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The Social World of BDSM:

A Descriptive Phenomenological Investigation

Emma L Turley

Introduction:

Langdridge and Butt (2004) describe the beginning of the 21st century as a time for sexual stories. Sexual practices such as bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism (BDSM) are now becoming more evident in society and BDSM related themes are apparent in mainstream films and television programmes such as 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' (Burr 2006). Weiss (2006) reports that media representations of BDSM are on the increase, however, Barker, Iantaffi & Gupta (2007) argue that it is the BDSM imagery, rather than the sexual practises, that have become more socially acceptable, while 'real' BDSM remains an illegal and pathologised practice.

Research Aims:

The notion that people are able to derive sexual pleasure from acts traditionally considered dangerous is perplexing to many (Barker et al 2007), and is difficult to encompass in most mainstream psychological theory. This research aimed to examine how BDSM practitioners understood the social world of BDSM and their place within it.



Findings:

Five participants were interviewed and individual structural descriptions produced for each participant. Here I will present Tom's individual structural description. This refers to those aspects that were essential to it being a true BDSM experience for Tom.

Aspects of Character:

Tom's sensation seeking personality requires him to have a stimulating and exciting sex life, and some of Tom's previous relationships had ended as a result of lack of sexual excitement leading to boredom. For Tom, BDSM addresses and fulfils his need to experience sexual thrills and his uninhibited, adventurous nature utilises BDSM to add an element of excitement that Tom finds it difficult to locate elsewhere. Part of the appeal of BDSM is that it allows Tom to take risks in his quest for sexual fulfilment, a thrilling concept in itself.

Authenticity of Role:

Tom finds the authenticity of the role being assumed important for his enjoyment. Authenticity for Tom means the validity of the BDSM situation and the sincerity of those assuming the various roles. This includes symbolic and ritualistic elements of the experience, such as clothing, along with the genuineness of those involved in his BDSM experience.

Detachment from Humanity:

Tom's attraction to submission appears to be the fact that he is somehow able to shed his humanity (being human). Tom enjoys participating in puppy play, where Tom role plays the part of a dog. Tom's pleasure is derived from not being restricted by human emotions, and the puppy play is a rejection of the complexities of the human condition. There is no need to comply with human notions such as embarrassment and self-consciousness.



Method:

This study is conducted within a descriptive phenomenological framework, as phenomenology is concerned with understanding phenomena as it appears to the experiencer (Moran 2000). Descriptive phenomenology, advocated by Giorgi, is concerned with the *description* rather than the explanation of phenomena (Langdridge 2007). In descriptive phenomenology the aim is to capture the structure of the lived experience of the phenomenon (Giorgi 2008). A semi-structured interview technique was used to collect the data, and the interview transcripts were analysed by employing Giorgi's method pragmatically. See Giorgi (1985) for comprehensive stages of analysis.

What next?

The primary focus of the empirical research was to inform a second, more focused research project. This next project will be concerned with exploring the question 'what exactly is sexual about BDSM?'