

# The use of gender in the interpretation of BDSM

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## Abstract

In this article, we explore the ways BDSM practitioners negotiate gender. Based on 32 in-depth interviews with BDSM practitioners and thousands of message board posts from the then-largest online BDSM community in the USA, we explore the explanatory frameworks BDSM practitioners use to (1) downplay and (2) emphasize dominant notions of gender to make sense of BDSM practices and experiences. In so doing, we discuss some ways BDSM practices and interpretations may both challenge and reproduce broader societal patterns of gender inequality. In conclusion, we draw out implications for understanding (1) variation in the utilization of gender beliefs and assumptions within BDSM cultures, and (2) the consequences these patterns have for the reproduction of gender inequality.

## Keywords

BDSM, gender beliefs, interpretive frameworks, kink, social psychology

In the contemporary USA, gender is one of three primary person categories (along with race and age) people consistently and continually rely on to interpret the bodies of others and guide interactions with one another (e.g. Brewer and Lui, 1989; Fiske, 1998; Ridgeway, 1991, 2009). Ridgeway (2009, 2011) explains that sex category and gender work together as a primary frame for interaction through which people make themselves intelligible to others. As a primary person category and primary frame for interaction, gender is a social system that all individuals in the contemporary USA must negotiate daily. Gender influences our perceptions of ourselves and others and the kinds of interactions we have with others because we

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must negotiate gender to make ourselves intelligible to others and to interact with others (Butler, 1999 [1990]; Carli, 1999; West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Our daily lives are filled with instances of making gender-related choices: which restroom to use, which pronouns to use to refer to ourselves and others, which clothing stores or sections of stores to shop in, which products we use to care for our bodies . . . the list is nearly endless. Gender directly or indirectly influences virtually every choice we make and impacts every aspect of our lives, from our educations (e.g. Buchman et al., 2008; Fuller, 2011; Jacobs, 1996) and careers (Browne and Misra, 2003; Padavic and Reskin, 2002; Ridgeway and England, 2007) to our families (e.g. Coltrane and Adams, 2008; McLanahan and Percheski, 2008; Risman, 1998) and social networks (e.g. Beneson, 1990; McPherson et al., 2001; Thelwall, 2008).

In this study, we explore how participants in BDSM—an umbrella term for bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism—draw on gender to make sense of and negotiate their BDSM activities. BDSM is a term used interchangeably both in scholarly literature and by participants to refer to a range of consensual activities (i.e. scenes or play) including but not limited to leather, kink, sadomasochism (SM), dominance and submission (D/s), master/slave (M/s) relationships, power exchange, bondage, and discipline. While this diverse array of activities makes it difficult to identify common features, scholars generally agree on the following criteria for labeling something BDSM: consensual, mutual definition of the situation, some form of power exchange, and frequent but not necessary sexual context or meaning (see, e.g. Langdridge and Barker, 2007; Weinberg, 2006; Weinberg et al., 1984). Within such practices, “dominant” refers to someone who exerts power (e.g. top, master, and sadist) and “submissive” refers to someone who relinquishes power (e.g. bottom, slave, and masochist) while “switch” refers to someone who takes on different roles based on context.

The earliest studies of BDSM (then referred to only by the clinical term, “sado-masochism”) were conducted by founding sexologists based on clinical case studies that sought to find the underlying causes of sexual “disorders,” including BDSM (Ellis, 1901; Freud, 1905; von Krafft-Ebing, 1903). These early studies treated BDSM as abnormal and deviant, and sought primarily to explain sadomasochistic etiology and establish “cures.” This pathologizing approach characterized much of the work on BDSM through the mid-20th century, during which time it was approached through a deviance model and studied as a medical and/or psychiatric “problem” (see Beckmann, 2001, 2009; Kai, 2017; Moser and Kleinplatz, 2006). The earliest empirical work on BDSM thus sought primarily to explain the underlying causes of BDSM participation and to find effective “treatments.” Around the middle of the century, BDSM began to appear in standard catalogs of human sexual behavior (e.g. Hite, 1976; Kinsey et al., 1948; Masters and Johnson, 1966), which often continued to treat BDSM as deviant.

Beginning in the early 1980s, studies of BDSM began to shift away from pathology and deviance toward a social constructionist model (e.g. Moser and Kleinplatz, 2006; Taylor, 1997; Weinberg, 1987; Weinberg et al., 1984). Shortly

thereafter, empirical work expanded from studying participants and practices to exploring the organization of BDSM cultures and communities (e.g. Bauer, 2014; Ernulf and Innala, 1995; Langdrige, 2006a; Langdrige, 2006b; Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011). The social constructionist approach emphasizes that BDSM practices cannot be understood without understanding the socio-cultural contexts in which they take place.

The move away from pathology models is also reflected in recent changes to the DSM V (American Psychological Association, 2013) and the move toward destigmatizing BDSM among mental-health professionals (e.g. Barker et al., 2007; Kleinplatz and Moser, 2005; Kolmes et al., 2006; Lawrence and Love-Crowell, 2008; Pillai-Friedman et al., 2015), yet this shift is gradual. And while representations of BDSM have been increasingly mainstreamed in American culture prior to and continuing beyond the *Fifty Shades Phenomenon*<sup>1</sup>—for example, through references on TV shows such as *Law and Order*, *Will and Grace*, *Sex and the City*, *CSI*, *Weeds*, *The Surreal Life*, *House*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Family Guy*, *Nip/Tuck* and in music videos by well-known artists such as Christina Aguilera, Madonna, Rihanna, Lady Gaga, and others—these depictions of BDSM are often problematic, conflating BDSM with abuse, crime, and/or violence. Additionally, BDSM continues to be criminalized and the practice has a complicated legal status in the USA (see Klein and Moser, 2006; Kotek et al., 2006; Ridinger, 2006; Weiss, 2008; Wright, 2006). In sum, despite changes in the direction of destigmatization decriminalization, and depathologization, BDSM remains a frequently marginalized and misunderstood practice, and BDSM participants construct their understandings of their practices in the context of these broader socio-cultural narratives.

BDSM has also long been a subject of debate among feminists. Since the feminist sex wars catalyzed in the mid-1980s, two primary lines of feminist argument have emerged.<sup>2</sup> Radical feminists tend to view BDSM as relying on conventional power inequalities in ways that replicate and reinforce structural inequalities<sup>3</sup> that harm women (e.g. Dworkin, 1987; Jeffreys, 1986; Linden et al., 1982; MacKinnon, 1987; Reti and Parker, 1993). For example, Lorde and Star argue, “*even in play* to affirm that the exertion of power over powerlessness is erotic, is empowering, is to set the emotional and social stage for the continuation of that relationship, politically, socially, and economically” (1982: 68, their italics). In contrast, sex positive feminists tend to view BDSM as creating possibilities for subverting inequalities (e.g. Califia, 2000; SAMOIS, 1987; Snitow et al., 1983; Vance, 1984). Califia, for example, argues, “S/M roles are not related to gender or sexual orientation or race or class... S/M recognizes the erotic underpinnings of our system and seeks to reclaim them” (2000: 166). For both radical and sex positive feminists, the relationship of BDSM to gender inequality is key.

More recently, an emerging line of research explores how BDSM participants *themselves* understand the relationship between gender and BDSM. Implications of these studies include that some practitioners interpret BDSM as a method for subverting and revealing gendered power imbalances in the world (see e.g. Bauer, 2007, 2008; Ritchie and Barker, 2005), and that practitioners are no more

likely than the general population to hold conservative beliefs about gender (Cross and Matheson, 2006). They also suggest that BDSM settings may serve as social spaces wherein gender norms are not as rigidly or frequently enforced (Newmahr, 2011) and BDSM practices may reveal nuances and complexities related to doing and undoing gender (Simula, 2012). While these studies have moved our understanding of gender and BDSM beyond binary notions of good versus bad practice, we know less about the ways BDSM may illuminate taken-for-granted aspects of gender embedded within our social world. How do BDSM participants make sense of gendered background expectations, and what consequences do these actions have for the reproduction or challenge of gender inequalities?

We examine these questions through analyses of in-depth interviews and discussion board posts gathered from active BDSM practitioners. Specifically, we analyze how these practitioners, responding to background assumptions about gender and attempts to develop consensual power exchanges, “framed” (Ridgeway, 2011) gender in traditional and alternative ways by emphasizing or downplaying hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity in their interpretation of BDSM. In so doing, we synthesize and extend analyses of BDSM and gender by demonstrating some ways BDSM may both challenge and reproduce gender inequalities. It is not our intention, however, to generalize our findings to the larger BDSM population. Rather, we use the data from this case to elaborate strategies whereby people may reproduce and adjust hegemonic gender frames in various social settings wherein they seek to negotiate the interrelation between gender and power (see Becker, 1998).

## **The social construction and maintenance of gender**

Feminist scholars working from a social constructionist approach have demonstrated many ways that people construct, enact, and negotiate—in short *do*—gender in relation to their social locations within interlocking systems of oppression and local, regional, and international assumptions about what it means to be feminine and/or masculine (see e.g. Butler, 1999 [1990], 2005) Collins, 2005; Connell, 1987; West and Zimmerman, 1987). These studies reveal that gender is not an inherent characteristic of people, but a socially constructed set of practices, beliefs, assumptions, and ideals that reproduce the subordination of women to men (Martin, 1997), some men to others (Messner, 1997), and transgender people to cisgender people (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009). These studies also show how the social construction and maintenance of gender reproduces sexism (Sumerau, 2012), heterosexism (Pascoe, 2007), monosexism (Sumerau, forthcoming), classism (Ezzell, 2012), racism (Wilkins, 2012), ableism (McEwen and O’Sullivan, 1988), and cissexism (Westbrook and Schilt, 2014). In sum, these studies suggest understanding the reproduction of large-scale systems of inequality requires investigating the social construction and maintenance of gender within and across varied social contexts.

Investigating the social construction and maintenance of gender requires analyzing, among other things, how people make sense of existing assumptions or background expectations about gender (Ridgeway, 2011). Following Goffman

(1974, 1977), this process involves examining the ways people “frame,” or define situations, based on beliefs about gender (see also West and Zimmerman, 1987). Ridgeway (2011) defines “gender frames” as taken-for-granted assumptions about gender, masculinities, and femininities embedded within situational patterns of activity and interpretation (see also Goffman, 1977). Since these “frames” or “background expectations” can become salient in any situation, Ridgeway (2011) notes that gender is a primary source of information for people navigating a wide variety of social obligations and activities, and in fact functions as one of three “primary person categories,” in contemporary American culture—along with race and age—operating as a largely unconscious cognitive sorting process. Whereas the specific gender frames people draw upon may vary dramatically historically, culturally, and situationally, Ridgeway (2011) argues all such framing endeavors aim to segregate the world into seemingly natural masculine and feminine domains, abilities, beliefs, and practices (see also Martin, 1997).

Like the feminist social psychological framing approach, Butler’s (1999 [1990], 2004, 2005) performative approach to gender examines the ways gender functions as a mechanism for sorting individuals. Butler argues, “persons are regulated by gender . . . this sort of regulation operates as a condition of cultural intelligibility for any person” (2004: 52). Butler explains that gender is always done in concert with others and in response to norms or stereotypes that one does not create oneself:

One does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. One is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my ‘own’ gender appears perhaps at times as something I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author. (Butler, 2004: 1)

For Butler, as for Ridgeway, gender works as a basic category through which individuals are interpreted, but the terms of that interpretation are not of our choosing. Butler argues that because gender attributes “are not expressive but performative . . . these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (1999 [1990]: 180). We draw on the performative approach to gender to explore how participants perceive the “naturalness” and stability of gendered selves in BDSM settings.

Investigating the social construction and maintenance of gender also requires making sense of hegemonic gender beliefs (see e.g. Connell, 1987; Martin, 2004; Sumerau and Cragun, 2015), or the most honored, respected, and accepted gender frames institutionalized within a given cultural and historical context. Even though many people will rebel against institutionalized assumptions about gender in any given culture and time (Ridgeway, 2011), hegemonic gender beliefs typically carry enough symbolic (Connell, 1987) and institutional (Martin, 2004) weight to pervade the entire social landscape and provide the “background assumptions” (Sumerau and Cragun, 2015) that all gender frames

will be measured against (see also Lorber, 1994). As Patricia Yancey Martin observed:

Societal members regularly “use gender” to construct the social relations and dynamics of other institutions. Doing so does not diminish gender’s institutional status. On the contrary, the borrowing of gendered expectations to create and legitimate social relations in all or most other institutions is a clear indicator of its institutional power. (Martin, 2004: 1266)

As such, people engaged in any type of social relation may feel the need to make sense of their own gender performances in relation to hegemonic gender frames embedded in the social landscape wherein they experience their lives (see also Butler, 1999 [1990], 2005; Ridgeway, 2011).

Previous research has documented many ways people align their actions with hegemonic gender frames. Some of the men in Ezzell’s (2012) study of a treatment facility, for example, claimed masculine selves by “doing dominance” (West and Zimmerman, 1987) through emotional outbursts that allowed them to demonstrate their masculine aggression and anger. As one man responded after being questioned about his anger issues, “Fuck you! You’re like one of those yappy little dogs. You’re good for nothing and you’re just annoying” (Ezzell, 2012: 206). Similarly, researchers have shown many ways that people—especially when occupying marginalized positions—work to demonstrate their conformity to hegemonic notions of male dominance and female submission through the use of emotion management (Hochschild, 1983; Wilkins, 2012), bonding rituals and joking (Ezzell, 2009; Schrock and Padavic, 2007), and sexual and romantic displays (Asencio, 2011; Wolkowir, 2009). In each case, people capable of adopting hegemonic notions of gender demonstrated their affirmation of these ideals.

Researchers have also noted many cases where people seek to subvert or adjust hegemonic gender frames. In a study of cisgender partners of transgender men, for example, Pfeffer (2010) found that cisgender women attempted to adjust hegemonic gender frames by defining inequitable divisions of labor within their households as the result of individual characteristics and decisions rather than gender. As one cisgender woman put it: “I do the dishes, but I’m so neurotic about having a clean house and he is not... I definitely do more than he does, but again, I’m the one that happens to be a neat freak” (Pfeffer, 2010: 173). Similarly, studies exploring the ways that, for example, gay men (Anderson, 2011), transgender people (Sumerau et al., 2015a), liberal Christians (McQueeney, 2009), members of goth subcultures (Wilkins, 2008), and female athletes (Ezzell, 2009) seek to subvert or adjust hegemonic gender frames often reveal that such attempts generally redefine some aspects of the dominant frame *and* reproduce other patterns of inequality (see also Schwalbe et al., 2000). In such cases, people seek to resist hegemonic gender frames, but often do so by replicating the same patterns suggested by the frame even as they offer different interpretations for doing so.

Previous research has also revealed the importance of evaluating hegemonic gender frames embedded within sexual cultures (see e.g. Schrock et al., 2014; Sumerau et al., 2015b; Yeung et al., 2006). Even when such groups seek greater equality and recognition for marginalized sexual identities and practices, these studies have shown they may do so by relying upon and reproducing hegemonic notions of gender (McQueeney, 2009). In so doing, sexual cultures may frame gender in new or alternative terms that ultimately reproduce the subordination of women to men, some men to others, and/or transgender to cisgender people (see also Schrock et al., 2014). Whereas these studies suggest sexual cultures may redefine some aspects of gender, they also reveal that these efforts are not uniform and may rely upon and reproduce long-standing patterns of gender inequality in newly packaged frames.

Echoing these findings, studies of BDSM have revealed the potential for such practices to resist and reproduce hegemonic gender frames. While some have argued that BDSM itself is a form of gender inequality (Linden et al., 1982; Reti and Parker, 1993), others have argued it provides a form of liberation from gender inequality (Califia, 2000; Hale, 1997). Empirical studies, however, have noted that BDSM communities roughly approximate larger populations in relation to gender beliefs (Cross and Matheson, 2006), and that BDSM practices and communities create “safe spaces” for playing with existing gender beliefs (Bauer, 2008; Newmahr, 2011; Ritchie and Barker, 2005). In fact, some scholars have suggested BDSM may create an optimal arena for teasing out the ways hegemonic notions of gender may be formulated, refuted, reproduced, and adjusted at the same time in concrete social settings (see Newmahr, 2011; Simula, 2012, 2013). Building on these insights, the present study demonstrates some ways BDSM participants both subvert and reproduce hegemonic gender frames in their interpretation of BDSM practice.

To this end, we use the case of BDSM to elaborate both the fluidity and maintenance of hegemonic gender frames within the experiences of marginalized groups. While the BDSM participants we studied are in some ways unique, their experiences reveal specific ways hegemonic gender frames may be reproduced and resisted within the same population. Thus, their example draws our attention to the complex interpretive work people do to make sense of gender in various situations and settings, and to ways such interpretive acts facilitate the “persistence of gender inequality” (Ridgeway, 2011) in the contemporary world (see also Collins, 2005; Martin, 2004; Sumerau and Cragun, 2015).

## Methodology

Because this study focuses on the meanings of behaviors and experiences to participants themselves, participants’ narratives of their experiences are the primary focus of analysis. Data for this study derive from two sources collected as part of a large-scale study of US BDSM communities and participants. First, we draw upon 32 semi-structured interviews with self-identified BDSM participants collected by

the first author. The first author suspected that participants might describe their experiences differently to a researcher in the context of an interview than they would in other settings, particularly amongst other BDSM participants. Therefore, in addition to interviews, the first author collected thousands of pages of discussion-board data from bondage.com (one of the largest BDSM community websites in the world with over 1 million members). However, we found no differences in the content of participants' narratives about their experiences across these two data sources, which may reflect the first author's status as a "knowledgeable outsider" in the context of interviews.

Prior to beginning the interview portion of the study, the first author had been working in BDSM communities for nearly a decade, was vouched for by several community leaders, and—perhaps most importantly—used terms common in the BDSM community in interview questions (e.g. "subdrop," "headspace," "RACK"). The interview sample was developed through purposive (also referred to as theoretical) sampling (Bernard, 2002; Clarke, 2007; Flick, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Weiss, 1994). As Maxwell (2005) explains, in qualitative research, purposive sampling, which involves deliberately selecting participants, is a common sampling strategy. Purposive selection involves "defining the dimensions of variation in the population that are most relevant to your study and systematically selecting individuals... that represent the most important possible variations on these dimensions" (Maxwell, 2005: 89–90), or as Weiss puts it, "selecting respondents purposively so that we obtain instances of all the important dissimilar forms present in the larger population" (1994: 23).

While purposive sampling is not representative and therefore cannot be generalized to the population as a whole, working with small, purposively created samples, as qualitative researchers do, allows for examination of the meanings individuals create for their experiences and the processes through which they create those meanings (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Additionally, such samples can be used for conceptual or theoretical generalization, particularly in terms of "social processes" and "configurations of social interaction" (Snow et al., 2003: 188). For this study, key dimensions of variation that were purposively sampled for include: gender identification, BDSM role, sexual orientation, and type and length of participation in BDSM communities.

Interview participants were recruited through the then-largest cyber BDSM community sites, Fetlife.com, alt.com, and bondage.com; through physical BDSM community sites such as dungeons and munch venues in the Southeast and on the West Coast; through regional kink-focused listserves; and through Yahoo groups focused on specific subsets of the kink population (such as FemDommes groups and TNG (The Next Generation) groups) and on specific subsets of interests within the broader BDSM/kink umbrella (such as shibari and watersports). To be eligible to participate, individuals needed to be 18 or older, currently live in the USA, and self-identify as a BDSM participant. Both to create a geographically diverse sample and include participants who would feel uncomfortable in an in-person interview, respondents chose whether to be interviewed

face-to-face, by phone, via Skype, or through instant messenger. The majority of interviews were conducted by phone or via Skype, and lasted approximately 1.5 hours.

Interview questions were constructed based on key themes of the study and developed through the first author's prior work in BDSM communities in conjunction with the first author's extensive readings of BDSM participants' journals and correspondence held by the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago—the largest BDSM archive in the world—as part of another study not reported here. Interviews included questions concerning preferences for BDSM roles and activities, current and former BDSM relationships, and other memorable BDSM experiences and interactions, such as first scene, most meaningful scene, and so on. Respondents were further asked about interpretations of gender, sexualities, and power as well as the relationships between BDSM and their other life experiences. Questions about the relationship of gender and BDSM included, for instance: “Have there been any times that you felt your own gender(s) clashed with or went against something that happened during a scene/play?” “Have there been any times when you felt that something happened during a scene/play that really supported your gender(s)?” “In general, would you say that some BDSM roles fit better with men and some fit better with women?” Demographic questions were asked at the end of the interview in order to avoid suggesting normative responses, and all such questions were open-ended.

The interview sample was divided evenly in thirds across general BDSM role preferences: dominant, submissive, and switch, with considerable variation across specific roles within these general categories. Approximate length of time participating in BDSM ranged from less than one year to more than 20 years. Most (60%) had participated in BDSM for 10 or more years at the time of the interview. Participants ranged in age from early 20s to early 70s; most participants were between 30 and 50 years old. Most (78%) interviewees reported white and/or Caucasian as their race or ethnicity. Table 1 provides the sample characteristics.

Discussion-board data come from targeted searches of *bondage.com* for themes related to the study. The first author sampled discussion boards, but also read all discussion boards during a 12-month period between 2009 and 2010 to collect data not directly named in topics or threads. For example, if a thread was titled “High Protocol Dinner” and did not reference gender in the title, but the replies to the topic included substantial discussion of gender, men's or women's “roles” or expected behaviors, gender-differentiated protocol, or similar issues, the thread was included in the sample. The threads collected span a period from 2002 to late 2010 in their entirety, and comprise 344 threads averaging 32 replies per thread and representing more than 1000 users. Because posters rarely self-identify on the boards and because site administrators do not allow demographic data about site membership to be acquired, we do not have demographic data for these users except in cases where the user self-identified in the thread. Posters are also discussed via pseudonyms to protect their privacy, but we have created pseudonyms in ways that reflect the structure and content of actual usernames.

Table 1. Interview sample characteristics.

Interviewee	Gender	Age range	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity	Region	BDSM role	BDSM participation, # of years	Interview setting
Chris	Male	40–50	Heterosexual <sup>†</sup>	White*	West coast	Dominant	6–10	Skype
Sam	Female	20–30	Pansexual	White*	Southeast	Submissive	Missing	Phone
Jordan	Male	Not reported	Bisexual	Missing	Southeast	Switch	Missing	Phone
Tracy	Female	40–50	Heterosexual <sup>†</sup>	White*	Midwest	Dominant	6–10	Phone
Lee	Female	30–40	Bisexual	White*	Midwest	Switch	11–19	IM
Taylor	Male	50–60	Missing	White*	Midwest	Submissive	11–19	Phone
Casey	Trans	60–70	Bisexual	White*	Northeast	Submissive	1–5	IM
Robin	Male	30–40	Heterosexual <sup>†</sup>	White*	Midwest	Switch	11–19	IM
Morgan	Female	20–30	Bisexual	White*	West coast	Switch	6–10	Phone
Pat	Non-gender	30–40	Heteroflexible	Indian	Midwest	Switch	20 <sup>†</sup>	Skype
Reese	Male	20–30	Gay <sup>^</sup>	White*	Southeast	Submissive	6–10	Phone
Ryan	Male	40–50	Gay <sup>^</sup>	Native American	Southeast	Dominant	20 <sup>†</sup>	Phone
Shawn	Female	30–40	Pansexual	White*	Midwest	Dominant	20 <sup>†</sup>	Phone
Riley	Male	60–70	Bisexual	White*	Midwest	Dominant	6–10	Phone
Andy	Male	50–60	Heterosexual <sup>†</sup>	White*	Midwest	Switch	<1	Phone
Jamie	Female	30–40	Likes everybody	White*	Midwest	Dominant	11–19	Phone
Devore	Female	50–60	Heterosexual <sup>†</sup>	White*	Southeast	Submissive	20 <sup>†</sup>	Phone
Quinn	Male	50–60	Gay <sup>^</sup>	White*	West coast	Submissive	11–19	Phone
Alex	Male	30–40	Heterosexual <sup>†</sup>	White*	Northeast	Switch	1–5	In person

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Interviewee	Gender	Age range	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity	Region	BDSM role	BDSM participation, # of years	Interview setting
Cody	Male	Not reported	Missing	Missing	Southeast	Dominant	20 <sup>+</sup>	In person
Sydney	Male	50–60	Heteroflexible	White*	Midwest	Dominant	6–10	Phone
Avery	Female	40–50	Heterosexual <sup>†</sup>	White*	Midwest	Submissive	6–10	Phone
Dana	Male	30–40	Straight with bicurious	White*	Midwest	Dominant	20 <sup>+</sup>	Phone
Sydney	Female	30–40	Heteroflexible	White*	Northeast	Submissive	11–19	Skype
Dominique	Female	30–40	Heterosexual <sup>†</sup>	Ukranian	Southeast	Switch	11–19	Phone
Devon	Female	40–50	Queer	White*	Southeast	Dominant	11–19	Phone
Drew	Male	30–40	Heterosexual <sup>†</sup>	White*	Midwest	Dominant	20 <sup>+</sup>	Phone
Shannon	Female	Not reported	Missing	Missing	Southeast	Submissive	11–19	Phone
Peyton	Female	20–30	Heterosexual <sup>†</sup>	Native American	West coast	Submissive	1–5	Phone
Harper	Female	20–30	Heterosexual <sup>†</sup>	White*	Southeast	Switch	11–19	Phone
Dakota	Male	40–50	Gay <sup>^</sup>	White*	Southeast	Submissive	20 <sup>+</sup>	Phone
Aubrey	Female	50–60	Bisexual	White*	Midwest	Switch	1–5	Phone

<sup>†</sup>Including “straight.”

<sup>\*</sup>Including Caucasian.

<sup>^</sup>Including reported sexual orientation “homosexual” combined with reported gender identification, “male.”

Our analysis developed in an inductive manner. Drawing on elements of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), the first author conducted interviews and collected discussion-board data simultaneously, which allowed her to ask about themes emerging in the data and add terms to discussion-board searches. She initially coded all data for broad themes related to gender, power, and sexualities before revising and refining these codes over time. After sharing these codes with the second author, we began to see patterns concerning hegemonic gender frames, and the two authors explored these patterns. In so doing, we observed two broad approaches to making sense of hegemonic gender frames: (1) downplaying gender (i.e. gender is unrelated to BDSM) and (2) emphasizing gender (i.e. BDSM can confirm gender; different genders do different styles; and one gender is better suited to dominance). In the analysis that follows, we examine these interpretations of BDSM and gender in relation to hegemonic gender frames permeating the broader social world at present.

### **Downplaying gender**

Most (22 of 32) of the BDSM practitioners the first author interviewed downplayed gender. In such cases, respondents defined gender as irrelevant to BDSM practice by focusing on the roles of performances, relationships, and scenes and suggesting any gender could take any role. In so doing, respondents resisted cultural depictions of men and/or males as dominant and women and/or females as subordinate by highlighting situations that contradicted such expectations. Rather than gender, these respondents (in interviews and on discussion boards) emphasized individual personalities and styles to conceptualize BDSM as a practice wherein dominance and submission—rather than gender identities or expectations—took center stage.

Respondents who downplayed gender in BDSM often focused on the similarities between women and men. As Devore noted, “I think it’s totally individual. I really do. It’s about their personality and how they are because I know female masters and I know male masters and they’re all the same to me.” Likewise, Devon explained: “It all depends on the person and doesn’t go with gender. It has to do with who wants to play the specific part.” Harper also noted: “Gender is pretty much irrelevant.” Similarly, Chris explained: “Gender is irrelevant to be quite honest with you. I have met folks who are pre-transition, lesbian, and otherwise—the roles can be played out in any way. Power is more important.” In such cases, respondents interpreted gender as “irrelevant” to their play, and suggested men, women, and people of other genders had equal access to any BDSM role because the heart of practice concerns “power” rather than a specific set of gendered roles or expectations.

As suggested in some of the previous quotations, respondents who downplayed gender also emphasized individuality. At times, as the following illustration from Quinn suggests, this involved emphasizing the individual characteristics, desires, and experiences to define gender as unnecessary to BDSM play, including in some

instances in ways that set up BDSM role in a similarly essentializing identitarian framework as is normatively associated with gender:

The things that determine who is wired to be a submissive and who is wired to be a dominant, frankly, I think its really more just about how a person's head is wired. Because there are doms and tops and switches on all three sides, and I think it's really just kind of irrelevant in terms of a person's gender. Spin the wheel and see what happens because I personally consider gender to be completely one hundred percent fucking irrelevant to the role that they play in the BDSM lifestyle. It's got as much to do with it as your favorite brand of socks quite frankly.

Like this respondent, many respondents suggested BDSM activities and people in general were too complicated to be distinguished by gender. As Sam noted: "Just because you're a male doesn't mean you're a dominant, just because you're a female doesn't mean you're a submissive. There are so many variables." Like Sam, respondents who downplay gender are aware of hegemonic gender norms, but reject these suggestions in their interpretation and approach to BDSM.

In fact, respondents who downplay gender in BDSM experiences also interpret differences in BDSM performance as unrelated to gender. As starchaser999 noted:

I play with both men and women and I don't think I've ever considered there to be a difference in terms of how I approach different genders. I approach dominance in a variety of ways with different people. I'm more concerned with individual perception, issues, interests, and modes of processing information than with gender characteristics.

AquariusDomme adds: "I have not seen much difference. I have seen both genders interact in about the same way. The dynamics of interaction are about the same." Likewise, syd said: "I don't think there are too many differences between male and female dominance styles—I think it depends on whether or not you're a 'nice' sadist or a 'mean' sadist." Rather than gender based, these respondents interpret different styles in relation to individual perspectives and qualities while highlighting similarities between the ways people of varied genders approach BDSM.

BDSM practitioners who downplay gender thus focus on other factors that can explain experiences, play styles, desires, and roles within their communities and interactions. As Darkness put it: "There are so many different styles within a gender group, let alone across the gender gap. We don't have a rule book, its [sic] an individual achievement category of events." Instead of drawing on hegemonic gender beliefs, these respondents find alternative ways to make sense of their experiences, and argue that gender is too simplistic as an explanatory framework to provide a useful understanding of the "many different styles" of play in BDSM communities and groups. Thus, these participants define gender as an inadequate

categorization for measuring the complexity of people and experience, and suggest alternative interpretive frameworks (i.e. roles, styles, desires, or personalities) for making sense of the variety within their communities. To this end, their efforts resist hegemonic gender beliefs by downplaying the usefulness or importance of gender for “framing” (Ridgeway, 2011) BDSM.

### **Emphasizing gender**

While the majority of our interview respondents and some of the posters on discussion boards downplayed gender, some of the discussion-board participants (as well as the remaining 10 interviewees) emphasized elements of hegemonic gender beliefs. In this section, we look at three ways such participants utilize gender as an explanatory framework for making sense of their BDSM experience. In so doing, we outline how their efforts at times adjust or mirror hegemonic gender beliefs found in many other social settings. In so doing, we demonstrate, as suggested by Newmahr (2011), some ways BDSM experiences and interpretations may shed light on the complexities of gender in concrete social settings.

### *Confirming gender*

The first way respondents emphasized gender involved utilizing the inversion of hegemonic gender beliefs to confirm the gender of the participants. Specifically, respondents interpreted activities wherein individuals invert dominant notions of manhood or womanhood (i.e. men being submissive or women being dominant within scenes) as evidence of the essential masculinity or femininity of the participant in question. While this tactic occasionally showed up in relation to women who were dominant, it was most common concerning submissive men. Men’s submission was framed as an example of strength, self control, and resilience, which provided evidence that submissive men were in fact “real men” (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009).

In such cases, respondents echoed studies of men who compensate for temporary (Cragun and Sumerau, 2017) or long-term (see e.g. Ezzell, 2012; Sumerau, 2012; Sumerau et al., 2015b) marginalization by defining men’s submission (or temporary subordination to others) as evidence of a true or superior masculine self (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Rather than simply a sexual or relational act, such interpretations transformed men’s submission into re-assertion of manhood and an articulation of men’s “inherent” strength and prowess. As greeneyes973 put it: “It takes a very strong man to admit submissiveness.” Similarly, MsLisa noted: “It takes a very strong man to admit, much less embrace his submissiveness as the odds that he’ll be accepted for who he is are slim in our society.” Rather than downplaying gender to frame submission as having similar meaning for all individuals, such statements framed men’s submission as a sign of strength tied explicitly to their gender identities.

These statements were very common among respondents who emphasized gender. Participant candii7d offers an illustrative example of the general contents and themes:

It takes a very strong person to allow himself to be what he is. I think the male sub has it harder than the female sub given society's views, its [sic] traditional for a female to be subservient. Men, however, aren't even supposed to show emotions, let alone submit to a woman. I know many male subs and I've never questioned their masculinity, they are who they are and accepting that makes them even stronger.

Like the respondents who downplay gender, candii7d and others who use this interpretive style are familiar with hegemonic gender beliefs that position manhood as predicated on dominance and womanhood as predicated upon submission (Connell, 1987; Ridgeway, 2011; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). However, rather than challenging the accuracy and relevance of such hegemonic gender beliefs, as do participants described in the previous section, candii7d interprets the subversion of hegemonic gender expectations as bolstering the masculine identity of the male submissive by demonstrating strength and independence—both qualities typically defined as masculine (Johnson, 2005). Rather than doing away with gender designations and explanations, such responses emphasize the gendered elements of behaviors to confirm the gender identities of the participants even in cases where such activities subvert existing hegemonic gender expectations.

### *Gendering style*

The second way respondents emphasized gender in their interpretation of BDSM involved defining styles of dominance and submission in relation to existing hegemonic beliefs about women and men. Respondents in these cases utilized existing cultural notions of gender difference to make sense of the ways such people would “do” (West and Zimmerman, 1987) dominance and submission within scenes. Although their interpretations echoed those of participants who downplayed gender by noting anyone could be dominant or submissive, they also borrowed from respondents confirming gender by arguing that *how* people enacted dominance or submission could be predicted based on the gender of the individual in question.

Mirroring hegemonic gender beliefs about differences between women and men, for example, these respondents conceptualized men's skills and interests in terms of physical and bodily control (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009) and women's in terms of emotional and mental control (Connell, 1987). Men, for example, were expected by this subset of participants to be more likely to dominate via the use of physical power, focus on bodily experience including the use of restraints, orgasm control or the prohibition of eye contact, and displays of strength to manage the submissive. However, this subset of participants expected women to be more likely to dominate via the use of mental power, or focus on emotional or mental experience including

requirement for certain speech patterns, verbal commands or emotional triggers. A dominant who wanted a submissive to hold a particular position, for example, might use their own body or restraints to accomplish this (physical power) or might give a verbal command to accomplish this (mental power). For respondents who gendered BDSM styles, the former would be more expected of dominant men and the latter would be more expected among dominant women.

Respondents' gendering of BDSM styles typically relied upon the assumption—suggested in the previous section—that all men are physically stronger than all women. As Dakota explained in an interview: “Men tend to swing harder, but women are more inventive. Women are more imaginative with the way they can do things, they're more creative.” Flamedancer also noted: “Women are physically weaker than men as a rule so their approach to dominating can't be backed (even subconsciously) as much by knowledge of the ability to overpower a sub physically.” Kayce added: “A woman can only REALLY dominate a man if she incapacitates him with bondage, whereas a man can dominate a woman by superior strength alone.” Echoing hegemonic gender beliefs defining manhood as predicated upon physical dominance, strength, and the ability to physically subdue others (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009), these respondents gender BDSM styles by interpreting differences in tactics as evidence of and created by “natural” differences between women and men (see also Ridgeway, 2011).

These assumptions about essential gender difference also find voice in discussions about women dominants. As Flamedancer explains: “Female dominants, not having superior strength to back up their air of command, seem to opt for mental manipulation instead.” This participant further explains: “Male tops are more likely to focus on the physical aspects of BDSM, and female tops on the psychological/emotional.” Lyrica adds the following interpretation:

The more I top men, the more I think there may be some differences in styles based on our innate gender tendencies. Why mess with wrestling a man to the ground when I know if he truly resisted hard he'd win? Maybe the reason I jump to the mental control over the physical control is because I know physical control is illusionary. Women may gravitate toward the mental control because we generally aren't physically stronger.

These statements are especially intriguing since they disrupt a core interpretation of the nature of BDSM practice and power exchange. As Newmahr (2010: 396–397) notes, “At its core, the link between SM participants is a quest for a sense of authenticity in experiences of power imbalance. The authenticity in SM lies in the extent to which SM participants are able to convince themselves, and each other, of the realness of the experience.” If perceptions of BDSM as authentic rely upon seeing power exchanges as real and true, respondents who think men submissives can disregard dominants' attempts may significantly influence the experience of women BDSM participants in many ways.

One such form of influence may be found in significant differences between women and men concerning the accomplishment of subspace (i.e. a mental state submissives describe as similar to an out of body experience that is one of the mental and emotional rewards of play). Within our sample, men who submit reported much less likelihood of achieving subspace despite repeated attempts whereas all of the women who submit reported accomplishment of subspace easily. We saw similar patterns on the discussion boards as well. Strongmagic noted: "One difference I found when I started playing with men is that guys didn't seem to be able to or want to get into subspace the way women do." Other posters suggested women were more likely to achieve subspace because they are socialized to focus more on emotional experiences, which men are taught to avoid. In this situation, a gendered pattern of style and experience revealed itself in BDSM play, and respondents (as they did with styles of play) relied upon hegemonic gender beliefs to make sense of such variance. In so doing, as noted throughout this section, these participants gendered BDSM styles via the mobilization of hegemonic gender beliefs about essential differences between women and men.

### *Gendering power*

The final way respondents emphasized gender involved arguing that BDSM and hegemonic gender beliefs represented a shared "natural order" of human experience. While this suggestion arose only among a distinct minority of participants in this study, it is noteworthy that its contents effectively incorporated BDSM into other elaborations of essential or natural patriarchal forms of social arrangement (see Johnson, 2005). These respondents asserted that men were the only legitimate, authentic or natural dominants and that women were the only legitimate, authentic or natural submissives. In so doing, their conceptualization of dominance and submission re-created gendered definitions of power commonly found within patriarchal organizations, societies, and settings.

The respondents who interpreted dominance and submission as essentially tied to men's and women's status typically accomplished this by defining patriarchal arrangements as normal, natural, and even necessary in BDSM. As Lee put it in an interview: "I firmly believe men are naturally more dominant than women, and for me, it boggles my mind when I see a submissive male. I could never, ever, submit to a woman or top a man." Likewise, as John14 noted: "I know many male submissives, and as much as I appreciate their own particular deviation and much as I enjoy their insight, it just seems intrinsically abhorrent [sic] from the natural order. Color me prejudiced or elitist, but I just can't get my brain around it." Such respondents echoed longstanding patriarchal ideologies defining men's submission or women's power as unnatural "deviations" from the "natural order" of their worldviews.

While their conclusions do not necessarily match, these respondents repeated the initial assumption (noted in the previous section) about physical differences.

Rather than simply viewing gender as influencing how one does BDSM, however, their conclusions rested upon the interpretation of physical difference as evidence of naturally assigned roles for women and men engaging in power exchange. As Sophia noted: “For me, I can’t be submissive to a lady because a lady can’t overpower me physically. As a rule, I do not see women as dominant figures.”

Apparently unaware that expectations of men’s ability to always physically dominate women are merely stereotypical depictions that may not hold up in the empirical world (Ezzell, 2009), these respondents define power as located in the bodies of men, and define any power possessed by women as illusionary or products of men’s patronage that can be taken away at any moment.

Like respondents who gender BDSM styles, these respondents typically rely upon hegemonic gender beliefs to establish their expectations of men as the truly powerful. As DynamicBalance noted when talking about men: “They are physically strong such that you’re in doubt that if it came to a show of strength you just wouldn’t be able to get up if they pinned you down.” Importantly, the gendering process here is focused on women’s power. Respondents who gender power do not question women’s gender, but rather rely upon hegemonic notions of what it means to be a woman to challenge the legitimacy of women’s power. This becomes especially clear when such respondents talk about women dominants. In such cases, they generally argue that women cannot “truly” dominate, and further assert that men should not submit. This interpretation makes clear that such respondents perceive men to automatically hold power that they should not ever choose to relinquish, and interpret women as not having “real” options because they have no “real” power to create and enforce their desires. As a result, these respondents gender power itself through defining “authentic” power in patriarchal terms.

## Conclusions

Rather than attempting to pin down BDSM practices as being either “good” or “bad” for reducing gender inequalities, we have sought to address the often unexplored question of how BDSM practitioners may—like members of other sexual cultures—simultaneously challenge some aspect of gender inequality while reproducing others. We have drawn on Ridgeway’s (2011) articulation of gender as a primary frame of social organization to examine the ways concrete interpretations of gender by BDSM practitioners both challenge and reproduce dominant notions of gender embedded within broader social relations.

This type of interpretive negotiation played out in our sample in the following ways. In some cases, BDSM practitioners downplayed gender in their experience and interpretation of BDSM by defining gender as irrelevant or incapable of being used to make sense of the complexity and variety of BDSM experiences. At the same time, others emphasized gender to make sense of their BDSM activities by gendering power relations and performance styles and utilizing hegemonic gender beliefs to confirm their gender identity claims. While the former case represents strategies through which BDSM may be utilized to challenge and transform

existing gender relations, the latter case reveals such activities may instead be used to reinforce and reproduce existing social patterns of gender inequality and masculine privilege. These patterns of using gender to interpret BDSM experiences did not appear to be strongly correlated with gender, sexual orientation, age, or other demographic factors, and appeared across all three primary types of BDSM identification (dominant, submissive, and switch).

Our study has implications for understanding the complexity of contemporary BDSM experiences. While scholars have long argued for the benefits of *or* problems with BDSM, a dualistic model catalyzed by the feminist sex wars in the USA, our results echo scholars who have noted the tendency for BDSM practitioners—like members of many other sexual cultures (Schrock et al., 2014)—to challenge *and* reproduce societal patterns of inequality. Rather than arguing for or against BDSM as a set of practices, gender scholars may gain greater insights by focusing on *how* people do and interpret BDSM in concrete social settings, populations, and contexts. In so doing, scholars may better tease out the types and forms of BDSM that are beneficial as well as the types and forms that facilitate the ongoing subordination of women to men, some men to other men, and transgender people to cisgender people in society.

To this end, our analysis provides “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer, 1969)—or common practices and processes whereby people achieve common goals intentionally or otherwise—that scholars could apply to analysis of many settings and contexts. Researchers could begin to ascertain and document, for example, the ways BDSM participants in varied settings downplay or emphasize gender in their ongoing sexual, social, and other interactions. Further, researchers could explore what other social locations—such as race, class, sex, or age—influence people’s tendency to downplay or emphasize gender in their BDSM practice and/or interpretations. In fact, scholars who focused on the intersections of gender and sexualities in varied contexts could explore the ways a wide variety of sexual types, relationships, identities, and cultures emphasize and/or downplay gender in their romantic, sexual, and social endeavors as well as the consequences such patterns have for gender inequality. In all such cases, scholars could develop more nuanced understandings of BDSM, gender, and other social inequalities.

### *Limitations and future directions*

The findings presented here are subject to several important limitations. First, the sample on which this study is based is limited to participants who have at least some engagement with one or more of the BDSM communities. The first author purposefully recruited interview partners whose participation in BDSM communities varies significantly across types of communities in which they are involved, as well as the frequency and type of participation in those communities. However, the experiences of individuals who may identify as BDSM participants but have never participated in either physical or cyber BDSM communities (e.g. through attending BDSM events, creating a profile on a BDSM social networking site) are not

captured in these findings. For example the experiences of participants who read about BDSM in one or more of the many how-to guides now available but have no contact with either virtual or physical communities are not reflected in this study and their experiences may be significantly different from those of participants who have at least some contact with one or more BDSM communities.

Nearly all previous research on BDSM involves samples of participants who play primarily in public spaces such as dungeons and who are highly involved in local physical communities. In creating a purposive sample, this study intentionally recruited participants who play only in private spaces and who participate infrequently in either physical or cyber communities, as well as those who are more active in BDSM communities. The relationship between how participants use gender to interpret their experiences of BDSM may be shaped significantly by their participation in BDSM communities, including socialization to the different types of beliefs about gender present in BDSM communities. Future research could explore whether there are distinctions among type or frequency of gender beliefs among BDSM participants who take part in BDSM communities and those who do not.

Second, lesbian-identified participants are underrepresented in the interview sample. Future research could examine if and how lesbian-identified participants experience gender and sexuality differently compared with participants of other sexual identifications. For instance, do lesbian-identified participants perceive gender as less salient in BDSM contexts compared with other participants? Are lesbian-identified participants more or less likely to hold alternative beliefs about gender and power compared with other participants?

Third, race/ethnicity is a category in which there is an important lack of variation.<sup>4</sup> Of the interview sample, 78% reported white and/or Caucasian as their race or ethnicity, 6% reported Native American ethnicity, while Indian and Ukrainian ethnicity/ancestry were each reported by 3% of the sample. Meanwhile, 9% of interviewees did not report race/ethnicity. It is difficult to gauge whether the sample is significantly whiter than the BDSM population in general, in part because people of color who participate in BDSM may be less willing than those who have privileges associated with being white to identify with a potentially stigmatized identity (Sheff and Hammers, 2011).

Fourth, the present study focuses on the experiences of BDSM participants currently residing in the USA. Cultural differences influence the development of community norms and interpretive frameworks. Comparative research on how BDSM participants across different cultural contexts construct and understand the relationship between gender and power would help illuminate the ways in which culture mediates that relationship.

Finally, the present study focuses on the intersections of gender with power and sexuality. Future research could explore how other systems of social inequality, such as race and class, influence and are influenced by participants' perceptions of gender in BDSM. For example, do participants' perceptions of social class and race influence how they perceive the gender performances of others with whom they

interact? Are participants' perceptions of the legitimacy and naturalness of power and powerlessness enacted by bottoms and tops influenced by race and class differently than they are by gender? Given that race, like gender, is a primary person category in the USA, it would be useful to examine how participants' perceptions of race influence and are influenced by their participation in BDSM.

## Notes

1. Because all data for this study were collected prior to the publication of the first *Fifty Shades* novel and the subsequent rise of the *Fifty Shades* franchise, narratives analyzed in this study are not analyzed in relation to the narrative of BDSM constructed through *Fifty Shades*.
2. It is important to note that many arguments exist between these ends of the spectrum, but we note these ends specifically because they represent the dominant or most common voices in the debate thus far (see also Newmahr, 2011).
3. While the present study focuses specifically on the relationship of BDSM to gender inequalities, other work has examined the relationship between inequalities of race, class, and/or age (e.g. Beckmann, 2001; Demaj, 2014; Weiss, 2011).
4. The first author intentionally recruited in several racially/ethnically-specific cyber BDSM community groups, but we do not know whether participants of color are more likely to join racially/ethnically-specific communities, mixed communities, or both. The first author's sampling strategy itself may have also contributed to the relative whiteness of the interview sample for at least two reasons. First, the community sites of recruitment have mostly white members, paralleling the apparent overall whiteness of the BDSM community. Second, because some of the interviewees were referred by other interviewees and most interviewees were white, if their BDSM networks primarily included other whites, people of color would have had a lesser chance of being referred for an interview.

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