Consent vs. Coercion: BDSM Interactions Highlight a Fine but Immutable Line

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Abstract

In the majority of literature related to Bondage and Domination/Dominance and Submission/Sadism and Masochism (or Sadomasochism) (BDSM; Connolly, 2006), there exists a focus on the pathologization of such interactions, and little attention is given to a non-clinical BDSM-oriented population. What research there is analyzing non-clinical expressions of BDSM suggests that consensual BDSM interactions can positively influence individuals in various ways, such as through heightened meaning-making and self-awareness and intensified interpersonal connection through a deliberate exchange of power. A closer look at the extant literature discussing nonpathological expressions of BDSM reveals that the explicit communication of consent is paramount. Nonpathological mainstream sexual interaction is based on the construct of consent as well, though consent is often assumed rather than asserted. While the realm of BDSM encompasses a vast range of potential activities, explicit consent is the single universal characteristic in BDSM sexual interactions and is considered a fundamental tenet in the BDSM community. This article presents a review of the literature on BDSM interactions with three goals in mind: 1) to investigate the historical pathologization of BDSM; 2) to compare similarities between BDSM and mainstream sexualities; and 3) to highlight the importance of explicit rather than tacit agreements of consent in every type of sexual interaction.

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References


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