

Sadomasochism without Sex? Exploring the Parallels between BDSM and Extreme Rituals¹

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Introduction

BDSM (Bondage & Discipline, Dominance & Submission, Sadism & Masochism) is often defined solely as kinky sex. BDSM practitioners recognize, however, that BDSM can encompass more than just sexuality. In *SM 101*, for example, Jay Wiseman's (1996) definition of BDSM includes both sexual and non-sexual motivations:

The knowing use of psychological dominance and submission, and/or physical bondage, and/or pain, and/or related practices in a safe, legal, consensual manner in order for the participants to experience erotic arousal and/or personal growth. (p. 10)

Researchers have also begun recognizing non-sexual aspects of BDSM, with Newmahr (2010) conceptualizing BDSM as *serious leisure* (akin to mountain climbing and other activities that require investment, skill, and dedication to perform), Baumeister (1997) theorizing that masochism provides a method of temporarily escaping the burdens of selfhood, and Pitagora and Ophelian (in press) identifying therapeutic benefits of BDSM. Likewise, Hutson (2014) reviewed research on why we pursue unpleasant experiences, drawing parallels between the motivations for masochism and the motivations for a number of non-sexual activities such as eating chili peppers and riding roller coasters (Rozin et al., 2013), and climbing mountains (Loewenstein, 1999). Hutson also notes that sometimes we choose unpleasant activities over pleasant alternatives (e.g., an ice hotel versus a Marriot) in order to build our *experiential CV* (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011). We should note that many of these ideas, although compelling, still need empirical validation.

These non-sexual conceptualizations of BDSM suggest parallels with another type of intense physical activity: extreme rituals. Extreme rituals (e.g., body piercing, firewalking) have been documented historically (Catlin, 1867) and are widely practiced today (Fischer et al., 2014). As with BDSM, extreme rituals require skill and dedication to perform safely. Also as with BDSM, extreme rituals likely facilitate escape from the self, given the trances that some rituals are reported to produce (Pfaff & Simons, 1973; Xygalatas, 2014). Finally, it seems likely that some people participate in extreme rituals such as firewalking for the social and psychological benefits

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they get from being able to tell others (and themselves) that they have done so. Thus, people appear to pursue BDSM and extreme rituals, in part, for similar reasons, and they appear to anticipate similar benefits from both.

Parallels between BDSM and Extreme Rituals

Over the past several years, our research team has investigated the physiological and psychological effects of consensual BDSM activities and extreme rituals (see Table 1). Across these studies, certain patterns have begun to emerge. These patterns suggest that the parallels between BDSM and extreme rituals extend beyond the motivations and anticipated benefits of the activities to the role-specific effects of the activities. In this paper, we explore these parallels. Of necessity, we only briefly summarize the specifics of each study. Readers interested in the details are referred to the papers cited in Appendix 1.

The first parallel involves stress, particularly the disconnect between physiological and psychological stress observed in BDSM bottoms and in pierced ritual participants. We measured physiological stress using the hormone cortisol (assessed via saliva sample). Not surprisingly, given the physical pain and lack of control often involved, both BDSM bottoms and pierced ritual participants showed increases in cortisol from before to during the activities. At the same time, however, BDSM bottoms and pierced ritual participants reported decreases in the psychological experience of stress. We suspect this disconnect between the physiological and the psychological might be indicative of an altered state of consciousness achieved by BDSM bottoms and pierced ritual participants (see Xygalatas et al., 2013, for a similar disconnect regarding measured and experienced heart rate among firewalkers). BDSM tops and non-pierced ritual participants (ritual leaders, drummers, piercers, observers, etc.), in contrast, typically showed no change in cortisol and reported decreases in psychological stress. This reduction in psychological stress in BDSM tops and non-pierced ritual participants suggests that it may not be necessary for all participants to experience the same level of pain or intensity as bottoms or pierced individuals to psychologically benefit from the activity.

The second parallel involves altered states of consciousness. Anecdotally, both BDSM practitioners and ritual participants report that the activities sometimes induce altered states of consciousness (e.g., *topspace* and *subspace* in BDSM tops and bottoms; trances in ritual participants). We assessed two altered states: flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991) and transient hypofrontality (Dietrich, 2003), which we believed might be the states described as *topspace* and *subspace*, respectively. Flow is a highly pleasurable and satisfying mental state involving intense absorption and optimal performance on an activity such as sports or music. In our studies, BDSM tops, ritual piercers, and those supporting a specific pierced ritual participant reported the highest levels of flow, particularly on the optimal performance facets of flow. Likewise, BDSM bottoms and non-piercer ritual participants (pierced participants, ritual leaders, drummers, observers, etc., but not piercers) showed decrements in performance on the cognitive Stroop test (MacLeod, 1991), suggesting temporary impairment of the brain's executive function capability consistent with *subspace*/transient hypofrontality. It is notable that BDSM tops and ritual piercers showed no evidence of cognitive impairment, suggesting that they retained the cognitive capability to perform the technically precise actions required for their roles.

These results have important implications for safety within BDSM scenes and extreme rituals. In particular, the temporary cognitive impairment shown by BDSM bottoms and non-piercer ritual participants suggests that the altered state of consciousness achieved by these individuals might make recognizing personal limits more difficult. Fortunately, evidence from BDSM tops and ritual piercers suggests that these individuals retained the concentration and focus necessary to perform their roles and to monitor the well-being of their scene partners and fellow ritual participants. Furthermore, our data suggest that BDSM scenes and extreme rituals might represent multiple routes to achieving the same altered states of consciousness—in essence, different paths to the same place. Baumeister (1988) explored a similar question when he linked masochism to other methods of escaping the self:

The question of why someone comes to prefer masochism over mountain climbing may be comparable to the question of why someone comes to prefer skydiving over mountain climbing; accidents of habit, opportunity, and association may play key causal roles. (p. 54)

The third parallel involves intimacy. We measured intimacy using the Inclusion of Other in Self Scale (Aron et al., 1992), in which respondents indicate their relationship with another person (their scene partner; their fellow ritual participants) by selecting one of seven pairs of increasingly overlapping circles, one labeled “self”, the other labeled “other”. Across all our studies and across roles, BDSM practitioners and ritual participants reported increases in self-other overlap from before to after their activities. BDSM scenes and extreme rituals both appear to foster intimacy between participants. As with psychological stress, these findings suggest that experiencing pain during these activities may not be necessary to reap personal benefits.

The primary area of distinction we observed was participants’ conceptualization of the activities. After the activities were over, we asked participants how sexual, how sadomasochistic, and how spiritual they found the activities. For BDSM scenes, tops perceived the scenes as highest in sexuality, and bottoms perceived the scenes as highest in sadomasochism. In contrast, ritual participants perceived the ritual as highest in spirituality. Future work should investigate which elements of these activities contribute to these different conceptualizations.

Conclusion

The topics of BDSM and extreme rituals are disproportionately understudied within the scholarly literature and widely misunderstood by the general public. It is our hope that this research can help illuminate the reasons why people choose to engage in these types of activities and that this understanding might lead to greater acceptance. As noted above, people appear to pursue BDSM and extreme rituals, in part, for similar reasons, and they appear to anticipate similar benefits from both. And as the results of our studies illustrate, BDSM scenes and extreme rituals appear to have similar effects on participants. Indeed, even the primary area of distinction we observed—the conceptualization of the activities—might not represent a universal difference. As Easton and Hardy (2001) observe:

Today we are also seeing the emergence of S/M- often referred to in this context as "Sex Magic"- as a spiritual practice. The combination of ritual with S/M, and the use of strong

sensation and sometimes opening the skin to achieve transcendent states, have led to a potent combination of S/M practice with spiritual seeking. (Easton & Hardy, 2001, p. 8; see also Easton & Hardy's *Radical Ecstasy*, 2004)

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Appendix 1

Studies of BDSM Scenes and Extreme Rituals

Study	Summary	Host	Measures
Ambler et al. (under review)	14 BDSM practitioners randomly assigned to the top or bottom role for a scene	Arizona Power Exchange	Cortisol, testosterone, IOS, PANAS, self-reported stress, self-reported sexual arousal, Stroop, flow
Klement et al. (under review)	67 participants in the "Dance of Souls", a hook-pull/ball dance ritual	2012 Southwest Leather Conference	Cortisol, IOS, PANAS, self-reported stress, self-reported sexual arousal
Lee et al. (under review)	83 participants in the "Dance of Souls", a hook-pull/ball dance ritual	2014 Southwest Leather Conference	Cortisol, IOS, PANAS, self-reported stress, self-reported sexual arousal, Stroop, flow
Lee et al. (2014)	22 participants in a hook-pull	2013 Leather Levi Weekend	IOS, PANAS, self-reported stress, self-reported sexual arousal, flow
Sagarin et al. (2009) Study 1	13 BDSM practitioners participating in a scene	Arizona Power Exchange	Cortisol, testosterone, IOS
Sagarin et al. (2009) Study 2	45 BDSM practitioners participating in a scene	2002 Thunder in the Mountains	Cortisol, testosterone, IOS

Note. The Arizona Power Exchange is a Phoenix-based BDSM organization. The Southwest Leather Conference is an annual BDSM/Leather conference held in Phoenix, AZ. The Leather Levi Weekend is an annual weekend event held in Northern California. Thunder in the Mountains is an annual BDSM/Leather conference held in Denver, CO. Cortisol and testosterone are hormones measured via saliva sampling. The IOS is the Inclusion of Other in Self Scale (Aron et al., 1992), a measure of intimacy or relationship closeness. The PANAS is the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988), a measure of positive emotions (e.g., interested, alert) and negative emotions (e.g., distressed, upset).