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Practice Thesis Proposal

THE EFFECTS OF STIGMA ON SELF-DISCLOSURE IN THE BDSM COMMUNITY

This document proposes thesis research investigating the impact of stigma on the online BDSM (Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism) culture utilizing qualitative content-analysis and interview approaches.

Stigma are almost always negative and impact the quality of interaction that the stigmatized person can have with others (Goffman 2009:3).There is a growing collection of academic literature on the topic of sadomasochism, but mostly as a cultural analysis (Weinberg 2006:17-19) or critique (Mokros et al. 2011:189) that is deeply anchored in the BDSM culture itself. There is very little research that places BDSM or sadomasochism in the context of the dominant culture. The absence of research on the impact of stigma on the BDSM community is a gap which ignores the interaction between individuals who identity with the BDSM community and the discourse of their social surroundings. The discourse of dominant society does not render BDSM as a valid sexuality in its entirety, which excludes members of that community from their surrounding society. As a result of this gap I believe there is limited understanding of the impact that the perceptions, assumptions and attitudes about BDSM held by the majority population on the individuals who identify with the set of desires and attitudes that are

classified as BDSM. I propose to conduct a content-analysis and interviews to investigate the impact of the stigmatized identity on the members of the BDSM community.

Literature Review

As a base upon which to frame the research question a definition of BDSM community is needed. A prior review of the literature conducted by Thomas Weinberg found that there were numerous definitions of the BDSM community and BDSM subculture, most of which involved some level of self-identification with the group (Weinberg 2006:19). Other literature suggests a strong distinction between people with normative sexuality that engage in the practices of BDSM and those that identify with BDSM as a sexual identity or cultural affiliation (Newmahr 2010:320).

One of the many BDSM subcultures is the community that has formed on the Internet (Amir and Safir 2006:91). Early preliminary work on paraphilic sexuality found that most individuals who participated in online exercises of sexual expression reported feeling more sexually empowered than those who did not utilize such an outlet for expression. This is explained by the anonymous interaction with others that formed an affirming social experience (Amir and Safir 2006:75). Social stigma is thought to cause a push phenomenon that results in alternative sexualities being forced to online venues to seek social affirmation and a sense of community (McKenna and Bargh 1998:690). The implications for the BDSM community is that the members of the community become

more comfortable socializing with other members of the community online than with people perceived as being dissimilar to them in physical situations (McKenna and Bargh 1998:692).

Academic literature regarding the impact of stigmatization on practitioners of BDSM is rather limited. One of the few articles specifically addressing the topic uses semi-structured interviews to understand the process of self-disclosure among participants in BDSM (Bezreh, Weinberg, and Edgar 2012:38). Bezreh, Weinberg and Edgar discovered many reasons why BDSM practitioners choose to conceal or reveal their identity. One of the most commonly reported reason to reveal the identity was in seeking partners and friends who would be compatible with themselves (2012:40). The strongest reason for not disclosing the BDSM interest was fear of the response of outsiders, either in a personal or professional setting (Bezreh, Weinberg, and Edgar 2012:49-50). There is some discussion of BDSM in conjunction with stigma in the psycho-medical and legal literature. An analysis of legal precedents confirms that there is some social risk associated with engaging in some forms of BDSM, specifically those that involve the expression of physically violent desires (Taylor 1997).

Information regarding the prevalence of BDSM identification is difficult to interpret because of different measures used to collect data and different interpretations of BDSM. One study suggests that up to 14% of Americans may identify with the BDSM culture (Janus and Janus 1993), whereas a Canadian study that focused only on the

attribute of bondage desire claims that as many as 65% of Canadian university students have desires to be bound in a sexual way (Renaud and Byers 1999).

At the core of most research involving stigma is Erving Goffman's *Stigma*. Goffman is often cited as both the definition of stigma and the theoretical background upon which research is based (Levin and Laar 2005). Goffman describes stigma in several ways throughout his book, but the description most relevant to this research is "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance. (2009:loc 27)" Goffman provides a concept for stigma that is based on the presentation of a virtual identity and the conservation of an actual identity (2009:2-3).

Stigma has historically been shown to have an impact not only on the perception that is held by the dominant social group, but also on the self-concept of individuals who belong to the stigmatized group (Crocker and Major 1989:610). If a person receives social information regarding a negative stigma or stereotype of a group to which they belong, then it is possible for it to be integrated into the self-concept, resulting in a negative self-perception. Negative self-perceptions can lead to a lack of social engagement (Levin and Laar 2005).

Popular culture is changing the social perception of BDSM, but this does not mean that the stigmatized status is disappearing. Margot Weiss found in her study of attitudes regarding BDSM that "increased exposure to representations of SM has not resulted in progressive or politically useful feelings of acceptance or understanding." (Weiss 2006:105) The form of BDSM that has become socially acceptable is that which

is practiced privately between monogamous partners in a heterosexual or pseudo-heterosexual relationship. Typically it is expected that the male be the dominant figure and the woman the subordinate. To reverse the binary would result in a comical reaction from a normative audience (Weiss 2006:106). BDSM in the form of sexual role playing is not of concern to this study, but rather a more serious BDSM identity which is enacted as a sexual identity, hobby interest or cultural affiliation is the subject being considered. Previous work on this particular community has shown that they identify themselves as distinct from those who do not engage with BDSM activities in a serious way (Newmahr 2010:317).

Fifty Shades of Grey by E.L. James is an erotic novelization that romanticizes the notion of BDSM into a normatively digestible form (2012). It is also representative of the type of "bedroom" BDSM that is permissible in the atmosphere created by an aggressively dominant hegemon. As Margot Weiss states generally of most mainstream BDSM representations, it has been "disciplined, commodified" by a culture that is "already bound by ideological dichotomies. (Weiss 2006:106)"

Research Questions

Approaching this research I believe that the level of interpersonal disclosure that is practiced by members of the BDSM community may be impacted by the social stigma that surrounds their community. I also seek to understand if the participants in the BDSM

community that are also active in the online segment of that community have a different reaction to the stigma than those without the support of such a community.

Several questions are raised by considering the impact on stigma on the online BDSM community. Does the presence of an online community provide a positive influence on self-concept? This question requires determining if there are differences in the perceptions of others on individual members of the BDSM community between their real lives and the type of lives they construct for themselves in online communities. Does the level of disclosure differ depending upon the specific areas of desire that are assimilated into the self-concept? This question is key in understanding whether there is a monolithic reaction to the perception of a stigmatized identity or if the reaction varies based on more specific types of identity characteristics.

There are a variety of factors that can impact the outcome of these questions. There is the possibility of a bi-directional impact on the identities and levels of self-disclosure between the online and "real-life" social experiences. The online BDSM community can produce a more affirming social experience for the participants than a physically local social experience due to fears of the outcome of the social stigma (Amir and Safir 2006:78). It is possible that the affirming social experience offered by the online community could result in more self-disclosure of identity in real life social situations. Such an affirming experience could also have the opposite effect and discourage self-disclosure in other social situations due to the level of personal comfort

achieved with the online community. One objective of this research will be to determine if either of these hypothetical occurrences are accurate.

My final objective with this research will be to add to the discussion of the question "What is the BDSM community?" As mentioned in my review of the literature, there is an active conversation in the academic discourse regarding how the community is defined or even if the community can be defined. This research will attempt to contribute an additional perspective to the discourse.

Research Design

To study the research questions I will utilize a content analysis of existing blog posts and social media narratives to measure major themes regarding the impact of social stigma on the self-concept and levels of identity disclosure among people involved in the BDSM community who take advantage of the availability of online community. I will also utilize interviews to understand the self-concepts, levels of self-disclosure and other factors that impact the ability of people in the BDSM community to function in a larger social context. For the purpose of this research I will restrict the definition of BDSM community to those who identify with BDSM as a primary sexual identity or associate themselves with the BDSM subculture.

The primary demographic that will be targeted in the study is gay males that self-identify as part of the BDSM community that represent the most active online population,

with an age range between 18 and 36. The sample population will be purposive and will likely snowball through the development of network relationships through the community. The limitation of the age range allows for analysis of a population that has a similar set of social experiences and comfort with online communication forms. The sample for the content analysis will be driven by the content of the blogs, with those containing themes relevant to the investigation. The sample for the interview portion of the study will be based upon the available number of respondents. If a sufficient number of respondents are available, then the sample will be randomized with the sample weighted to allow for increased inclusion of participants that have other marginalized identities that intersect with their BDSM identification, such as being African-American or Latino.

The content analysis will begin by assembling a list of qualifying blogs. Blogs for inclusion will not be limited to blogs that are specifically targeted to or written about the BDSM community, but will also include individual blog posts from other blogs that touch on the topic of BDSM identity. Assembling the list of blogs for the study will require using multiple techniques. The initial technique to be applied to this task is a basic Internet search. An Internet search utilizing a list of category terms such as "bondage", "BDSM", "kink" and "fetish" will be paired with terms to restrict the type of results returned, such as "blog", "journal" and "diary" to retrieve an initial seed list. Google is the search engine of choice for this particular search, as it allows for unfiltered search results and uses some artificial intelligence to provide search results that are more relevant given any particular search context. In addition Google adheres to the robots.txt

search specifications, which ensures that the privacy of the content creators (bloggers) is respected. Google's robotic indexing service (called a "crawler") will not catalog any website which has explicitly specified in the robots.txt file on the web server that it should not be cataloged (Google, Inc 2013). Once the search is conducted only web logs will be retained on the list. For the purpose of this study a web log shall be any website that is based on user-created content written in journal or opinion article style that is indexed in a chronological way. It is not required that content appear in chronological order, but posts must be dated, have descriptive titles and be written in the styles mentioned previously. Only blogs written by individuals will be considered, corporate blogs and community journals are not considered relevant to this particular study because they do not reflect the social experience of the individual.

After the search-based list is compiled, then a network-based list will be created. The network-based list will be formed by following links on blogs in the search-based list to other blogs. This may be from a static list, often referred to as a "blog roll", or from links within posts. This process reflects the way that an intuitive Internet user is expected to find content and is therefore being considered as a method for exploring various attitudes in the community. There is the possibility for some clustering of similar attitudes in this method, but the two lists will be maintained separately in order to provide some control for this phenomenon and such occurrences will be noted in the final report.

From the list of blogs that is assembled a selection of 20 to 30 distinct blogs will be selected that are representative of a spectrum of sub-identities in the BDSM

community. The selection of this quantity of blogs is a result of the number of blogs that are actively maintained and are likely to contain information useful to this research. This number also represents a manageable number of blogs to review given the resources available and the number of individual posts contained in each blog. Blogs can contain hundreds or thousands of posts created over the life of the blog which require a lot of time and resources to effectively and accurately analyze and code.

There are four major topics of key interest to this study: bondage, sadomasochism, fetish and dominance/submission. Each category has distinct properties that create a distinct experience in personal identity and in interactions with cultural stigma. The interaction with the stigma will be considered as a social factor through the analysis of discussion of interactions with friends, family, coworkers and others who are not directly involved in the sub-culture.

The content of the blogs and individual blog posts will be gathered and coded based on their content into categories utilizing grounded methodology regarding major themes that emerge. It is anticipated that there will be themes relating to interaction between the stigma (the external image) with the development of a stigmatized identity (the self-concept), such as fears of presenting a "true" identity outwardly. Due to the online community involvement of the population being studied it is also anticipated that there may be some impact on the level of self-disclosure and the openness of the self-concept.

While the information contained in the blog posts is openly available on the Internet and subject to viewing by anyone with access or being crawled/indexed by a search engine there is an inherent obfuscation and anonymity afforded by the vast quantity of content available and singling out particular authors or blogs may pose a certain privacy risk. As a result of the potential perception of privacy by the bloggers, the data will be stored anonymously.

One of the benefits of a content analysis is that it uses data that already exists in a natural setting. The content to be analyzed was not written with the objectives of the study in mind and any bias that could be generated by phrasing of questions or the emotional reaction to questions being asked is minimized. Conducting a content-analysis also avoids issues of access to a vulnerable population, wherein it would likely not be possible to obtain a random sample regardless of the methodological approach. This approach has the potential to introduce a bias toward the views and opinions of the more prolific members of the community, however this potential is considered negligible considering the bias that would be generated in interviewing or surveying members of the community that are outgoing enough to respond to such requests. Some of the bias will be limited by blogs that allow commenting that have been responded to other members of the community with dissenting opinions. The most challenging aspect of the study is that before it is conducted it is unknown whether the content to be analyzed would contain adequate information on the themes that are at the core of the research. In the spirit of allowing surprise in social research this will not be a deterrent to conducting the study

and the themes of socially constructed identity, no matter what form they take will be extracted from the content of the blogs.

Participants for the interviews will be located through a variety of methods. The initial method will be to request access to send a message requesting volunteers through major social networking websites for the BDSM community such as GearFetish.com, Recon.com and FetLife.com. This will require approval of the website administrators. In past studies (Weinberg, Williams, and Calhan 1995) such access has been allowed by major websites that serve marginalized sexuality communities. The secondary method will be utilizing social media, such as Twitter, to disseminate an invitation for participation. This method relies on existing contacts that the researcher has in the BDSM community to provide the invitation to others in their communication networks. The number of responses gathered will be dependent upon the size of the social network websites for the communities for that method, and will be dependent upon the number of "retweets" and other in-network promotions that the invitation receives. The sample is somewhat self-selected and opting in to the study will be entirely voluntary. It is anticipated that several hundred responses could be received, providing a reasonable sample pool from which to draw participants.

The interviews are expected to be conducted either by e-mail or through a method more conducive to interactive communication, such as a chat service (XMPP, AIM, Yahoo, Skype, etc). Interview communications will be conducted in text when possible to require a minimum of interpretation. It is an accepted loss that subtle characteristics of

vocal communication such as vocal inflections and sarcasm may be lost by using a text-based communication method. It is anticipated that participants in the online gay BDSM community will be more open to communicating through text-based communication forms as this is a key component of how members of the community interact with each other.

Topics of the interviews will be a variety of questions relating to self-disclosure and relationships with non-BDSM friends, family and co-workers. An initial demographic survey inquiring about age, race, sexual orientation, gender and affiliation with the community will collect basic data that will be used to identify if there are any cultural, racial or age related factors that may lead to similar types of attitudes and feelings about how they are viewed by the society they live in. The survey will be asked at the opening of the interview and will therefore utilize the same protocol and security measures. All interviewees will be asked the same uniform set of questions initially (see Appendix 1), but the structure of the interview will be adapted based on the responses given by the participants. Probing techniques will be used where necessary to attempt to elicit responses and elaboration on topics that are relevant to the study. The interviewer will avoid asking leading questions or responding with comments that may indicate personal feelings about a particular response.

The responses from the interviews will be kept confidential by the interviewer. E-mails and chat transcripts will be copied from their original sources and stripped of all identifying information, then stored in coded files that will allow for matching survey

responses with the interview feedback. Once the interviews are made anonymous and are paired with the surveys the original copy of the transcripts and e-mail messages will be deleted. As with any electronic communication method, it is possible for the transmissions to be intercepted along the path or potentially be recovered after it has been deleted. All possible precautions to ensure the privacy of the participants will be taken, such as using an encrypted chat system where possible and utilizing an e-mail server to which the researcher has full administrative control.

This study is designed as an introductory study to catalog the attitudes and reactions of the BDSM community to their social surroundings, specifically the stigma that surrounds their identity and existence. At the conclusion of this particular study, further work could be done based on the themes that are revealed, perhaps following a quantitative method that would measure the impact of various sources of stigma on disclosure.

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Appendix I – Working Interview Protocol

Opening Survey

1. What is your age?

2. What race and ethnicity do you identify with?

3. At this time, what do you consider your gender to be?

4. At this time, how would you describe your sexual orientation?

Interview Protocol

1. What was your initial experience with bondage or sadomasochism?

2. Do you disclose your identity in the BDSM community or your BDSM activities with your close friends?

    a. How did those friends react when they first learned of that identity?

    b. What restricts you from disclosing that identity to your friends?

3. Do you disclose your identity in the BDSM community or your BDSM activities with family?

    a. How did those family members react when they first learned of that identity?

    b. What restricts you from disclosing that identity to your family?

4. How does your identity differ online versus in real life?

5. Do you feel more comfortable with self-disclosure online or in person? What factors affect that disclosure?

6. Describe how you feel that outsiders perceive the BDSM community.

7. Describe how you feel that outsiders perceive your involvement in the BDSM community.

8. Do you have close relationships inside the BDSM community either online or in person?

    a. Are those relationships rewarding? Do you feel more accepted in that community than with outsiders?

    b. Are there any specific factors which limit your ability or desire to have close relationships inside the community?