

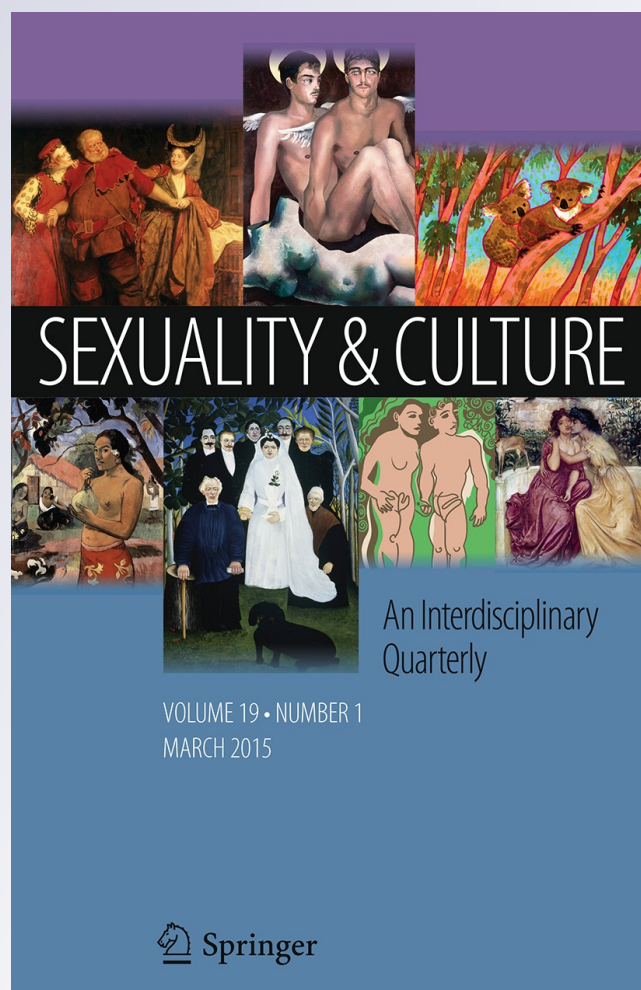
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“Topping from the Bottom”: Relational Convergence of Meaning in Domestic Discipline Relationships

Jocelyn M. DeGroot · Heather J. Carmack · Margaret M. Quinlan

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Abstract Domestic discipline (DD) is a relational approach that advocates wifely submission and male dominance through the use of disciplinary tactics such as spanking. Because DD is seen as a deviant behavioral approach to relationships, women often turn to the blogs in order to chronicle their experiences with DD. The purpose of this study is to explore how women in DD relationships document their journey and make sense of participating in a dominant–submissive relationship. In this study, we qualitatively analyzed 592 blog posts. Our analysis revealed that the women construct a meaning of relationships which conflicts with contemporary understandings of feminism, marriage, and relationship empowerment. These women’s blogs provide an explanation of relationships which (1) showcases women’s struggles with letting go of their independence, (2) positions men as dominant, and (3) celebrates feminine submissiveness and gender inequality.

Keywords Domestic discipline · Necessary convergence · Control · Submission · Dominance

Domestic discipline (DD), also sometimes referred to as Christian domestic discipline (CDD), focuses on the Bible’s authorization to spank one’s wife in order to help women be submissive (Audet 2008a). Many agree that while not all participants in DD are Christian (thus making it CDD), the underlying purpose is the

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same: The husband's "job" is to create or train a submissive wife through corporal punishments (Rubio 2013). Some people do utilize punishments similar to those used in sadomasochism (BDSM), but they do not put sex in the foreground.

In fact, DD couples adamantly reject references to their activities as "play" or as being for erotic pleasure. Rather, couples practicing DD focus on improving their relationships by establishing "traditional" relationships roles; the women act submissive, and the men are dominant and in control. The men set forth rules and identify tasks for their partners to complete. Failure to follow these rules, complete the tasks, or other transgressions can result in punishment for the woman. Punishments usually come in the form of spanking, sitting in the corner for "time out," removing privileges, or lecturing (Beusman 2013). These couples are usually heterosexual and married or in long-term relationships (Travis 2005). Many women who participate in DD blog about their experiences. The women's DD blogs as well as DD in general have recently been discussed and criticized in popular press outlets (Bennett-Smith 2013; Beusman 2013; Rubio 2013). The journalists and readers (in their article comments) indicate relentless skepticism of the DD practice, calling the behavior "abuse." The women, however, argue this is not abuse; on the contrary, DD is needed to help them be better wives and girlfriends.

The relational dialectic of dominance-submission is considered by communication scholars as the "fundamental dimension" of interpersonal relationships (Burgoon and Hale 1984). In interpersonal relationships, dominance and submission center on relational control—control over the message exchange process, where a dominant individual's assertive actions result in acquiescence from the other individual (Dunbar and Burgoon 2005). Although submission is an important part of this relational dialectic, dominance is typically the focus. Traditional research on dominance in interpersonal relationships frames this dialectic as primarily invariable; an individual may have a dominant personality or exert dominance in order to gain access to a place in the social hierarchy (Burgoon and Dunbar 2000). Dunbar (2004) proposed a more situational approach, the interactionist perspective, where dominance (and by extension, submission) is the combination of (a) the actor's temperament, (b) situational factors, and (c) the interaction of temperament and situation. Although an individual may have a dominant personality, this perspective posits that dominance will emerge based on the situation. The focus of the interactionist perspective, much like the other research on dominance and submission, is on dominance. What is missing from the dialectical conversation is how submission is constructed, enacted, and communicated in these types of relationships. DD relationships serve as an exemplary case to examine relational submission because it is the primary reason for the DD relationship—to help women be submissive relational partners.

The purpose of this study is to explore how women in DD relationships document their journey and make sense of participating in a relational approach that runs counter to the general public's approach to relationships. We begin with a discussion of DD and turn to necessary convergence of meaning to make sense of this unique relational approach. After explaining our methodological approach, we delve into the ways meaning is constructed in dominant/submissive relationships.

Finally, we conclude with discussions of the implications of this relational approach and of the dilemmas studying such relationships present for researchers.

Domestic Discipline: Creating a Convergent Meaning

Advocates of wifely submission or advocates of male dominance (Snyder-Hall 2008) include women who espouse a lifestyle in which wives submit to their husbands “in everything”, as commanded in the Biblical book of Ephesians, or get punished, most often with spanking. DD is the administration of consensual spankings (of the wife) in a relationship and is not necessarily sexual in nature (Audet 2008a). The husband may choose to spank his wife if she is disobedient in some way, but the wife does not spank the husband. Because this behavior is consensual, it is not considered by practitioners to be domestic abuse; they believe it is Biblical and part of a healthy, loving relationship. Nonreligious versions of DD exist, with couples in heterosexual and female-dominated same sex relationships participating in DD (Markham 2007). DD is not bondage, dominance, submission or sadomasochism (BDSM); however, like individuals in the BDSM community, proponents of DD espouse the phrase “safe, sane, and consensual” when referring to what they do (Wakeman 2008).

DD is a lifestyle choice that impacts the entire family (Audet 2008b). Although the Bible says nothing explicit about wife-spanking, it does praise the benefits of discipline, parental and divine (Hebrews 12:5–11). While biblical support for the corporal punishment of children is well known (Proverbs 13:24), the Bible also mentions that the husband is the head of household (HOH) and that true authority must be enforceable; he has the right to discipline his wife as well as their children.

Several female authors have advocated wifely submission as the secret to a happy marriage (Andelin 2007; Cobb and Grigsby 2002; Doyle 2001; Handford 1994; Mahaney 2004; Peace 2005; Slattery 2001; Wilson 1990). It is believed that obedience to male authority will ensure marital harmony and that the husband will take responsibility for guiding his spouse’s development as a woman, a wife, and a mother; also being spanked is comforting because it shows that someone cares enough to punish them (Wakeman 2008).

CDD and DD have been critiqued as anti-feminist; however, many individuals on CDD or DD blogs claim that they are feminists (Snyder-Hall 2008). Women participating in CDD and DD claim to be embracing traditional gender roles, while individuals who do not participate in CDD and DD equate this with domestic abuse (Travis 2005).

Necessary Convergence of Meaning

The cornerstone of interpersonal relationships is the “meaning-making” which occurs during message exchanges (Berger 2005). Relationships are constituted by and through communication—they come into being through relationships and are maintained through communication. As a socially constructed experience, the ways

interpersonal partners communicate with each other co-constructs the relationship, influencing how they behave, talk, and think with and about each other. Contemporary romantic relationships have been socially constructed to be “partnerships,” with an emphasis on equity, equality, and empowerment (Schwartz 1994). DD relationships, then, are seen as counter to this contemporary definition. The unique nature of the DD relationship, with a singular emphasis on dominance and submissiveness, means that the communicative meaning making that occurs in these relationships helps to enact and maintain the dominance-submissive dialectic. To study this unique communicative dynamic, we turn to the Necessary Convergence Communication Theory (NCC).

NCC, theorized and developed by Miller-Day (2004) examines the communication and meaning-making that occurs in relationships where one partner is dominant and one is submissive. Originally developed to study the power difference between parents and children (Miller-Day 2004; Miller-Day and Fisher 2008), NCC has been expanded to include other interpersonal relationships, such as romantic relationships (Miller-Day and Jackson 2012). NCC examines how power in a dominant–submissive relationship influences the meaning of interactions. Meaning is still influenced by outside elements (socially expected and acceptable behaviors and communication), but NCC focuses on how meaning can be “hijacked” by dominant individuals in interpersonal relationships (Miller-Day 2004, p. 210). Control in the relationship is not solely dependent on the dominant partner; submissive partners display *conditional regard*, where the submissive partner accepts the dominant partner’s meaning making in order to maintain the relationship. This creates meaning convergence.

The foundation of NCC is convergence communication. The dominant–submissive relationship hinges on the expectation that submissive individuals will seek to interpret their world and relationships similar to the ways their dominant partners interpret them (Miller-Day and Fisher 2008). This is why the term “necessary” is important to the theory; convergence is seen as essential to the success of the relationship. If the submissive partner does not have a similar viewpoint as the dominant partner, then convergent meaning cannot occur. In NCC, submissive partners will relationally adapt and accommodate their dominant partners by assimilating the dominant partners’ interpretive schema.

There are three components necessary for the success of convergence communication (Miller-Day 2004, 2005). The first component is equilibrium and disequilibrium. In a more power balanced relationship, there is equal distribution of equality in the relationship. Partners equally contribute and participate in the relationship. In a dominant–submissive relationship, disequilibrium occurs. Because power difference is a crucial element of the dominant–submissive relationship, disequilibrium is expected in this type of relationship. In DD relationships, disequilibrium is not only experienced but expected. How partners communicate about expected inequality and address when equality or an inappropriate inequality (such as the submissive woman becoming dominant) occurs is an important part of meaning making and maintaining the DD relationship.

The second dimension is interpersonal deference. This dimension, previously referred to as weighted proportion of meaningfulness (Miller-Day 2004),

emphasizes the submissive partner's deference to the dominant partner, accepting and conforming to the dominant partner's point of view, opinion, or desire. In this dimension, the submissive partner's action of deferring to the dominant partner reinforces the relational meaning convergence because it places more importance on the dominant partner's meanings. At the heart of DD relationships is interpersonal deference. In order for a woman to be submissive and the man to be the head of the house (HOH), the woman must defer to the man's point of view or desires. He creates the relational rules, she must follow them (and by extension, gives them more weight), and if she does not, he decides the discipline needed to correct the violation (which she also defers to as being correct).

The final dimension is motivation (Miller-Day 2004). The motivation dimension posits that in order for convergence communication to occur and be maintained, the submissive partner must perceive some kind of relational motivation. There has to be reason for the submissive partner to engage in interpersonal deference. This may be accomplished with a rewards and punishments system (Miller-Day and Jackson 2012). Important to the motivation dimension, there may be negative relational consequences if the submissive partner does not defer to the dominant partner. Motivation is an important, albeit complicated, element of DD relationships. The entire foundation of DD is dominance/submission, so motivation to engage in interpersonal deference is high.

Online Communication and Blogs

Researchers have examined numerous blogs written about a variety of subjects, ranging from US politics (Webb et al. 2012), to health issues (Buis and Carpenter 2009), to grieving (DeGroot and Carmack 2012). Blogs focusing on DD are similar to other blogs, narrating a person's experiences with the respective topic. The focus of our research is the bloggers' experiences of being submissive in DD relationships.

Various aspects of online communication benefit blogging about sensitive topics, such as DD. The most significant aspect is anonymity. Many bloggers choose to write anonymously. They use their blogs as a way to voice their thoughts and opinions without revealing these ideas to their offline friends and family members (Qian and Scott 2007). Suler (2004) identified these feelings of dissociative anonymity and invisibility as two of six factors that create the online disinhibition effect. He argued, "People say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world" (p. 321). In fact, Joinson (2001) found that visual anonymity permitted by blogs could increase the degree of online disinhibition. As a result of this anonymity, the perceived risks usually associated with revealing information are lessened (McKenna and Bargh 2000), which can result more in self-disclosure than in face-to-face situations (Tidwell and Walther 2002).

In essence, DD bloggers are likely to say more about their trials and tribulations with DD online than they would face-to-face. Additionally, many bloggers indicate their desire to keep the "vanilla" part of their lives separate from the DD part of their lives and the nature of online communication allow for this. The vast amount

of self-disclosure revealed on blogs also provides an ample amount of “naturally occurring” data for researchers to analyze.

Methodological Approach

Context

The women writing DD blogs come from all walks of life, including housewife (the blogger's label), doctor, and administrative assistant. Nearly all women engaged in DD are married; however, one blogger analyzed in this study was a divorcee. Each of these women was encouraged or required by her husbands, HOH, or Dominant (Dom) to keep a blog. Due to the general socially objectionable nature of the activities, the bloggers use pseudonyms and change identifying features as necessary.

Hollenbaugh (2011) identified numerous motives for people maintaining personal blogs, such as those used to chronicle their participation in DD. These motives include helping/informing, social connection, passing time, exhibitionism, archiving/organizing, professionalism, and getting feedback. The women writing the DD blogs indicated a variety of reasons for starting DD. Overall, the women indicated that they chose to bring DD into their marriage as a means to strengthen their relationship. In one of the first blog posts in one blog, the author said, “Hopefully this will be a growing experience for both of us. One that will bring us closer together, although just change in my attitude and my willingness to step back has made a difference.” The women also noted the use of DD to help meet their personal goals. One woman wrote, “We decided to use DD as a means to help me be more organized and more goal oriented.” Other goals included weight loss, smoking cessation, and regularly working out.

Although DD sometimes leads to sexual behavior, it is important to note that DD, as the community itself defines it, is not related to sadomasochism (S&M). One blogger clearly outlines the difference:

If you snoop through our drawers and closet you will not find x-rated DVDs and magazines. Nor will you find adult toys, like cuffs, spreader bars, nipple clamps (I nursed three babies and those things look painful) butt plugs (*shudder* uncharted territory), whips, chains or anything else along those lines.

The bloggers indicated that they do not enjoy the spanking; rather, they enjoy, as one blogger put it, the “the peace and order that it brings.” The women mentioned the contentment they feel after the discipline, when the situation has been “dealt with.”

In addition to being spanked for punishment, women are also spanked for “stress relief” and “seasonal affective disorder ‘funk.’” This means that the men spank the women in order to release the endorphins and make the women feel better, less stressed, and less depressed. All of the couples utilized “maintenance spankings,”

which serve as painful reminders to keep the women submitting to the husband's demands.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to examine how women make sense of their DD experiences, we use unsolicited blog postings as our site of analysis. The use of public texts as units of analysis allows us to examine a social phenomenon experienced by individuals in their own words, without prompts from researchers (Lindlof and Taylor 2002). Individuals' comments are guided by their own understanding of their experiences, not by questions from researchers. Moreover, studying blog posts is appropriate because this is a social group whose communication generally occurs online.

We began data collection by collecting links to DD blogs. We initially identified 24 publicly available DD blogs through a simple Google search using "DD blog" as the search terms and then viewing those blogs' "Related Blogs." There was a variety of blog authorship; some blogs were written by women, some were companion blogs written from the husband's perspective, and other blogs were co-written by partners. Most blogs are written by heterosexual couples, although homosexual DD blogs do exist. To narrow our focus, we decided to focus this study on DD blogs written exclusively by heterosexual women, narrowing our dataset to 12 blogs. The authors began by identifying the blogs with the most activity in order to capture a representative picture of DD blogs. This resulted in a total of six blogs. These blogs ranged in start date from 2005 to 2011. They were in varying stages of activity: three of the blogs were active, with women posting updates about recent DD activities, while three of the bloggers had stopped posting in 2008, 2010, and 2011. We collected all blog posts from the inactive blogs and set a cutoff date of January 10, 2013, for the active blogs. Ultimately, we analyzed 592 blog posts. Along with blog posts, we made note of all pictures, Bible scriptures, and other miscellaneous items included on the blog.

We engaged in a constant-comparative method of analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). All authors individually read through the blog posts several times, using open coding to make note of initial themes that emerged in the data. The authors came together after their first analysis of the data, discussing potential themes. We were continuously engaging in and identifying concepts, until themes crystallized. We reached theoretical saturation after coding the first four blogs, the point at which no new codes emerge (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Although grounded theory traditionally necessitates gathering data only until theoretical saturation is met (Glaser and Strauss 1967), we did choose to look at posts on two additional (previously identified) blogs in order to ensure that no new themes emerged. We then engaged in axial coding to combine similar topics, which led to the creation of three overarching themes that represented various types of discourse. After a reevaluation of the data, NCC emerged as a theoretical lens through which to make sense of the themes. We provide exemplar comments in this manuscript from the blogs in order to illustrate these themes. We chose to present these comments as

they appear in the blog, including profanity and any spelling and grammatical errors.

Analysis

Blogs detailing a couple's relationship with DD from the wife's perspective highlight the ways meaning are co-constructed by the partners and the struggles the women encounter as they create meaning convergence. Our analysis of these blogs revealed three schemata women in DD relationships use to make sense of meaning convergence: (1) a submissive-independent tension, (2) male control, and (3) feminine submissiveness and gender (in)equality.

“Topping from the Bottom”: Submissive-Independent Tension

Control is a central motivation of DD and one that the bloggers struggled with most. The women revealed in their newfound submissiveness, yet, at times, their posts revealed an underlying yearning for control in their relationships. This tension, referred to as “topping from the bottom” is a common one in the DD discourse. This term refers to when women assert dominance and discipline in order to be submissive. One woman documented her struggles with control and concern about violating the meaning convergence created for their DD relationship:

For the past few weeks I have been thinking that I need...want...am ready...for more control...for a deeper submission. And although I always advise all of you to talk out your needs/wants with your HOH or Doms, I did not follow my own advice. I felt it might be like “topping from the bottom”, and Master has been so darn busy lately, I have held back.

Some of these tensions resulted in requesting additional or different punishments or wanting husbands to be more involved. Another blogger explained her awareness of this effort for control, “I know, logically, that since Master wants me to do this, I am not taking control or over stepping, or ‘topping from the bottom,’ but then why am I struggling?” Generally, the women tried to avoid controlling their HOH and their relationship, attempting instead to maintain interpersonal deference. However, their quests for control often ended with the women questioning their partner's and their own commitment to DD and even their commitment to the relationship.

Despite general consensus regarding the women's desire to give all control to the men, it nevertheless appeared that the women were not entirely submissive. Requesting spanking, suggesting punishments other than spankings, and demanding their male counterpart to be stricter are the main areas in which the women attempted to control (and often succeed). Almost all the women indicated their desire to control the men. One woman posted, “I have become more feminine and in doing so, my desire to control him lessens a little bit....I don't just agree with him, but have come around to his way of thinking.” Essentially this woman is admitting that she still desires to control her husband; she is not entirely submissive. Another

blogger indicated a need for a more organized spanking experience from her husband:

I've had a need lately for more... routine with a spanking. There's this weird part after [my husband] says he's going to spank, and before he starts spanking that just seems all out of whack. Like I don't have any direction. Sure, "wait for me" is a direction..., but it just feels strange. Then he does get ready to start and I'm in the process of going over his lap...the atmosphere is strangely laid back and relaxed...I'm starting to like a little more structure pre-spanking and a big firm "get over here" might go a long way.

Some women outright asked their husbands to participate more fully in DD. A blogger wrote, "I asked [my husband] to really tighten the reins to help me keep DD at the front of my mind for a while."

The submissive-independent tension often resulted in the women's questioning their husband's commitment to DD and their own commitment as well. One woman explained,

[My husband] is out of town right now, but my goal when he comes back is to try to get more on the same page about rules, etc. We haven't had a punishment spanking in a long, long time. I'm not complaining about that, but at the same time it makes me feel a little bit like I don't know what we're working on right now ...Instead of working on the big overall issues, maybe if we added something like swearing, or not calling him when I'm on my way home to the list, that it would be easier for me to see our DD inaction. I don't love punishment spankings, but they do help me feel more secure about [my husband's] commitment to DD.

Another blogger composed, "I told him it wasn't that he was spanking wrong it was the fact that he didn't want to spank. He said 'Oh you got that did you' Yeah I did...it spoke volumes." She continued, "I told him that he's been too easy on me lately. He lets me get away with too much and in doing so, I lose a little respect for him." Another blogger questioned her husband's commitment to DD by walking away from a spanking:

So last night I totally blew it. I am pretty sure I have set us back further than when we started. I pushed and shouldn't have. I asked for a spanking and I could tell he really didn't want to but like I said I pushed. I asked for a long hard one that would release stress and shed tears... Well I shed tears ok not because of the spanking but because his heart wasn't in it and I could tell he did not want this...

Another woman explained, "He's gotta buy into [DD] 110 %. It's not one of those things I'm willing to just throw out there to 'try.' I can already tell you how it would be if it 'almost worked'—pointless." For the DD relationship to be successful and embraced by the dominant group, both partners need to be committed to DD. On an individual level, the women's frustrations with their HOHs not wanting to discipline speaks to a concern about how committed their partners are to giving them what they want or need in a relationship. This ultimately ties back to issues of control;

although the women may be giving over control of their behaviors to their HOHs, they are still attempting to control the relationship.

Although the bloggers claimed to desire DD, some of their posts indicated otherwise and disclosed skepticism with DD. After a particularly difficult week with DD, one writer confessed, "I was angry, I felt helpless and pushed around. Submission and obedience don't come easy for me, especially when the voices of the feminists who influenced me in the 70s keep screaming in my ear." As a final example of questioning DD, one woman recounted her own uncertainty with it:

DD kind of exploded at our house over the last month or so. I was starting to doubt it. I started feeling like it was just a stupid idea and all those nagging insecure thoughts flooded to the forefront once again. I thought about quitting DD, and just as I was getting ready to break that news to [my husband], he decided to spank for something and it didn't go very well, and everything just kind of, well, exploded. I basically said that DD was dumb and I wanted to quit and it made me resent him...I thought I'd never say to the man I've worked so hard to get to buy into this.

In this submissive-independent dialectical tension, we found examples of females sharing a desire to leave DD as a way to reconcile the tensions. Finally, one blogger wrote, "I am slowly raising him to the status of 'King of the castle' and realize that even though we are 'equal' we really are not equal at all." By stating this, the woman indicates that it is her doing that resulted in her husband's position of power, taking credit for his "success."

"Stepping Back into the 50s": Feminine Submissiveness and Gender (In)Equality

An important element of relational convergence is the way bloggers narrated their relationship with feminism and equality as well as the evolution of their submissiveness or their giving up control to their husbands. For these women, the emphasis on disequilibrium was a driving motivation for their DD relationships. Many of the bloggers reflected on their unmistakable awareness that DD violates the ideals of gender equality. Several referenced feminists and the women's liberation movement. One blogger explained her transformation from being in control to being submissive:

I graduated from high school many, many years ago. Women's lib was just starting to catch on, and although i never actually burned any of my bras, the movement did create a fire in me. I would be independent, in charge, in control, and i would have it all. (remember i was very young!) For the most part i achieved the independent, in charge, in control part and lived it for a very long time. I had a teaching career that i was good at and loved, my classroom was never a democracy, i was "the queen", i trained student teachers, was in positions of leadership at school. I was in charge at home, many of my friends considered me a go-to person to help with problems. I

achieved what i set out to do. Then that all got turned around. I discovered that deep inside of me, was a submissive woman.

Important to this blogger's comment is that she does not see these two perspectives (women's lib and submissiveness) as conflicting. Likewise, one woman marries the 50s and contemporary life when indicating her excitement about being submissive and following her husband's rules: "Wow, this is kind of cool. It's almost like stepping back into the 50s, but I'm not *wearing any panties!*" Another blogger recognizes the apparent gender inequality that exists with DD, and rhetorically asks her readers how she is supposed to explain DD to her pastor husband's parishioner:

How do we explain the politically incorrect concept of a male-led household when all their lives they've dreamt of the 50-50 marriage and equal partnership? It would be great...to express that a head of household learns through DD to be a champion, a protector, a man of integrity and credibility. That a woman turns her home into his sanctuary, his soft place to land through respect, obedience and graciousness. How is it explained that this is not violence, but a loving means to grow closer in the marriage relationship by resolving issues expediently and correcting damaging behavior that can destroy intimacy?

These women attempt to reconcile submissiveness with their interpersonal deference, especially the dominant belief that women are supposed to be empowered and equal. For these bloggers, the challenge comes not from justifying this relationship to themselves, but from trying to explain to others the shared meaning and motivation for DD.

Although the women were responsible for introducing the idea of DD to their male counterparts, the bloggers' submissiveness did not appear to come easy to all of them. A blogger explained, "It took a long time for that woman to accept that part of me. One of the things that i struggled with the most, was the feeling of neediness that i started to feel. Me...needy? How could that be?" Many of the other bloggers echoed this sentiment. They discussed how being needy or submissive is often seen as a weakness, and they did not like appearing weak to others before their experiences with DD. This tension in the blogs, wrestling with wanting to be submissive but not knowing how to do so, speaks to the difficulties in maintaining a dominant-submissive relationship. Their difficulties in embracing DD show how they sometimes struggle with the disequilibrium created by DD relationships. The natural inclination to restore equilibrium is difficult for the women because the natural state of DD relationships is disequilibrium.

A second element of the DD relationship is the relinquishing of control, which runs counter to the dominant narrative of women being empowered and in control. Across the blogs we investigated, the women seemed to revel in their lack of control. One woman asked her readers,

Just how much freedom do you have? Does you get to choose your own clothes, does you have own checking account or are you given an allowance? Are you free to come and go as you please and just check in or do you need

permission before going some where? I personally feel I have too much freedom.

Another blogger explained, “I am getting better at being spoiled and treated like a queen; not that he wasn’t good to me before but I ordered my own food, sometimes I let him open the doors for me.” Many women spoke of using DD to become a better wife for her husband. A representative post included:

It wasn’t until last October when we started DD that I began to realize that the wife I had become was not the wife I wanted to be for him. There was something in my attitude that was lacking. It wasn’t until my first spanking that I understood that the issue of my cavalier disobedience meant more to him than I ever imagined.

Another exemplar is:

My husband reminded me that part of his goal is to take control away from me. As much as I hate it, I know it’s necessary in order to help me find my tiny submissive self. Until I “give it up” so to speak, she stays hidden.

Another woman maintained that she was always meant to be submissive and attend to her husband’s needs. She explained her husband’s role, “I have come to the realization that I was made for submission...he is retraining me to let him take care of me.” The women also appeared happy to be pleasing their men. One woman explained,

One of the things he told me was that he really preferred me in skirts and dresses. I [wore them] to please him and in doing so, he beamed at me each evening he walked in the door and saw me in a dress or skirt.

Another blogger confessed,

...I had been thinking I want/need more control. What I realized last night was...if I can’t handle...conform to...keep...obey...the rules I have, I certainly have not earned more control. A long time ago, someone told me, the more submissive you are, the more dominant your partner will want to be.

The bloggers’ comments speak to the belief that, through DD, they are reborn; their “true” self, the one suppressed by the dominant narrative about gender equality) is resuscitated through the practice of DD. Similar to when people are revived or brought back to life, there are certain negotiations with an old life that must be addressed. For instance, when a person is reborn a Christian (something that often takes place after a period of ‘walking the troubled path’) there is a negotiation with a new (re)commitment to God and the pleasures of a previous life. The women experience a similar negotiation as they document their struggles with their new submissive lifestyle. Women in DD relationships desired their husbands to take control, and blogging was a way for women to story their damaged identities.

“You Will Show Me the Respect I Deserve”: Male Control

As a relational activity, the men's role in DD as the Head of House (HOH) is an important part of the relationship. Not only must women learn to be submissive, but the men must also learn to be strong HOHs, enforcing submissiveness with control and discipline. Many of the bloggers discussed that this was initially difficult for their HOHs, as they had been raised to believe in relational equality. The women, however, enjoyed the male control as well as the HOH rules/punishments and “submission days.” As the key means to maintain control, many of the men involved in DD create and uphold an explicit set of rules for their female counterparts to follow, a key way of communicating interpersonal deference. One list of rules read:

1. You are not allowed to touch a door outside the house if I am with you.
2. You will not order food when I am with you.
3. I will call or text you will chores to do when you are off and I have to work.
4. If you are told to do something you will do it no questions no arguments.
5. You will wear what I ask you to wear.

In the blogs, the women detailed the numerous responsibilities for which their husbands held them accountable as well as a list of unacceptable behaviors. A list of punishable actions included lying, not communicating with or ignoring their partner, walking out on a conversation, smoking, gaining weight or not working out, making unilateral decisions, disobeying orders, “sassing,” forgetting to take medication, losing keys, and procrastinating. The men also controlled what the women wore (including underwear, length of skirts), shaving, and food consumption. Another action that the husbands demanded was that the women uphold a DD blog. Failure to maintain and post to the DD blog often resulted in a spanking. Blogging also turned into a catch-22 for some women because blogging about their punishment and questioning could be considered an act of insubordination. Thus, the women would be punished for what they blogged.

In addition to daily responsibilities and rules, the women occasionally participated in a “Submission Day,” which centered on the woman's being submissive and allowing her husband to control her. On one woman's “Submission Day,” the blogger was told to “girl up” by wearing a skirt, blouse, and no panties. The woman also received a written list of her husband's expectations of her. She wrote:

I am to stand behind him with my arms around his waist, and If I desire to be released to go off on my own, I am to ask permission by whispering in his ear. He will either release me or turn down my request. otherwise I am to stay connected to him at all times by either holding his hand or hooking my finger through his belt loop while we are standing or on the move. When ordering in a restaurant, I am to make my selection, tell him, and he will order for me. I am to allow him to open all doors for me including the car door. When going up stairs, I am to be in front of him and behind him when descending stairs for

my protection against falling. I am to wait for him to pull out my chair, and when I stand to go to the ladies room he will stand in reverence and respect to my femininity...

The women sometimes complain about the rules, but they do abide by them because they recognize that their husbands have the control to make and enforce them. For example, a blogger wrote:

There have been times when we've been shopping and he declares a skirt too short or for "at home only." I roll my eyes but the fact is that as the captain of this ship, he can and will make some decisions that I won't agree with. So be it. The bottom line is that he gets to choose what is best for me.

When the women do not follow rules set forth by their HOH, they are corrected via spankings. One blogger described a punishment by detailing what her husband said during a spanking:

You *will* have a chat curfew and you will abide by it." WHAP! "When I tell you to get off the computer, you *will* do it immediately." WHAP! "You *will* show me the respect I deserve" WHAP! "You *will* drop everything when I walk in that door at 5:00 every day" WHAP! "You *will* put your husband and your home first" WHAP!

Another woman provided the following explanation of one of her spankings: "He starts in much faster... Then i make a big mistake...i say...ok, You have made your point! I decide when my point is made, is the reply...and He shows me that He can make a stronger one." A rule for one blogger was that she takes her antidepressant medication on time every day. She was also expected to eat healthy and keep the house clean. Failure to do so resulted in a punishment as portrayed:

It seems he noticed I haven't been taking my meds like I was supposed to and I had slipped back into my old eating habits and the list went on and on. It was a mild understatement to say my beloved was not very happy with me. I lost count of the swats because they just kept raining down on my bottom. He would lecture and swat...swat and lecture and lecture and swat at same time.

The women believe that the spankings not only help to keep them submissive, but will also serve as a corrective to behaviors they did not even realize were problematic. As women entering into DD after years of acting as empowered women, their blogs highlight the struggles they encounter as they change their lifestyles. In spite of these reflections, the women were pleased with how their men took control of them and made them feel submissive. A related blog post explained:

I am...very pleased and proud of my hubby...he is finally seeing the good that is coming out of this new life we are living. He sees a difference in me and I see the man that he has always been but I never allowed him to be because I was the one in control.

As noted above, incorporating DD into the relationship was typically initiated by the woman, and the men hesitantly entered into it. After the couple utilized DD for a

span of time, the women often noted that their significant others became even more controlling than they desired. One wife revealed:

But something's happened that I hadn't expected. My man turned into a spanko lunatic. Not only is he finding opportunities to put me over his knee, but now sometimes those opportunities aren't even verbalized or justified. And when I press for explanation, more and more I receive the answer of, "Just 'Cuz."

When wives indicated their husbands became too controlling or as one termed a "spanko lunatic," they also indicated a submissive-independent dialectic tension they found their marriages in.

Discussion and Implications

Women who engage in DD relationships struggle with embracing what they see as their "truer" identity as a submissive woman in the face of a societal norm which tells women that they should be equal partners in relationships. These blogs highlight a number of tensions as women struggle with explaining why they want to be submissive, how submission can be empowering, the role of male control, and how not to fall back into roles of independence.

One of the most powerful elements of these blogs is that for these women, submission is empowering. The women do not want to be in an equitable relationship; they want a strong male HOH and to be a good submissive wife/partner. They want disequilibrium in the relationship. They choose this type of relationship over an equitable one. The women bloggers view participating in DD as an empowering decision. These women want to do DD; in fact, most of the women write about how they not only want to do DD, but they were the ones who proposed it and had to convince their HOHs that this would be good for the relationship. This is an interesting dilemma because the women are empowered enough to be able to *choose* to be in submissive relationships. If men suggested DD, it might be seen as domestic abuse. The fact that the women were the ones to recommend and push for DD is one that cannot be ignored.

Control as a form of motivation is also problematized in the blogs (Barker et al. 2007; Langdridge and Barker 2007; Langdridge and Butt 2005). One of the premises of DD is that the man is the HOH and in control. The woman must be submissive and is not in control. As straightforward as this seems, the DD blogs present a much more complicated understanding of control. Although the women are relinquishing control, and even admit that they have too much freedom and do not want the control, they still sometimes control the relationship, especially when they "top from the bottom". The women are the ones who introduced DD to their relationships and who led it from the onset. This may explain many bloggers' struggles with still being independent and "topping from the bottom." If the woman is saying she needs more spankings or different forms of discipline, she is still controlling the situation, undermining the premise of being submissive.

Additionally, the women still maintain control over the relationship because they claim they can stop the DD at any time.

Analysis of DD blogs using the lens of Necessary Convergence Communication helps to complicate this burgeoning approach to interpersonal relationships. First, Miller-Day (2004, 2005) argued that one of the major assumptions of dominant/submissive relationships is that meaning is often “hijacked” by the dominant partner, which is problematic because submissive beliefs are subjugated. Convergence communication becomes coercive and motivation becomes tainted. Going further, prolonged participation in convergence communication may lead to negative relational outcomes. When this happens, the submissive partner may have difficulty making personal decisions or distinguish their own opinions from dominant partner. DD relationships, grounded in dominant/submissive relationships, flip this problem. In DD relationships, convergence communication is cooperative, not coercive. Partners made the decision together to engage in this kind of dominant/submissive behavior, co-constructing the interpersonal deference. DD partners construct DD as a desirable, albeit alternative, approach to relationships. Is it really coercive if both partners agree to the dominant/submissive roles, especially if the woman initially requested it?

Limitations and Future Studies

As an exploratory study, there are limits to our approach but several opportunities for how to expand research on DD. First, we made a conscious decision to focus this study only on DD blogs written by women in long-term relationships. As mentioned in the methods section, there are other DD blogs written by HOHs and joint blogs written by both partners. We only hear the women’s narratives of their DD journeys, missing out on the other half of the relationship. Additionally, we chose to include blogs only from women in heterosexual relationships. After completing our initial analysis, we did find DD blogs written by individuals in homosexual relationships, but decided to not include those blogs to our already completed analysis. The dynamics of DD are uniquely complicated by homosexual relationships, and we chose to present only one interpretation of DD relationships. Future projects need to explore the DD journey from the HOH perspective as well as from homosexual couples’ perspectives. We also need to move beyond just studying DD online; other additional future projects should focus on individual and dyadic interviews with DD participants. Finally, we intentionally did not include blog comments by readers, although we did read them. Another future study should examine how blog posters react to DD and how they frame and understand the concept.

“DD will never sit right in everyone’s stomach, and it shouldn’t. The long history of socially sanctioned submission, legislated inequality, and intimate partner violence against women makes it dizzying to determine if DD is empowering or dangerous” (Wakeman 2008, p. 68). DD bloggers attempt to pull back the curtain of DD, expelling myths about their choices to engage in this nontraditional approach to relationships. Their vulnerable stories paint a picture of women struggling to enact a part of their identities after being silenced or embarrassed. It is imperative that we

have these conversations, uncomfortable or not, in order to have a more complex understanding of relational submission.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical standard The manuscript does not contain clinical studies or patient data.

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