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A CRITICAL MICROETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION
OF POWER EXCHANGE, ROLE IDENTITY AND AGENCY
WITH BLACK BDSM PRACTITIONERS

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

The practice of BDSM (Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, and Sadomasochism) is a roleplay activity that facilitates the examination of power dynamics through erotic play. Historically, the mental health community relegated BDSM as a deviant sexual practice. Modern therapeutic perspectives, however, affirm the normality of practitioners and report psychological benefits of BDSM. Nevertheless, the practice remains stigmatized and misunderstood. The goal of this research was to examine how BDSM works, and how power is exchanged within relationships. More specifically, the experiences of Black BDSM practitioners were investigated to add nuance to how racial dynamics further impact power relationships.

Ethnographic procedures were applied to help deconstruct relational interactions in BDSM practice. Observations were carried out at three public BDSM dungeons, and 13 Black BDSM practitioners were interviewed to examine how power plays out with respect to role identity, communicative behaviors, negotiation and consent. Dramaturgical analysis was applied to outline observable and obscure behaviors within BDSM social interactions.

The findings of this study present structural insights into BDSM practice that may be applied to mental health counselor's increased understanding of power relationships. Furthermore, findings suggest dynamics observed in BDSM can be applied to non-BDSM relational interactions with regards to negotiating power and exercising personal agency. Lastly, the narratives of Black BDSM practitioners provide insight into how marginal identity statuses can impact psychological safety within unequal power relationships.

Keywords: BDSM, power dynamics, role identity, dramaturgy, microethnography

This work is dedicated to Black and Queer people, everywhere.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	x
LIST OF TABLES	xi
LIST OF ACRONYMS	xii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Power Dynamics	2
Black Sexuality	3
Power Play	6
Power Relationships in Counseling	8
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	11
BDSM Practice	11
BDSM and Mental Health	15
BDSM and Queer Space	19
BDSM and Ethnography	21
Symbolic Interactionism	26
BDSM and Dramaturgy	28
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	30
Purpose.....	32

Research Questions.....	32
Participants.....	33
Sampling and Recruitment.....	36
Researcher Positionality.....	38
Setting.....	39
Ethics and Informed Consent.....	40
Data Collection and Analysis.....	42
Stage One: Compiling the primary record.....	43
Stage Two: Reconstructive analysis.....	44
Stage Three: Dialogical data generation.....	45
Interview Protocol.....	45
Stage Four: Describing system relations.....	46
Validity and Trustworthiness.....	47
Summary.....	49
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS.....	51
Introduction.....	51
BDSM as a Social Setting.....	51
BDSM and Power Dynamics.....	57
Cultural Characteristics.....	58

Structural Characteristics	64
Political Characteristics	74
Race and BDSM	86
Roles Enactments.....	86
Agency Preservation.....	92
Summary.....	95
CHAPTER 5: SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSIONS.....	98
Overview of Study	98
BDSM and Dramaturgy	99
Power Relationships.....	102
Race and BDSM	110
Critical Consent	110
Race and Submission	112
Agency Preservation.....	115
Recommendations.....	117
Reevaluating Pain	117
Advocating for Equity in Power Relationships	118
Pleasure as Political	119
Future Research	120

Conclusion	121
APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT	124
APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER	126
LIST OF REFERENCES	128

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Thematic Analysis of Power Dynamics in BDSM.....	47
Figure 2: Top-Down versus Symbiotic Power Dynamics	106
Figure 3: Critical Consent in Power Relationships.....	112

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Research Question Matrix for BDSM and Microethnography	33
Table 2 Participant Characteristics	36
Table 3 Interview Protocol.....	46
Table 4 Feedback Matrix during Dominant-Submissive Interaction.....	70

LIST OF ACRONYMS

BDSM	Bondage/Discipline (BD), Dominance/Submission (DS), Sadomasochism (SM)
DM	Dungeon Monitors
GRS	Gender Role Strain
MSJCC	Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies
POC	People of Color
PRICK	Personal Responsibility, Informed Consensual Kink
RACK	Risk Aware Consensual Kink
SI	Symbolic Interactionism
SSC	Safe, Sane, and Consensual

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Human behavior reflects a dynamic tension between conduct and inhibition, governed by affect, avoidance, and the pursuit of social freedoms. Power plays a central role in everyday social interactions and serves as an organizing principle in social and behavioral contexts (Reis, Collins & Berscheid, 2000). Provisionally, power is defined as an individual's relative capacity to modify others' behavioral and cognitive states by providing/withholding resources or administering punishments (Keltner et al., 2003). Resources may be material (food, money, economic opportunity) or social (knowledge, friendship, decision-making opportunities) and can be experienced in the absence of observable behavior. For example, racial bias contributes to implicit interpersonal expectations that may have a positive or negative impact on empathy, social inclusion or access to material resources (Baldwin, Kiviniemi & Synder, 2009; Kress, 2018). Nevertheless, it is generally understood that everyone (individuals, dyads, and groups) holds a relative capacity to influence others whether explicit or implicit. Even within mutual agreement or consensus, decision-making is often a byproduct of what idea or outcome holds the most influence in a given space. According to the seminal work of French and Raven (1959), the basic units of power are coercion and authority. Legal-rational authority is bureaucratic and regulatory in nature; traditional power is legitimized through cultural norms; and charisma is the ability to inspire devotion and obedience through compelling attractiveness (Weber, 1965). Status, credibility, expertise, informal hierarchies and leadership also serve to monitor the distribution of power.

Power Dynamics

The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) invites mental health counselors to be aware of and acknowledge how dynamics of power present themselves within therapeutic spaces (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016).

Although dynamics of power exist in both formal and informal contexts, the construct of power is difficult to see in action and it does not generalize across situations (Lukes, 1986; Keltner et al, 2003). Rather, power is situated and often contingent on the roles and positionings of the subjects within specific contexts, determining its circulation. For example, in therapeutic contexts, mental health counselors hold professional power given to them through education and credentialing bodies. Furthermore, within some systems, power is inherently distributed to certain categories according to hegemonic ideologies such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, privileging certain groups over others. This duality of privilege and oppression persists as means of maintaining social order and reinforcing empowered and disempowered identities, respectively.

In 1961, French postmodernist, Michel Foucault offered an ideological departure away from coercion as the predominate conception of power. Rather, Foucault suggests power is pervasive, diffused and embodied in all discourse, knowledge and social relationships. This proposition describes power as an everyday, metacognitive construct that is in constant flux and negotiated within all aspects of society. Foucault argues that social normality is produced by multiple forms of discipline and constraint; a disciplinary power operating as a system of surveillance and assessment. Even in the absence of force, people learn to discipline themselves and behave in expected ways allowing for interactive power to carry out in collaborative

sequence. Moreover, Foucault posits that physical bodies are subjugated and made to behave in certain ways, as a microcosm of social control. The hegemonic regulation of conventional behavior, resistance and the distribution of social sanctions produces and reproduces power dynamics within society. Power dynamics are layered in relationships through race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, class, language and on elusive levels related to access of intimacy, time, support, and sex. Because power is interwoven in every relationship on multiple levels, it's largely a subconscious experience. However, because power is often not directly observable, it's intuitive nature may cause harm through institutional manipulation (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Thus, the conscious awareness of power is necessary for counselors to understand in order to navigate therapeutic interactions more effectively. As follows, the examination of power play, as a reflection of conscious and voluntary power exchange, may be a beneficial platform for exploring and interrogating power dynamics through role play.

Black Sexuality

Historically and socially, racial and sexual minorities have experienced systemic regulations on their bodies and sexuality. As chattel property, enslaved men and women's reproductive labor was valued for its economic benefit as their children created a self-replenishing labor pool. In Dorothy Robert's *Killing the Black Body* (1997), the systematic assault on Black bodies is contextualized through the lens of economic propriety. Enslaved women were given incentives to bear children and often endured punishment for failure to procreate. Furthermore, the Black woman's rate of fertility influenced the price of slave auction blocks. With no rights to motherhood or autonomy over her sexuality, Black women were robbed

of their humanity and societal worth. In the early twentieth century, the eugenics movement sponsored the systemic sterilization of Black women through coercion and unauthorized medical procedures (Nittle, 2019).

In modern American culture, enduring racial stereotypes fuel the perception of Black women and men as savage and hypersexual, making Black people vulnerable to ongoing sexual debasement and fetishization (Holmes, 2016). Anti-black imagery portrays Black women as innately promiscuous compared to controlled, respectful and modest depictions of White women. Meanwhile, Black men are often stereotyped to have unusually large penises with hypermasculine features of untamed aggression portraying them as violent, sex-crazed criminals (Hutchinson, 1997). It is suggested that persistent exploitative practices are rooted in and maintained through colonial imperialist ideologies embedded in Western social systems. This is evidenced in the devaluation of Black lives through ceaseless state-sanctioned violence and race-based discrimination, subordinating the physical and mental health needs of Black folks. (Mays, Cochran & Barnes, 2007). The belief that Black people are sexually lewd perpetuates disproportionate rates of sexual exploitation and abuse. And the ideology of Black inferiority further regulates gender embodiment and sexual expression of racialized bodies through implicit and explicit social messaging. To some degree, the hypersexual myths of Black men and women have been retained in the media as cultural norms, preventing Black folks from exercising agency over their sexual expression. And for sexual minorities in the Black community, cultural norms of debasement may be enforced through social rejection or violence (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007; Doss, 2013; Meyer, 2003).

In her work *Uses of the Erotic*, Andre Lorde (1978) argues the suppression of Black sexuality is a direct function of racial and gender oppression. As the sexual nature of Black people has historically been exploited, they often turn away from the exploration and consideration of their sexuality as a source of power. More specifically, the historical profiteering of Black bodies for economic gain has deepened the separation between the erotic and personal fulfillment; a conditioned outcome that devalues pleasure as a vital need. Although Lorde posits that the erotic is a lifeforce, religious conservatism prevalent among Black Americans encourages the separation of the spiritual from the erotic (Masci, Mohammed & Smith, 2018). While this disconnect may be an attempt to subvert stereotypes of sexual indulgence through restraint, Lorde contends that abstinence and the denial of feeling is not self-discipline, but rather an act of self-denial. Thus, the erotic as foundation of creative energy, “the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives”, creates an opportunity for Black folks to reclaim their pleasure experience (Lorde, 1983, p. 55). Through conscious engagement with one’s body, Black people may enter relationships with agency and generate a sense of personal power within social interactions.

Haraway (1989) emphasizes that despite systemic objectification, marginalized groups and individuals hold a keen awareness around the denial of equity that threatens their autonomy. Historical trauma connected to dominance and violence creates a sensitivity to power that situates the knowledge and experiences of ethnic and sexual minorities as distinct, communal and contentious. Racial stereotypes and distortions regarding Black sexuality generate spoiled or stigmatized identities reproduced by internalized and externalized oppression (Cruz, 2016;

Davis, 2017; Goffman, 1959). Through shared contexts, marginalized groups have developed language and interpretative frameworks to determine their identities as well as negotiate and transcend their environments (Freire & Macedo, 1995).

Power Play

As power dynamics materialize in social interactions, individuals often seek opportunities to push and play with boundaries as a way of transgressing oppression. The reclamation of Black sexuality lies in the fertile and forgotten sites of complexity and mutable sexual identities. For racialized bodies, sexual embodiment is political as much as it is pleasurable. Resisting admonitions of sexual repression, power play is an expressive vehicle for rehearsing agency, accessing and critiquing power (Cruz, 2015). Lorde (1978) further emphasized that the task of Black people is not simply to reengage the senses through erotic bonding, but to generate a deep, acute and holistic feeling through eroticism. And through the awareness of one's capacity for feeling, Black people can identify other areas of life where the same fullness can be felt.

Bondage/Discipline (BD), Dominance/Submission (DS), Sadomasochism (SM), referenced by the encompassing acronym "BDSM", serves as a stage for accessing feeling through erotic power exchange. Although there is not one way to practice BDSM, Weinberg (1984) discusses four components to characterize the BDSM interaction. First, participants assume a power role. The most popular identities are labeled as "dominant", the person who asserts control; "submissive", the person who yields to the influence of the dominant person; and "switch", the person who embodies both dominant and submissive stances. Next, BDSM practitioners develop a scene or context for their play which includes the discussion of

objectives, intentions, boundaries and consent. Then comes the play itself, or the interaction between the power roles. During BDSM interactions, various types of stimuli are used to give and take away power such as giving commands, implementing restrictions, using physical restraints or introducing painful stimuli for enhanced pleasure. At the conclusion of the scene, BDSM practitioners engage in a recovery process called “aftercare” where the participants reflect of the experience of the power play.

Sensitive to the autonomy and mutual pleasure of participants, BDSM facilitates the examination of power dynamics, agency and social positioning within sexual contexts (Weinberg, 1984). Historically, practitioners of BDSM have contended with a psychiatric narrative of sexual deviance and coerce-laden pathology. This relegation has contributed to cultural stigma and bias towards the BDSM community, even among mental health counselors (Stockwell, Hopkins & Walker, 2017). A study investigating bias in counseling collected 175 responses from clients who practiced BDSM and found 118 instances of biased or inadequate mental health care (Kolmes, Stock & Moser, 2006). The most common ideologies included the belief that BDSM is abusive and unhealthy. More specifically, counselors would try to treat the client’s BDSM lifestyle, assuming submissive practitioners were “self-destructive”. Another common assumption is that BDSM interests are indicative of past family or spousal abuse, often requiring a client to give up BDSM activities in order to continue in treatment. More recently, however, researchers have departed from neurotic assumptions and that found most BDSM practitioners experience comparable, and at times lower rates of mental disorders compared to test norms and generalized estimates of diagnostic criteria. Responses on psychometric measures reveal that BDSM practitioners have lower rates of depression and anxiety, and experience

trauma and obsessive compulsions at the same rate as the general population. This empirical evidence is counter to the pathological narrative suggesting BDSM practitioners, as a group, are more traumatized or generally disturbed (Connolly, 2006; Sagarin 2009; Wismeijer & Van Assen, 2013).

Within the BDSM community, however, the interpretations of power play among Black practitioners is under investigated. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the ways in which racial minorities seek connections and negotiate roles within sexual subcultures. As a relational construct, racial identity plays a salient role in power dynamics (Rudes & Guterman, 2007). Nonetheless, racialized bodies are typically absent or are peripheral within BDSM discourse. This omission of Black BDSM practitioners contributes to the idea that racialized bodies lack agency over their sexuality, or that BDSM is a White phenomenon inaccessible to or inappropriate for racial minorities (Cruz, 2016). Even in Foucault's analysis of BDSM, he does not account for racial differences in sexual variance or expression. Foucault imagined an equivalence of power between partners, where power exchange was straightforward, rather than situated contextually (1978).

Power Relationships in Counseling

BDSM demonstrates a microcosm of power exchange and reproduction of sociopolitical patterns. In therapeutic spaces, the counselor and client assume power roles set to the backdrop of their contextual narratives. This dynamic speculates whether BDSM contains within its practice a structure that can be extrapolated and applied to non-BDSM spaces. As a unique ecology, BDSM utilizes language, symbolism, and routine action within power play to

communicate the needs and experiences of practitioners. The purpose of this research study is to examine these systems of power and relational sequences to better understand how the community functions and how the practitioners relate to one another. Beyond a holistic understanding of power dynamics, a critical analysis of BDSM among racial and sexual minorities will provide insight into the intersection of situated knowledge, power, and sexuality. Dramaturgical analysis invites researchers to evaluate the roles and performative nature of social interactions. As the guiding conceptual framework for this study, dramaturgy will further highlight the structure and intersubjectivity of BDSM culture. Blumer (1969) emphasizes that nothing has inherent meaning. Rather, individuals assign meaning through social learning and interactions. It is proposed that BDSM practitioners engage in a “mind action” process of creating and recreating experiences through contextual power play. This subjective knowing is essential for counselors to reduce systemic bias and enhance cultural competence specific to a community that remain socially stigmatized. Furthermore, it is proposed that Black BDSM practitioners may benefit from the opportunity to generate and regenerate agency and self-determination through BDSM. It is unclear if this agency is a byproduct of BDSM or if it is supported by the constructive nature of the practice itself.

As a discipline, multicultural counseling concerns itself with the impact of social positioning on individual and group well-being through the monitoring of power dynamics within the therapeutic relationship (Ratts et al., 2016). BDSM has been under investigated from a therapeutics lens and thus fallen victim to counselor bias perpetuated by social stigma, a history of pathology, and misinformation (Hillier, 2018). Systemic approaches to psychological theory emphasize the importance of intersectional considerations in the conceptualization of mental

health and wellness. Cultural identity markers such as race and sexuality, and the placement of such identities within relational dynamics, is central to therapeutic inquiry. A historical departure from the individualistic tradition of psychoanalysis, the premise of social construction offers the counselor an essential understanding of knowing the client's experience (Hansen, 2005; Rudes & Guterman, 2007).

The central inquiry which undergirds this research study is how to move power from an illusory posture to a phenomenon that is directly observable. The micro-level examination of interactive power proposed in this study will explore the mechanics of power relationships from a cultural, structural and political perspective. Furthermore, the social positioning of Black bodies will be explored to better understand how roles are enacted and boundaries are regulated. The findings of this investigation will inform counseling praxis as it relates to codifying communicative acts and identifying relational parallels in BDSM and non BDSM spaces. Lastly, the contextual nuances of Black practitioners, unaccounted for in empirical research to date, will present additional insight into how marginalized individuals negotiate boundaries and agency within unequal power systems.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

BDSM Practice

BDSM practice is the inequity of power illustrated through theatrical enactments of fantasy and role-play (Lee, 1983). BDSM is an overlapping acronym encompassing a variety of power-exchange practices and relational interactions such as Bondage/Discipline (BD), Dominance/Submission (DS), Sadomasochism (SM) (Pitagora, 2013). Distinct from actual violence or coercion, power in BDSM practice is engaged through the consensual exchange of taking and giving of power within various sexual and non-sexual contexts. Similar to dramaturgical settings, BDSM interactions take place in a bounded period of time called a “scene”, and active participation is referred to as “play” (Weinberg, 1984). Less focused on the physical enactments, Taylor and Ussher (2001) stresses the reciprocal nature and shared process of retaining and releasing control as primary to the success of the scene.

Individuals who participate in BDSM often self-identify relational roles in terms of their preferred positioning within the interactive power dynamic. Their role may be fluid, fixed, temporary or long-term, and may extend beyond a dominant-submissive binary (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). An individual who asserts control or facilitates physical/psychological sensations may identify as a top, dominant, sadist, or master/mistress. The individual who prefers to play a subjugated role may identify as a bottom, submissive, masochist, or slave. The individual who is fluid in their power role may identify as a switch (Pitagora, 2013). Power role identifications are rarely associated with an individual’s innate personality, but rather influenced by a person’s play partner or the specific BDSM activity in a scene (Yost, 2007).

Although all BDSM practitioners do not engage in all possible aspects of BDSM, role identification centralizes dominant and submissive expressions through various stimuli. A BDSM taxonomy developed by Alison, Santtila, Sandnabba, and Nordling (2001) codifies various behavioral and psychological activities encompassed by BDSM. Physical pain and stimulation such as spanking and flogging are practices most highlighted in BDSM discourse and mainstream depictions of BDSM practice. Levitt (1971) posits that pain can provide a general psycho-physiological arousal that contributes to anticipation, expectancy and excitement; however, it is neither necessary nor a sufficient condition for BDSM. Furthermore, physical pain is not always erotic, supporting the idea that BDSM can have non-sexual motivations. During a scene, changes in dopamine levels coupled with endorphin production result in some BDSM practitioners describing physical stimulation as a “rush” or “body high” similar to pleasure reported by weightlifters, runners and dancers. (Newmahr, 2010; Pitagora, 2017; Sargain, 2009, 2015). Nevertheless, the degree of pain involved in power play is respective to the desires of the participants and is only sought after within the rules and roles of the BDSM scene. Physical pain can be completely absent of BDSM preferences, in favor of psychological stimulation. Verbal commands and humiliation are the most commonly observed forms of psychological stimulation within a dominant/submissive dynamic. The interplay of bondage and discipline is a low-impact practice that involves physical and/or mental restraints such as ropes, chains, suspensions, masks, sensory deprivation and other forms of confinement or restriction (Sagarin; Yost, 2007). The use of specialized paraphernalia, fetish objects, leather clothing and acting out stories are also common power-play faculties (Weinberg, 1984).

Beyond the scene itself, a common BDSM practice among practitioners is ‘aftercare’. This is a mutually beneficial recovery process of care and attention for the more emotionally and physically spent participant after the conclusion of a scene. Sagarin et al. (2009) defines aftercare as the interaction between participants after completing the main scene activities and before leaving the play area. After care is not sexual in nature. Rather, it is a time for partners to reflect on the activities engaged in, reconnect to the basis of reality, and re-establish roles that existed outside the scene. Because of the chemical and hormonal changes experienced during BDSM play, participants may experience a post-scene “drop” characterized by decreased energy, mood swings, irritability, depression or a sense of alienation. These changes occur when the brain release levels of prolactin to help modify and regulate the levels of dopamine within a participant’s system (Pitagora, 2017; Sargain). Thus, aftercare serves to enhance bonding and communication between partners, beyond physical care and safety protocol. Aftercare often includes physical comforting (i.e. hugging, caressing, cuddling and massage), verbal processing of the scene, and may include food or drinking water. The construction, participation and conclusion of the BDSM scene demonstrates the highly scripted and well-monitored nature of BDSM interactions.

Although the specific activities that fall under the umbrella of BDSM are vast, the basis of power-play is interactional and contextual (Alison, 2001). Explicit consent is the single most common characteristic in BDSM interactions. As a fundamental and non-negotiable tenet among BDSM practitioners, consent is defined as the mutual agreement to engage in an interaction and to respect the participant’s limitations within the scene (Connolly, 2006; Pitagora, 2013; Sagarin et al., 2019; Yost, 2007). Consent within BDSM also requires a ‘compatibility of definition’

which requires the participants to agree on the parameters, procedures, and the interpretation of a given activity (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). As a bidirectional activity, expectations, parameters and consent are negotiated prior to the onset of a scene and continued throughout the scene. In order to maintain mutual interaction, consent is protected, and the risk of collapse is managed through various methods. For example, hand signals and ‘safe-words’ are designated to communicate when a limit has been reached. Safe words are often established between participants, however in public BDSM organizations, universal safe words are implemented. Universal safety protocols are generally color-coded, defined in membership paperwork, and posted in plain sight to produce a shared communication system, decrease liability and assimilate newcomers. (Pitagora, 2013; Weinberg, 1984).

Further, Sagarin et al. (2019) discusses how decisions about partner selection and the environments where BDSM takes place can increase or decrease health risks and impact the process of consent. Private BDSM play is a personal interaction between partners. Sometimes private play is carried out as explicit dominant-submissive scenes, other times it consists of distinct activities integrated into existing sexual engagements. Alternatively, public play is facilitated within collectives such as “play parties”, membership-based organizations or demonstrations at educational conventions. Large-scale BDSM-themed events such as Kinkfest in Portland, OR, Folsom Street Fair in San Francisco, CA, DomCon in Los Angeles, CA and the Southeast LeatherFest in Atlanta, GA are spaces for individuals with BDSM interests to build community, participate in workshops, and share safety practices (Holt, 2016; Herman, 2017). A formative, and perhaps the most popular BDSM phrase “safe, sane, and consensual” describes the underlying tenet of the practice. Safety in public play spaces often requires participants to

follow sanitation procedures and use barriers during activities that could lead to the exchange of bodily fluids. In recent years, the phrase “safe, sane, and consensual” (SSC) has been replaced with “risk-aware consensual kink” (RACK) or “personal responsibility, informed consensual kink” (PRICK) to eliminate the pathological connotation of the word “sane” and emphasize personal responsibility for choices and actions during BDSM play (Williams, Thomas, Prior, & Christensen, 2014).

BDSM and Mental Health

Historical records suggest that humans have incorporated bondage, pain, and power exchange into their sexual practices for thousands of years. However, the terms sadism and masochism did not enter medical discourse until the 19th century (Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984). German-Austrian psychiatrist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing devised the terminology in his text entitled *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) which merged literary illustrations of sexual deviance with clinical case studies of criminal offenders. The diagnostic criteria of what would later to be conjointly referenced as sadomasochism was derived from samples of men sentenced to state institutions who committed harmful non-consensual acts of violence. Bullock and Bullock (1977, p. 210) concludes the consensual preference for sadomasochistic activities was erroneously subjugated as a result of misappropriated pathology, “Sadomasochism is a good example of the way a pathological condition is established by the medical community. Until it became a diagnosis it received little attention, and was not even classified as a sin.”

Bauer (2016) further asserts that psychiatric and therapeutic communities have made a priori assumptions regarding BDSM practice with little critical reflection of sample bias generated

from Krafft-Ebing's original studies. Thus, individuals engaging in BDSM activities are assumed pathological just as homosexuality and gender identity disorder were the subjects of diagnostic discourse.

Defining the population and prevalence of BDSM practices is challenging as variations in context, behavior and identity conflate its presentation. A national survey of nearly 20,000 Australians estimated that 2 percent of the population regularly engaged in BDSM practices (Richters et al., 2008). Participants in this study were asked if they had been involved in "B&D" (bondage/discipline) or "S&M" (sadism/masochism) dynamics within the past 12 months. Data results indicate engagement was more significant among members of the LGBT community, however there were no significant differences between genders and no racial demographics were reported. As the definition of BDSM becomes more enigmatic, the prevalence shifts. For example, in many sexual interactions, one partner often assumes an assertive role, denoting the inherent power dynamics in sexual expression. Biting or wrestling may also be features of consensual, mainstream sex, and not marked as BDSM-oriented by the participants (Pitagora, 2013). The Janus Report (1993) published a nationwide survey of sexual behavior among adult Americans, indicating between 5-14 percent of the population have had sadomasochistic experiences and enjoy pain in sexual contexts. Prevalence jumps to 50 percent when individuals include a preference for "love bites" and up to 68 percent of the general population report fantasizing about BDSM-related activity (Holvoet et al., 2017; Kolmes, 2006; Sagarin, 2019).

Despite the seemingly common preference for some version of BDSM related practice in mainstream sexual activity, the assumption that psychopathology underlies all BDSM interests and behaviors prevails. Early psychoanalytic literature drove the primary explanations of BDSM

eroticism as a symptom of traumatic experiences and arrested development (Freud, 1913/1938; Krafft-Ebbing, 1886/1965). More recently, Taylor (1997) suggests that sadomasochistic interests are a result of intimacy issues, mood disorders, anxiety around autonomy and control, brain disorders, and a compulsive desire to re-enact traumatic events. These perspectives were echoed in the revised third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1987), in which sadistic or masochistic behavior, alone provided sufficient evidence for a diagnosis of a psychosexual disorder. As sponsors of clinical content, mental health practitioners are privileged to classify normal and deviant behavior. This position enables therapists to project an interpretation, definition, and description of other's intersubjective experience around BDSM, which may or may not be accurate. In the absence of contextual considerations, non-normality can be pathologized by virtue of difference rather than legitimate disturbance (Weinberg, 1984). Counselor bias towards BDSM practice and relationships has been documented in the literature, along with corresponding poorer treatment outcomes, often resulting from a history of overgeneralizing and pathologizing BDSM-related behaviors. Similar to the etiological assumptions of Krafft-Ebing's research, mental health explanations of BDSM practitioners have historically been normed on those persons most likely to come to the attention of clinicians for psychiatric intervention (Hillier, 2018; Hoff & Sprott, 2009; Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006). Connolly (2006) asserts that, while there are exceptionalities within any population, and without negating the potential clinical presentation of any person with BDSM interest, the overgeneralization of any individual's motivation is problematic. Frank (2019) echoes this sentiment in their analysis of sexual risk-taking behaviors. They note, for example, the endemic stereotype of viewing all gay or bisexual men as members

of a “high-risk culture” even if they do not engage in high-risk behaviors. Yet the assumption that people who share physical space will likely share some relevant characteristics remains unquestioned. Thus, the environmental safeguards of scene negotiation and mutual consent serve a critical role in distinguishing typical BDSM play from pathology or coercion (Pitagora, 2013).

Countering pathological narratives, there is an increasing academic and clinical interest in alternative sexual identities and practices among non-clinical samples. Much of this literature has focused on the psychological functioning of people who engage in kink, BDSM, fetish practices, or those who engage in consensual nonmonogamy (Hopkins, Brawner, Meyer, Zawilinski, Carnes, & Green, 2016). Empirical data suggests BDSM practitioners present no widespread levels of psychopathology on psychometric measures of depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, psychological sadism, psychological masochism or post-traumatic stress disorder (Connolly, 2006). The assumption that engaging in alternative sexual/erotic practices as pathological appears unwarranted given most research finds little or no difference in psychological functioning and attachment styles of those who engage in alternative sexualities compared to control groups (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008; Rubel & Bogaert, 2014; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Nevertheless, Bauer (2016) struggles with the reality that BDSM remains a socially stigmatized practice that “needs explaining” to resolve how one ‘became this way,’ denoting an ongoing supposition of abnormality. Weinberg (1984) reasons that because BDSM seems counterintuitive to the observer, its normality is difficult to accept. By this logic, behaviors that appear bizarre are designated as wrong — despite understanding of psycho-physiological dialectics of intense sensations as pleasurable (i.e. consuming spicy food). Thus, the extensive labeling of BDSM behaviors as perverse, harmful, or

abusive is a function of this misperception. Although the psychological characteristics of sexual variance is established, presenting BDSM as the misbehaving ‘other’ makes it vulnerable for perpetual oppression. Furthermore, when subcultures deviate from mainstream normality, they are often under-investigated or undertheorized. However, there is value in learning what is shared among subcultures to demonstrate how these shared elements both differ from and relate to the mainstream (Frank, 2019).

BDSM and Queer Space

As empirical research moves beyond a pathological approach to BDSM, ethnographic researchers have focused on the perspectives of the participants and culture-shaping elements of BDSM as a sexual minority and subculture (Simula, 2017). Historically, in order to normalize transgressive expression, sexual minorities have localized spaces and produced collective environments for organized interaction. This is evidenced in early social constructionist work on BDSM focused on gay SM and leather subcultures (Kamel, 1983; Lee, 1983; Spengler, 1977). However, because the practice of BDSM is not distinctly ‘sex’, despite encompassing sexual interactions, BDSM practice does not fit the definition of a collective sex environment. Unlike venues such as bathhouses or commercial sex clubs, communal taxonomy of BDSM behaviors reveals few activities that would qualify as conventional sex (Alison, 2001; Frank, 2019). This incompatibility is further demonstrated in the non-sexual motivations of BDSM such as psychological dominance and submission, mental escape, building community and recreational leisure (Baumeister, 1988; Graham et al., 2015; Simula, 2017; Williams et al., 2016; Wiseman, 1998).

In an analysis of queer geographies and poststructuralism, BDSM appears to more appropriately fit the definition of Queer space. Oswin (2008) outlines that spaces do not pre-exist as one thing or another, rather they are produced and designated. The occupation of space is an important visibility tactic for racialized bodies and other marginalized folx. Through the localization of power as productive rather than oppressive, marginalized bodies force people to recognize their produced normality of a space. Like other minority groups, however, the BDSM community encounters an identity crisis with regards to its transgressive street credentials. Langbridge and Butt (2004) concludes that BDSM communities oscillate between seeking inclusion within normative sexual discourse or positioning themselves as an oppositional identity, entirely transgressing norms. To some degree, the queerness of BDSM is a social imposition, forcing them to operate beyond powers that control and enforce normality. Thus, BDSM can be interpreted as Queer space that resists and ruptures hegemonic heterosexuality, which is the source of their marginality and exclusion. Moreover, because descriptive norms or typical behaviors within BDSM are inherently contextual, BDSM may also be characterized as a community of practice. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) describe a community of practice as a group of people who work together towards a mutual endeavor. As a social construct, the BDSM community is defined both by its membership and/or the behavioral engagement of its participants. Because BDSM can be enacted in organized spaces, social networks or private bedrooms, both the activity and the space may define the community.

Despite the progressive literature exploring sex and gender performance, Oswin (2008) claims the intersection of race and the experience of racism in queer spaces requires amplified exploration. Nash (2005) notes that queer spaces may produce a landscape of White patriarchy,

perpetuating pre-existing racialized and politically conservative processes for profit-accumulation. Beyond describing racial fetishizations such as race play, there is a general failure to include BDSM practitioners of color in BDSM discourse or empirical studies. This sentiment is most vivid in Weiss' portrayal of BDSM communities in the San Francisco Bay Area where the sole mention of any African American character is during a slave auction reenactment (Davis, 2017; Weiss, 2011). As a culture-shaping environment, Sagarin et al. (2019) posits that BDSM is less paternalistic and thus experiences less resistance. However, a lack of ethnic diversity in empirical samples may subject this perspective to cultural bias. It is not yet known to what extent BDSM environments vary in terms of norms and rules in relationship to the ethnicity of participants. To such a degree, an intersectional analysis of BDSM practitioners of color can address how race contributes to queer geography.

BDSM and Ethnography

Over a period of eight years, Weinberg, Williams and Moser (1984) conducted one of the first ethnographic studies of BDSM culture with heterosexual, gay, and ethnically diverse participants. Although Black or African American individuals were not included in the sample, 129 men, women, and trans persons with varying sexual orientations were interviewed as part of Weinberg's extensive fieldwork. Observations were conducted in BDSM clubs, bars, organizations and parties in San Francisco and New York City. Participants were qualified as BDSM practitioners based on their interest (i.e. consumption of SM literature and fetish paraphernalia) and participation in BDSM related activities such as organizational membership or those who frequent BDSM institutions. As a socially defined category, ethnography was a

useful method to examine constructs of BDSM to better define its functionality. The objective of this study was to examine how participants used BDSM to organize and make sense of their sexual lives.

Although the specific activities varied amongst participants, Weinberg found five interrelated social features common in BDSM interactions: dominance and submission, role-play, context, mutuality and consent. Dominance and submission are characterized as the interplay of ruling over and yielding to the influence of another. Yet, central to BDSM is the exaggeration of dominant/submissive expectations through the medium of fantasy and role play. Roles were established according to preference but remained fluid. For example, a participant can play bottom with one partner and top with a different partner, depending on the context of the scene. Weinberg explained that, to some degree, all participants observed were acting out sketches. This observation supports the premise of BDSM as performative and symbolic. Still, participants reported at times feeling emotionally overwhelmed during a scene even if their feelings were a charade. The contextual nature of BDSM frames the presumption that activities are situated and not generalized. Weinberg discussed the problem with attempting to characterize certain phenomena as BDSM and others as “not” and suggests instead that symbolic meaning is generated within the partnership. Beyond the shared understanding of play by the participants, mutuality is carried out bidirectionally through inequities of power. Finally, consent was observed as a bilateral agreement to enter dominant/submissive play and continuously honor limitations throughout the scene. Sagarin et al. (2019) offers additional insight into shared characteristics of organized BDSM spaces such as the prohibition of illegal drugs, limitations on alcohol and the presence of supervisors who monitor scenes and enforce the rules. The cultural

sentiment of “looking out for each other” is evidenced by universal safe-words and the designation of aftercare as part of informed BDSM practice.

More recent studies have expanded to describe the perspectives of BDSM practitioners in communal settings. Newmahr’s (2011) four yearlong ethnography examined the nuanced, micro-level features that move BDSM beyond the perception of “kinky sex” or casual leisure and into the realm of serious leisure. Observations and interview data revealed BDSM was neither a precursor to conventional sexual activity nor a replacement for it. Instead, Newmahr qualified BDSM as a highly disciplined recreational activity requiring considerable effort, knowledge and specialized skill. The process of “learning to play” is viewed as an integral and shared responsibility of the BDSM community with regards to recruitment, education and supervision of play. Beyond the acquisition of skills, understanding and de-coding communicative behaviors during play is essential to consent and mutuality. Safe words were observed as a signal of last resort while other suggestive and subtle signals were employed to manage risk within a scene. Understanding modes of scene communication could only be learned through extensive play, observation and active reflection. Furthermore, the development of skills coupled with social interaction results in durable social-psychological benefits commonly associated with serious leisure. Newmahr notes that although observations were conducted in a racially and ethnically diverse city, the participants interviewed for this study were disproportionately “White, and largely Jewish”.

Margot Weiss (2006) conceptualized BDSM as “working at play” to encompass both the productive labor and creative recombination of the practice. BDSM is analyzed as a situated cultural geography with transgressive boundaries, yet still dependent on social norms. Relying on

a “performative materialist” approach, Weiss conducted 60 interviews and completed participant-observations in the San Francisco Bay Area to learn about the sociopolitical elements of BDSM practice. Participants varied in gender and sexual identities, however 53 of the participants interviewed identified as White, providing little insight on ethnic variance (Weiss, 2011). Andrea Beckmann (2009) conducted a traditional ethnography in London, England with a similar objective as Weiss. Rooted in feminist approach, Beckmann investigates the political practices of BDSM that manifest through body construction, intimacy and sexual ethics. In addition to reporting the macro and micro levels of BDSM culture, Beckmann states some BDSM practitioners can experience a spiritual “transcendence” during play. This self-reported outcome supports the psychological benefactors noted in Newmahr’s (2011) work and other cognitive studies related to BDSM. During the study, Beckmann conducted 16 unstructured “non-directive” interviews and completed participant observations in “scene-clubs” over the course of ten months.

In 2016, Robin Bauer published the first full-length ethnography to focus exclusively on BDSM among queer women and trans communities. Conducted over five years, Bauer utilized Queer theory and the conceptual framework of situated knowledges to question heteronormativity as it relates to the pathologizing of BDSM identity and practice. Forty-nine Queer-identified individuals were interviewed to learn how they understand and experience their BDSM interactions. All participants included in this study identified as White. Bauer attributes this limitation to the predominately White make-up of the BDSM community and to their own racial identity as a White researcher. Despite the lack of racial diversity, over half of Bauer’s

sample identified as non-binary or trans, and all participants ascribed to some non-normative sexual identity (i.e. queer, “queer-dyke”, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or gay).

A critical finding of Bauer’s (2016) research is a resistance to static meaning among BDSM participants, arguing against the tendency to generalize a definition of BDSM practice, activities or culture. Bauer notes that participants defined their practices, identities and relationships in varying and oftentimes contradictory ways. The same practices could have different meanings over time, across partners and across contexts. Furthermore, Bauer posits that identity is sometimes only intelligible within queer cultures. This underscores the enigmatic nature of cultural literacy, and the relational and communal aspects of the participant’s identity. A secondary conclusion of significance is Bauer’s discussion of consent. Instead of agency versus non-agency, Bauer presents a contextual alternative to understanding consent as an uncontested axiom. Because identity (i.e. race, gender, sexuality) denotes one’s social power and hierarchy, the status of being marginalized may impact one’s ability to provide meaningful consent within unequal power dynamics. Bauer examines how queer folk act within limited choices and how boundaries are constructed, policed and/or transformed with BDSM.

Through micro and macro level analysis, Bauer (2016) concludes that Queer practitioners use BDSM to explore social dynamics and inequity. Rather than using dominance and submission to mask or cover up psychological hang ups, BDSM practitioners use queer space to practice negotiating power dynamics. However, Bauer emphasized that performance enactment was limited to social acceptability, further highlighting how larger social structures continue to regulate self-expression. Consequently, Bauer suggests that although BDSM interactions can be neutralizing or even redemptive, role performance and role-play are somewhat hypothetical.

Symbolic Interactionism

Social interaction is the basis of any organization, group or culture. Intercourse between persons describes a situation in which the behaviors of one actor are influenced by another actor, and vice versa. Behaviors are codified as overt movements, mental negotiations, and individual functioning governed by three interrelated processes: motivation, interaction and structure (Turner, 1990). Simplified, people are driven to behave in mechanical ways according to social structuring. However, the interactional process involves the added complexity of interpretation. Humans engage in perspective-taking and information-sharing that cues social actors of shared meaning and symbols within society.

Symbolic interactionism (SI) posits that individuals interact intersubjectively within coordinated activities of society. A micro-level theoretical framework that addresses how society is constructed through repeated interactions, SI is a “bottom up” structure explaining how people define spaces and institutions (Carter & Fuller, 2016). Prior to this perspective, the dominant focus was on how social structures impose or constrain individuals (i.e. “top down”). Notwithstanding the influence of oppressive formatting, SI posits that individuals are autonomous agents who use language and symbols to communicate and design environments. Originally conceptualized by George Mead, his student Herbert Blumer published the term symbolic interactionism in 1969 and developed the perspective. As a conceptual framework, symbolic interactionism is an examination of social settings through an intimate understanding of social actors in order to see the world as the individual perceives it.

Grounded by the idea that individuals learn and assign meaning to the objects and actions surrounding their experience, SI is governed by two concepts: symbols and interaction.

According to Blumer's methodology (1969), symbols are any social object (physical object, gesture or word) that stands in place of or represents something else. Interpersonal communication that transmits the meaning of symbols designates an interaction. Culture is therefore a product of interaction. As active creators of symbolisms, individuals are empowered to construct, share, resist, modify and reject aspects of the social world (Carter & Fuller, 2016). According to Schwandt (1997), symbolic interactionism is threefold: (1) individuals relate to objects and people based on the meaning they have for them; (2) this meaning is derived from social interactions with others; and (3) these meanings move between the social to the individual through an interpretative process. As people interact, they develop shared cognitive frameworks for understanding their social positioning, roles and behavioral expectations of their environment (Stryker, 2008). By virtue of the human's ability to role-take, individuals can also assume the perspective of others and use this information to self-evaluate or choose an appropriate line of conduct (Mead, 1934).

As a specified subsidiary of symbolic interactionist thought, dramaturgical analysis posits that social roles emerge from a reciprocal influence of networks and patterns. Developed by Erving Goffman (1959), role performance within groups is predicated on the differentiation of selves, and people learn normative expectations for actions as they relate to their relationships. For example, familial identities (i.e. mother, father, in-law), political identities (i.e. democrat, republican), and occupational identities (i.e. doctor, employee) are distinct yet situated objects within social relationships (Stryker, 2008). A parent defines their role in relation to their child; a teacher to their student; a clinician to their client. Performance of one's role is monitored through an interactive process called impression management by which individuals work to manage their

level of commitment and adherence to the designated position they hold through communicative behaviors. However, roles are contextual and reflexive. Depending on the situation, identities can be concurrently invoked, challenging an individual's commitment to carry out social roles as outlined. Contemporary frameworks of intersectionality support the recognition of multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities within an individual (Crenshaw, 1989). Diverse identity markers (i.e. race, gender) stand to disrupt the homogeneity of any dominant ideology. Consequently, intersectional identities dance between macro sociological structures and micro level interpretations (Shin, 2016). As such, the roles and routine actions of BDSM practitioners take on contextual meanings when converged with racial identity, an intersection yet to be explored.

BDSM and Dramaturgy

The demonstrative interplay of authority and obedience are central to BDSM. Cialdini & Goldstein (2004) assert that individuals experience social-cognitive rewards for behaving in accordance with the opinions, advice, and directives of authority figures. Social players engage in a dominant-submissive symbiosis of requests and responses. Erving Goffman (1959) would agree that BDSM, as a dramaturgical framework, highlights the contingent and situational aspects of power relations in order to manipulate action and outcomes. Authority and power within groups, cultures and organizational settings is characterized by credibility and hierarchy-based power dictated by existing social structures. And compliance, as a behavioral standard of appropriateness and social maintenance, is contingent on the mutual relationship between the target and the influencer. Within organizational settings, Koslowsky & Schwarzwald (2001)

further emphasize that dominance without consideration for the needs of the subordinate will yield unfavorable compliance. Power dynamics within informed BDSM practice functions mutually and subsequently profits from cooperation (Tyler, 1997).

In addition to authorities, social norms provide insight into the functionality of groups and organizations. Descriptive norms or typical behaviors within BDSM contexts are defined and established by the community. The BDSM scene itself is defined as the basic unit of BDSM practice. The scene is a fixed social site, governed by time, space and consent . Meanwhile, communal behaviors and compliance are structured manifestations of agency, individual actions and social interactions (Turner, 1990; Weber 1978). Symbols are then used to interpret contextual agreements and subsequently carry out interactive sequences between participants. It is unclear how the racial identity of BDSM practitioners influences their social positioning and embodied power within BDSM contexts. In the following study, BDSM will be explored as an interpretative framework for examining the dynamic of interactive power and agency. The object of primary interest is the interactive sequences and the context in which the interaction occurs. Furthermore, the narratives of Black BDSM practitioners will be examined to gain insight into the nuanced experiences of racial minorities with respect to role enactment, boundaries and personal agency within BDSM spaces.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Researchers generally define culture as the nature of experience performed through learned, shared ideas about behavior (Robbins, 2001). Ideas about cultural practices are situated contextually and linked to language, symbolic meaning and social interaction.

Microethnographic research seeks to deconstruct the details of human interaction through the micro-level examination of communicative acts such as patterned behaviors, semantic units, role analysis and shared symbolic meaning (Sage, 2011). Critical microethnography is a method for examining how people use language and other forms of communication to negotiate consent with attention given to social, cultural, and political processes (Bloome et al., 2005). It emphasizes how the use of symbols shapes interactions and simultaneously reproduces sociopolitical patterns. A derivative of critical ethnography, this method describes, interprets, and explains the meanings people give to their own practices and experiences, linked to power and situated knowledge (Carspecken, 1996).

Critical qualitative research examines power dynamics and social inequalities with the intention to promote positive social change. Kinchloe and McLaren (1994) offer a dense collection of assumptions rooted in the notion that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relationships, that certain value systems are privileged over others, and that oppression is reproduced when marginalized groups accept their social status as natural and inevitable (Guba, 1990). Moreover, Michelle Fine (1994) argues mainstream research practices are dislocated. By separating the participants from their subjective and political contexts, they reproduce systems of class, race and gender oppression through the process of “othering”. Critical researchers insist

that in order to disrupt hegemonic discourse, the voices and local meanings of participants must be imported as a vehicle for social representation (Carspecken, 1996). Interrogating mainstream inquiry requires an understanding of the relationship between power and thought, and the connection between values and facts. Critical microethnography is a framework for validating symbolic representation through objective, subjective and normative categories. Objective ontology grounds the norms, protocols, roles and structures of a culture or group. Meanwhile, subjective data reconstructs the meaning of contextual power and role analysis. Data from such examination culminates into the establishment of normative standards within power relationships.

Critical microethnography follows two phases: exploration and inspection (Carter & Fuller, 2016). During the exploration phase, the I familiarized myself with the topic of inquiry. My goal was learning to understand the culture from the perspective of the people who actively participate in it. Building trust within the BDSM community required me to interact with individuals from this social group prior to engaging them for data collection. In addition to examining literature, media and popular portrayals of BDSM, I attended classes and workshops to enhance my understanding of community practice. Data collection procedures of observation and interviews further contributed to the explorative phase of research. The goal of analyzing the ethnographic data collected is to synthesize concepts to better understand the interactive sequences of power demonstrated through BDSM practice. Field notes and interview transcripts were inspected and applied to the analysis process. Exploration and inspection overlapped as I continuously engaged with collected data and modifies the exploration process as necessary.

This critical microethnographic design provides qualitative, observational, cross-cultural and dialogical data to reexamine BDSM and the assumptions that direct interpretations of its practice. Microanalysis of interactive power relationships within BDSM context presents an opportunity to better understand how power circulates, and how racial minorities interpret power dynamics.

Purpose.

The BDSM context demonstrates a microcosm of power exchange, an interplay of dominance and submissive patterns. Little analytic attention has been given to how cultural context shapes interactional identities, power dynamics, and embodied meaning within BDSM cultural networks, particularly as it relates to Black/African American BDSM practitioners. The purpose of this research study is to examine symbolic systems of power and interactive sequences within BDSM.

Research Questions

1. How does power-exchange operate in BDSM?
2. How are roles, boundaries and agency socially enacted for Black BDSM practitioners?

A research question matrix outlines a summary of the proposed methodological process. For each inquiry, the method of data collection, analysis procedure, validity claims, and a priori codes are listed (see Table 1).

Table 1 Research Question Matrix for BDSM and Microethnography

Research Question 1	Data Collection Method	Data Analysis Procedure	A priori Codes	Code Sources
How does power exchange operate in BDSM?	Observation (field notes) Interview (dialogical data)	Primary Record Reconstructive Analysis	The Scene Negotiation Equipment Roles Routine Actions Aftercare	Alison et al. (2001); Sargain et al.(2009, 2015, 2019);Taylor & Ussher (2001); Weinberg (1984)
Research Question 2	Data Collection Method	Data Analysis Procedure	A priori Codes	Code Sources
How are roles, boundaries, and agency socially enacted?	Observation (field notes) Interview (dialogical data)	Primary Record Reconstructive Analysis	Power Dynamics Consent Agency Decision-making Social positioning Cultural scripts	Bauer (2016)

Participants

Identifying the population of participants in any type of queer space is a challenge. Frank (2018) illustrates this challenge with the example of swingers, citing a range of definitions from social or sexual behavior (e.g., attendance at clubs, participation on web sites, choice of sex partners) to self-identification. Identifying the population of BDSM practitioners is equally difficult because definitions of what “counts” as BDSM vary and surveys sometimes leave room for subjective interpretation of the questions. Estimates of the prevalence of BDSM range from a low of 2 percent to a high of 68 percent of the general population. The low estimate derives from a representative sample of 19,307 Australians (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith,

2008). Two percent of the sample answered yes to the question, “In the last 12 months have you been involved in BDSM?” The high estimate comes from a representative sample of 1,027 Belgians (Holvoet et al., 2017), 68 percent of whom had either performed or fantasized about a BDSM-related activity. Even more ambiguous, there is no empirical data available on the prevalence of non-white participants of BDSM. Langdrige and Butt (2005) assert all sexual practices involve power, thus distinction between BDSM and non-BDSM can be difficult. Furthermore, the implicit or explicit recognition of power differential in erotic interactions is relative to the participants. In this study, the understanding of sadomasochistic identity was determined by self-identification (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007). Participants for this research study met the following inclusion criteria:

1. 18 years of age or older
2. Self-identify ethnically as Black or African American
3. Self-reported engagement in BDSM practice within the last 12 months. This includes bondage and discipline, sadomasochism, or dominance and submission.
4. Self-identify with a power along the dominant-submissive spectrum. This includes but is not limited to roles such as a “dominant”, “submissive”, and “switch”.

Although roles within BDSM interactions are variable, one must assume a position within the dynamic for the sequence of play to be enacted. The designation of a participant’s role identity along the dominant-submissive spectrum is critical to indicating cultural affiliation through shared language, interpersonal roles and social engagement. Unlike traditional social roles characterized by gender, power roles in BDSM are pragmatic, serving as primary identity markers within the population. The ethnic criteria of Black/African American participants in this

study demonstrates a focus of a single racial minority. Furthermore, excluded from sample analysis are continuous dynamics known as “24/7”, Master/slave dynamics “M/s” or “Lifers”. These are labels for long-term or continuous dominant/submissive relational agreements enacted beyond time-bound BDSM play. It should be noted that is not uncommon for a BDSM practitioner’s “play partner” and romantic/intimate partner(s) to be different people.

In addition to meeting the inclusion criteria, additional demographic data was collected during the screening process to generate a fuller characterization of the sample. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the chosen sample. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym or alias for which they would be referenced during data collection and in the reporting of the data. Participants were asked to share how many years they had been engaged in BDSM practice along with the power role they assume during BDSM play. Finally, using their own words, participants were asked to share their gender and sexual identity.

All participants identified as Black or African American and ranged from 2 to 19 years of experience in BDSM. Eight participants identified a professional aspect to their BDSM practice including but not limited to BDSM or sexuality educators, professional performers or a practitioner that renders private BDSM services. Five participants identify as lay practitioners who do not engage in BDSM professionally. This characteristic was not determined at the outset of the study, rather noted as the study unfolded.

Table 2 Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Years in BDSM	Power Role	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity
BlakSyn*	31	13	Top	Non-binary	Pansexual
Jet Setting Jasmine™*	39	10	Dominant	Cisgender Female	Heteroflexible
Service boi TK	27	6	Switch	Boi	Queer
Trey	31	4	Dominant	Cisgender Male	Queer
QueenCxnt	27	2	Dominant	Womxn	Queer
Syre*	28	5	Domme	Womyn	Queer
Shakti Bliss*	31	5	Switch	Femme	Pansexual
Toya*	35	9	Dominant	Non-binary	Pansexual
Evanye*	36	10	Switch	Cisgender Female	Queer
Miss Marla*	39	19	Switch	Femme	Lesbian
Davita	29	7	Switch	Cisgender Female	Bisexual
Dann	35	3	Dominant	Cisgender Male	Heterosexual
Coach Felyne*	35	10	Domme	Femme	Pansexual

*Practitioners identify as a BDSM or sexuality educator, professional performer or renders BDSM services for a monetary exchange.

Sampling and Recruitment

Primary recruitment efforts took place at the 2019 Sex Down South Conference held in Atlanta, GA. The city of Atlanta, GA is the second largest majority Black metropolitan area in the United States and boasts the second-highest LGBTQ percentage in the southern United States (US Census, 2017). Gallup (2015) estimates approximately 4.2 percent of the Atlanta population is gay, lesbian or bisexual. It reasoned that any city with such a large volume of sexual minorities would invariably have a significant population of individuals openly participating in a queer practice such as BDSM. Thus, Atlanta, GA was identified as an ideal setting to access BDSM practitioners of color. Sex Down South is a sexuality conference designed for sex educators, mental health counselors, practitioners and laypeople. The conference consisted of interactive

educational sessions, BDSM demonstrations, after-hour shows and a play space. The accessibility of Black BDSM practitioners at the Sex Down South conference presented it as an ideal recruitment site.

Criterion sampling and individual recruitment was the most effective way of utilizing informant networks. While purposeful sampling is not representative and therefore cannot be generalized to the population, working with a purposefully created sample allowed for a situated examination of the social process unique to the participants (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Participants were contacted privately and provided information about the research study. Upon expressing interest, participants were screened for inclusion criteria and provided informed consent prior to dialogical data collection (see Appendix A).

Primary informants or “gatekeepers” within the Black BDSM community were identified through social networking at Sex Down South and utilizing personal contacts within the BDSM community. Jet Setting Jasmine™, Miss Marla and BlakSyn served as the primary informants of this study. All three practitioners demonstrate longevity with respect to cultural membership, all function as BDSM educators, and hold considerable influence within the BDSM community. Jet Setting Jasmine™ is a well-known adult entertainer and curator of BDSM events designed for women and people of color. Miss Marla is the co-founder of the Sex Down South conference and boasts nearly 20 years of experience in BDSM practice. BlakSyn is a well-known BDSM educator with a significant social network following of nearly forty thousand consumers.

Researcher Positionality

Throughout the recruitment, data collection and analysis procedures of this research study, it was crucial to recognize my power, privilege, politics and bias in all spaces that I occupied. From a critical standpoint, acknowledging my positionality helps to denounce the power structures that surround Black people and our participation in research studies (Madison, 2005). It was important that I remain accessible and transparent throughout the study to generate safety for the participants.

My political ideology regarding the supposed psychological and cultural normality of BDSM practice is a biased position. Within the mental health discipline, there is still considerable debate regarding the social and psychological acceptability of BDSM practice. As a Licensed Mental Health Counselor, it was critical that I assert my affirmative stance in acknowledging that I do not believe BDSM is perverse or inherently problematic. The purpose of this study was to contribute an affirming narrative of Black BDSM practitioners; thus, my confirmatory position informed the basis of this study.

As a Black, cisgender femme-identified, polyamorous, queer/lesbian switch, and religious person with a middle-upper class background, my values enter intrinsically and inseparably into the methods, interpretations and epistemology of this study. Although my values are connected to the research questions, participants and observation sites I chose to investigate, my value orientation does not determine the facts discovered within this work. Just the same, Gubrium & Holstein (1997) states that material discovered is inherently connected to the method of discovery. My identity as a Black researcher granted me privileged entry to examine relational power dynamics of Black BDSM practitioners from a situated perspective inaccessible to other

researchers. This access presented the likeliness in my ability to obtain more adequate and sustained accounts of BDSM from a Black perspective, however it required critical awareness and accountability on my part. Reflective notes were maintained throughout the tenure of the research project. Furthermore, peer debriefs were utilized to offer feedback to reduce bias and sound practice.

Setting

The BDSM scene itself serves as the social site in which routine activities and interactions take place. As a community of practice, the cultural setting of BDSM does not imply geographical boundaries. Rather, the spatial and temporal boundaries of the scene allow for BDSM to occur in different venues within various timeframes. Governed by consent, the contextual setting of BDSM is not directly observable. Yet routine action is organized by shared understandings of the participants which make interactive power play possible. Tacit negotiations produce a consensus between participants where cultural, economic, and political conditions influence the coordination of interactive power and communicative acts. The observation of BDSM interactions provides contextual insight to relational dynamics which other research methods cannot capture. It allows for a rich and detailed understanding of cultural nuances, practices and interactions (Carspecken, 1996). Furthermore, through direct exposure, observation can disprove negative bias and stereotypes about the population in question.

Contextually speaking, public membership based BDSM venues tend to serve majority White patrons, while private venues are common among queer and ethnic minorities. Weiss (2011) insists public BDSM venues reproduce macro-level socioeconomic disparities

contributing to the segregated demographic structures. However, all private venues require privileged access, initiated through a vetting process by event organizers and community members.

For this study, ethnographic observations will be conducted at three public venues: The Colonial, Southern Charm, and The Labyrinth. For the reporting of the data, the dungeons are referenced by non-legal or fictional names and their locations kept private as means of preserving confidentiality of the establishment and their occupants. Public dungeons were chosen because of their accessibility. Prior to entry into the venue, a list of “house rules” are given to all attendees detailing a code of conduct, consent to privacy and nondisclosure. It should be noted that for confidentiality purposes, BDSM venues prohibit the use of recording devices. Thus, field notes collected for this study will be reflective in nature and taken ex post facto.

Ethics and Informed Consent

Prior to dialogical data collection, an application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was generated, submitted and approved (see Appendix B). Observational data was exempt from informed consent protocol as it was classified as “observation of public behavior”. Qualification for this exemption was predicated on my agreement to remove all identifying information about the three dungeons I observed for this study. All public dungeons are referenced by a non-legal or fictitious name throughout the reporting of the data. Furthermore, no reference to the dungeon’s geographical location (i.e. city or state) is included. Lastly, the IRB protocol states that while I may describe general characteristics of the settings, behaviors observed, and content presented at educational workshops, I must not describe the occupants of the dungeons in ways that violate

their confidentiality. I was given retroactive consent by Miss Marla, co-founder of Sex Down South to include my experiences from the conference. Similarly, I was given retroactive consent by Coach Felyne to reference scenes in which she participated in at The Labyrinth dungeon. The IRB protocol as written allowed me the ability to freely make behavioral observations within public dungeons while maintaining the confidentiality of the dungeon occupants.

Ethnography presents a unique risk in the immersive nature of its methodology, thus ethical considerations were taken to minimize risk to the participants and liability of the researcher (Creswell, 2016). Marginalized groups are understandably suspicious of scientific researchers due to an explicit history of social disembodiment, thus Madison (2005) stresses that advocating for participant agency is essential to maintaining ethics and safety of the participants. The following ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study.

1. Informed consent detailed the purpose and description of the research study, presented an outline of the data collection procedures and described expectations for individuals who consent to participate. It is also important the participants to know the researcher's desired outcomes of the research and how the information gathered will hopefully contribute toward social change. Prospective participants were informed of the risks and benefits of participation; however, they were under no obligation to participate in interviews. Furthermore, participants had an unconditional right to withdraw from the research study at any time, and without penalty.
2. Participants were given the opportunity to pick their own aliases (Bauer, 2016). Although most BDSM practitioners utilize aliases during BDSM play, the identities of research participants may be altered and safeguarded from the general public and

institutional colleagues. Participants are encouraged to be frank from the outset, knowing their privacy is protected and their credibility retained.

3. The BDSM community has developed safety standards for members in semi-structured spaces. First, consent is a defining characteristic that must be explicit within all interactions. Furthermore, safety is implemented through social control (i.e. scene monitors), trust and communication. The researcher will comply with all safety protocols outlined within the community (i.e. RACK) and the respective settings (i.e. safewords).

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative researchers try to avoid “variables” as generalized measurements of actions, conditions and experiences. Rather, social action and human experience is viewed as highly contextualized and holistic in nature. This study is guided by two flexible research questions regarding the contextual conditions that influence BDSM social patterns, subjective experiences, and interactive power relationships. I pursued these areas in the following ways: obtaining a focused and dense record of social routines in the BDSM scene, producing a detailed reconstruction of the BDSM scene with evidence of cultural themes, and examining structural determinants of micro-level interactive activities. Ethnographic analysis requires constant engagement and ongoing critical interpretation, even during the data collection phase. Thus, analysis is not a separate stage distinct information gathering. Carspecken (1996) outlines the five methodological stages of critical ethnography used in both data collection and analytic procedures of this research study, four of which were applied to this research study.

Stage One: Compiling the primary record.

Throughout this study, I completed a total of nine observations across three public dungeons: The Colonial, Southern Charm, and The Labyrinth. Observations occurred over a period of six months and included attending specialized conferences, demonstrations, workshops and events designed for BDSM scene interactions. Central to ethnographic observation, I focused on gathering insight into the cultural setting, normed practices, and observable structures of BDSM practice. I developed an observational guide to help me stay focused on the observable components of the spaces rather than inquiring why anything was occurring (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011):

1. How is the space staged and recognizable as a BDSM play space?
2. How are roles communicated and how are they maintained?
3. What tools, implements, equipment is used?
4. What verbal cues and commands are used?
5. How do the players respond to each other during the scene?

Following each observation, a primary record was built through reflective field notes generated from the observations and conversations from the BDSM sites. Because recording devices are prohibited within BDSM spaces, I created and maintained mental notes of details and impressions until full fieldnotes about the scene are generated ex post facto. Field notes were written in first-person, however BDSM activities and interactions were described from the perspective of an uninvolved observer, using low-inference vocabulary. A thick description begins with initial impressions. These impressions include heavily detailed records of the physical space, equipment, materials, the look and feel of the locale, and contextual information

such as the purpose for gathering. The primary record also describes significant or “important” events, reactions, surprises, verbal and nonverbal behaviors. The speech acts, body movements, postures, and dyadic interactions between participants will be included here, as well as my personal reactions to incidents in the BDSM scene (Emerson et al., 2011). Descriptive transcriptions of observation data were produced prior to initiating analysis.

Stage Two: Reconstructive analysis

Using data from the primary record, initial meaning is constructed to determine roles and routine modes of interactive power. The process of putting words to the actions observed takes place using low-level a priori coding procedures. This coding process will help distinguish routine events and anomalies within the BDSM according to previously published accounts of BDSM culture. Initial themes will outline culture-shaping norms of BDSM power play including role identity, role-play, body positioning, materials used, and techniques. Because the I cannot know for certain what a participant intended with an action through observation alone, impressions of meaning can only be specified as a range of possibilities. After initial “fields of meaning” have been validated through dialogical data in stage three, the researcher will return to this stage and apply coding procedures to reconstruct contextual agreements, roles and awareness of power relationships. Interactional processes will be coded a priori according to the dramaturgical approach to BDSM and cultural variables outlined in Table 1. Coding analysis is used to make sense of tacit meaning that may underline the interactions recorded as it relates to the cultural, structural, political and dramaturgical aspects of BDSM.

Stage Three: Dialogical data generation

Ethnographic interviews were conducted with participants in order to “democratize” the research process and challenge material produced in stages one and two. Semi-structured interviews with 13 individuals were conducted and recorded. Of the 13 participants, two practitioners were interviewed as a couple. All other interviews were conducted one-on-one. There are no rigid guidelines for the appropriate number of participants in ethnography. The general rule of thumb is to keep sampling until saturation or until no new thematic content is generated (Saunders et al., 2017). The open nature of the semi-structured interview process reduces potentially unequal power dynamics inherent in ethnographic research by enabling participants to collaborate in the data production (Acker et al, 1996). Interviews took place face-to-face or virtually via the Zoom network. Interviews lasted between 45-150 minutes. Each participant was given \$50.00 cash as a gift for their time.

Interview Protocol

Interview content covered objective data related to the BDSM scene, contextual information related to scene information, and the subjective experiences of BDSM practitioners. Similar to the generation of field data, the ethnographic interview focused on how BDSM practice was constructed for each practitioner rather than their individual motivations for practicing. Furthermore, interviews with the primary informants varied slightly in inquiry. In addition to gaining insight into their patterned practice, primary informants were asked to provide structural and political insights to BDSM culture. Topical domains, lead-off questions, covert categories and follow-up questions are outlined in Table 3. Interviews were audio recorded and then I generated a clean transcription compared to verbatim accounts. Most of the

interviews included colloquialisms and casual antidotes immaterial to the interview objectives. Footage not pertaining to the study’s objective and parts containing identifiable information were removed from the transcription document. Following transcription, data followed the reconstructive analysis procedure outlined in stage two.

Table 3 Interview Protocol

Topic Domain	Lead-off Question	Covert Categories	Possible Follow-up Questions
Power	What power role do you assume in BDSM scenes?	Roles and routines Position-taking Activities and techniques used during BDSM play Aftercare	Who does what during the scene? Can you describe (blank) in more detail... What devices are used? How do you know you're doing it right? What happens at the end?
Context	Who do you play with?	Power dynamics Negotiation Decision-making Protocol and scripts	How do you choose your play partner? What do you want your partner to know about you? How are decisions made? Describe a situation where the scene was unsuccessful.
Agency	What does negotiation look like?	Negotiation Decision-making Expectations Roles Consent	What does the conversation sound like prior to BDSM play? Describe your needs, preferences and limits. How do you know what you want? How do you know you achieved your goal?

Stage Four: Describing system relations

Prior to generating a narrative account of the data findings, one hundred and eighty-eight pages of transcription data were coded following a priori coding procedures. Empirical themes outlined in Table 1 were used to guide the organization of the transcription data. The reconstruction of interpretative schemas generated 9 salient themes describing a narrative structure of BDSM play. More specifically, to demonstrate how power dynamics were organized

in the BDSM setting, coded data was placed into four social categories outlined by Goffman’s theoretical framework: cultural, structural, political and dramaturgical characteristics of social interaction (see Figure 1). Beyond the reconstruction of social norms and systemic relations, the synthesis of the data serves to identify nuances between Black BDSM practitioners and the larger BDSM community. Furthermore, themes generated provided context to interactive sequences of power. Micro-level relational findings helped refine macro-level assumptions about interactive power relationships, particularly as it relates to marginalized groups.

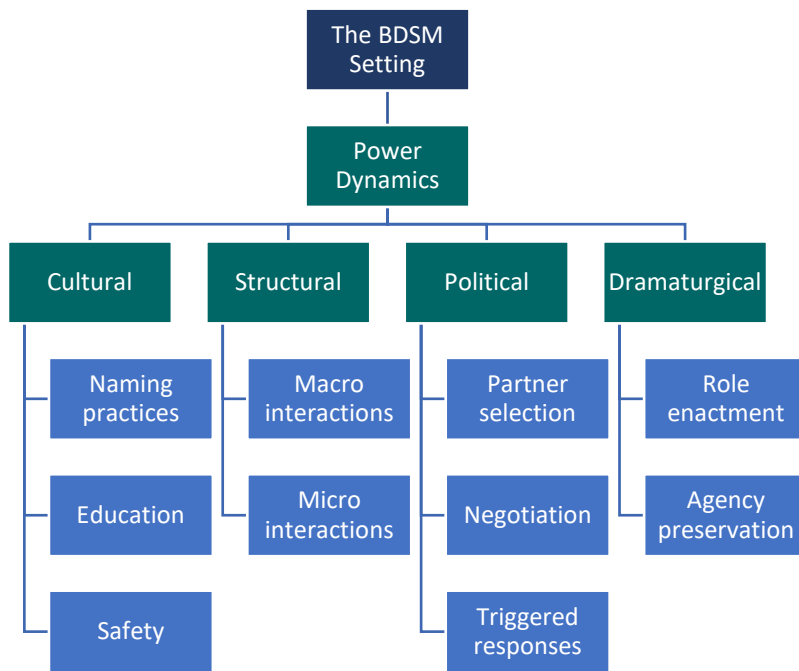


Figure 1: Thematic Analysis of Power Dynamics in BDSM

Validity and Trustworthiness

It is essential that data and field records produced are true to what occurred, analysis procedures are performed consistently, and the conceptual claims of analytic techniques used are

sound. Critical epistemology posits that truth itself depends on consensus, and that validity concerns are not simply limited to the logic of an argument (Habermas, 1984). Rather, cultural understandings and shared agreements are rooted in social routine which are fundamental to coordinating activities between people in everyday life, including power dynamics. Symbolic interactionism recognizes an objective world which is influenced by cultural categories used to describe actions and behaviors. Following Carspecken's (1996) validity procedures for critical ethnography, truth claims were regulated from different directions: objectively, subjectively and normatively. These three ontological categories ground the research inquiry of this study and guide the data collection process.

The objective data generated defines the existence of an agreed upon reality. In this study, the primary record prioritizes objective validity. Unlike most ethnographic studies on BDSM that generally focus on one dungeon perspective, three dungeons were observed for this study. Observational data from three sites enhanced the reliability and validity of my accounts. Furthermore, the use of low-inference vocabulary in the written record enhances accessibility and agreement to the researcher's description. These transcripts are an accessible representation of what took place in a manner that any observer or participant would report under ideal conditions. The primary record was also used to conduct consistency checks between the observed activities and what was said in interviews.

Contrary to objective reality which can be accessed by many, subjectivity is characterized by privileged access. Statements concerning emotions, desires, intentions and various levels of awareness are reflections of the participant's subjective domain over which they hold a certain amount of control. Consistency of performance and consistency of self-disclosure are never

conclusive; however, this consistency is the most helpful argument to validate subjective references. Subjective states are therefore represented as expressive actions. Thus, identifying patterned action and normative behaviors helped me better understand how the participants evaluate and qualify their experiences.

Prior to data analysis, I employed the use of peer debriefs to review some transcripts and field notes throughout the data collection process. Opportunities for scrutiny by colleagues, peers, and participants was welcomed. These perspectives were instituted to highlight potential instances of bias, preference or leading on my part. In addition to debriefing sessions, I was responsible for maintaining a reflective commentary of my subjective experience. Member checks were utilized to equalize power relations during the research process. Beyond sharing transcriptions, it is necessary for me to share meaning constructions with the participants and ask for feedback.

Summary

In sum, the data collection and analysis process took nine months to complete. While in the field, I attempted to take advantage of a variety of opportunities to expand my understanding of how BDSM functions. The Sex Down South conference was an essential recruitment hub that provided me access to an abundance of kinky Black people. All inquiries on my behalf were met with intrigue and enthusiasm by the practitioners reflected in this study. Although all participants in the sample identify as Black, the group was decidedly queer with respect to gender identity, sexuality, and role enactments. The coding and analytic procedures brought the narrative of these Black practitioners to life, providing insight not only into the physical setting of BDSM, but the

relational dynamics. The dramaturgical narrative of these Black BDSM practitioners is presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to learn how power dynamics operate within BDSM, and how Black people who practice BDSM engage with or experience these constructs of power within their practice. This chapter is divided into three sections (a) illustrating the physical space where BDSM interactions take place; (b) outlining the power constructs observed in BDSM; (c) reporting racial considerations that directly impact Black BDSM practitioners. The chapter is organized in accordance with Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework which outlines four aspects of the social setting: cultural, structural, political and dramaturgical. The observation of public BDSM dungeons allowed for the initial examination of BDSM practice within a designated environment. Next, cultural, structural and political elements were identified to contextually illustrate how power functions within BDSM spaces. Lastly, dialogical data is examined to describe the nuanced experiences of Black BDSM practitioners with respect to role identification, boundaries and personal agency. Excerpts from observation fieldnotes and verbatim interview content are inserted throughout the narrative to highlight the findings. This chapter concludes with a summary of how the experiences of Black BDSM practitioners work in concert with or contradict the operational dynamics of dominance and submission.

BDSM as a Social Setting

Prior to analyzing the dynamics of BDSM practice, it was important to gain insight into where BDSM play happens. To this end, three public dungeons were chosen as the locations for

observational study: The Colonial, Southern Charm, and The Labyrinth. Public dungeon spaces are accessible to the public; however, they typically require a membership along with associated fees to enter and utilize the facility. Similar to a gym membership, public dungeons are spaces or entire buildings equipped for BDSM play for active members. The presence of public BDSM play spaces is searchable via the web; however, for confidentiality purposes their physical locations are oftentimes obscure. The Colonial and Southern Charm dungeons operated in warehouses with no exterior signage, while The Labyrinth was a makeshift dungeon on the lower level of a conference hotel. Prior to entry into play areas, dungeons positioned front desks or tables where participants are required to complete membership forms, sign liability statements, and agree to “dungeon rules” and/or consent policies. The membership forms were simple, requiring one’s legal name, a chosen alias, photo identification, and disclosure of preexisting conditions that could be impacted by BDSM play. The Colonial and Southern Charm both assessed a one-time fee of \$35 for a one-year membership, and a \$25 entrance fee per visit for individuals wanting to use the facility for BDSM activity. In addition to active BDSM play, public dungeons host educational workshops to members and non-members, free of charge. Comparatively, The Labyrinth did not require an entrance fee as it was a voluntary play space available to attendees of Sex Down South, a sexuality and educational conference. For all three spaces, no exclusionary criteria forbade membership. The Colonial and Southern Charm, display value statements on their websites affirming patronage safety and describe their space as welcoming of “any identity and/or lifestyle choice”. Relatively, exclusion from dungeons were conditional based upon a participant’s ability to abide by the rules and safety regulations outlined

within consent policies. With some variance, all dungeons shared the following rules and protocols:

- No cellphones, audio-recording devices, or cameras are permitted. No pictures are allowed anywhere on the premises.
- Dungeon Monitors (DMs) are identified with a colored badge or armband, and they are guided by the principles of RACK (“Risk-Aware Consensual Kink”).
- Negotiate scenes and safe words ahead of time. Use the universal safe words “red, yellow and green” to communicate pleasure threshold.
- Be aware that other people may be waiting to use equipment. Limit your scene when others are waiting.
- Clean up after yourself.
- Treat everyone with respect.

The most notable distinction between the three dungeons was their policy on penetrative sex. The Colonial and Southern Charm explicitly state there is no sex, masturbation or ejaculation allowed in the dungeon, bathrooms or on other parts of the premises. The Labyrinth states that penetrative sex is allowed, and they provided safe sex supplies to anyone who requests them.

Beyond the front desk or lobby area, public BDSM dungeons are typically comprised of a main play space with auxiliary spaces designated for storage of personal items, changing clothes, non-play related socializing, merchandise, and aftercare. The play space is furnished with equipment for various types of BDSM play such as chairs, posts, benches and pedestals.

Flogging is a common activity observed where one person deals lashing to the body of another with special implements such as whips and paddles. For the person receiving the lashing, benches are often used to bend them over or lower their position for controlled movement. BDSM furniture is also utilized for activities such as bondage, where one person is physically tied to a structure using a device such as hand cuffs or materials such as rope or fabric. Beyond bondage, rope can also be used to suspend a person into mid-air. Rope is used to bind various body parts in a focused manner, and then a rig hanging from the ceiling is used to suspend the body:

The dungeon is one large open space, and there are stations set up around the perimeter. To the right, there is a row of three massage tables, with cleaning supplies displayed on the shelving hanging on the wall. There are towels, disinfectant and multiple first aid materials. Along the entire back wall are stations for bondage and impact play. There are a couple St. Andrew's crosses, and pedestals with people bent over them while their partners work with them. There is also a large spider web device that spans 6-8 feet in diameter; someone is tied to it. Most people are working in pairs; the others are hanging out on the couches in the aftercare space that takes up the back-left portion of the room. (observation, January 25, 2020)

Following a BDSM scene, the participants initiate a period of recovery. I observed some partners embrace after the conclusion of the activity for which they were engaged. Others were escorted to a secondary space away from the main play area. They sit on couches or lie down and rest. Sometimes, there is conversation, other times, they appear to share physical, non-sexual, touch

and be quiet. The aftercare spaces are located either off to the side of the main play areas or in separate rooms providing an altogether contrasting feel:

[Aftercare] happens in a large room with floor beds, pillows and fabric paneling covering the walls. All the materials were soft, and the colors were light, like pastel. The ambient feel of the aftercare room was a contrast to the masculine vibe of the front area.

(observation, November 2, 2019)

The main play space is dark with dimmed or colored backlighting to support an alluring and slightly sinister mood. Southern Charm had heavy metal music playing over the speakers while The Labyrinth donned a more rhythmic and sensual playlist. Regardless of musical accompaniment, the sounds of people being physically stimulated is the persistent background noise. Their voices, or the sound of their body parts being impacted defined the erotic nature of the atmosphere:

Without focusing on any singular scene, the sounds of bare skin being slapped, soothed, lashed or otherwise stimulated blended with their corresponding vocal replies of exclamation and reinforcement. Amidst the heavy metal, I hear an orchestra of whips on skin, grunts, squeals, giggles and rattling chains. Some of the sounds are rhythmic while others are sporadic, aggressive, pleasurable and relieving. (observation, January 25, 2020)

Most participants I observed at The Colonial and Southern Charm were White, middle aged, and presented as cisgender and/or heterosexual. On a typical weekend night, the dungeons hosts between 50 to 60 individuals, with five or six people of color in attendance or serving as part of the staff. The Labyrinth boasted a majority Black crowd with participant's appearing to

be in their late twenties to mid-thirties. Gender and sexuality are much more obscure in *The Labyrinth*, suggesting many identify outside of binary spectrums:

There's a Black masculine-presenting person with thick locs, donning a leather vest, flogging a Black femme in the corner. There is a funky suspension device in the back corner. There is no rope or tying involved. Rather, it's a full body enclosure of black elastic webbing that hugs the person like a chrysalis and then slowly lifts them in the air. There are three Black women waiting in line for their turn to be hoisted into the air. They are giggling and cheering on each girl that tries the suspension ahead of them. I'm awfully curious how they are operating that suspension without pulling down the ceiling tiles. On the other side of the room, there is an older White man renting out floggers for participants who did not bring their own. I overhear him explaining the different materials and types of floggers he has available. Behind me is a Black femme with big hair in a short strappy black dress suspended in a full-body swing, like a hammock. She is receiving vibrational sensations to her arms and legs via an electric wand controlled by a Black queer femme sporting sisterlocks and a crown. (observation, September 7, 2019)

Despite differences in the crowd's composition, the style of dress in BDSM dungeons is more or less mainstream goth. Some folks are in casual clothing, while other's sport traditional fetishwear such as leather, latex, fishnets, corsets, etc. Many masculine-presenting folks wear leather vests on top of tight black t-shirts. Others present with vests sans t-shirt, or they are topless with leather harnesses across their chests. Like a sexualized motorcycle gang. Black boots seem to be a standard footwear choice for everyone. And regardless of the outfit's composition, black is the most predominate color choice. No dungeon had an explicit dress code,

although committing to the moody and sensual theme is encouraged. Plus, fetishwear is part of what makes the setting distinctly BDSM:

I noticed as the night progressed, people's outfits became decidedly "kinky". The easygoing, meet-and-greet, "everyone's welcome" spirit of the early evening had faded away. And the more provocative, commanding, latex-intensive part of the night had arrived, making me feel woefully out of place. My black leggings, boots and crop top were not going to cut it. The boots were my saving grace. But I could not stand up to the corsets, knee-high boots, chained harnesses, masks or collars worn by other participants. (observation, November 2, 2019)

The unspoken rules surrounding dress felt alienating at times, as if one could not fully participate if they didn't dress the part. However, just as the activities, tools and equipment in the space help to distinguish BDSM from an otherwise basic jungle gym, the style of dress amplifies cultural membership and identification (Kaiser, 1990).

BDSM and Power Dynamics

The willful exchange of dominance and submission is the defining characteristic of BDSM practice (Lee, 1983; Pitagora, 2013). Embedded within the interaction are cultural values, structure, patterns, routine actions and decision-making that help qualify the practice of BDSM while providing insight into how power dynamics operate. Goffman (1959) posits that social environments contain within them cultural, structural and political characteristics granting context for the interaction between participants. These three constructs were examined within each public BDSM settings observed.

Cultural Characteristics

A basic practice within BDSM is learning to identify with a power role. Typically, a practitioner's power role positions them along the dominant-submissive binary, namely as a "Dominant" or "submissive". Practitioners who embody both dominant and submissive characteristics often identify as a 'switch'. There are countless other descriptors used to communicate how one positions themselves within the dominate-submissive spectrum, including 'top', 'bottom', 'Master', 'Mistress', 'sadist', 'slave', 'masochist', etc. Even if a practitioner chooses not to give themselves a label or title, it is common to identify with a social role that aligns with how one behaves within power-exchange practices (Hébert & Weaver, 2015). Ethnolinguistics indicate there is a relationship between naming and self-concept, and that we conceptualize and send messages about who we are and how we expect to be treated by our names and associated titles (Herbert, 1990). In addition to identifying with a power role, BDSM practitioners typically employ the use of pseudonyms. Aliases encountered during observations took on three different forms: pseudonyms, handles, and honorifics.

Pseudonyms. In its simplest form, choosing an alias involves assuming a name different from a name issued on formal identification cards or used in everyday, non-BDSM settings. For example, a woman may use her given name, Evelyn, while working as an office manager or when visiting her mother. But she chooses to go by Cassidy when she participates in BDSM-related activities. Similar, but more distinguishing, some BDSM practitioners construct a new name to describe their self-concept with more intention, such as interview participants BlakSyn and Syre.

Social media handles. Akin to Facebook, FetLife is a social networking website that allows people interested in BDSM, fetishes and kinks to engage in topical discussions, explore desires and arrange offline events. Upon registration, FetLife requires you to create a “nickname”. This nickname is often descriptive in nature, communicating one’s personality or kink preferences such as interview participant ShaktiBlissBunny. BDSM practitioners often use their FetLife handles when introducing themselves or exchanging information in BDSM spaces. Usernames on Instagram are also used as social indicators to communicate roles and positionality. For example, BlakSyn’s Instagram handle @kinkyblackeducator designates their status as a BDSM sexuality educator.

Honorifics. Some BDSM practitioners adopt or enhance their names with titles or attributes to qualify and aggrandize their identity (Newmahr, 2011). For example, interview participant Jet Setting Jasmine™ is a prominent adult entertainer and Master Fetish Trainer. Her name is trademarked and designed to communicate her grandeur and wide-spread influence within the BDSM community. Honorifics such as ‘Mistress’, ‘Master’, ‘Sir’, ‘Daddy’, ‘Mentor’, ‘Coach’, and ‘Goddess’, are commonly added titles prefixing a dominate-identified person’s name as means for communicating respect:

Miss Marla is what people call me if they want to be serviced. They have to call me Miss Marla all the time whenever I ask them a question. I command it. It's how I walk into the room. It's how I make people address me. (interview, March 4, 2020)

The Colonial’s consent policy, however, clarifies that honorifics are a form of verbal roleplay and should not be used without permission from the name holder.

In addition, to naming practices, I noticed when a dungeon staff person or workshop facilitator would introduce themselves to a large group, the number of years they have practiced BDSM comes after their name. Without formal credentialing standards, the number of years a practitioner has been “in the Life (style)” is often used as a positioning tool to qualify authority and communicate competence. In education settings, sharing how many years one has practiced may be a way to help the audience feel confident in the facilitator’s practice and demonstration. It appears longevity in the BDSM community is considered a symbol of status and competence. Most of the practitioners in this study identify as BDSM or sexuality educators, ranging from 2 to 20 years of practice in BDSM.

Education. Specialized competence not only improves the efficiency of BDSM practice and scene objectives, it also promotes safety and reduces liability (Meeker, 2013). Educational workshops are accessible to the BDSM community through large conferences, sex shops, specialized meetings, online forums, and public dungeons (Holt, 2017). Topics cover a myriad of subjects such as basic cultural terminology, tools and implements, safety and best practices, gender and sexuality, scientific and psychological frameworks. At the Sex Down South conference, I attended educational sessions on BDSM basics, negotiating a scene, and rope play. At Southern Charm, I attended a workshop on Sensual BDSM:

The facilitator tells us about her background and introduces us to her male submissive; she is Black, and he is White. They both look to be in their sixties. She explains the purpose of the session is to consider the “softer side” of BDSM, and how we can engage our senses through BDSM with less intensity and more sensuality. The main takeaway was that sensual play could be achieved with items we likely already had in our homes.

She used her submissive to demonstrate the use of fur blankets, feathers, scarves, squishy toys, or just your hands. (observation, January 25, 2020)

A different workshop I attended, at The Colonial covered the practice of giving and receiving pain using mindfulness techniques. The facilitator, a middle-aged White woman with twenty-three years of BDSM experience, emphasized the importance of “warming up” the body to receive stimuli. She also taught us to recognize non-verbal cues such as changes in skin color and breathing patterns to indicate pain-pleasure thresholds, and then applying mindfulness techniques such as breathwork to enhance BDSM practice. On a different weekend at The Colonial, I attended a workshop led by a Black practitioner on the use of single-tail whips:

The workshop took place in the main dungeon place with folding chairs arranged conference-style, on either side of a table holding a laptop and projector. When I noticed an entire power point presentation, I anticipated the content would be rich and specific. In addition to the projection screen, I noticed a long table with several whips laid out. There are roughly 65 people in attendance, and about 20 of them are Black. This is the most Black people I have seen at The Colonial, at once. I wondered if we all held the same curiosity— Black people being whipped and all. The facilitator introduced himself by sharing his day-to-day occupation, his power role as a Dominant, and how many years he has been practicing BDSM. He also shared that impact play is his preferred method of power-exchange. He emphasized that during this workshop he would focus on how the whip is physically constructed, the physics that makes it “crack”, historical factors to consider when using it with African American practitioners, and then he concluded with a demonstration. (observation, February 22, 2020)

Because BDSM is a hands-on activity, demonstrations and hands-on practice are useful elements of BDSM education. In a controlled environment with a competent facilitator, participants are given the opportunity to learn and execute best practices. Beyond communal education, most of the BDSM practitioners included in this study hold advanced degrees in counseling and social work, and/or formal credentials in kinesiology, massage therapy, and other forms of body work such as Reiki healing. Their academic or formal education often combined with specialized training in BDSM practices supported the practitioner's self-efficacy, proficiency and reduced the potential for harm when participating in a scene (Williams, et al., 2014).

Tools. Beyond modalities of play and techniques, I noticed tools, implements and toys were used to accompany or enhance BDSM play. During education workshops, facilitators would bring a variety of tools to demonstrate their proper use. I also noticed Dominants would arrive to public play spaces with large chests or duffel bags containing various BDSM devices such as floggers, rope, tape, cuffs, scarves, paddles, etc. The tools were used to carry out a specific objective, such as rope used to physically restrain someone, or they were used to enhance stimulation to the body such as the use of a leather flogger with multiple tails.

In public dungeon spaces, it appeared the standard protocol is to you bring your own tools and materials; the furniture and larger equipment is communal, but the gear is personal. The Labyrinth was the only dungeon space observed that rented out BDSM tools for temporary use. I appreciated this service as it allowed for curious attendees to explore and participate in BDSM activities without the financial investment of creating their own toy collection. In my observation, however, practitioners with longevity in BDSM practice or those who render professional services owned the most specialized devices and showed up to the dungeons fully

equipped. However, private practitioners demonstrated a considerable investment in their practice while being resourceful in creating their own toolkits.

While interviewing Dann and Davita, a Black polyamorous couple, they described how they save money by purchasing ordinary items and repurposing them for BDSM play. For example, Dann shared that in a recent scene he used standard rope from a novelty store in the mall, clothes pins, gardening tools, or a paddle left over from his days at the fraternity house as implements. When I inquired about the monetary worth of his toolkit, Dann commented, “About \$450. Because few of those items were specific to BDSM. We use things around the house. But if it were all “BDSM equipment” — purchased for, and as “BDSM equipment” — I would have easily spent \$1500”. Evanye, a queer-identified switch shared some of the contents of her toolkit:

I call it my Hoe Bag. I have gloves, and a little pair of scissors in case I need to cut the fingers off my gloves in order to make like a dental dam or genital barrier. I have condoms, homemade wet wipes, and I keep a little tiny thing of coconut oil in there for lube. I always have my butt plug in there just in case I'm feeling fancy. Toothbrush and toothpaste, a whip, bondage tape, and scarves that double as restraints and blindfolds.

(interview, February 22, 2020)

Similar to other non-BDSM hobbies, it is common for BDSM practitioners to collect tools and invest in gear associated with their sport (Newmahr, 2010). Notwithstanding, tools appear to be an essential component of BDSM play used to enhance physical elements of the practice that require some financial investment.

Safety. The subject of consent and safety are emphasized in the governing BDSM literature and presented as cultural priorities in BDSM practice. Public dungeons display consent reminders on membership forms, lists safety protocols and expectations on their websites, and posts rules on the walls throughout the dungeon. To reduce the exchange of bodily fluids, the main dungeon play spaces are stocked with sanitation supplies, first aid and sexual barrier items. Although public dungeons are interested in reducing personal liability, they emphasize and encourage individuals to take personal responsibility for their own practice (and pleasure) experience. Other normative restrictions such as no cameras, recording devices, and sex in some dungeons are employed as protective devices to preserve the confidentiality of everyone in the space, and again, reduce liability for the facility. The individuals who enforce the safety policies of the play space were called Dungeon Monitors (DMs). In all public dungeons observed, DMs were identifiable by special name tags or brightly colored arm bands. Dungeon Monitors were authorized to intervene or even stop a scene they feel is inappropriate or non-consensual.

Structural Characteristics

Public dungeons, as organized bodies, dually provide macro-level oversight of protocols and decorum while also supporting micro-level power play between practitioners. Because our individual bodies are embedded within social systems, Goffman (1959) argues individuals cannot conceptualize themselves without consideration for the structures that influence their behaviors. Thus, the analysis of interaction explores how BDSM spaces are organized, the division of power within BDSM scenes, and how people cooperate and carry out these tasks.

Macro-level interaction. In public BDSM dungeons, facility managers, Dungeon Monitors, the front desk girl, the bearded guys in leather vests, and the workshop facilitator, and

all embody forms of gatekeeping within the larger BDSM space. These gatekeepers regulate safety practices and manage the flow of information through protocol and educational practices. BlakSyn, a pansexual, non-binary educator asserts, “Black people have a history of experiencing gatekeeping at the hands of White people. And when you spend so long looking at media that doesn't reflect your experiences, then you're more inclined to believe [BDSM] is not something for you.” Imbalances in gender and ethnic representation in BDSM spaces can cause minorities to feel relegated or isolated in larger spaces. Consequently, practitioners may form or join subcultural groups that provide supplemental structures in spaces more aligned with personal their interests or identities. Many BDSM practitioners belong to Leather communities or smaller social groups that reflect specific kinks or demographics. Southern Charm hosts monthly meetings such a “Submissive Safe Space” and “Dominants Round Table” where practitioners can openly discuss the benefits and challenges associated with their respective roles from a power-specific framework. The Colonial hosts gatherings for various age groups (younger and older) as well as groups tailored for gay men. Similarly, groups like ONYX is a Leather/BDSM fraternity for gay men of color, with a sister organization called ONYX Pearls. Miss Marla, co-founder of Sex Down South, is an original member of ONYX Pearls Southeast:

We were the first line to cross and I'm still a part of that group. It is like a sorority. You basically apply to be either an associate or pledge, and they look over your application and then you do the whole pledging process. We have a President, Vice President, Sergeant at Arms. We have a health and wellness committee, education committees— all these different committees and there are requirements. We have monthly meetings and bar nights, which are for fundraising. (interview, March 4, 2020)

Groups like ONYX not only provide an empowering space for the BDSM community, they also engage in community activism and help sponsor educational programs to expand specialized practice within BDSM play.

During our interview, Dann, a 35-year old Black male, compares his membership in a Greek fraternity to BDSM practice: “I’ve had a lot practice because of the pledge process. Most of my understanding regarding BDSM, and my experience, comes from the Black fraternity pledging process. They are very similar.” Just the same, the overrepresentation of cisgender and White people observed in positions of leadership at public dungeons creates an inherent social inequity with regards to acceptable decorum and behavioral regulation. During my time in the field, as a Black woman, sometimes it was difficult to decipher whether dungeon rules were a function of protocol (i.e. “only Doms can sit here”) or if my movements were being policed unnecessarily (i.e. “I don’t want you to sit here”). Nevertheless, each dungeon seemed to reinforce the dialectical notion of liberal play within highly structured contexts.

Micro-level interaction. Most scenes I observed took place in pairs or dyads, where one person exerted influence (dominant) and the other person received the action (submissive). They worked as a team, positioning their bodies, tools and style of dress as discernable clues into each person’s respective power role. The following are four examples to help distinguish power roles:

1. A person with a flogging device, dressed in embellished clothing, is standing behind another person who is restrained to a wooden post. The person restrained is topless and wearing a leather collar. In this case, the person holding the flogging device is playing the dominant role, and the person restrained is playing the submissive role.

2. A person is standing in place while another person binds different parts of their body with rope, securing it with elaborate knotting patterns. The person holding the rope moves and turns the other person's body to create more ties, perhaps using a suspension rig to elevate their body and suspend their movements. In this case, the person tying the rope and executing the suspension is playing the dominant role, and the person who is bound by the rope is playing the submissive role.
3. A person is bent over a chair while another person uses a paddle to spank their back side. The person using the paddle is playing the dominant role, and the person bent over the chair, receiving the impact, is playing the submissive role.
4. A person directs another person to "turn around and sit down here." The secondary person promptly turns and sits. The person giving the directive is playing the dominant role. The person complying is playing the submissive role.

Common in each example is the exchange of power. Regardless of the tools or devices used, the dominant person leads and asserts their influence while the submissive person yields to the direction of the influence. At The Labyrinth, I observed Coach Felyne, a 35-year old Black Domme engaged in dominant-submissive play:

She was giving the submissive commands, mostly about her posture: stand, kneel, get up, stand up straight. The girl follows the directives, keeping the scene in flow. Coach Felyne has a vintage suitcase full of tools and implements. She reaches for a flogger and begins using it on the girl's back. Softly at first, watching her body respond with each contact. Then with more intensity. Other folks in the space look on with curiosity. We can't hear

what she's saying because the music is so loud. But Coach Felyne is the one giving the lashings, and the girl is taking it without resistance. The girl's body responds with each connection. Kind of like getting shoved; her body shifts according to how it's pushed. Because the girl is standing with her back-facing Coach Felyne, each strike to her back sends the girl's body forward. As the impact intensifies, the girl leans against the cage in front of her for support. Coach Felyne starts using her elbows to apply pressure to the girl's sides. She continues to say things in the girl's ear after each blow. I remember cringing; the girl's face makes it look like it hurts; she looks tired, willing, determined and exhausted at the same time. The impact eventually brings the girl to her knees, and Coach Felyne comes down to meet her there. They kneel there, together, for a couple minutes. Coach Felyne holds and rocks her for a bit. They eventually get up, hug it out and leave the space. (observation, September 7, 2019)

In this example, Coach Felyne played the dominant role. She issued directives and applied negotiated impact to arouse various responses from the recipient. The secondary person played the submissive role as evidenced by their willingness to follow directives and receive the impact with little resistance. A similar example of dominant-submissive play took place at The Colonial between a male-female dyad:

The woman's outfit is black, skin-tight, with cut-outs across her chest and arms. She has metal embellishments on her belt, and really nice boots. Her male partner is shirtless with tiny shorts, and a mask covering his face. There is a cut-out for his mouth. She is actively binding him to a wooden beam with saran wrap. His movement is mostly restricted. I can visually see her mouth moving, but I cannot hear what she is saying. Nevertheless, he

only responds after she initiates verbal communication. When she completes the bondage exercise, she walks away, leaving him in this restricted position. As I watch, I notice his body remains still and does not struggle. But his head begins to turn as if he is searching for something or trying to look around. The mask is covering his eyes, so he technically cannot see. The movement reminds me of how a blind or visually impaired person turns and adjusts their head to align with perceived sound. With his arms, legs, torso, and vision restricted, listening became his primary method of seeing. (observation, November 2, 2019)

In this example, the woman played the dominant role as she coordinated the restraints and facilitated the bondage experience. The man played the submissive role by serving as the acceptor and beneficiary of deprived movement and heightened sensation. In both instances observed, the implements and reactions were different, however, the interaction highlighted two interconnected processes: suggestion and reception. The dominant uses various devices (verbal, physical or psychological) to suggest the submissive's movement or behavior. Meanwhile, the submissive receives the directives and reacts accordingly.

Less visibly obvious, however critical to the activation and sustainment of the activity are the communicative behaviors of consent and feedback. Consent is an agreement to participate in the structural and behavioral elements of a scene negotiated within the dyad. Consent is not only given at the onset of a scene; however, it is an active and ongoing agreement monitored through feedback systems between the practitioners. Feedback is a system of reactionary cues generated and processed to reinforce consent, communicate thresholds, modify activities and means to process individual likes and dislikes. Although negotiation of specific objectives, boundaries and

preferences typically happens behind the scenes, I was able to observe respective verbal and non-verbal feedback within the BDSM interaction (see Table 4).

Table 4 Feedback Matrix during Dominant-Submissive Interaction

Type of Feedback	Dominant Role	Submissive Role
Verbal Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gives directives Checks in on physical and emotional status Gives evaluative feedback Provides positive or negative reinforcement Processes following a scene 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of coded language and safe words to communicate preferences and limitations Verifies physical and emotional status Asks for clarity Vocalizes pleasure Expresses affirmation and gratitude
Non-verbal Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of tools and devices to stimulate, activate or deprive sensation Use of touch to aggravate or soothe an area of the body Withdrawal of touch Guiding the body's positioning Restricting range of motion Use of silence Facial expressions Physical intimacy following the scene 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical lowering (bending, bowing, kneeling, sitting, lying down) Physical adaptation to influence Moving body towards stimulating source Moving body away from stimulating source Nodding head in agreement Shaking head in disagreement Hand signals to communicate threshold Changes in breathing patterns Changes in skin tone Physical intimacy following the scene

The submissive generally responds to suggestive movements, and the Dominant awaits feedback before issuing subsequent directives. This suggested that verbal and non-verbal behaviors occur in a symbiotic manner throughout the BDSM scene. Verbal and nonverbal check-ins are utilized

to reinforce the participant's consent to ongoing structure, stimuli and behavioral expectations throughout the scene. Likewise, reactionary cues further communicate agreement and disagreement regarding the participant's pleasure experience. I asked Evanye, a 35-year old Black queer - switch how she verbally communicates boundaries and processes non-verbal feedback:

Here's what I don't do. I don't use pet words or made up names. It's literally a yes or no. There's no green, yellow. There's no in between. It is a 'yes, I want this'. 'Yes, keep doing that'. 'Yes, keep going' or 'no, stop'. No "pineapple". None of that bullshit. When something is not right, usually I get a pulling away or I get... I don't know, it's tension. I can feel the tension because I do breathwork. I can pay attention to people's breathing language that occurs naturally with any form of erotic or arousal type of play— the breath is going to go in the chest organically. I'm always looking at your body. It's hard to explain, but I can do it with anybody, and they won't even realize it. (interview, February 22, 2020)

Dann further emphasized the importance of observation and being mindful of feedback:

Paying attention to those very small cues and putting those things together. Like, how many times did she say yellow in the last 10 minutes? How many times has she buckled? How firm is she standing in this moment? All those things. A lot of thought and observation goes into it, and consideration goes into it. That's how I determine when to end. It's also how I determine, how much aftercare I need to do, or what type of aftercare do I need to do. (interview, February 21, 2020)

Aftercare, the period of active period of recovery following the BDSM interaction, looks differently for all dyads. Aftercare is a nonsexual period of reflection and an active process that may take place immediately following a scene and can last for days following the conclusion of the scene (Sagarin, 2009). Interview participants shared that aftercare often involves rest, nourishment, verbal and mental processing, and potential follow-up. Service boi TK, a 27-year old Black queer switch describes aftercare as a form of self-care:

When I'm in a submissive state, a lot of my aftercare is just like hydration and nourishment. My Dom may want me to clean up after we do a scene. But I have a Dom who is also mindful to first check in with me like, "Do you need water? Do you need nourishment? Do you need a hug?" I'm a big cuddler, so a lot of my aftercare looks like cuddling, having cuddle dates, and stuff like that. Having a good meal, whether I'm cooking it myself or being open to receiving someone cooking for me as well. Yeah, I would say it is really just being mindful of the basic needs. Making sure I feel seen and heard and acknowledged at the end.(interview, March 5, 2020)

Davita, a 27-year old Black bisexual switch shared a similar sentiment around receiving care and providing acts of service during aftercare:

Aftercare is a lot of touch, a lot of cuddling, words of affirmation, talking about how we felt, about how I felt. Lots of conversation and warm baths. The next morning, I got up and made breakfast for us. Acts of service are a huge thing for me. Because it was like I woke up and felt the appreciation for the time and energy. I knew he was carrying the whole scene, and that was a lot of work. (interview, February 21, 2020)

For some practitioners interviewed, verbal process is an important opportunity to evaluate the experience as pleasurable, informative, efficient or worthy of modification. Coach Felyne describes her recovery as a physical and relational process:

After I have a hard scene, I try not to schedule anything too intensive. I stretch, I take my baths. I will get fresh juice. I will just take time to breathe. It is always a self-care day, and it takes a day. I mean, the quickest it's ever taken is a day. I always give [submissives] my information. I always tell them, "I want to hear from you tomorrow." And I've fortified some great relationships that way. I know there's a lot of folks who may not take that step. But for me, I want to know that after our interaction, you're OK. And "OK" can look a million different ways. But that trust hasn't been destroyed, your safety hasn't felt violated, and recovery is going well. I definitely keep in relationship. I find tremendous pleasure in getting feedback. (interview, February 19, 2020)

Shakti Bliss, a 31-year old Black femme switch, reports that receiving personal space for both verbal and mental processing is critical to her self-care:

I am that person who takes a good 12 hours to process everything that just happened. What happens immediately right after is not super important to me. Usually I'll cuddle a little bit if the person likes that, or I like to go into service mode and see if they need water, get myself water— go into self-care mode. And just sort of allowing myself to have internal moments. It doesn't mean I have to be alone, but it means I probably won't talk for a little bit. And I really do prefer being checked in with the day after, because at that point I have processed, and I can voice things to you. (interview, March 2, 2020)

Macro-level structures within the BDSM community appear to monitor behavioral expectations whether through social groups, protocols, or safety regulations. Meanwhile, similar structural characteristics are mimicked in micro-level BDSM interactions through power roles, feedback, and aftercare practices. However, persistent throughout the BDSM interaction are acts of giving and receiving through touch, verbal suggestion and somatic response.

Political Characteristics

Decision making practices about power roles, partner selection, BDSM play activities, and the communication of boundaries are often hidden from the visible performance of power play. Prior to engaging in a BDSM interaction, however, practitioners decide who they want to play with and how the prospective engagement should be carried out. Therefore, BDSM practitioners must have some idea about what they want to experience or, at the very least, an awareness of their preferences. Similarly, in order to participate in negotiation practices, the BDSM practitioner needs to have an awareness of their dislikes, personal limitations, plus any additional physical limitations or triggers that should be considered prior to engaging in power play (Pitagora, 2013). Goffman's perspective of social interactions suggests consent, boundaries and risk-taking behaviors propagated within BDSM culture are inherently political:

An establishment may be viewed 'politically', in terms of the actions which each participant (or class of participants) can demand of other participants, the kinds of deprivations and indulgences which can be meted out in order to enforce these demands, and the kinds of social controls which guide this exercise of command and use of sanctions. (1959 p. 153)

Risk-aware consensual kink (RACK) is a standard, communal and self-governing protocol which instructs BDSM practitioners to assume the risk involved in any activity. However, the political dynamics of an interaction go beyond whether or not an activity is deemed safe, logical or feasible (Wismeijer & Assen, 2013). The consent-laden agents of partner selection, negotiation and boundaries are examined in the following sections.

Partner Selection. The practice of BDSM requires the practitioner's willingness to let go of control, surrender to the care of another person and to risk being vulnerable within a social interaction. Interview participants shared the importance of trust or an expectation that their teammate should be safe and reliable. During her interview, Davita clarified faulty expectations regarding the process of surrendering:

We expect submission to be instantaneous and sudden. Like I meet you one day, and I trust you. And I'm willing to give over all of my emotions, feelings, body, soul, ideas, thoughts, my mind, my will, all overnight. Submission is a process. I'm not just going to hand everything over. That is where I think the unhealthy behavior begins— when you're suddenly handing people things that they can't even be responsible for. (interview, February 21, 2020)

Partner selection, or the process of choosing who participants in the BDSM interaction, is contingent on various factors such as relationship status, context of the scene itself, or whether the play was transactional or personal. Many participants in this study identified as polyamorous meaning they have multiple partners with various affectual, sexual or romantic roles within their respective relationships (Klesse, 2014). BlakSyn shared how they engage with some but not all their partners in BDSM:

I have four partners; two of my partners are Black, one of my partners is Asian, and one of my partners is White. I've been with one partner for five years, one for two years, one for one year, and one for eight months. One partner identifies as my submissive. And I am their Daddy; their Top. One of my partners also engages in kink as a Top. She is amazing. My other partner, we do kink sometimes, not all the time. We have a very loving, amazing relationship. We hang out, watch stuff, and sometimes they're like, "I need to be tied up". And then the partner that I've been with the longest, we do not engage in kink, at all. (interview, March 5, 2020)

Some practitioners disclosed they seek BDSM play partners through social media networks such as FetLife or Facebook, while others play with romantic partners or acquaintances with whom they have an established working relationship. Study participants further expressed their consideration for underlying racial dynamics when choosing whom to work with in BDSM spaces. Toya, a 35-year old Black non-binary professional Dominant reflected:

Mentally, it's hard to wrap by mind around paid domination for Black people. You know what I'm saying? I was out here to beat on White boys and that's all I wanted to get paid to do. They loved it. They ate that shit up. But the resentment was real for me; that came from my core. I'm not a Mistress unless you're a White man. My level of domination depends on who you are. I know there are some Black people who enjoy humiliation, but I'm not the Mistress for you. (interview, March 2, 2020)

Syre, a 29-year old Black queer Domme emphasized a connection between racial dynamics and safety while sharing a submissive experience:

The first time I was suspended, a White man suspended me. And for like the rest of the month my head hurt; my body hurt. It took a lot of reflection, and a lot of clearing to be like, "I can't take that energy." I don't feel like a lot of White people in these kink spaces are cognizant of that. I get invited to events, and I decline. Then they'll say, "Well, we don't ever see you at our events." And my response is, "Because I don't feel safe. Because I don't trust y'all, and there's nothing that you will be able to do to make me trust you. If I don't feel safe, I'm not going to be able to open myself up to explore."

Coach Felyne further states the racial identity of their partner doesn't make for a better or worse play experience, simply a different approach to care:

There are some folks that I cannot help but create a different level of care for: Black women, femmes, queer folks. I definitely approach them and communicate much differently than with a middle-aged White man. I'm very intentional about that. It's almost not up to me. You know what I mean? I play within the places that I feel comfortable.

Participants express that both safety and individual preferences are essential in selecting a partner. Participants first assess the objectives for play and then work to invite a partner who is capable of supporting them in the BDSM container. In addition to qualifying the risk involved in a specific BDSM activity, risk is also weighed in racial dynamics. For some Black practitioners, working with a White person in scene presents a compounding power imbalance beyond the inherent inequity of power play. Interview participants shared that although power dynamics in BDSM are necessary, the added imbalance of racial power may be a contentious feature for some. Nevertheless, once a potential partner is considered, additional communication is necessary to clarify specific needs and expectations during the BDSM interaction.

Negotiation. The goal of negotiation is for dyads (or groups) to arrive at a mutual definition of the context for which the scene will take place and understand the activities involved in a scene, prior to the scene taking place (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Negotiation is like a rehearsal before the actual performance; an opportunity to gather information about each participant relevant to the interaction, set the mood, clarify expectations, and make any necessary changes. The practitioners interviewed assert that explicit communication begins with a series of questions to learn about each participant's desires and expectations. For BDSM practitioners who render professional services, the initial conversations resemble a formal intake session. Coach Felyne utilizes a questionnaire to guide their first session:

I have a questionnaire that they fill out. Questions around their identity, their experience, why they contacted me, particular kinks that they may be interested in, may not be interested in, the ways in which they communicate during erotic interactions, the ways in which you ought to be taken care of... And we'll have like a video session where we go through those answers; do some exploration and some clarifications, if necessary.

(interview, February 19, 2020)

Syre details a similar approach to assessment while working in professional capacities:

An initial session with me involves a lot of conversation, a lot more talking than it does actual playing. I really want to know about your background and about your experience. I want to know about your psychological state of mind. I want to know about your relationship to your body. I want to know about your relationship to other people whom you've engaged in. I want to gather as much information as possible. You go to a Dom to guide you, to take you somewhere. So, I need to know exactly where it is you want to go.

I will ask the same question five times, five different ways. In my head I'm like, "All of your answers need to line up. And if they don't line up, I'm going to ask the same question a sixth time a different way". I don't want to live in the unknown. There's no fun in the unknown for me. I need to be extremely clear. (interview, March 2, 2020)

Both Coach Felyne and Syre demonstrate a systematic approach to information gathering. For non-professional practitioners, negotiation also requires an assessment of needs and wants. Even if the participant doesn't know exactly how they want the scene to play out, a common practice is to begin with identifying desires, feelings and pleasure states that one would like to generate during play. This may include an invitation to self-assess, explore or participate in demonstrations prior to initiating scene play. Evanye describes her experience working with a lesbian couple who had never participated in BDSM play and were interested in setting up a scene:

The first part was going to their space, having a conversation, and really talking about what it is that we wanted. I ask questions like, "what is your fantasy and what do you want to feel?" I brought over some butt plugs. I brought over a whip and just some basic scarves for bondage play. The conversation turned into a demonstration. Just inviting in the mood and cultivating how it's going to feel. Let's make sure that we're all on the same page together. (interview, February 22, 2020)

At the Sex Down South conference, I participated in a session on negotiation with famed sex educator, Midori. She mentioned that beyond information gathering, setting the mood is a key component to constructing a BDSM scene. One of her favorite questions to ask before setting up a scene is, "What kind of mood do we want to go to?" A single tool or implement, such as a

rope, can generate a myriad of different feelings ranging from aggression to sensual to tactile. Thus, identifying a desired mood helps define the context of the scene itself. Furthermore, identifying everyone's present mood state is an opportunity for the practitioners to take ownership over the energy they bring to the space or contributes to the scene itself. Engaging in power play with someone who is irritated can severely impact the conditions of the scene, compared to working with someone who is more pleasant. Shakti Bliss shares how she prepares herself for a rope scene:

Before I even enter this space of feeling sexy or in a role, I make sure that I've dealt with my own shit. I've figured out how I feel —how I feel that day. What I'm coming to the table with and what that might mean in terms of the negotiation of my boundaries with myself, what I would want to do, what I wouldn't want to do, and how I might react to certain things. I bring all those things to the table, and I expect [my partner] to hopefully do the same. And then, I like to sit for a moment and breathe with my partner, understanding that the rope is just a tool for our connection and extension of our touch. So, we typically have some sort of touching without rope [before the scene]. And I like to put myself into a place of softness which is not a default for me. And so allowing myself to drop into that place to feel like I can receive, and have suggested motion and movement, and be fluid, and allow someone else to move me and put me in certain places, and just submit to the moment is a mindset that then I drop into. (interview, March 2, 2020)

Because consent is an active and ongoing feature of power play, Midori suggests negotiations must also include opportunities to clear up misunderstandings or modify

agreements, if necessary. Even if one consents to a conversation, it doesn't mean they must engage in play activities. Similarly, if a participant consents to play, they have the right to modify or cease play at any time. QueenCxnt, a 27-year old Black queer Domme shared a story with me about the process of negotiating with a submissive she met on FetLife. Although she consented to pre-negotiation of a Dominant/submissive dynamic, during initial assessment QueenCxnt learned the submissive was in a committed relationship. An expectation was then established to ensure the martial partner was kept abreast on all the details surrounding their pending dominate/submissive partnership. Furthermore, when QueenCxnt inquired about his past BDSM experiences, the submissive stated, "My last Mistress really fucked me up." It was important for QueenCxnt to assess if the submissive was recalling a pleasurable, painful, or otherwise nonconsensual experience. Midori mentioned in her session that it is important to clarify if "Oh fuck!" or "Oh, God!" is a good thing or a bad thing. To that end, Midori suggests partners explain to each other what they look like and sound like when they experience pleasure, pain, discomfort or how they communicate affirmation. Syre further emphasizes that it's not only recommended partners be clear on what they want to experience, but also on how they qualify those experiences:

How will I know that you're enjoying what we're doing? What does punishment look like for you? A lot of people think that spanking is a punishment, but people enjoy being spanked— brats, in particular. But if you're being punished, I don't want to give you positive reinforcement. I want to punish you. (interview, March 2, 2020)

Similarly, it's necessary to facilitate a discussion on preferred language, words or phrases that are permitted or off limits. Although terms such as 'Master' and 'slave' are acceptable identity

variants within BDSM, most practitioners interviewed expressed a firm limit regarding the terms ‘Master’ and ‘slave’ in BDSM play. Service boi TK clarifies terminology early in BDSM spaces:

I like to be very mindful when I play with White people, or when there are new people of color in the space, that I'm not a slave. One of the things that I like to clearly announce about myself is, "Hi, I'm service boi TK. I'm not a slave, though". Let's get that very clear. (interview, March 5, 2020)

The terms ‘Master’ and ‘slave’ may carry a negative historical connotation for Black BDSM practitioners because of the history of exploitive practices towards Black people (Roberts, 1997). Midori further suggests dyads share positive and negative indicators to spoken words and behaviors including touch, facial expressions, gestures, and physical signals. This type of open communication about responses to pleasurable touch and undesirable touch, for example, amplifies safety and expectation.

Responding to triggers. Even with thorough preparation, practitioners disclosed at times they may encounter unexpected responses or outcomes during play. It is possible to consent to an activity (i.e. spanking) however, the sensation caused by the activity (i.e. the physical contact or sound of being spanked) can result in an unpleasant memory or cause a negative reaction. According to Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (2014, Chapter 3), triggers operate like fire alarms; they are loud, jolting and persistent until settled. They are often unexpected, throwing the person experiencing the trigger by surprise, while possibly upsetting others around them. The high-stimulus and intimate nature of BDSM can make practitioners vulnerable to adverse reactions. Nevertheless, prompt and compassionate responses help minimize the dramatic and

lasting impact of triggers. Trey, a 31-year Black queer Dominant describes a paddling incident gone awry :

[Using a wooden paddle] I started with soft hits, and out of nowhere he started crying. At first, I thought he was laughing. But then I was like, "No, he's crying." I stopped and I was like, "Are you okay? What's going on? Do you need some water? What's up?" We sat down, and we talked about it. They had a trigger connected to childhood trauma. And so that had me triggered because I'm a survivor of child abuse. It really fucked with me, like it took me a while to recover from that. I'd never want to purposefully hurt somebody. We did continue having conversations. They ended up going to a therapist and talking about it which was good. (interview, March 4, 2020)

Syre, who holds a graduate degree in counseling, shares a similar experience with a client who became triggered during a scene:

I started caressing their neck. They gave me the green light for that, so I did that. Then I let them know that I'm going to apply a little bit of pressure. They gave me a green light to apply pressure. Immediately, everything switched. Their body shut down. They started hyperventilating. They started crying. I stopped the scene. I turned on the lights. It became an opportunity for us to have a conversation. Within our initial conversation, however, I had asked them if they had any trauma around choking and they assured me that they did not. I asked this question several times, several ways, and they assured me things were fine. Come to find out that they had a partner who pinned them up against a wall. He didn't choke with his hand. He choked with his forearm. So the pressure applied to their neck was enough of a reaction for them to be triggered. The rest

of our time was spent doing aftercare, talking and having that conversation and trying to work them back down. That's probably one of the hardest things that I experienced as a Dom. Because I care about you. I want you to leave in the same state that you've shown up. But I'm also not going to send you out into the world if you're not okay, so we kept talking. In all honestly no one fucked up here. It was just a clarification thing that needed to be had. We were able to have that conversation, and we were able to move forward and maintain that professional relationship that we had with each other. For ethical reasons, however, I can only see people in the capacity that they come to me for. She could not become a therapeutic client at that point. I had to refer her out to another therapist. (interview, March 2, 2020)

In some cases, practitioners shared a trigger can be activated by the context of the environment rather than the sensation itself. Shakti Bliss describes the discomfort she experienced during impact play:

I wanted to try getting whipped. I think I got two lashes before I was like, "Oh, this is making me uncomfortable. Because you're a White dude whipping me in a room full of White people, in the middle of a dungeon, in Florida." We love [kink] because we get to play a character and we get to feel outside of ourselves. But when I step into a dungeon I don't get to not be Black. I'm Black wherever I go and that is something I deal with in every space that I navigate in. And in just a quick moment I realized, "I'm not even uncomfortable with the pain. I'm not even worried about how this going to feel. I feel awkward because you are an older White dude whipping me, a Black girl, in the middle of a fucking dungeon full of White people. And that is not going to happen today." I used

my voice. I used my words. Things stopped. Everything was fine. We had decompression discussions afterwards. We also had decompression days afterwards. I appreciated their participation in it. From my scope, I don't have any negative feelings towards that person, or even that situation, but it was a lesson. And it's now something that I openly like to tell other people, specifically women of color, if that's something that's even on their radar. Just to be mindful that there is still a societal association with all the things that we do. (interview, March 2, 2020)

For these BDSM practitioners, triggers were experienced sensationally and symbolically. The activities generated unpleasant emotions and memories, activating a sense of fear and discomfort. When the alarm system went off, BDSM practitioners promptly stopped the scene, checked-in, and followed up with extensive verbal processing. In cases where unresolved trauma required deeper attention, practitioners offered a therapeutic referral. In BDSM, defining context is an important element of negotiation (Weinberg, 1984). A practitioner may choose to restrain their partner to a bed post in a dimly lit room, with soft music in the background, applying hot wax to the lower extremities while maintaining eye contact. In a different scenario, a practitioner may choose to restrain their partner to a chair and place them in the center of the room, blindfolded, no music, refraining from speech while they flicker the lights on and off. Both scenarios demonstrate the use of restraints as form of bondage, however depending on the person, setting and limitations established, the unfolding of these incidents could generate positive or adverse emotional reactions. Even if past traumas, physical and emotional boundaries are accounted for in early conversations, practitioners emphasize the importance of conducting a holistic assessment of boundaries to minimize blind spots and enhance safety.

Race and BDSM

From a dramaturgical perspective, cultural values, social hierarchies and political dynamics influence how roles are enacted and how safety is generated and/or reinforced in social relationships (Goffman, 1963). During dialogical data collection, Black practitioners were asked to share the power roles they assume, but also assess the function and maintenance of their roles throughout BDSM interactions. In turn, practitioners in this study revealed how their gender and racial identity markers often regulate self-expression in BDSM interactions, at times presenting barriers to authentic assertion. . Furthermore, Black practitioners share how their marginal identity makes them vulnerable in dominant spaces and their strategies for preserving personal agency.

Roles Enactments

The role play experience that defines BDSM presents an opportunity to openly and playfully explore, and push boundaries (Cruz, 2016). Some practitioners shared that BDSM helps them express and/or reconcile parts of themselves deemed otherwise flawed. Evanye described her entry into BDSM as “an awakening within my sexual self” and recalls that playing in dungeons makes her feel “at home”. She shared the importance of having a place and a practice where she is comfortable expressing all parts of herself without judgment or restriction. Similarly, Trey describes BDSM as an opportunity to embody the fullness of his identity:

I recognize that I got pleasure from being perceived as very sweet and very innocent in some settings, but very controlling and dominant in others. [Kink] allows me to live out my full spectrum of expression. For me, it created this duality. Kind of like drag. So, having that space to be able to take my drag off and on. One, it's been really pleasurable.

But two, it's also been very comforting, in the sense of being able to express everything I need to express, that I may not be able to express in other spaces. (interview, March 4, 2020)

In her day-to-day life, Davita describes herself as “very independent”. She holds a corporate job that requires her pragmatism and analytic strengths, qualities she and her partner Dann value greatly. She shared how actualizing her submissive identity has been both a liberating and intellectual experience:

For me, submission and BDSM is about allowing myself to release control. It's very stimulating. I've studied Kama Sutra and there's a huge BDSM element to Kama Sutra. There's rituals associated with biting and spanking your partner. The intention with Kama Sutra is to activate your Kundalini energy. So, when Dann is doing those things to me, that's what I'm thinking of. I know when you touch this hip... or you hit this hip a certain way, I feel energy there. And if there is trauma there, I ask myself, “What is this trauma associated with?” I'm not just getting my ass beat. I'm processing my life and processing our relationship. It activates my intellectual side as well, and that turns me on. To me, it's a very holistic experience. (interview, February 21, 2020)

Shakti Bliss affirmed BDSM has helped her navigate work, trauma and relationships over the years:

I had disconnects between my academic life, ordinary work, and other structured areas. And the other side of me wanted to explore my sensuality and sexuality. It was through unpacking a lot of my trauma that I learned to explore and own my sensuality and sexuality. I stumbled upon a lot of this when I was married, but it was really, honestly

through my divorce that I kind of broke out into the world. I started going to events by myself. And I honed into one kink. And I ended up going to a bunch of rope conferences by myself and finding people in the community on my own. This taught me about all the different types of connection and engagement. (interview, March 2, 2020)

It is evident Black practitioners place value in the ability to embrace and engage themselves in various dynamics of BDSM play. For some, the transgressive nature of BDSM allows them to push the boundaries of their erotic expression. For others, it presents a container to confront the structures of power they live in daily. Still, how one plays is contingent on the positionality they assume within the interaction. For Black practitioners, deciding the role they embody has much to do with how they have been socialized to view and feel about themselves.

Gender. In BDSM, it is propagated that gender-based roles are immaterial (Sagarin, 2019). To some extent, the presence of female-identified Dominants and male-identified submissives challenges hegemonic ideologies that assume men are aggressive and women are passive. However, the demographics reflected in BDSM spaces I accessed were disproportionately cisgender and heteronormative. Furthermore, BDSM culture consistently upholds gender binary expressive standards, regardless of sex or gender identity; if you present as masculine, you are assumed to be dominant, and if you present as feminine, you are assumed to be submissive. BlakSyn describes how their role identity in BDSM evolved over time:

I used to identify as a cis man. My masculinity dictated it to me. “Oh, I’m dominant. I’m the man. I should be dominant”. I saw it depicted in media, when I was watching porn, all I ever saw was men topping. All I saw were men in that role. Then, after changing my gender identity [to non-binary], and coming to terms with my orientation, you get a feel

for the world around you. You get a feel for the individuals that also participate in this with you. And then you start learning about some of the deeper aspects of kink, and how it can intersect with so many parts of us in our very human experiences. Last year, I began to identify as a “top”. It gives me the greatest amount of malleability to call on the different energies that are suited for what I've negotiated with another human being. I identify as a top because that's the position I take. I'm able to call on dominance. I'm able to call sadism. I'm able to call on humiliation. I'm able to call on discipline, and so many other aspects of kink, as well. Being a top gives me that malleability, both in name and in action. (interview, March 6, 2020)

Toya further shared how people often place them in the dominant category based on their stature and appearance:

There's a lot that comes with being in my body. I get a lot of masculinity attributed to me. I think just being fat and Black and not light-skinned...it comes with its own shit. People gatekeep femininity. People gatekeep softness. People gatekeep what it means to be Fem identifying and/or a woman based on that person's appearance. Growing up, I had my femininity held out of reach by such gatekeepers. My softness—which does exist, held out of reach. It irked me that people just made so many assumptions about me based on how I look. I often question my identity in BDSM and sexuality, and in relationships. I am an outspoken person. I'm forward thinking. But how much of that was molded by me being thrust into this category just based off how I look? I have an issue with the fact that most people leave no room for me to explore my submissive side. And even if I do look for more masculine-centered [partners], I still get that automatic, “Oh you're dominate,

you run the show.” It makes me question my identity a lot. How much of this is me just falling into character? (interview, March 2, 2020)

The negotiation of gendered-expectations and role enactment highlights a conflict between structural power and personal agency Goffman deems as inherent part of all social relationships (1979). The ability to choose one’s presentation or identity is often contingent on the norms and expectations of their respective culture. *Master Fetish Trainer, Jet Setting Jasmine™* emphasizes how the inflation of masculine and feminine stereotypes have contributed to the misuse of Black bodies and the crippling of healthy sexual expression. More specifically, she asserts that the hypermasculinity programmed and/or stereotyped to Black men have made submissive practices such as listening and being receptive nearly inaccessible. Not because they don’t want to try things associated with a submissive stance, but because the aggressive stereotypes attached to Black men and their sexuality may result in deep shame and psychological wounding if they choose to depart from that personality. *BlakSyn* shared a similar sentiment regarding Black men in BDSM:

You don't see a lot of Black male submissives. You don't. It's not a thing. And when I do see Dominants in the Black community, they are this caricature of hyper-masculinity. “I'm the man. And I've got to do the thing”. That was me back when I was a youngster and believing those same exact things. The exploration of sexuality amongst Black folks is stunted, for whatever reason. (interview, March 6, 2020)

Thus, cultural norms and stereotypes may challenge the notion of consensual role enactment for Black BDSM practitioners. Black people must ask themselves how much of their role has been

impressed upon them, at what cost, and to what degree do dominant and submissive embodiments, in any way, threaten their Blackness.

Fetishization. Consensual role enactments are further challenged when practitioners encounter racial fetishization, or the sexual debasement of their bodies in BDSM spaces. Many practitioners interviewed discussed how the hyper-sexualization of Black bodies and racial stereotypes creates a unique vulnerability when navigating BDSM power structures. In order to minimize the risk of exploitation, they must assess for racial bias in an already layered negotiation process. They discuss the need to be aware of race-based fantasies that may come up during negotiation, and the importance of enforcing boundaries:

When I'm playing with non-Black folks, especially White folks, I have those conversations. Because I'm very mindful that I can be having a certain fantasy and they can be having another fantasy. The history of fetishizing Black men, stereotypes like Black thugs or big black cock (BBC), stuff like that is very unnerving. And, to me, it's a form of violence. For example, an experience happened to me recently, where I was talking to somebody who said they were into the thugs. I asked him, "So, what has you into Black guys?" He's like, "Oh, because they're more masculine than White guys and because of the big black cock." They said they like the "thug personality". I was just like, "Okay, that sounds interesting." I was very much weirded out by that point because I'm like, "You're just really talking about a bunch of stereotypes that I'm not feeling." And they continued with sharing how in the past they called Black guys "colored boy". At this point, I was like, "I'm going to end this conversation right here. I want to end this conversation right here." They got pissed off, and then they started calling me a nigger.

And this reminded me why I just stay with mostly Black folks, and some people of color that I trust. I really don't have a lot of space nor capacity for White folks and their foolishness. Period. (interview, March 4, 2020)

In further discussion, Jet Setting Jasmine™ summarized the explicit and implicit struggle Black practitioners contemplate when considering the embodiment of submission in power play:

Our community, our bodies have not been our own for as long as we've been on this continent. Our bodies are still fetishized. Our bodies are stereotyped to the point that it's dangerous for us. Our bodies are mimicked. They are appropriated. The power dynamic that happens in BDSM—giving, relinquishing power— is a really big thing, when you live in a world that has set you up to be powerless. So, when we are in these spaces for pleasure, and we're considering giving up power, we don't just ask ourselves, "Should I let this person?" We go through generations of, "Is this okay?" (interview, March 5, 2020)

Role enactments for Black practitioners of BDSM are not as simple as picking a character and negotiating the details of a scene. Rather, gender and racial narratives influence what roles Black practitioners choose to assume. Beyond that, one must also consider the consequences of embodying certain roles, particularly the submissive stance. The marginal status of Black people, which comes with its own set of vulnerabilities, makes choosing a power role a risk-taking experience on its own.

Agency Preservation

Central to Goffman's work is understanding how we regulate and preserve agency within any social interactions. The interplay of dominance and submission are the structural hinges of

BDSM practice, with consent acting as the governing force that regulates its expression. All practitioners in this study agreed BDSM is a useful platform for trying on roles, practicing intimacy and learning communicative skills, however, some questioned how structurally accessible BDSM is for Black people to truly explore. Miss Marla discussed the need for accessible intimacy as a function of our survivorship:

My philosophy in life is just to keep pushing. Keep pushing people to their limits. Pushing them to what they think their limits are, and then past their limits. I'm also pushing myself to my limits and evolving and growing as a person who's inflicting this pleasurable pain on someone. I think [BDSM] is healing. A lot of us don't get access to people touching us. We don't ever have access for pain. We don't have access to the kind of intimacy where we can use different types of touch to get those endorphins running through our systems—get those good hormones going. I think it's healing not only in a sense of survivorship, but healing in a sense of gaining access to intimacy. (interview, March, 5, 2020)

During my field work, I anticipated BDSM spaces to feel welcoming, safe and accessible to me by virtue of shared interest and cultural membership. However, when I attended a BDSM gathering and workshop held off-site at a restaurant, I was met with exclusion and dismissal:

When I arrived, I contemplate sitting in my car for a few minutes to settle my nerves. But this is my first time, and I don't want to walk in "late" and reinforce a stereotype that Black folks are never on time. I want to make a good impression. The hostess leads me to the back room used for private events. Upon entry, I notice half the seats are occupied. I scan the room and noticed I was the only Black person in attendance. I approach one of

the tables and ask if I may sit there. The attendee said no and explained they were saving the seats for friends who had yet to arrive. No biggie. I move on to the next table and ask if I can sit with them. They say no and apologize. I move to the next table and ask if I can sit there. They also say no. I make my way to each table and I am met with a “no” each time. I felt anxious and flush. I scan the room again and notice there is an empty two-seater table in the corner of the room. I take a seat— alone. I watch as more people come into the room and find seats at the tables I was denied access to. I felt hot and embarrassed, like a kid who didn’t get chosen for the team. I heard people laughing, asking questions, and responding to the facilitator’s solicitation, but it all sounded so distant. Like I was in a tunnel. I was too blinded by my humiliation to recall anything that was said during the forum. (observation, November 12, 2019).

A couple months later, at Southern Charm, I witnessed a similar scenario where a Black male-identified person was asked to give up his seat when there were plenty of seating options in the space. The denial of seating seems trivial, but it challenged my sense of belonging within a practice to which I deeply align. BlakSyn candidly asserted, “It’s no secret that White folks run the majority of the BDSM community.” They went on to affirm whereas they’ve had many positive experiences in BDSM they are displeased by the lack of melanin, thus robbing them of shared experiences with people that look like them. Similarly, Toya relates their experience regarding the lack of diversity they have observed in public BDSM dungeons:

I used to go to dungeons off and on. I learned a lot. I really owe it to them for just expanding my mind about things, workshops, and cool stuff like that. But in terms of committing myself to going to a dungeon, I didn't do a lot of that. I was in there trying to

enjoy the Black queer scene, and that's not who I saw in those dungeons. I still think that I would love to experience more dungeon time, but I want to see my folk when I go in there. (interview, March 2, 2020)

Jet Setting Jasmine™ discussed the presence of microaggressions in BDSM that are no different from those present in society at large. She expressed discomfort that is generated within BDSM spaces that are founded on a limited knowledge of people of color, or spaces not necessarily curated with people of color in mind. Further asserting that Black people should not let their guard down at the expense of their safety and comfortability:

Safety is paramount, like if you and I are having a play session, or a group of us are having a play session. We always talk about physical safety, psychological safety, and emotional safety. This is not just a physical exchange. It's an energetic exchange. It's an emotional exchange. [In BDSM] you experience changes in your body chemistry. You may feel something that you didn't feel before. We must take extra time to warm people up emotionally to a space. We must account for that. We can't just walk in and get to beating on folk. (interview, March 5, 2020)

Summary

Exploring BDSM practice first-hand within public dungeon spaces allowed me to observe the cultural and structural mechanics of power-exchange. The setting where BDSM takes place are communal areas that provide a stage for erotic interaction and bonding, in full costume, within prescriptive boundaries set by the participants. Beyond the drag of it all, public

dungeons also present opportunities for practitioners to attend workshops to improve their respective modes of play while connecting with people who hold shared interests.

Consistent in all scenes observed, BDSM practitioners structure their play around dynamics of power. Practitioners choose a role along the dominant-submissive spectrum and exchange their influence using tools, touch and communicative devices. The implementation of impact, restraint, pain, and discipline is carried by an undercurrent of verbal and non-verbal feedback between the teammates. Moreover, all activities are openly discussed through negotiation practices prior to the scene commencing with the option to modify throughout.

Practitioners in this study openly discussed the embedded politics within BDSM practice regarding who they play with and how they chose to play. In BDSM, safety takes center stage. Communal safety protocols emphasize risk-awareness and harm reduction practices to buffer the BDSM container of erotic play. However, trust is an essential practice that regulates and preserves the BDSM interaction itself. When selecting a partner, Black practitioners outlined the need to assess their personal needs when establishing boundaries to minimize relational trauma. Some practitioners discussed the process of confronting traumatic responses to stimuli and unspoken racial dynamics in BDSM. Others described how taking a transactional approach to BDSM helps them preserve their agency and minimize exploitative experiences.

In a similar vein, however, Black practitioners report being vulnerable to race-based fetishism and exclusionary practices with the community. Practitioners expressed resentment related to being sexually objectified or being denied access to certain modes of expression such as masculine-centered submission. Furthermore, the lack of ethnic representation in public dungeon spaces, and the BDSM at large, makes Black practitioners feel unwanted and at times

uncomfortable. Macro-level exclusions in turn impede on the physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing necessary to explore power play safely.

CHAPTER 5: SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Overview of Study

This study examined the interactive dynamics of power within BDSM practice, and inquired how Black practitioners of BDSM enact roles, regulate boundaries and preserve their agency within BDSM practice. Racial identity, as a relational construct, plays a salient role in ongoing power dynamics, however Black practitioners are often peripheral within BDSM discourse. BDSM uses language, symbols and routine action to communicate needs through erotic power play. This playful interaction can serve Black people with an expressive vehicle for rehearsing agency and accessing power. The examination of BDSM through a cultural, structural and political lens provided an opportunity to see how the community functions and how activities within BDSM facilitate relationships. Through an interplay of dominance and submissive patterns, BDSM symbolizes the microcosm of power exchange that undergirds all social interactions (Stockwell, 2017). However, little analytic attention had been given to how these cultural networks influence interactional identities, particularly as it relates to Black BDSM practitioners. The purpose of this research study was to examine interactive sequences in BDSM and to learn how Black practitioners negotiate roles and seek connections within this erotic subculture. This study was guided by two primary questions:

1. How does power-exchange operate in BDSM?
2. How are roles, boundaries and agency socially enacted for Black BDSM practitioners?

Ethnographic procedures were applied to help deconstruct social interactions in BDSM practice. Both the cultural practices of BDSM and the relational interactions between participants

were the primary foci of analysis. Observations were carried out at three public BDSM dungeons, and 13 Black BDSM practitioners were interviewed to examine how power plays out with respect to relational roles, communicative behaviors, negotiation and consent. As a framework that highlights the devices used to regulate social interactions, dramaturgical analysis was applied to understand the cultural, structural and political elements of BDSM. The guiding premise of dramaturgical analysis posits individuals participate in various observable and obscure behaviors in order to manage their roles and personal agency in relationships (Goffman, 1959). Because BDSM consciously and explicitly engages with dynamics of power, dramaturgical analysis is a well-suited framework to examine the theatrics of BDSM play.

Beginning with an illustration of the settings where BDSM takes place, observation data outlined the cultural processes of BDSM spaces such as shared language, customs, style of dress, procedures and safety protocols. Next, structural elements of dominance and submission were examined through the observation of BDSM scenes and power play activities. Political aspects of BDSM were then explored through decision-making practices such as partner selection, negotiation, and gaining insight on how practitioners respond to adverse reactions during a scene. Lastly, Black practitioners shared how BDSM gives them permission to explore themselves and their sexuality. Furthermore, interview participants reflected on the gendered and racial barriers they have encountered within BDSM that impact their personal agency.

BDSM and Dramaturgy

BDSM is a recognizable cultural group defined by shared language, values and practices. In many ways, BDSM is a theatrical display of power-exchange between individuals who

embody dominant and submissive stances (Lindemann, 2010). Visually, the community is marked by its provocative presentation, gothic ascetic and erotic flare. The costuming is highly textured with leather, latex, silks, and metals as means of accentuating, restraining or exposing body parts. The corsets are cinched, the body suits are formfitting, the vests are embroidered, the boots are shiny, and the heels are extra high. The costuming serves to enhance the performative nature of the practice. Although not explicit, it appears there are unspoken rules regarding dress as an expression of cultural membership and means of social distinction. Just the same, everyone doesn't dress up in traditional fetishwear as depicted in the media, in movies, or sold in your local sex shop. I observed many participants in BDSM spaces dressed more casually donning shorts, tank tops and fishnet stockings while still evoking a dark, mysterious confidence. Despite a BDSM focus, it is common during casual gatherings ("munches"), educational workshops, conferences, and vendor events for participants to be dressed in street clothes such as jeans and t-shirt.

In her ethnographic text, Margot Weiss (2011) was critical of the economic pressures placed on BDSM practitioners to maintain aesthetic benchmarks enforced by the culture at large. She discussed how BDSM can be a significant financial investment with handcrafted toys or implements such as leather floggers costing hundreds of dollars. Similarly, clothing such as leather pants, latex attire, custom jackets and corsets can cost practitioners several hundred dollars. During observational visits to the dungeon, I recall feeling considerably underdressed (or wearing too many clothes) and thus ineligible to participate fully in communal play activities. Furthermore, entrance fees required at public dungeons can also present an economic disadvantage for individuals wanting to participate but do not have \$25 every weekend for the

cover. In a community practice such as BDSM, failure to “keep up with the Joneses” could be perceived as a mark of socioeconomic or cultural inferiority (Kaiser, 1990). Weiss concludes the time and energetic commitments necessary for active membership easily designates BDSM as a labor-intensive practice most accessible to the middle class.

Beyond dress, naming your character is central to BDSM culture. Like other live-action role play communities (LARP) or video game avatars, BDSM practitioners are referenced by a chosen pseudonym that represents an alter-ego or defines their social position in power play. These labels or signifiers are used in online communications, on social media sites and within BDSM play spaces. In theory, you can be whoever you want to be in BDSM role play: a bratty schoolgirl named Tiffany, the Goddess Oshun, a servant called Tommy, Sir Francis Onyx, Mistress Faye, or participants may go by a one-word stage name like Madonna. Names are often accompanied by an honorific to emphasize their social position. Dominants typically choose engendered titles such as ‘Sir’, ‘Miss’, ‘Dom’, ‘Domme’, ‘Master’, etc. And beyond gender expression, there are some limitations related to historical context. For example, some Black practitioners express a dislike for the submissive label ‘slave’. Just the same, Black practitioners resist calling a Dominant ‘Master’ especially if the name holder is a White male.

It is easy to observe how role-taking practices in BDSM parallel with non-BDSM realities of role-identity development. Dress and naming are empowering practices that allow us to embody a preferred essence, dictate our social position in an interaction, and sometimes our presentation serves as means for demanding respect. The characterization of our identities is a normal part of our everyday social lives. We use our dress, names and titles to communicate our social roles and hierarchical standings in various social settings. For example, in academia,

prefixes such as ‘Dr.’ or ‘Professor’ are used to distinguish instructors from students. Parents use titles like ‘mom’ and ‘dad’ to relay gender and role distinctions to their children. Likewise, the military and law enforcement agencies use numerous titles to communicate rank and task responsibilities. The adoption of pseudonyms or new names in BDSM is also consistent with the naming practices of other cultural groups who wish to denote kinship or convey their roles more effectively. For example, married people change their names to communicate familial cohesion (Finch, 2008). Meanwhile, African Americans have undergone several name transformations since slavery. And in some Pan-African traditions, African Americans are encouraged to adopt new names by rejecting the familial names of their colonizers (Ghee, 1990; Ukpokodu & Ojiambo, 2017). Likewise, some transgender individuals adopt new names to align more authentically with their self-expression (Hill et. al, 2018).

Power Relationships

Mental health counselors are tasked with recognizing power relationships and being sensitive to the impact of those interactions on individual and collective health (Ratts et al., 2016). The conscious examination of power exchange in this research study serves to enhance clarity on how power plays out in relationships. Furthermore, because some mental health counselors continue to perceive BDSM as inherently abusive, awareness about the construction of power systems within BDSM may assist counselors in distinguishing harmful systems from supportive systems of power (Hoff & Sprott, 2009).

Per observation and testimony, in BDSM, power is orchestrated through a symbiotic exchange of assertion and reception. Typically, BDSM is practiced in teams of two or more persons, where participants assume a role along the dominant-submissive spectrum. The most

popular terms used for members of the dyad are ‘Dominant’, ‘submissive’ and ‘switch’. All practitioners do not limit themselves to these three labels, however all participants carry out a power role and manage their impression through a series of actions and directives. Without labels such as dominant and submissive, many everyday power binaries can be observed in ordinary contexts. For example, the teacher takes a dominant role in the classroom through the dissemination of information, evaluative procedures and reinforcement practices, while the student assumes a submissive role as the receptor to information and evaluative feedback. Similarly, within the therapeutic relationship, the counselor issues directives intended to illicit client disclosure, or they apply intervention techniques to generate cognitive and behavioral modifications. Regardless of the practitioner’s chosen method(s) of expressing dominance and/or submission, the dynamics of power are always at play where one partner impresses upon the other in a negotiated exchange of influence.

In alignment with Foucault’s central ideologies on power dynamics, Lynn Chancer (1992) asserts that power roles are fluid rather than static. These shifting identities are most easily understood as we acknowledge the numerous dominant and submissive roles we hold in designated contexts. For example, an individual can identify as a teacher in one context, and a student in a different context, thus their power roles change according to the environment. An additional element to understanding the fluidity of power is recognizing that an individual is capable of embodying both a dominant and submissive position on the same relational spectrum. This can be seen in the teacher-student spectrum, as one individual can occupy both the role of the teacher and the student at different times. Another example of this fluidity is reflected in the parent-child relational spectrum; a parent holds a dominant position with respect to their child,

however, they remain a child to their respective parent. This recursive pattern of role-taking is seen in other dynamics including but not limited to doctor-patient, therapist-client, and manager-employee. In BDSM, an individual who identifies as “switch” is a prime example of power fluidity as they recognize their potential of embodying either dominant or submissive roles within a power relationship (Simula, 2015).

Chancer (1992) further emphasized the importance of recognizing the transformative consequences of holding both powerful and powerless positioning on the same relational spectrum. She states if we view power relationships in a static manner, it’s easy to polarize our experience as either the perpetrator or the victim; the powerful or the oppressed. However, if we can see ourselves as having the potential to hold both roles, we increase our capacity to empathize with whichever power role we don’t hold in that context (Warren, 2018). Empathy is reduced, however, when power roles are fixed. For example, if an individual is fixed in their identity as a store manager, they may easily lose perspective of the employee’s experience.

Impression Management and Stigma. According to Goffman’s theory of impression management (1959; 1963), individuals consciously or unconsciously employ protective devices to defend and maintain their positionality in a relationship. Thus, not only can the store manager with a fixed perception deny themselves perspective of the employee, they are likely to engage in various behaviors as means of protecting their positionality or “saving face”. This was evident from the data as BDSM practitioners discussed behavioral expectations associated with their respective roles. Although they intuitively understood their power to be fluid, while in the scene, however, they regulated their chosen rules through various maintenance strategies. For example, during a scene, the Dominant maintained their impression by giving commands, suggesting

movements, and sometimes administering punishments to negatively reinforce behaviors.

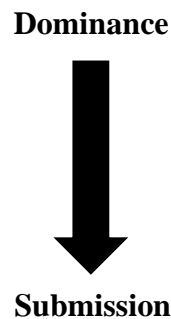
Similarly, the submissive in BDSM scenes often regulated their role through the use of verbal and non-verbal feedback to communicate compliance, express agreement and emphasize their pleasure.

From a pragmatic stance, impression management is not necessarily problematic as it can be useful in establishing protocol and maintaining boundaries in power relationships. However, impression management and holding a fixed perspective may contribute to stigmatizing individuals and groups in order to uphold a power position. This subconscious practice of regulating and reinforcing the status quo can lead to marginalized people feeling inherently disempowered in social relationships. Inductively, the stigmatizing of minority groups can be observed through the hierarchical assemblage of racial groups and the oppressive practices used to regulate and reinforce domination (Lendhardt, 2004). Moreover, White supremacist ideology has gone to great lengths to designate White people as superior, wholesome and worthy, and contrastingly label Black people as inferior, deviant and undeserving. Like the binary nature of power, racial groups have been polarized to maintain a status quo (Bonilla-Silva, 2012; 2015). The dichotomous labeling of White people as good and Black people as bad unfairly prioritizes colors which otherwise could be perceived as fluid shades of the same human spectrum. Notwithstanding, this prejudicial perspective of White superiority could deny marginalized people access to their own relational power, while simultaneously reducing empathy towards people of color or not considering their worthiness. It could be argued that racial power is a perversion of power itself as power dynamics are not meant to be an inequitable display of uncompromising domination and passive submission. Rather, the power embedded in all

relationships is meant to function more harmoniously as a balanced distribution of influence (Jordan, 2013).

Symbiotic Power. Media portrayals of BDSM tend to propagate unilateral dominance through an overrepresentation of dominant impact and restraint such as one person whipping another person, or one person handcuffing another person to the bed posts. Whereas, these types of dominant play are acceptable, it is a limited stereotype of BDSM (Williams, 2016). In movies characterizing BDSM, it's unlikely to gain insight into the collaborative process between the practitioners, further perpetuating an abusive ideology. My fieldwork experience demonstrated that power play is not a unilateral experience where one person overpowers another to satisfy their own objectives. Rather, power functions symbiotically in an informed and structured manner (see Figure 2).

Top-Down Power Approach



Symbiotic Power Approach

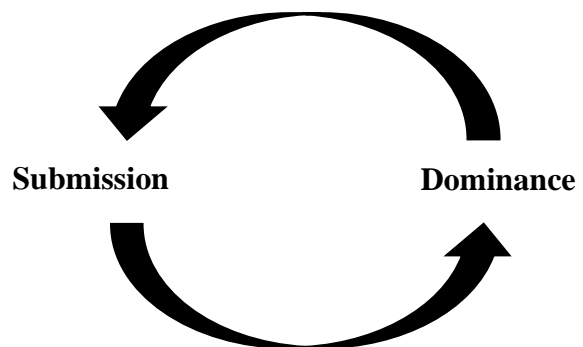


Figure 2: Top-Down versus Symbiotic Power Dynamics

BDSM is a team sport that requires skilled action, the recognition of verbal and non-verbal cues, and the extensive use of feedback. In between the slaps and the groans is a delicate attention to body signals, temperature changes, foot twitches, finger taps, facial expressions, tonality, vocal exclamations, silence and safe words. Rather than callously dealing out a series of commands, a Dominant's directives were given within a definitive context and followed up with feedback from the submissive. Not only does communicative feedback enhance overall safety, the emphasis on mutual attunement helps dispel the misconception that BDSM is inherently violent (Williams, 2016). On the contrary, abusive, violent, or flagrant behavior in BDSM (which totally exists) is a structural and political violation of the practice. Social sanctions (i.e. discontinuation of the scene or dismissal from public play spaces) and community standards of consent (i.e. risk-awareness, agreement of to certain activities and limitations) are emphasized to minimize potential harm and promote personal agency before, during and after a scene (Holt, 2017).

A Backstage Pass. Negotiation practices and feedback appear to work together during BDSM interactions. These communicative behaviors of assessment and evaluation are consistent with ethnographic literature describing structural and political aspects of BDSM (Pitagora, 2013). However, during fieldwork data collection, I was unable to witness the negotiation process in real time apart from demonstrations at workshops as negotiation is not always directly observable. Similarly, it's unlikely to watch sports teams discuss strategies and objectives off the court, nor are we likely to be invited to the writer's table while a television series is being scripted. Without backstage access, the outsider is only provided admission to the performance itself which they must accept at face value. Analogous to the iceberg metaphor often used by

counselors to distinguish the conscious from the subconscious, with limited visibility into the backstage processes of social interactions, the outsider will generate a limited understanding of the relationship (Epstein, 1994).

Many of the discursive formations labeling BDSM as maladaptive or perverse, including counselor bias, come from an outsider's perspective with limited insight into the layered communicative practices of BDSM (Kelsey, 2013; Williams, 2016). Interview participants were able to fill the gaps and provide insights on the negotiation and feedback experience. Practitioners report they must specify, disclose, and agree upon feedback patterns prior to the scene. The submissive is tasked with sharing how physical, verbal, nonverbal and emotional responses align with various stimuli they may encounter. The dyad must participate in discussions that outline personal preferences and limits. Furthermore, negotiation requires practitioners seek clarity on various reactions to minimize confusion or consent violations. For example, the exclamation "Oh God!" can be interpreted as either a pleasurable response or a distressed response. Enhanced clarity of the preferences, likes, dislikes, reactive cues and nuanced responses ultimately generates trust and safety within the dyad. In therapeutic spaces, seeking clarity is a common practice that works to help the client construct meaning of their reality and corresponding experiences. Likewise, feedback from the client guides the counselor in deciding follow-up actions or interventions. Continuous feedback from the client is considered a critical device in monitoring the strength of the therapeutic alliance (Shaw & Murray, 2014).

Aftercare. Within the BDSM community, there is a common sentiment that asserts "submissives actually have all the control" referencing their decision-making power in setting boundaries, providing expressive feedback, and the ability to terminate scenes. This ideology is

also meant to dispel the narrative that submissive are victims (Williams, 2016). Nevertheless, shared decision making is a hallmark of the BDSM interaction and ensuring the submissive is seen and heard is critical to the success of a scene. However, some participants in this study shared how this cultural ideal can unintentionally neglect the needs of the Dominant beyond their role of facilitating the scene. A workshop facilitator at Southern Charm shared how she was taken aback when a submissive asked her what she needed for aftercare. She went on to say that in her 20 years of practice, no one has ever asked her what she needed.

During data collection, I asked practitioners what they wanted their partners to know about them. Dominant practitioners most often stated they wanted their partner to be aware of their scope of competence, they wanted to feel gratitude for their efforts, and they wanted permission to rest and not have to make decisions once the scene concluded. Aftercare is a tertiary element often not visible in mainstream BDSM messaging, however it is a critical and expected part of BDSM interactions. Practitioners shared various rest rituals including but not limited to hydration, preparing a meal, cuddling, taking a long bath, chatting with their partner about the scene, reducing obligations or making space to be alone. It was also customary for practitioners to follow up with each other the following day, or days later.

Mental health counselors and other therapeutic practitioners assert that rest and self-care practices are essential to optimal functioning and mental health (Scott, 2016). Although the cultural value of aftercare is present in BDSM, it appears practitioners who assume a Dominant role are still working on how to center their personal wellness while managing role expectations. The disparity in self-care between the submissive and the Dominant is replicated in non-BDSM relationships. For example, we can observe the need for rest, rejuvenation, care and attention in

the overworked executive, the burned-out therapist, or the exhausted parent. The exchange of giving and taking control requires a mutual respect and understanding for the efforts put forth by each player.

Race and BDSM

Black BDSM practitioners are keenly aware of how their social identities impact their presence in BDSM spaces. Regardless of power/role play preferences, being Black is a continuous variable these practitioners cannot negotiate. Racial identity is a social role that undergirds and intersects with the structural and political elements of the spaces Black practitioners occupy. Bauer (2016) posits that BDSM practitioners who hold various marginal identities (i.e. Black, queer, trans, etc.) are tasked with understanding how those identities show up in the macro- and micro-level aspects of BDSM. More specifically, Bauer asserts that holding an oppressed sexual, gender or racial identity challenges one's ability to fully consent in dominant spaces further limiting how the marginalized show up in those spaces.

Critical Consent

The concept of consent can be generalized as the practice of giving permission or expression agreement, however, the application of this idea in social interactions is layered and complex (Bloomer, 2019). As a marginalized group, Black people are often asked to do or engage in interactions they don't necessarily consent to or want to participate in. For example, microaggressions subject the targeted to subtle yet hostile indignities in everyday settings (Sue et al., 2007). Meanwhile, state sanctioned violence makes minorities vulnerable to being over policed, discriminated against, exploited, verbally and physically assaulted, or defenseless in

death (Pulido, 2017). Furthermore, continuous exposure to race-based violence are related to minority stress and traumatic responses (Polanco et. al, 2016). Thus, the stressful ramifications of holding minority status persist throughout various social contexts. From a dramaturgical perspective, skin color is a fixed part of our daily costuming that accompanies us wherever we go and dictates how others interact with us (Tyler, 2018). Considering the social stigmas and disparities experienced while having black skin, it's reasonable to assume that the experience of being Black may compromise one's ability to generate power or preserve agency within social interactions.

After completing the first ethnography exclusively examining queer BDSM practitioners, Bauer (2016) challenged the liberal consent practices standard in BDSM practice that emphasize personal responsibility, feasibility, risk-awareness and voluntary assent. Although these characteristics are essential to safe practice, BDSM practitioners who hold marginal status must also consider how their identity markers impact or impede the social interaction. The findings of this study support Bauer's nuanced and culturally sensitive definition of consent. Black practitioners shared how their racial and gender identity most often dictated partner selection, the dynamics of negotiation and their perceived safety within the physical settings of BDSM. Table 3 illustrates the symbiosis in balanced power relationships while demonstrating how critical consent regulates the overall functioning of the social interaction.

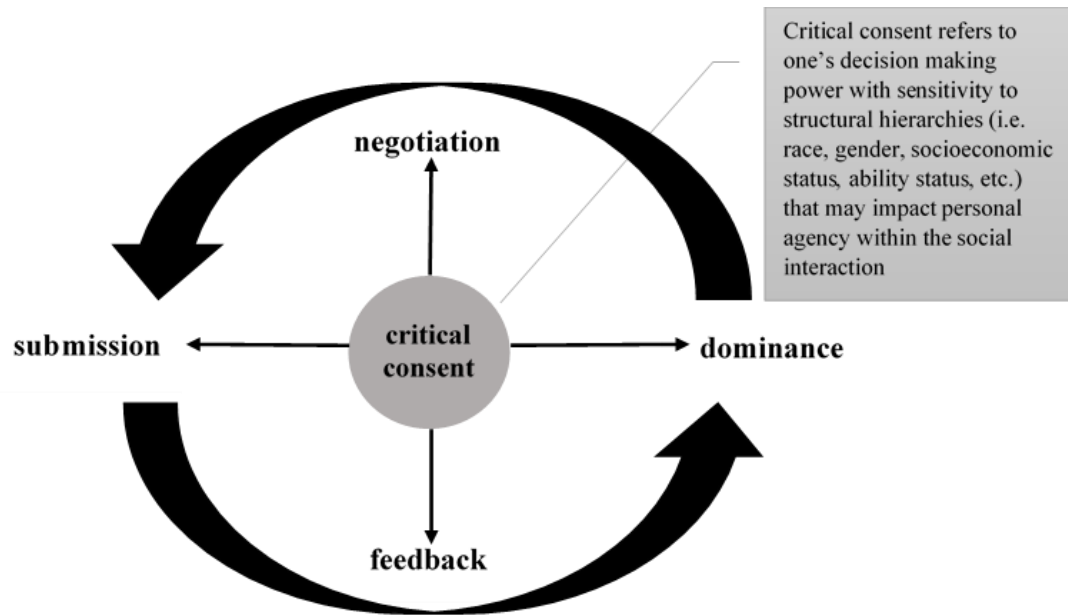


Figure 3: Critical Consent in Power Relationships

In *The Color of Kink*, Ariane Cruz (2016) concurs that consent is not a universal principle. She further postulates because Black people’s history of racialized violence has been perpetual in many ways, consent can become more complicated when negotiating dynamics of dominance and submission. However, she asserts that when Black people recognize the power of consent, not only is consent possible but it can also be pleasurable and satisfying. Beyond pleasure however, Cruz comments that BDSM for Black people “perhaps becomes a kind of critical negotiation for the abject black body— a way of working not through the past, but perhaps in and through the present.”

Race and Submission

When interview participants were asked about the roles they enact during BDSM play, some shared how race and gendered expectations can negatively impact one’s ability to access

submission. At times, they were speaking about their own personal identification, other times they were commenting on the lack of submissive visibility amongst Black BDSM practitioners in general. A commentary in *Ebony* magazine's Love & Relationship column critiques the contested topic of Black women and submission, particularly as it relates to Black women's relationship with Black men. Pickens (2014) outlines that historically speaking, Black women have held more decision-making power compared to their White counterparts as a result of working outside of the home and engaging in more egalitarian partnerships. In a similar vein, however, religious conservatism prevalent in many Black families sends a conflicting message that women should submit to their husbands (Masci et al., 2018). Pickens laments, "When I hear Black men say they are looking for traditional, submissive wives, I can't help but think they are, instead, looking for mules." A sentiment earlier remarked by Zora Neale Hurston in 1937 explains that the idea that Black women are like mules holds two behavioral expectations: 1) Black women must do what they are told, and 2) Black women must do everything at the same time.

Racial and gender-based violence means that Black women have long been initiated into a top-down understanding of power, an approach that BDSM culture actively challenges (see Figure 2). The persistent subjugation of Black women coupled with the pressure to always be present, engaged, available and responsible for everyone around them results in crippling depression, anxiety, and decreased intimacy (Nelson, Cardemil & Adeoye, 2016). Instead of resting or taking a break, Black women often overwork themselves as a form of impression management in order to decrease the potential of being viewed as weak. From the top-down power framework, submission is viewed as weak or subordinating. Thus, it is reasonable to

understand a Black woman's resistance to assuming a submissive stance, especially in a vulnerable environment like BDSM. Practitioners interviewed for this study agreed that as a Black person, accessing submission could be a difficult task, however they reported that successfully dropping into a submissive role can be very empowering. In BDSM, the submissive stance allows for the enactment of power and the exertion of control as the submissive provides a negotiated narrative of how influence will flow during power play.

Similarly, in a discussion related to the lack of visible Black male submissives in the BDSM community, it appeared masculine-centered submission was an illusionary condition. Both Toya and BlakSyn expressed frustration in cultural gatekeeping that deny access to submission for masculine-presenting people. The concept of gender role strain (GSR) outlines the persistent conflict and pressure on cisgender men to conform to rigid, often anti-homosexual, expectations of masculinity which are often dictated by their families, communities and peers (Lamont Fields et. al, 2015). Standards of hypermasculinity in the Black community may also apply to masculine-presenting women, consequently denying them an opportunity to embody a submissive stance in BDSM play.

The history of violence perpetrated against Black bodies has resulted in conditioned fear-based responses that impede rapport and trust building (Williams-Washington, 2010). Nevertheless, Black people have every capacity to access softness and express their desire for receptive intimacy. Shakti Bliss brilliantly summarized that the armor Black people have built up in response to trauma and maintained for protection can disrupt surrender, rest and the desire to let go:

I think that Black women specifically have the utmost amount of softness. We constantly forgive and live around people that screw us over on the daily. So, we have the softness, it just depends on how we like to use the softness. And we don't just give it away to everyone. It takes a little bit of effort. It's a journey inward. It's an inward journey of getting to know yourself. I am still doing that. I spent years building up this armor, like years. Piece by piece; shined it, hardened it. It was perfect. It was beautiful armor and it kept everything out. I was safe and I was accomplished because that is how you survive trauma; is you build up the armor.

Agency Preservation

In sharing how BDSM impacts their ability to self-determine, some practitioners clarified, whereas BDSM helps them access multiple dimensions of themselves, they are not always keen on playing with White people in BDSM scenes. The social determinant that White people generally outnumber Black people in the BDSM community cannot be avoided and thus must be navigated with care and consideration. Racial dynamics may further compound the vulnerable nature of BDSM, adding a heightened anxiety or lack of trust in the power dynamics perceived in BDSM spaces. Moreover, Black BDSM practitioners remarked that the lack of ethnic representation in BDSM media, conference attendance, workshop facilitators and vendors reinforces inherent gatekeeping practices by White people within the BDSM community. These racial disparities are not unique to the BDSM community, rather they serve as a reflection of many social systems and environments in the United States, in particular. By virtue of demographic stratification, and Black people holding minority numbers compared to White

people, it's easy to see how the needs and safety of Black people can be overlooked (Meyer, Schwartz & Frost, 2008).

Jet Setting Jasmine™ and Miss Marla have ascended as cultural leaders for Black practitioners. They design culturally sensitive BDSM spaces intended to neutralize power dynamics and provide a safe space for Black people who want to learn more about BDSM practice. The most distinguishing feature of their play spaces compared to the settings I observed during my fieldwork was Jet Setting Jasmine™ and Miss Marla do not host BDSM events in public dungeon spaces. Other study participants who identify as BDSM educators echoed a similar approach by hosting BDSM workshops and gatherings in non-dungeon settings. Comparatively, events that center people of color (POC) are taking place in housing collectives, private homes, basements, swingers clubs, art galleries, bookstores, and specialized conferences such as Sex Down South.

Jet Setting Jasmine™ and her husband King Noire curate a POC-focused experience called Kinky Pop-Up, an interactive event that travels across the country performing, demonstrating and educating people of color on kink and power play. After our interview, Jet Setting Jasmine™ invited me to participate in a flogging demonstration with she and her husband. The demonstration would be part of a live event for a sexuality-based podcast, hosted at a comedy club. With nearly 200 people of color in the audience. the ethnic contrast compared to public BDSM dungeons was overwhelming yet thoroughly satisfying. In the brief moment of sharing the stage with Jet Setting Jasmine™ and King Noire, I affirmed, 'this is where Black BDSM happens'.

Recommendations

BDSM is not a utopia, however the cultural, structural and political elements of the practice present a container for individuals to safely explore their sexual selves and better understand how they relate to others. For mental health counselors, it's necessary to identify what elements of BDSM interactions we can apply to our understanding of power relationships and to the improvement of relational experiences. Furthermore, the narratives shared here present an opportunity for counselors to rewrite the pathological narratives of the past by dismantling stigmatized ideologies related to BDSM and Black sexualities. To some degree, one must be initiated into the cultural practice of BDSM to holistically understand the somatic and psychological changes that accompany BDSM play. However, the nuanced ethnographic analysis presented provides outsiders insight into more consistent dynamics of BDSM interactions otherwise misunderstood.

Reevaluating Pain

BDSM practice rests at the crux of pain and pleasure, two seemingly contradictory reactions born from the same affective construct. And for many people outside of the BDSM community, the symbolic roleplay of power or the use of painful stimuli appears confusing or counterintuitive. However, the concept of pain is a familiar and necessary component of therapeutic processing. Mental health counselors understand that relationships, intimacy, growth and learning are all composed of uncomfortable processes with pleasurable outcomes. Thus, another way for counselors to reconcile the discursive assumption that BDSM is perverse, eroticized violence, is to reevaluate how we talk about and conceptualize pain. There is a marked distinction between the pain of violence, grief, growth, birth, and the pain in stubbing one's toe.

The care to separate nonconsensual violence and trauma from consensual power play will serve in minimizing negative assumptions when encountering clients who may disclose their interest or participation in BDSM practice.

The examination of BDSM mechanics challenges counselors to assess the different ways pain can show up. And it's right to assume counselors are equipped and well-suited to work with pain, considering the therapeutic process is hinged on helping client's access and process discomfort. However, counselors are human too and vulnerable to employing conscious or unconscious mechanisms to avoid painful experiences. Thus, improving perceptions of BDSM requires counselors to be transparent in recognizing their own countertransference and understanding how their intolerance to pain may be projected on the client. Without a holistic and empathic response to pain, counselors may compromise the safety of the therapeutic container thus impeding client growth.

Advocating for Equity in Power Relationships

There is an inherent power differential embedded in the counseling relationship with counselors assuming the dominant role and clients taking a submissive stance. Although the therapeutic alliance is governed by mutual contributions of both parties, the counselor must be sensitive in how they assert their influence. By virtue of specialized expertise, credentialing, the implementation of interventions, and being the gatekeepers of normality, counselors are vulnerable to errant and subconscious engagement in top-down power practices that may impede the agency of the client. BDSM normalizes mutuality and bidirectional power processes that mimic some parts of the therapeutic process (i.e. rapport building, assessment, shared agreement of treatment, the implementation of various techniques to facilitate access to discomfort,

checking-in, and termination). Beyond these parallel characteristics, negotiation and feedback are critical BDSM elements that counselors can adopt to help generate and maintain equity within the therapeutic dyad.

The top-down power framework which is rooted in oppression does not leave room for negotiation, and marginalized clients accustomed to feeling overpowered or subjugated may be resistant to the therapeutic process altogether in the absence of mutuality. People of color move through the world with others assuming authority over their bodies and movements while also regulating their thoughts and feelings. Thus, it is possible marginalized clients may only have exposure to top-down power approaches. Counselors could benefit from applying a power-sensitive approach to healing that acknowledges layered power dynamics and supports vigilant efforts to disrupt exploitative practices in micro- and macro-level systems. The decolonialization of therapy requires counselors to actively redistribute power by helping the marginalized regain access to pain, pleasure, intimacy and safety necessary in growth-fostering relationships.

Pleasure as Political

In her work *Pleasure Activism*, adrienne maree brown (2019) asserts that generating pleasure is a political act, especially for people of color. Collective trauma perpetuates mind-body disconnections keeping our physical bodies in a hyper state of arousal further hindering access to affectively pleasurable compassion. Ingrid LaFleur concurs that “for oppressed people to intentionally cultivate pleasure it is an act of resistance” (Brown, 2019, p. 271). Thus, in order for mental health counselors to support racial healing, it is suggested somatic paradigms be integrated into race-based therapy practice. An interactive focus on bodily sensations may be necessary in assisting Black people to acknowledge their complexities, reclaim their bodies and

preserve agency. The reclamation enhances decision making powers, allowing Black people to feel secure in exploring their sexualities. Furthermore, somatic development has the potential to help the marginalized make decisions that align with their desires rather than behave from a place of constraint. It is important for Black people to learn to effectively communicate what they want and don't want in real time, and to access their own energy when they need to employ better boundaries. Equitable advocacy on behalf of counselors has the power to help Black clients in seeing their pleasure experience as an antidote to racial depression.

Future Research

While working with people of color, counselors must employ a social justice approach to human sexuality. More specifically, a relational-cultural approach to BDSM research may help to directly measure the impact of narrative scripts on the psychological formation of power relationships in BDSM interactions. A relational-cultural framework could also allow researchers to revisit the psychodynamic assumptions of BDSM originally generated by the psychiatric and psychological communities. Existing claims regarding the relationship between BDSM and trauma generally focus on adverse childhood experiences and attachment styles. However, a systems approach to collective trauma and BDSM could provide insight into the political dynamics of the practice.

Black sexualities is often discussed in relationship to sexual debasement in popular media, hypersexual or maladaptive sexual behaviors associated with trauma, and sexual conservatism in religious settings. Within the therapeutic disciplines, however, research on diverse sexualities within the Black community remains limited. For instance, little is known about multitiered relational collectives (i.e. polyamory, polygamy, polyandry, etc.) among Black

people. Furthermore, attention is warranted to examine the intersection of religion and BDSM, particularly among Black BDSM practitioners. Considering the structured and ritualistic elements of BDSM, it may relate to religious participation. Just the same, the sadomasochistic components of BDSM could potentially be applied to religious atonement and reconciliation practices of Abrahamic religious systems.

Lastly, microethnography in counseling research could yield essential feedback to social justice and decolonizing efforts in mental health. Experiential and immersive experiences are shown to effectively enhance multicultural competency (Barden & Cashwell, 2013). However, microethnography goes beyond cultural norms and identity markers, penetrating micro-level communicative behaviors that help qualify social interactions. Microethnographic approaches to counseling research can assist in understanding relational nuances from a cultural, structural and political stance. This research design can have implications for understanding several intersectional groups such through direct exposure, enhance cultural competence while disproving negative bias and stereotypes about the population in question (Carspecken, 1996).

Conclusion

As cognitive and behavioral authorities, the mental health community is required to examine and reexamine individuals and groups for normality as it relates to functionality. Immersive methodological practices, such as microethnography, allow counselor educators to become insiders to social phenomena otherwise under investigated. Furthermore, it promotes contextual understanding for counselors who hold bias or limited understanding of the BDSM community. Insight into the mechanics of the BDSM scene serve to normalize the practice as

defined by the community itself, and better grasp the interactions themselves. The interactive sequences of BDSM hold information about bidirectional power exchange that supports relational discourse. Micro-level analysis further presents connections to macro-level social practices that support or oppress marginalized individuals. The exploration of racial and ethnic identity within BDSM interactions generated contextual data useful for appreciating the relational needs of Black and African American individuals.

Without context, the naked eye reads BDSM like a primitive drama with elaborate costuming— an embellished ritual of contention, or a sensual exhibit of savagery. And with respect to the beholder, perceiving BDSM as an erotic gymnasium is perfectly acceptable. On its own, the practice is playful, arousing and mysterious. The performative elements are provocative and entertaining at the very least. However, laced in the backs of bone-in corsets are the politics of pleasure. The experiences of Black practitioners shared throughout this narrative suggest the structure and disciplined practices of BDSM provide a creative access point to safely explore sexuality. For many, BDSM is an opportunity to express elements of their identity otherwise condemned by normative standards of society. Black people are often denied the space to express and process the full range of their emotional capacity. In dominant spaces, they may feel silenced, incapable or unworthy to avow their true feelings and forced to modify or abandon their emotions all together. For Black practitioners, BDSM provides a stage for assertiveness and pain.

The power structures in BDSM are regulated through negotiation practices typically inaccessible to marginalized bodies in dominant spaces. Black practitioners not only get to name themselves, but also articulate their preferences, dislikes and limitations thus improving their relational skills and capacity for intimacy. Power play offers a container constructed by consent

and governed by pleasurable intent. The transgressive nature of BDSM offers a space to resist hegemony, push boundaries, preserve agency. Whether through the mastery of skill, consensual force, disciplined restraint, sensual pleasure or quiet reflection, Black BDSM practitioners unapologetically reclaim their power, which alone, is a symbol of righteous rebellion.

APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT



EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Title of Project: Power-Sensitive Play: A Critical Microethnographic Examination of Role Identity and Relational Dynamics of Black BDSM Practitioners

Principal Investigator: Amber Norman, MA, LMHC

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Kent Butler

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part or not is completely up to you. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how Black and African Americans use BDSM to define power and personal agency in relationships. Although the benefits of BDSM have been well-documented, the experiences of Black and African American practitioners have largely been left out of psychological and mental health research studies. This study seeks to center the voices of Black and African American BDSM practitioners. The insights of this study will contribute a culturally relevant and empowering narrative about BDSM practice. The overall findings of this research will contribute to my dissertation entitled *Power-Sensitive Play: A Critical Microethnographic Examination of Role Identity and Relational Dynamics of Black BDSM Practitioners*.

Participation in this study will consist of completing a short demographic form and completing an interview with me, lasting approximately one hour. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions about your experiences in BDSM, power dynamics, roles, negotiation, and your cultural insights. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed by me. Your interview transcription and the overall study findings will be shared with you. Immediately following the interview, you will receive a monetary gift of \$50.00 cash for your time.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose to not answer any questions or withdraw permission to use data from your interview without penalty. There are little to no risks associated with participating in this study. To protect your confidentiality, audio recordings will be encrypted and then destroyed at the conclusion of the study. To safeguard your identity, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym so that your name and identifying information will not be associated with the written report of the research.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.

For more information about the study, please contact: Amber Norman, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Counselor Education, College of Community Innovation and Education at amber.norman@knights.ucf.edu

To report any problems or complaints, please contact: Dr. Kent Butler, Faculty Supervisor, Office of Diversity and Inclusion at skbuter@ucf.edu

IRB contact about your rights in this study or to report a complaint: If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or have concerns about the conduct of this study, please contact Institutional Review Board (IRB), University of Central Florida, Office of Research, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901, or email irb@ucf.edu.

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Institutional Review Board

FWA00000351
IRB00001138
Office of Research
12201 Research Parkway
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

January 7, 2020

Dear Amber Norman:

On 1/7/2020, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Study, Category 2
Title:	Power-Sensitive Play: A Critical Microethnographic Examination of Role Identity and Relational Dynamics of Black BDSM Practitioners
Investigator:	Amber Norman
IRB ID:	STUDY00001294
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Racine Jacques, Ph.D.
Designated Reviewer

LIST OF REFERENCES

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