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To cite this article: Alexzandria C. Baker (2016): Sacred kink: finding psychological meaning at the intersection of BDSM and spiritual experience, Sexual and Relationship Therapy, DOI: 10.1080/14681994.2016.1205185

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2016.1205185

Published online: 15 Jul 2016.

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Sacred kink: finding psychological meaning at the intersection of BDSM and spiritual experience

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ABSTRACT
This study posed to participants the phenomenological question: “Can you describe, in detail, a specific time when you had a spiritual experience while engaging in a BDSM scene?” It was the goal of the researcher to understand the psychological meanings of spiritual experiences, occurring either spontaneously or through deliberate induction, had by participants who were actively engaged in BDSM scenes at the time of the experience and to capture a limited view of this lived experience. A descriptive phenomenological psychological approach was used to explicate the key psychological constituents of this phenomenon as it was lived.

The key constituents discovered in this research were (1) ordeal, (2) surrender, (3) visionary experience, (4) embodied sense of an energetic force, (5) sense of spiritual presence (Other), (6) self-surrendered/transcended state of consciousness, and (7) deeply personal and lasting transformation. Clinicians could possibly use the context of this research to better understand clients who are positively engaged in BDSM in the same way that one might view the religious and spiritual practices of a client.

KEYWORDS
BDSM; sadomasochism; spirituality; spiritual experience; paraphilia

Introduction
The practice and practitioners of BDSM have slowly gained the attention of a handful of sympathetic researchers over the last few years (Klein & Moser, 2006; Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2008; Nichols, 2006; Powls & Davies, 2006; Wright, 2010), and yet the body of literature on the topic is still negligible at best. The majority of research has tended to focus on the problem of BDSM from a psychopathological, legal, or physical health perspective. The examination of the lived experience of BDSM practitioners is extremely rare and the study of BDSM as a catalyst for personal growth and self-transcendence is notably absent from scholarly investigations. One known exception is a phenomenological study of SM in which 6 of 24 participants identified a transcendent quality to their experience (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). The phenomenological approach has also been used in several recent dissertations to examine various aspects of BDSM and this will hopefully lead to additional academic publications (Baker, 2016; Field, 2011; Matthews, 2005). On the other hand, the subject of sacred kink is emerging in the realm of popular
literature and quickly gaining a noticeable presence in the BDSM communities (Easton & Hardy, 2004; Harrington, 2009; Kaldera, 2006). In anthologies presenting a wide variety of experiences had at the crossroads of BDSM and spiritually, spontaneous and deliberate, essays range from personal reflections to the philosophical and instructional (Harrington, 2010; Sadie, 2007). However, the academic preference for, and even dependence on, empirical research published exclusively in peer-reviewed journals creates a protective barrier between these stories “from the street” and the “credible” scholarly archives.

This study was partially conceived with the intention of bridging this gap between the popular and academic literature. The objective was to understand the psychological meanings of spiritual experiences occurring, either spontaneously or through deliberate induction, for participants who were actively engaged in BDSM scenes at the time of the experience and to capture a limited view of this lived experience.

Methodology

This study posed to participants the phenomenological question: “Can you describe, in detail, a specific time when you had a spiritual experience while engaging in a BDSM scene?” A descriptive phenomenological psychological approach was deemed the most appropriate method for this research as the primary objective was to capture not only the lived experience as told by the participants but also key psychological constituents of the phenomenon as it was lived (Giorgi, 2009).

Regarding the definition of “spiritual experience,” the research process involved in creating this study took as a given that these mystical or spiritual experiences do exist for the participants and the researcher made no attempt to define these experiences for the participants. Neither did this research attempt to quantify, prove, or validate the experiences reported by the participants. The research question was carefully crafted and refined over the course of two preliminary studies. The concept of “spiritual experience” underwent several revisions including “transformative event,” “peak experience,” and “mystical experience,” all common phrases within the popular and academic literature. The researcher was specifically looking for reports of experiences in which, from the individual’s own perspective, the individual’s consciousness was shifted (deepened, heightened, or otherwise distorted) outside of a normal day-to-day state and into a receptive state where great personal insight was achieved followed by the return of consciousness to a normal state and a lingering impression or transformation. However, the term peak experience was avoided due to the potential pop-psychological connotations. Likewise, the terms religious and mystical were avoided as qualifiers to the quality of the experience. For the purposes of this study, such events were referred to as being spiritual in order to remove, as completely as possible, any definitional connection to the established theory or suggested expectation conveyed by these other terms, and in order to solicit the natural attitude meanings of “spiritual” for the participants. Hence spiritual experience was left up to each participant’s own interpretation.

Regarding the phrase “during a BDSM scene,” this was also left entirely up to the participant’s own interpretation. The breadth of what might be classified as BDSM would be impossible to fully define and, for this study, it would have been inappropriate to restrict the definition. The understanding of “scene” may also vary in length, tone, set, setting, with or without negotiation, or by partner.
The researcher’s own definition and expectations of spiritual experience and BDSM were suspended per the requirements of the phenomenological method. While impossible to completely remove previous knowledge, experience, opinion, or expectation, the researcher used the steps within the method to bracket these personal definitions as much as possible and the process of imaginative variation, one of the steps within the phenomenological method, assured that the researcher’s experiences were only one of a number of possible meanings, thereby reducing the potential for personally influencing the data transformations.

**Procedures**

**Participant selection**

Forty-six volunteers responded to the recruitment questionnaire answering in the affirmative both to having had an experience like the one in question and being willing to be interviewed. All 46 respondents were contacted via email and asked to schedule a five-minute phone call with the researcher. Of the 46 respondents, 19 scheduled screening calls. Sixteen respondents actually completed screening calls with the researcher in which they were told of the informed consent form and their rights as participants. They were also asked (1) why they wanted to participate in the study and (2) to give a very brief outline of the experience they wished to share. From these 16 respondents, 9 were selected to participate in the interview portion of the study based on the richness of their experience, their apparent ability to speak coherently from a personal perspective without self-analysis, and perceived emotional stability in regards to the topic of study. Gender, gender of partner, and role within the scene were not used as determining factors. Differentiation between spontaneous and deliberately induced experiences was noted but not used as a selection criterion. Of these nine selected participants, seven completed interviews. Of the seven interviews conducted, three were included in the final data analysis.

Recruitment questionnaires collected minimal demographic information, which was tallied for the participant analysis.

**Data collection**

Interviewees were asked to schedule a one-hour telephone interview. Calls began by confirming minimal demographic information. Interviewees were reminded of the informed consent agreement and given the chance to ask any questions they might have. Interviewees were not informed of the study’s methodology or the process for analyzing data in order to reduce biases and to better elicit the natural attitude of participants.

Interviews focused on the question, “[Will you] Describe, in detail, a specific time when you had a spiritual experience while engaging in a BDSM scene?” The researcher asked minimally directive, clarifying questions as needed. Interviews were concluded when the participant indicated that the description was complete and the researcher had no additional questions.

**Participant analysis**

The initial 46 recruitment survey respondents reported a range of genders and partner gender pairings. There was also represented a mix of roles within the scene and spontaneous versus induced experiences (see Tables 1 & 2).
Of the seven participants who completed interviews, only three were selected for the final analysis (see Table 3). Of the four that were excluded, two were spontaneous experiences and two were deliberately induced. One of the spontaneous experiences was closely considered but finally eliminated due to the brevity of the description. The other spontaneous experience was excluded due to the deeply analytical nature of the narrative, meaning that the narrative was not told from the natural attitude required in a phenomenological study but rather as a retrospective explanation of a past event. The natural attitude is one as free as possible from self-reflection or personal analysis. Giorgi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Role within reported scene and partner gender identification for all questionnaire respondents by classification of experience.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role of bottom/submissive/slave within given scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male-of-center/intersex</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MtF transgender</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender fluid</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender queer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metagender</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primal femme</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer female</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical female, spiritual</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender queer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Demographic information for three included participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Religious/spiritual affiliation</th>
<th>Partner’s gender</th>
<th>Spontaneous or deliberate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male-of-center/intersex</td>
<td>Top/dominant</td>
<td>Pagan, traditional shamanism</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Spontaneous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bottom/slave</td>
<td>Eclectic pagan</td>
<td>Male Group</td>
<td>Spontaneous Deliberate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender fluid</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Shamanism, pagan, cultural Jew</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the seven participants who completed interviews, only three were selected for the final analysis (see Table 3). Of the four that were excluded, two were spontaneous experiences and two were deliberately induced. One of the spontaneous experiences was closely considered but finally eliminated due to the brevity of the description. The other spontaneous experience was excluded due to the deeply analytical nature of the narrative, meaning that the narrative was not told from the natural attitude required in a phenomenological study but rather as a retrospective explanation of a past event. The natural attitude is one as free as possible from self-reflection or personal analysis. Giorgi
(2009, p. 96) writes, “…what is sought is simply a description that is as faithful as possible to the actual lived-through event.” The participants describing deliberately induced experiences tended to stop frequently to explain the set-up for the experience or the religious mythos being cultivated and to reflect on the many other similar experiences they had crafted. Again, these latter participants were excluded because their interviews failed to present the natural attitude required of a phenomenological data-set. They also failed to focus on the details of a single lived experience enough to fully explicate any useful constituents.

**Data analysis**

The three data-sets were compared in order to explicate the key psychological constituents of the phenomenon. Seven key constituents were found to be held in common among the data-sets:

1. Ordeal/pain
2. Surrender
3. Visionary experience
4. Embodied sense of an energetic force
5. Sense of spiritual presence (Other)
6. Self-surrendered/transcended state of consciousness
7. Deeply personal and lasting sense of meaning

**Findings and discussion**

This research was meant to take a clear, non-pathologizing look at the intersection of BDSM and spiritual experience. It was proposed that BDSM might serve, for some practitioners, as a path toward self-transformation and connection with that which is held as sacred. In the analysis of the three data-sets selected for this study, seven key constituents were found to be essential to an overall structure of this phenomenon. As a phenomenological study, this research was not undertaken in order to validate a hypothesis.

**Structure**

P described, in a visionary way, the lived experience of engaging in an intense ordeal related to a BDSM scene in which a willing surrender of ego boundaries was required. P reported feeling as if P entered what for P was a self-transcended state of consciousness wherein P experienced a heightened awareness of what P describes as an energetic force experienced in an embodied sense, which triggered deep psychological, emotional, sexual, and spiritual associations. P also reported sensing a spiritual presence. P indicated that the lived experience left P with a deeply personal and lasting sense of meaning.

**Key constituents**

**Ordeal**

In beginning the pilot study that preceded this work, it was presumed that the experience of excessive pain would drive such an experience via sensory overload (Baker, 2013).
However, the experience of pain was ruled out as a key constituent because two of the pilot study participants were *inflicting* pain rather than receiving it. Reflecting on the new data-sets, it comes to light that receiving pain is only one form of what might be called the Ordeal. In each case, participants were compelled in some way to open themselves, emotionally, physically, and psychologically, to a new level beyond their normal expectations, and perceived limitations.

For P2, the entire event was an ever-increasing ritual ordeal designed to push the participants of the event beyond pain and into another realm of consciousness. P2 was engaged in what is known as a *hook pull* in which the participants pierce themselves with body hooks a then, by either hooking to each other individually or in groups or connecting solo via pulleys, use the experience of pain to reach ecstatic states of consciousness. P2 described the physical and mental state following the induction of pain as, for P2, breaking down perceptual illusions and merging with the universal or cosmic presence in an embodied way. P2 described a psychological shift that was “like translating pain into something beyond pain, that it’s this sensation of being alive and feeling everything.”

For P1, the ordeal was more internal. P1 recounts a grueling outward ordeal as he put an intense amount of physical and psychological energy into the consensual beating of his partner. Beyond the physical strain of the scene, however, P1 describes being challenged by an unexpected initiatory vision into the connection between BDSM and his spiritual path that changed his entire relationship with each.

For P3, the ordeal built over an increasingly intense flogging scene. This followed another flogging scene earlier the same evening. P3’s description lacks detail in regard to the level of pain experienced; however, P3 did indicate a certain level of psychological conditioning that came with the sequence of events within the scene and the specific tools used by her partner. She reports that this combination typically “drives [P3] down” into a state referred to in BDSM as *subspace*. According to P3, it was through going into and emerging from this embodied psychological state that she came to what P3 describes as a spiritual experience.

**Surrender**

Surrender was a very prominent and powerful theme throughout all three descriptions. In these cases, the spiritual aspects of the experience would not have been possible without a full surrender of self either to the larger, transcendent self or an external power. There is an important distinction to be made here between surrender and submission. In these descriptions, it is clear that surrender was a willing choice and not a case of being overpowered by another, having free will taken away, or resigning to fate.

P2 talked extensively about surrender and the empowerment that she received from surrender. In P2’s case, the surrender was primarily internal. She gave in to being-in-the-moment and thus surrendered her self-doubt and psychologically held limitations. In many instances, P2 implied a surrender of reflective awareness as, for P2, she sank into a more pre-verbal part of her psyche. This is demonstrated here in a few excerpts from P2’s description:

… And as the hooks pulled, the pain dissipates, it’s there, but the ecstatic feeling is what took over, and he just kept pulling and pulling and it was this experience of being so surrendered and empowered at the same time, and just feeling capable of anything.
… Anytime I have something show up, like, oh, oh you know, my body’s not good enough, or I’m not doing this right, and just surrendering and him pulling, and able to release that, and to just experiencing this ecstaticness, this, it, it’s like a mixture of sexual energy, primal energy, um, fear, love, connectedness, um, like all of those emotions tied up together … Um, and because of the trust of him being in that role, I surrendered to that. And I surrendered to my own power of being capable of this … And surrendering is an act of power to me because you have to … you have to be strong enough to let go of the fears, to let go of the stories of I, you know, I’m not capable, I’m not good enough, or whatever it is, in order to surrender.

P1 and P3 never specifically used the word surrender and yet they both describe a deliberate psychological shift that allowed them to open to the lived experience. In the case of P1, he vividly describes consciously giving over his control to what he felt were higher beings present to him during the scene. He reports giving himself over to these beings that they could work through him to finish the goal of healing and comforting P1’s partner. While P1 was the dominant participant in this scene, his description of this surrender was reminiscent of a bottom who willingly serves, giving himself over to a Master.

P1 stated:

… I said, “Please, whoever you are who are watching, whichever one of you are,” and I … got the feeling there was, there was multiple eyes on this, “Please use me. Use my hands as your vessel to put in, put back in something positive to fill up the space that I just stripped out of her.” And I felt this flow through my hands, and it was not me. It was not energy that was any part of me or like anything that I am. It just came right through me cleanly into her.

P3 describes the deep level of trust in her partner required in order for P3 to surrender herself so completely that she was able to enter the state that P3 refers to as subspace. It was by relieving herself of those personal concerns and placing her care and safety needs in the hands of another that P3 reports being free enough to transcend her own ego boundaries and open herself to being the vehicle for the channeled extrasensory messages she delivered to her partner and others.

**Visionary experience**

Ps each used some manner of visionary language to describe their personal experience. To give a clearer picture of how Ps each used visionary detail in recounting their lived experiences, some excerpts are included here.

P3 stated:

And I was sitting there looking out into the night and it felt like it came at me over the trees, like a wave, that’s exactly how it felt like, it came up over the tree line and crashed down into the open area in front of us like a wave […] like a dampening feeling and the words came out of my mouth almost like I was vomiting them.

P1, recounted:

And just a minute or so into the scene, I stopped because I could see just pools of dark stuff inside her. And it moved a little when I hit her […] It was mostly centered around her heart chakra […] with my hands on her chest and on her diaphragm and I tried to pull it out of her and I got maybe little bits of it but not the whole thing.

P2 refers to visualizing energy moving in a “microcosmic orbit” as a means to charge herself with sexual and ecstatic energy.
This metaphorical language is common among recorded and studied accounts of religious, spiritual, and mystical experiences. Even if the experience did not consist of visionary content, however, subjects appear to have no other means by which to communicate the lived experience of such a pre-verbal, pre-self-consciousness than putting it into visual terms.

**Embodied sense of an energetic force**

The extrasensory perception of an external and vital energetic force could almost be, and almost was, combined with the constituent of visionary experience. The reason for this is that, in almost all cases, Ps mentioned some sort of “energy” surrounding the visionary experience that went far deeper than emotional or psychological “seeing.” On the other hand, the interactions with this energetic force are all described in an extrasensory, but not elusively visionary, way. Ps describe this energy as an embodied sense of psychological, erotic, emotional, or spiritual importance that is separate from Ps and yet deeply felt and impactful on some combination of these levels. Some excerpts from the descriptions demonstrate this constituent.

P2 stated:

... it, it’s like a mixture of sexual energy, primal energy, um, fear, love, connectedness, um, like all of those emotions tied up together, and building up and clearing them out and raising them up again and clearing them out and re-connecting and feeling joy.  
... it’s like when that energy’s building other people want to join in, so then I think the, the circle actually got fuller, there were probably like 8 or 10 of us connected in. Um, and we just danced with each other while we were pulling on our hooks together and, and, you know, connecting our eyes, connecting our hearts, connecting our sexual energy together.

P1 recalled:

... And so I made, I made that little cut and of course everything, everything in me, my mouth watered, I wanted it. I wanted it badly, I wanted it, the taste of it in my mouth. I wanted, um, um, I, I wanted the energy, the prana that was in it. 
... something really tiny and they only shed a drop of blood, but still a hole is made and something physical passes out and even that one drop of blood can end up being a carrier if the context is right, if the scene has led up to that. It can be a carrier for a lot of negative energy that can just come out of them

P3 reported:

... I don’t use words like, like good or evil, I use light or dark, because that’s how it feels to me. And this energy that was dark, was a dark energy and it felt, to me, very quiet and silencing like a ... like a dampening feeling 
First of all I ... The dark energy, um ... First thing I should have mentioned when we started this is I’m energy sensitive um, and I only make a differentiation between lightness and dark. Um, and this ... The place that we were at is full of light energy, white energy. It’s full of good positive energy and maybe, maybe in that comparison the dark energy seems darker than it might have really been. I can only, I can only use the words in my vocabulary to describe something that really doesn’t have a name to it.

As with all key constituents, the ontological index is here suspended. Regardless of the veracity of these descriptions, this energetic force is an embodied piece of the lived experience for Ps. This force is not the same as having the physical vitality required for action or the psychic energy invested in mental operations. It could be similar to what is theorized
as the “human biofield” by researchers investigating energy work such as Therapeutic Touch and Reiki. Although the human biofield is held to exist within close proximally to the living body and while it is claimed that some highly sensitive people can feel the biofield of another, it is not a common experience (Nelson & Schwartz, 2005). The descriptions given by the participants also refer to what they suggest are ambient and cosmic energies separate from themselves until the point of embodied experience. Perhaps in using the term “energy,” Ps are actually using thermodynamic phrasing as a metaphor for an embodied experience that is beyond quantifiable measure.

In the case of P1, some of the energy described is directly that of his partner, but that is not the only energy present to him. He also referred to prana, a vital and cosmic energy in yogic practices. P2 discusses human energy in relation to one partner but also in the context of a group energy, as well as a spirit energy and a universal, cosmic energy far beyond the human aspect. P3 describes energy almost entirely as outside and separate from her and while some mention is made of the energy of people it is in a group context.

Psycho-spiritual and psycho-sexual energy, in both the cosmic and individual sense, have been written about in similar terms for more than 3000 years (Chia, 2009). It is common in the Taoist and Tantric texts, as with the Microcosmic Orbit mentioned by P2. It is also very common in Pagan and Occult writings (Belanger, 2007; Kraig, 1999; Regardie, 2000). Likewise, it is mentioned occasionally in BDSM manuals (Easton & Hardy, 2004; Miller & Devon, 2003). It is very difficult to imagine the crossing of BDSM and spiritual experience without this intense embodiment of eros, psyche, and spirit.

**Self-surrendered/transcended state of consciousness**

In BDSM, there are certain states of consciousness that are common and yet not generally associated with spiritual experience. P3 mentioned *sub-space*, this is one. There is also the state referred to as *top-space*. Miller and Devon (2003) defined each as “erotically altered consciousness” (pp. 227, 238). They attribute to sub-space (bottom-space) the characteristics of “diminished ego awareness, less active cognitive behavior, surrendering of will” (p. 227). They attribute to top-space “intense focus, clarity of thought, a sense of extreme power or high energy” noting that “feeling of distance and objectivity” may also be characteristics of this state. Another term that Miller and Devon use is *flying*, which they define as a “trancendent state of consciousness sometimes [emphasis added] achieved during an SM scene” (p. 230). This state is marked by feelings “similar to out of body experiences and often include a psychic link with the dom” (p. 230). In their definition, this state is only attributed to bottoms.

P2 gave the most vivid description of what she indicated was an altered state of conscious. She repeatedly referred to an embodied “ecstatic” state that transcended her own conscious control. P2 reports experiencing this state as emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually expansive. Even in the early stages for P2, the physical and psychological preparation was to facilitate what P2 perceived to be a shift in consciousness that allowed for what was, for P2, a more transpersonal connection with the group and with a larger, more cosmic, spiritual current. P2 described levels of consciousness through which she progressed as the event intensified. These states appear to have oscillated between trance and rapture accompanied by the intense release of psychic, erotic, and spiritual tension. P2 reports that at certain points throughout the experience she merged into a shared trance with one or more partners. P2 describes psychologically shifting into a pre-verbal,
pre-personal state shed of her own ego boundaries. She finally came to a point in her description where she had difficulty remembering the exact sequence of events, how much time had passed, and how she had flowed from one space to another.

P3 reports that she and her partner entered into the scene with the goal of putting P3 into the state of sub-space. P3 indicated that there is a certain level of psychological conditioning between her and her partner that helps to facilitate the shift into sub-space. P3 begins the description of the spiritual aspects of her experience after going into sub-space and, according to P3 and P3’s report of her partner’s assessment, coming out of sub-space. She repeats several times that she felt she had not properly exited sub-space, as if she couldn’t “click back right.” She described her typical experience of sub-space as a strong physically and mentally dissociative state in which she is removed from her surroundings to varying degrees, including leaving her own body. In this case, however, that state was followed by a more embodied state but a continued floating, disorientation, and shifted awareness. At one point, P3 had to repeat what her partner had told her about her post-scene behavior because she could not recall that period exactly. P3 describes being overwhelmed by an embodied surge of emotional and spiritual energy. P3 reports lacking a sense of time and reduced ego boundaries. Although she spoke a message to her partner, P3 describes herself as being pre-verbal and the message to be from an external source. P3 indicates a high level of passivity involved in her spiritual interaction.

P1, who was the top in his scene, expressed a number of conflicting feelings. He felt drawn to helping his partner through her emotional wounds and, while he felt that he had the ability to do this, he also expressed fatigue and in the end having to give himself over to something more powerful to finish the job. P1’s whole description conveyed a deep connection with his partner in an energetic and visionary way and yet a great interpersonal distance. P1 describes himself as intensely focused on using his skills as a top to achieve his perceived goal. P1 also described the embodied sense of another entity moving through him. He did not have a sense of leaving his body but rather sharing it with spiritual beings. P1 reports feeling confused, bewildered, and exhausted at the end of the scene. He indicated a maintained interpersonal distance with his partner. P1 was the only participant to offer no description at all of his surroundings or his interaction with his environment. P1 is also the only one who did not describe a gap in time or lapse in memory although he was very non-specific in regard to those aspects of the experience.

**Sense of spiritual presence (Other)**

All participants reported the felt sense of an external and spiritual presence. This is perhaps what Rudolf Otto described as the *Numinous*, or an experience of the “wholly other.” Otto characterized the numinous as being entirely different from the experience of daily life, awe-inspiring, potentially frightful, fascinating, and wondrous. The experience of the numinous evokes a “sense of one’s own nothingness in contrast to its power” ([www2.kenyon.edu](http://www2.kenyon.edu)). This sense of presence is frequently mentioned in relation to such transformative experiences. Maslow (1962) mentions it as a component of peak experiences. It is the first item listed on the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (Currier et al., 2012). It is also a regarded as a key component in spiritual healing (Koss-Chioino, 2006) and religious conversion (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004).

This sense of Other took on a unique form for each of the participants. For P1, the Other took the form of multiple deities that he called “gods of death and pain.” Not being
able to assign a specific source for these deities at the time, P1 stated that he “later discovered who they were.” P3 also experienced a presence that she only described in terms of “dark energy” and yet it forced upon her a message meant for her partner. P2 felt the Other as a primal, universal, or cosmic force.

For both P1 and P3, their interaction with this numinous force was one of a conduit. For P1, he was able to surrender to these beings and allow them to finish the healing work that he had begun and yet could not fully complete. For P3, this dark energy flowed through her as a more passive conduit in order to deliver messages to her partner and others. For P2, the exchange was bi-directional. She envisioned that the ritual event was generating energy in order to feed some primal force and yet it was this pre-verbal, archetypical force that was channeling through her and the other participants of the event.

Deeply personal and lasting sense of meaning

Personal and lasting impressions of meaning are often seen as a result of such experiences as these whether they are called peak experiences, awakening experiences, religious experiences, or spiritual. In this case, Ps each indicated some lasting impact stemming from the live experience. For P1, he experienced what might actually be called a conversion experience as it did fall within his spiritual context and did leave with him a deep calling that forever changed his practice of spirituality and BDSM as well as his vocation. When asked what final comments he might want to make about the experience P1 concluded with:

I want to say that, uh, the way I have described it may sound to some people like, oh, that sounds awful that you kind of lost your, your, uh, um … In doing this work I, I did kinda lose, I did lose my, my, uh, my recreational casual BDSM life. I did. Um, and I, I mourned that for a while but eventually I helped enough people that I came to see that this was worth it. That, that making that sacrifice and giving that up was, uh, it was worth it in terms of the amount of, of good I was able to do for the world. And, it was the right thing to have happened.

P3 was left with a deep sense of connection to the place of the event and a deep longing to return. While she was not specific in how the experience changed her, she concluded her description stating that even though this experience was not her first or last lived experience of a spiritual experience related to BDSM that it was “one of the most profound spiritual experiences that [P3] ever had.”

P2 found within her experience a new sense of self-reliance and a new strength to go beyond her self-appointed limitations. It was clear in her description that these changes lingered with her still. She is still part of the same group with whom she shared this experience and regularly participates in similar events.

Discussion

It is well established at this point that some people do experience the subjective phenomenon of spiritual experiences arising from BDSM activities. Beyond the spiritual characteristics, this study was concerned with the psychological meanings of the phenomenon. These are demonstrated through the key constituents. What comes to light is that within the negotiated parameters of the BDSM scene several levels of what Maslow called the Hierarchy of Needs are met automatically, even if only for a brief time and in an artificial
way. For the bottom in a scene, it is of paramount importance that the top (or monitor) can be trusted completely with basic physiological and safety concerns. This is seen occurring in the cases of P2 and P3. The scene itself is meeting certain social and intimacy needs as was mentioned in all three narratives. In some cases, esteem needs are also met with praise for “doing a good job,” persevering through the negotiated ordeal, or a sense of personal accomplishment. P2 described this deep sense of accomplishment and “empowerment” after her surrender. Even in scenes that threaten these levels of personal security and esteem, there is an underlying agreement that the top is explicitly aware of the limits. However, none of the scenes in this study or the pilot study included a high degree of humiliation.

For the top in a scene, esteem and social needs are met in much the same way. Physiological and safety concerns are met in the deliberate preparation for the scene, which requires setting aside any outside distractions. P1 discusses the top’s responsibility to make that separation. Essentially, the scene becomes a sacred space or manifestation of the axis mundi. In meeting each level of the needs hierarchy, it leaves only the higher aspects leading to self-actualization and peak experience. Of course, this level is not reached in every scene, even in those scenes that meet all of the needs at the lower levels.

Karen Horney, quoted by Cowan (1982, p. 98) states: “all masochistic strivings are ultimately directed toward the satisfaction, namely, toward the goal of oblivion, of getting rid of self with all its conflicts and all its limitations.” The striving to reach a momentary transcendence of self, of one’s ego boundaries, however, is not an inherently pathological intention. Although he was performing in the role of top/sadist, P1 is an excellent example of individuation through such a transcendent shift. In his description he discusses how much of his previous self he lost through this experience and how that space has since been filled with a much more mature sense of purpose in his life.

From a Jungian perspective, BDSM (masochism specifically) can serve as a driver toward the state of individuation via the obliteration of ego. As quoted by Cowan (1982, p. 113), Jung writes:

The Dionysian is the horror of the annihilation of the principium individuationis and at the same time ‘rapturous delight’ in its destruction. It is therefore comparable to intoxication, which dissolves the individual into this collective instincts and component — an explosion of the isolated ego though the world.

P2’s description was highly reminiscent of the Bacchanalia including the literal act of rending and tearing flesh. P2’s explanation of dissolving self and sending the collective energy outward to the people present, those not present, to the universe, “and beyond” could be summed up in those very words “an explosion of the isolated ego though the world.”

It should not go unnoticed that each participant in this study was asked why she, he, or ze wanted to participate and the nearly unanimous response was “because someone asked.” It was clear from these responses that the respondents needed these experiences to be heard and in some way recognized (not validated) as having not only happened for them but having had what each felt to be a profound impact upon her, his, or zir within the context of a normal, healthy, and productive life. Perhaps participants feel that this is an important step in assuaging judgments made against them. It may also be that participants wish the clinical world to see the positive side of BDSM. Further research is
warranted because this is an aspect of a much maligned population that is not fully represented in academic or clinical research.

Clinicians could possibly use the context of this study to better understand clients who are positively engaged in BDSM in the same way that one might understand and accept the productive religious and spiritual practices of a client. Furthermore, the diminished ego boundaries and perceived self-transformation resulting from these experiences may open new avenues of meaningful discussion within the therapy office. Clinical attitudes toward practitioners of BDSM are slowly turning and it is hoped that this brief glimpse into the positive psychological meanings BDSM holds for some people will take that one small step further.

Note

1. P being the universal participant.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges Marc Applebaum, Ph.D., Ed Mendelowitz, Ph.D., and Bonnie Burstein, Ph.D., all of Saybrook University, who served as dissertation committee in support of this research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Is Gay BDSM Just a Pain In The Ass? An examination of the relationship between theory and the lived Leather experience


