief to encounter a kindred spirit, so to speak. To know that there are people who have the same thoughts and urges- it makes one feel a lot less like a freak, at the very least. Plus there's the benefit of comparing notes and learning new techniques, so as to enrich one's own experience.

The theme of acceptance however, runs deeper than simply building friendships and attending social events. The kink community is conceptually built on a foundation of acceptance for people who have been traditionally excluded and forced to the margins of society (Bauer, 2008; Martinez, 2015). In this way, there is a large representation of some traditionally marginalized groups. That is not to say that everyone feels a sense of acceptance in this community, having already highlighted some of the issues of othering within the community, but the kink community strives to be an inclusive space. Darcy established this as a significant part of her BDSM experience.

I guess for me the kink and the fetish world is also, even though my partners have mostly been men, very tied to my queer persona and the part of me that embraces that; And the part of me that enjoys sex with multiple people of multiple genders, and multiple identities.

This idea of the BDSM community being accepting of the Queer/LGBTQ population resonates with literature available about the transgressive and transformative potential for BDSM in the dyke community (Bauer, 2008) and also with the experiences of the disabled population who find empowerment and enjoyment in kink (Reynolds, 2007).

Challenging sex negative ideas

The majority of the participants introduced ideas of sex positivity and sex positive behaviour into their conceptualization of their participation in BDSM. They spoke of challenging the ideas that are attached to negative perspectives on sex, and instead championing acceptance and enjoyment of a wide variety of sexual behaviours. Max discussed his experience with the assumption that kink focused spaces (munches, play parties, dungeon spaces etc.) are fundamentally hedonistic spaces, with participants engaging in satisfying their carnal desires. While he does not necessarily disagree, he takes a different approach to understanding this behaviour than the vanilla population would, suggesting instead that the expression of desire and sexuality is not inherently wrong.

I am ... inclined to argue that they aren't necessarily wrong. I just argue that it's not a bad thing.

Sex positivity is a concept discussed at length by Darcy and Sage. Darcy readily offers her definition of this concept, linking it closely with ideas of acceptance.

I think being sex positive isn't about being ok with heteronormative/homosexual, penis vagina missionary sex. I think being truly sex positive is about embracing the world of sex, sexuality and gender with openness... Within the cultural world in which I live, in this sort of upper middle class sort of conservative psychosocial dynamic, I think sex

positive to them means don't ask, don't tell. Sex positive to me is telling all you want, and as long as you're doing what makes you happy and you're safe, that's fine.

Sage, on the other hand, first explores what sex negativity is before affirming his desire to embrace and educate others on sex positivity.

Challenging sex negative ideas, a lot of those are very subtle so its very hard to point out particular examples because they are very subtle attitudes that people have that are 'you shouldn't be involved in sexual activity with people', 'you shouldn't have multiple partners, 'why are you playing with this person while you're in a relationship with this person', and people just thinking that you doing that would make you a slut, or a person who is unworthy of being taken seriously.

Each of these concepts of sex positivity expressed fits remarkably well with the framework of sex positivity offered by Glickman (2000), and the traditional notions of third wave, sex positive feminism (Queen, 1977; Glick, 2000).

I mean it's all about consent

Arguably, the most significant form of resistance from the BDSM community is tied to the ongoing, pervasive assumption that BDSM is equal, or similar to domestic violence or abuse (Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984; Kolmes, Stock & Moser, 2006; Comber, 2008; Cunningham, 2010). The participants in this research were unanimous in their assertion that there is simply no link between BDSM and abuse, making clear distinctions between both types of behaviour and emphasizing the need for and practices of, consent within the BDSM community. Riley, in discussing the breakdown of his marriage, disclosed having experienced physical abuse and immediately became aware that this was something different than his consensual BDSM play with his partner.

There was just once incident because of my marriage breaking up where she struck my arm, and it was like, "call the police right now. Right now". That's after ten years of hanky panky. It was very clear that this was not something I was consenting to.

Max and Riley both express the process and rituals around discussions of consent and the act of obtaining ongoing consent from their partners to be something enjoyable. Max specifically enjoys the idea of his partners clearly stating their desires.

It's set out very clearly, which I personally rather enjoy. At least in my experience, you don't need to worry about asking somebody, "is it ok if I maybe slap your ass with this belt" if she has gone and strapped herself to a rack and said "slap my ass with that belt, Sir"

Sage, ever the educator, spoke of consent as something intrinsic to BDSM and elaborated with discussion of the consent related concepts in the BDSM community, SSC and RACK before discussing some of the other standard consent based practices.

Well, I mean it's all about consent, really. And by that I really mean informed consent. I mean there are certain things that people in the community have built up to make sure that BDSM is practiced in a safe way... Both of them [SSC and RACK] have the word consent in it... Another thing that people practice is check ins, which means that after a certain amount of time they check in with the partner and see if everything is ok, if there is anything that is uncomfortable, or if they want to change something. That's the way they continue an ongoing of consent, because the negotiation doesn't just happen at the beginning. You can also do negotiation in the middle of play; you can do negotiation afterwards. Negotiation for everything. Negotiation isn't just one thing that you do. It's something you're constantly doing all the time.

This idea of fluidity of negotiation and consent is also represented by Darcy, who resists the idea that consent is a simple statement.

Consent is ongoing and can change and is not a statement for me. It can shift in time. I think consent, for me, has a lot to do with desire. If I don't desire something or desire to give it to my partner, odds are I am not going to consent to it.

Sage also introduces a new concept to the idea of consent. Rather than simply working from the idea that he has obtained consent for something and wantonly proceeding, he continually questions himself about his partner's enjoyment.

What I tend to think of as consent is that if a person after the play is going to look upon it with a positive mindset. So if you ask somebody afterward if they were giving their consent during that play, are they going to say yes? And if they say yes, then there was consent happening. If they say no, then something was missed as far as consent goes during the play.

Sage also explicitly offers the distinction between BDSM and abuse, while also discussing the situations in which consent might not be sufficient, and abuse is happening in encounters that appear to be consensual, emphasizing the need for risk awareness and consent.

I would define the terms is that they are kind of polar opposites because I don't really think that you are practicing BDSM if you are not getting consent from your partner... There could be [abuse] if the person is not getting the proper informed consent that they are supposed to be getting, if there is a risk they are taking that they might not be aware of, or if their partner is using a technique like gas lighting to convince them that everything they are doing is correct and that their concerns about it are faulty, that situation is where the person who is participating may not be aware of something that is going on, and that is definitely something to be concerned about. And that does happen.

This discussion of the fluidity of negotiation, and the giving and obtaining of consent within a post structural framework lends itself to a Foucaultian interpretation of the power dynamics involved in consent versus that of abuse. Foucault's post structuralist conceptualization of power alters the traditional understanding of power being held by any one person or group. Instead he interprets power as dispersed. Power is and can be embodied by multiple people, and enacted between them, rather than possessed by a specific individual. It is fluid and can be enacted in different ways depending on the context or circumstance (Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 2010). Power exhibited between people, in Foucaultian terms, forms an acceptance of discourses of power that function between people (Foucault, 2010). When applying this concept to discussions of consent, it fits well with the perspectives of ongoing negotiation and consent. In this framework, consent is not simply given, but is constantly being negotiated between the people included in the activity. Both parties are active and participating in this negotiation and

consent process throughout the encounter, with a balance of power enacted between them. In the context of BDSM, while the Dominant partner is traditionally thought to hold the power, instead it is the constant embodiment of power between the Dominant and the submissive that creates consent; the Dominant, who assumes power in a more traditional format, and the submissive who assumes power in their desire, their willingness, and their consent. It is only within this dynamic of mutually embodied power that BDSM can exist. Within this construction then, abuse or domestic violence becomes something other than the Foucaultian understanding of power, with the abusive partner enacting their power on the abused. It is precisely this lack of mutually enacted power that makes this dynamic abuse and decidedly not consensual BDSM. The exemplary way power is enacted between members of the BDSM community has the potential to inform, advise, and educate others on the dynamics of power, negotiation, and consent.

The BDSM community are continuously engaged in forms of resistance against the dominant discourses that surround them. They strive for acceptance from society, and create their community as an accepting place for others. The BDSM community also endeavour to challenge the discourses around sex negativity, and to ensure that people have a complete understanding of the complexities and context of BDSM.

The available data is analysed in such a way that the dominant discourses are explored and categorized in two ways. The majority of the experiences discussed by the participants are related to encountering the dominant perspectives and discourses of BDSM. The BDSM community encounters this dominance constantly, whether they disclose their interest and participation in BDSM or not. Yet, both as individuals and as a part of the broader BDSM community, the participants also discussed their acts of resistance. Not only did they resist the

influences of the dominant discourses in their individual lives, but many also engaged in resistance on a broader scale, working to shift the discourses in society.

CHAPTER 9: Implications for Social Work

As the discourses in society surrounding sexuality have been changed, in large part to the social movements of feminism and the advancements of queer rights, so has the sexual perspective in social work shifted (Dunk-West & Hafford-Letchfield, 2011). However, the dominant social work exploration of sexuality is inherently tied to the problematic experiences of clients and service users. Sexuality in social work has been relegated to the sidelines unless a client expresses a specific sexual issue or the social worker assumes the sexual behaviour is indicative of larger underlying problems (Dunk-West & Hafford-Letchfield, 2011). Instead, social workers need to be willing to engage with their client's sexuality in a meaningful way as a part of their human experience (Dunk-West, 2011). This becomes exponentially important when the sexuality is marginalized or discriminated against.

Understanding and working to meet the needs of marginalized groups is a fundamental principle of social work (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005). People who engage in BDSM desire acceptance from their friends, family, coworkers, service providers and the general population. The obligation for social workers to strive for social justice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005) simply has to include even the most marginalized groups, including the kink and fetish communities. Social workers must become educated and aware of the dynamics and complexities involved in sex, sexuality, and kink. Social workers also need to adopt and promote a sex positive perspective, and work to engage in advocacy towards shifting the dominant discourses of normative sexuality.

Education is a fundamental tool to dismantling stereotypes, assumptions and dominant discourses of both sex in general and the BDSM community. The participants in this project were unanimous in their desire for their service providers, including but not limited to social

workers, to acquire education about the actual experiences of those engaged in BDSM. Max called for heightened awareness of BDSM, while Darcy was more specific in her desire for education related to the difference between having a history of trauma and interest in BDSM.

I would like them to be able to differentiate between abuse, trauma and BDSM. As a service user, I'd like to be able to simultaneously confess that I am a trauma survivor and into BDSM and not have them conflate the two. And I think I would like every service practitioner to under go a sex positive BDSM workshop with somebody who understands it.

When discussing the lack of education related to therapeutic strategies he has encountered, Riley suggested:

When your only tool is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

Alluding to the idea that if social workers and service providers want to have comprehensive strategies to address the actual needs of their clients, they need the education to recognize if they need to use a hammer or another type of tool. Sage also discussed the need for education and called for service providers to have the ability to resist the desire to pathologize BDSM, or attribute it to abuse. He also suggested that BDSM should be approached from the assumption of consensual behaviour unless there is an indication of abuse.

What I would want them [service providers] to know is that BDSM doesn't automatically mean that there a mental illness, doesn't necessarily mean that there is abuse happening, it doesn't necessarily mean that somebody wants to cause harm to themselves, and that they shouldn't make those assumptions... I think in general people should come with the assumption that ... [BDSM is] consensual and safe until given evidence to the contrary.

Education of service providers about the complex dynamics of BDSM is the primary step in dismantling the dominant discourses that lead to the marginalization of the BDSM community.

There is a fundamental need for social work, as a discipline, to internalize concepts of sex positivity as a means to support their clients. As education about the kink community is increased, there will also inevitably be sex positive perspectives that develop in service providers

who have traditionally been sex negative. This will shift understanding both of BDSM, and sex positivity in general, as Darcy suggests.

BDSM is not about violence; it's not about trauma. It's about freedom, exchange of power, consent, enjoyment, and, being sex positive. And that part of being sex positive, if you want to identify that way, means embracing BDSM.

Sex positivity establishes a framework for sex education that can be utilized by social workers to engage in discussions about all forms of sex and sexuality with their service users. It facilitates a shift in the pervasive discourses about sex in social work that have been internalized from broader societal discourses of shame, silence and sexual oppression (Foucault, 1991). Social work from an educated, sex positive perspective allows for open, honest dialogue with clients about the benefits and risks of any variety of sexual behaviour, as well as conversations about safer sex practices. It allows social workers to approach the topics of non-normative sexuality without marginalization or pathologization of any group, including those involved in kink or fetish behaviour. Sex positivity forms the foundation of discussing sex in a way that assists clients to explore their sexual desires in a healthy, consensual way.

The combination of education about non-normative sexuality and sex positive attitudes has the ability to facilitate the work of social workers in their pursuit of social justice and equality. It becomes a platform to use in order to engage in advocacy to shift the dominant discourses in society to promote further acceptance of the kink community. This type of work is necessary, and overdue, and individuals in the BDSM and kink community deserve to benefit from the support and advocacy the social work profession can contribute as they seek to reduce their experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and oppression.

Additionally, social workers have the opportunity to learn from the BDSM community in the areas of consent, negotiation, tolerance, acceptance, and inclusivity. The constantly shifting

practice of negotiation and consent in the BDSM community is remarkably similar to that of the social worker and client relationship, wherein both parties are constantly in a position to negotiate and renegotiate the boundaries and practices in a helping relationship. Similarly, the BDSM community has become a space that values and prioritizes tolerance, acceptance and inclusivity of all types of people. Social workers can learn from these practices in the BDSM community in order to improve the same values in their own practices, services, and agencies.

CHAPTER 10: Final Reflections

The process of conducting this research came attached to intense emotional reactions for me. As I was conducting my data analysis and identifying the themes contained in the data, each theme resonated strongly with me as a sex positive social worker and as a member of the BDSM community. The theme of avoidance is one that I have struggled with repeatedly. While I make conscious attempts to live my kink in as open a way as possible, there are venues where I have felt the need to filter myself or I have been asked to avoid topics by those around me. Similar to Darcy, my own father has expressed a desire to not hear about kink related topics from me which creates internal conflict when he asks some questions. I constantly fight a battle between respecting his wishes and living with a sense of integrity, such as when he asks about my plans for the upcoming weekend or whom I am socializing with. My experience of feeling othered is similar to Sage's, where I have made strategic decisions to create environments in which I am sure to be accepted. My social circles are filled with liberally minded, progressive people, some of who are affiliated with kink. I also actively seek to exclude sources of information that make me feel othered. Where this becomes challenging for me personally is with respect to media, as I am continually confronted with depictions of BDSM in one of two ways: the butt of the joke, or the pathological criminal. These constant discourses in the media serve as a means to divide me from the general population and to distinguish my community as distinctly other. I can also echo the sentiment of my participants related to the essentialized identities that I hold as a member of the kink community and a self identified slut. For me, the representation of BDSM in media discussed previously serves as a form of essentialism, where BDSM is interpreted as either victimization or criminalization. Additionally, as a female masochistic submissive, the trope of the perpetual victim is one that is often associated with me and is also one that I actively combat

by providing education and different perspectives to the people I encounter. Finally, while I can recognize the discourses in the BDSM community with regards to disclosure to service professionals, I have never had a negative experience of this sort. I approach my services with the perspective of an informed consumer and I actively seek out kink-aware professionals, based on recommendations from the kink community. In doing so, I am able to connect with service providers who I am sure will be able to refrain from engaging in discriminatory behaviour. This strategy extends from finding a family doctor or new therapist, to finding aestheticians who will not be shocked by the appearance of bruises or other markings. Though, it has to be acknowledged that I seek kink-aware service providers in an attempt to avoid those same experiences that other members of the BDSM community had that were negative.

While I do strongly identify with the themes related to dominant discourses and marginalization, I have an even stronger affinity for the resistances discussed by my participants. Though, that could have been anticipated as I designed and engaged in this research project as my own form of resistance to the dominant discourses regarding sexuality and BDSM both in society and in social work. Since I entered the BDSM community, I have built strong and lasting relationships with other people who share my mindset and preferences. I have travelled to workshops and conferences to be in surroundings and environments where I know my lifestyle choices and sexuality will be respected and celebrated. The kink community, along with the sex positive community, have been an incredible source of resiliency for me and have become my biggest supporters in my personal and professional lives. I am strongly aligned with the values and ideals of sex positivity and plan to engage in further research about BDSM, sex and sexuality in social work. Finally, I cannot emphasize how grateful I was to develop a theme related to consent. My own personal journey to BDSM through the lens of a strong, independent

feminist raised significant, persistent questions related to BDSM and domestic violence. I am thrilled with the quality of the data that my participants offered in their differentiation between BDSM and abuse, as it fit remarkably well with the interpretations that I arrived at after years of contemplation and soul searching. The BDSM that I practice is structured around the constant fluidity and exchange of power between my Dominant partners and myself. It is in these experiences of submission that I feel I am able to fully embrace who I am. They create spaces in which I feel my safest and most taken care of. They allow for my vulnerability with other people and also help build my strength, resilience and power as I engage with the rest of the world. Far from being in any way detrimental, my submission helps me to thrive.

As a member of the BDSM community, I deserve acceptance. I deserve to be able to live my life and engage in my lifestyle and sexuality in the ways that appeal to me. Furthermore, I have the right to do so in an environment that does not marginalize me or discriminate against me. To this end, I will continue to seek to produce information that other service providers and the general public can use in order to dismantle the dominant discourses and systems of oppression that would seek to limit my, and others, explorations of sexuality. I believe that people who desire non-normative sexuality have the right to engage with it in their own way and I will continue to advance the sex positive, BDSM educated social work agenda in an attempt to minimize the dominant discourses that would seek to marginalize them for doing so.

APPENDIX A- Recruitment Flyer



SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
FACULTY OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

Accredited by The Canadian Association for Social Work Education

Defining the Difference: Developing Knowledge of BDSM

My name is Lauren Van Camp and I am currently completing a Master of Social Work degree at Ryerson University. I am in the process of recruiting participants for a small study designed to further understanding of BDSM. Specifically, the study is intended to allow participants to discuss how BDSM differs from the way it is typically understood in mainstream society, and how it is different than domestic violence.

The research seeks to allow the BDSM community to have an opportunity to contribute to the research produced about them. The purpose of the study is to comprehend how BDSM is understood by society, how this impacts the experiences of the community, and how the BDSM community is and acts different than the way they are understood. The research will also ask individuals who practice BDSM to discuss their views on how their sexual practices and/or lifestyle are different from abuse and domestic violence.

I am recruiting approximately four people who practice BDSM, and are over the age of 18 will be recruited for interviews. If you meet the criteria, and are interested in participating in the study, please contact me at the email address below. Additionally, I would greatly appreciate it if you could distribute this flyer to anybody you know who you feel might be interested in participating.

This research process will involve a phone interview, lasting approximately 90 minutes. Your participation will be anonymous as I will not seek information about your real life identity, and all information shared will be confidential. No identifying information will be published. Participation is completely voluntary and you can decide to end your involvement in the study at any time.

Finally, a bit about me. I have been actively involved in BDSM community for the last two years. I am passionate about changing the way BDSM is viewed in mainstream society, and fighting against the marginalization and oppression of this community.

I look forward to hearing from you. For more information please contact me at via email at lauren.vancamp@ryerson.ca

Thank you,

Lauren Van Camp, MSW Candidate, 2015 Ryerson University

APPENDIX B- Consent Form



SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
FACULTY OF COMMUNITY SERVICES
Accredited by The Canadian Association for Social Work Education

Research Interview Consent Form

Defining the Difference: Developing Knowledge of BDSM

You are being asked to participate in a research study. If you have any questions about the research, please contact Lauren Van Camp at lauren.vancamp@ryerson.ca. Before you agree to participate in this study please read the information below, and ask any questions you may have in order to understand what you will be expected to do.

PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR: Lauren Van Camp – Master of Social Work Candidate, Expected 2015, completing research under supervisor Dr. Susan Silver for a Major Research Project, in partial completion of the Masters of Social Work Degree.
email: lauren.vancamp@ryerson.ca

SUPERVISOR: Susan Silver, PhD – Associate Professor, Ryerson School of Social Work
email: ssilver@ryerson.ca

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

This research will seek to fill a gap in the existing knowledge about BDSM, and non-normative sexual practices in general.

The research seeks to allow the BDSM community to have an opportunity to contribute to the research produced about them. The purpose of the study is to comprehend how BDSM is understood by society, how this impacts the experiences of the community, and how the BDSM community is and acts different than the way they are understood. The research will also ask individuals who practice BDSM to discuss their views on how their sexual practices and/or lifestyle are different from abuse and domestic violence. Approximately four people who practice BDSM, and are over the age of 18 will be recruited for interviews.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY:

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we will ask you to take part in one individual interview lasting approximately 90 minutes. Your interview will take place over the phone, and then will be transferred into a transcription for analysis. Examples of interview questions you will be asked include the following:

- Tell me about your experiences being into BDSM in a vanilla world, where BDSM is not understood or practiced by everyone.
- Can you tell me about any experiences you have had when you felt the need to hide your sexual preferences?
- Have you had any experiences where you felt stereotyped for your sexual preferences? Can you tell me about them?
- Can you tell me about what in your experiences differentiates BDSM from abuse? What about ways in which they are similar?
- Tell me about your experiences with consent in BDSM? What does consent look like between you and your partners?
- What would you like people to understand about BDSM?
- What would you like service providers (social workers, therapists, counselors, mental health professionals) to understand about BDSM?

USE OF DATA:

The information collected in interviews will be used for several purposes. The first purpose is to complete a supervised Major Research Paper, which will be submitted to Ryerson University in partial completion of a Masters of Social Work degree. The second purpose will be to complete an unsupervised manuscript, which the researcher will submit to a peer-reviewed journal to potentially be published. Both the Major Research Paper and the manuscript will have the same focus. The information will also be put into a presentation format in order to be given as a presentation at conferences related to the topic.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS:

You might experience discomfort during the interview because of the length or because of the emotional nature of the discussion. I will offer all participants some referrals to online and telephone resources. Please note that you can stop the interview, take a break, or withdraw at any point during the interview process. You can also withdraw from the research study after the interview has taken place. If you decide to withdraw, all data collected from you will be destroyed and will not be included in the study.

The study has been designed to restrict any potential risk that your real life identity may be discovered, or your participation in BDSM exposed. The researcher will not ask for any information about your real life identity, and will maintain confidentiality of any identifying information shared.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY:

This research will fill a gap in existing knowledge related to non-normative sexualities, and BDSM, and it will contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding sexuality in Social Work. It will also allow participants to have a small voice in the way in which they are constructed in an academic setting.

I hope that this study will give you an opportunity to have a voice in how people who do BDSM are understood and viewed, and give you a chance to explain how this type of sexual practice is different from the way the vanilla population understands it. I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

All information obtained from you in connection with this study will remain strictly confidential. Only the student investigator and their supervisor will have access to the data collected. The data from the online interviews will be moved into a transcription, all identifying information will be removed, and pseudonyms will be used to ensure confidentiality.

For any participant who has an existing relationship with me from my involvement in the Toronto or Edmonton BDSM community, I may have existing information about your identity. All efforts will be made to maintain your confidentiality in this situation.

In situations in which I become aware of a participant's intention to harm themselves or someone else, or in the case that there is harm occurring to a child, I am ethically bound by a duty to report this information, including any identifying information regarding the participant, to appropriate authorities.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF PARTICIPATION:

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and stop your participation at any time before the final report has been written. At any point in the study you may refuse to answer any question asked, or to stop participation all together. If you decline to participate, or withdraw from the study at any point, this will not impact your future relations with Ryerson University, the investigator (Lauren Van Camp), or the supervisor (Susan Silver) involved in the research.

FUTURE CONTACT:

If you consent to be contacted for the purpose of sharing the study findings, you will be contacted when the study is complete via email.

COMMITMENT TO ETHICAL RESEARCH PRACTICES:

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact:

Research Ethics
C/O Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, ON, M5B 2K3
416-979-5042
rebchair@ryerson.ca

Appendix C – Interview Guide

Defining the Difference: Developing Knowledge of BDSM

1. Tell me about your experiences being into BDSM in a vanilla world.
2. Can you tell me about any experiences you have had when you felt the need to hide your sexual preferences?
3. Have you ever gotten treatment such as therapy or other mental health support? If so, can you tell me how your BDSM impacted this?
4. Have you had any experiences where you felt stereotyped for your sexual preferences? Can you tell me about them?
5. Can you tell me about what in your experiences differentiates BDSM from abuse? What about ways in which they are similar?
6. Tell me about your experiences with consent in BDSM? What does consent look like between you and your partners?
7. What would you like people to understand about BDSM?
8. What would you like service providers to understand about BDSM?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share? Anything I didn't ask about that you think is important? Do you have any questions for me?

Please note: This guide is merely intended to provide questions that may be asked in the interview. Not all questions will necessarily be asked.

Appendix D – Ethics Approval



To: Lauren Van Camp Social Work

Re: REB 2015-021: Defining the Difference: Developing Knowledge of BDSM Date: March 12, 2015

Dear Lauren Van Camp,

The review of your protocol REB File REB 2015-021 is now complete. The project has been approved for a one year period. Please note that before proceeding with your project, compliance with other required University approvals/certifications, institutional requirements, or governmental authorizations may be required.

This approval may be extended after one year upon request. Please be advised that if the project is not renewed, approval will expire and no more research involving humans may take place. If this is a funded project, access to research funds may also be affected.

Please note that REB approval policies require that you adhere strictly to the protocol as last reviewed by the REB and that any modifications must be approved by the Board before they can be implemented. Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication from the Principal Investigator as to how, in the view of the Principal Investigator, these events affect the continuation of the protocol.

Finally, if research subjects are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research.

Please quote your REB file number (REB 2015-021) on future correspondence. Congratulations and best of luck in conducting your research.

Lynn Lavallée, Ph.D. Chair, Research Ethics Board

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lynn Lavallée".

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