BDSM: a subcultural analysis of sacrifices and delights

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This is a qualitative investigation of 73 individuals in the Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sado-Masochism subculture. There is tremendous stigma attached to this subculture, and while the academic community may be increasingly accepting, the general public is not as accepting or knowledgeable. Fear of negative consequences means that many engage in secrecy and concealment strategies as protective measures. Although there is much literature on the possible consequences and the reasons for concealment, there remain gaps. Our findings reveal how many conceal to cover up or to hide what outsiders may consider immoral or otherwise unacceptable behavior. Others conceal as a means to create a distinction for themselves as part of a secret subculture. Whatever their reasons, those in this subculture engage in a variety of strategies to manage their identity and to minimize their vulnerability.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to report the results of a qualitative investigation of the difficulties/sacrifices and satisfactions/delights experienced by those who are members of the BDSM
lifestyle. Specifically, we examine the difficulties inherent in being part of a stigmatized subculture and the secrecy and concealment strategies that follow, as a means of stigma or information management. As a measure of balance and accuracy, we also examine the satisfactions experienced by those who practice Bondage and Discipline (BD), Dominance and Submission (DS), and Sado-Masochism (SM).

Currently, the stigma attached to BDSM is tremendous and the myths and negative press associated with BDSM are rampant (Moser and Madeson 2002). This stigma results from cultural evaluations or labeling of BDSM as deviant. The prevalence of what is referred to by BDSM participants as "vanilla sex" (non-BDSM sex), results in dominant social constructs that define BDSM as deviant. This means that BDSM participants become socially marginalized or invisible. While the academic community may be increasingly accepting of BDSM, or "kinky," as an alternative lifestyle choice, or subculture, the general public is not as accepting or knowledgeable. Thus, according to Moser, few people admit to BDSM interests, and the lack of understanding of BDSM has lead to many misconceptions as well as fear, which may further alienate those who are active in the lifestyle (1988). Fear of negative consequences means that many will engage in strategies or tactics as protective measures. One recognized protective measure is the control or concealment of one’s deviant or stigmatized identity.

Goffman (1963), defines stigma as an attribute "that is deeply discrediting" to an individual. What is stigmatized is also culturally specific and varies over time. One result of stigma is that individuals in the BDSM subculture must negotiate or construct their identities amid hostility and misunderstanding and therefore must maintain them within the context of a "deviant" subculture. Goffman (1963) contends that people must seek to manage "spoiled aspects" of their social and personal identities in a variety of contexts. In other words, one must manage discreditable identities. One way of doing so is through what Goffman termed "impression management" (1959). Stigma management translates into information management as a means of coping with a deviant identity. Individuals strategically regulate information about themselves, thus allowing them to construct and protect their identities, which in turn influences how they are perceived.

**CONCEALMENT AND SECRECY**

The secret... the hiding of realities by negative or positive means, is one of man's greatest achievements.

—Georg Simmel (1950)

One means of impression management and self presentation is to conceal information about oneself (Goffman 1959; Schwartz 1968). Bok defines secrecy as intentional concealment. She also makes a distinction between secrecy and privacy. Privacy is defined as "the condition of being protected from unwanted access by others" (p. 10). There is overlap between the two concepts when "hiding" is involved. Individuals protect their privacy from others getting too close by protecting their personal space. Personal space involves not only physical aspects but also personal information (Bok 1989). Kroeger terms the deliberate concealment of personal information "to present the self as other than who one understands oneself to be" (2003:104) as "disclosure management."

Some personal information, however, cannot be hidden or managed. We are often evaluated through social group membership based on race, ethnicity, and gender. These are readily perceived membership categories, but membership defined by sexual proclivities, such as "kinky," is concealable. Other groups also possess stigmatizing attributes that may not be apparent to others (being gay or lesbian, those with a nonconspicuous disability, etc). One would expect that individuals might conceal aspects of themselves that violate recognized norms of society or those that have not received wide acceptance. According to Bok, to do so permits one to leave undisturbed that which might result in suffering. This reduces vulnerability and provides one with more control over potentially damaging information (1989). Thus, secrecy is a strategy that is sometimes necessary as a protective measure against a potentially hostile environment. However, some say that we have a cultural
Much of the literature on concealing secrets espouses the benefits in revealing them, including improved mental and physical health (Parks 1982; Pennebaker 1997). This literature is typically focused on the harm of concealing personal or family secrets in close relationships (Bradshaw 1995; Caughlin and Petronio 2004; Imber-Black 1998; Vangelisti 1994; Webster 1991). Other research looks at the negative consequences of concealing such secrets as having had an abortion (Major and Gramzow 1999) marital abuse (Yuen-Tsang and Sung 2005) and HIV status (Klitzman and Bayer 2003). The assertion is that bringing secrets into the open can be therapeutic, healing, or beneficial and to continue to conceal them will only bring about further detriment or the festering of troubles (Bok 1989).

Still, others provide prescriptive warnings regarding revealing secrets. Kelly and McKillop (1996) suggest that before revealing a secret one should consider the consequences. They suggest that people should probably not reveal personal secrets if they lack a nonjudgmental and trustworthy person with whom to confide. Others suggest that concealment might be warranted if one has good reasons for it (Imber-Black 1998). The feeling here is that there is an unknown risk involved in revealing that one may not be sure how the receiver of that information is going to react. Thus, the reasons given for concealing secrets may be numerous according to Vangelisti (1994). First, individuals may perceive what would happen if a secret was revealed and they believe the reaction or evaluation would be disapproval. Second, some conceal secrets as a form of defense. That is, they often worry that the recipient would violate their trust. Third, some individuals worry that they will not be able to discuss the secret in a satisfactory manner. Fourth, some may simply feel that the secret is not relevant to others (Vangelisti 1994). The bottom line is that "people refrain from disclosing sensitive information because of the need for protection" (Afifi et al. 2005:565) as well as to protect others (Afifi and Guerrero 1998; Kroeger 2003).

However, according to ethnographer, Carol Warren, her study of gay males indicates that concealment and secrecy may not be entirely due to worries. She contends that
concealment "entails both sacrifices and delights" (1974:4), that "the secret response... adds excitement to stigma" (p. 5) and increases the importance of the community. Likewise, Altman (1976) contends that concealing activities may infuse them with a sense that the concealed activity is something sacred. This is particularly true for some religions, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons), as well as other groups such as Freemasons, who require oaths of secrecy from followers (Rich and Merchant 2003). Therefore, a secret can bind those who share it.

Concealment and secrecy are basic to being human and living among others. "With no capacity for keeping secrets and for choosing when to reveal them, human beings would lose their sense of identity and every shred of autonomy" (Bok 1989:282). Although the literature is replete with information on the possible consequences and the reasons for concealment, there are gaps in our understanding of stigma and concealment. Moreover, there appears to be no literature on concealment issues for those in the BDSM subculture. Because the focus of this study is on the meanings and perspectives of individuals within a specific social context, those involved in the BDSM lifestyle, we used a descriptive qualitative grounded theory design. Our hope is that our findings might (a) provide a clearer understanding of how one experiences belonging to a subcultural group and (b) generate greater understanding of the experiences of those in the BDSM subculture specifically.

**METHODS**

**Data Collection**

Although we utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to conduct our research of those who are members of the BDSM subculture, the major component of this study is based on a portion of the qualitative data gathered. These research findings represent one part of a much more comprehensive, ongoing research project. Interviews and observational data were gathered over a two year period. We conducted e-interviews as well as gathered data face-to-face. An active participant in the BDSM lifestyle, known to the
first-named author, agreed to act as gatekeeper to grant us access. He posted a notice of our research interests and intentions on a regional BDSM listserv. Many on this listserv posted it to other listservs to which they belonged. The notice contained an e-mail address for participants to contact if they wished to participate.

Once participants contacted us by private messages through the e-mail address set up specifically for this research, they were sent an informed consent form to be read, debriefed on the nature of the study, and guaranteed anonymity through the selection of codenames. Once they acknowledged they had read the informed consent and understood it, they were sent a short 27-item questionnaire to complete. This questionnaire was used mostly to gather demographic information as well as some attitudinal responses. Other than the demographic data used, it was not a part of the current analysis. This instrument was an adaptation of an earlier questionnaire created by Charles Moser, a researcher who has conducted much research on BDSM lifestyle participants. The final questionnaire created for the current research project was shown to an active participant in the lifestyle, and some changes were made to incorporate appropriate terminology used within the BDSM community. After the questionnaire was returned, an on-line e-interview began. This exploratory study employed semi-structured, open-ended interview questions. While pre-established sets of questions and lists of topics were used, additional interview questions emerged from the responses of participants. This permitted a mixture of structure, but also a conversational style of data collection. Small sets or numbers of questions that were related were used so as to decrease the likelihood of respondent fatigue or stalling in responding. Data collection from each respondent took anywhere from a week to several months, depending on the speed and length of the responses. Some respondents have remained in touch over the entire two-year time frame. Many of these have become highly valued informants. In addition, many of the respondents have been met in-person at various BDSM conventions to further discuss issues as well as to permit a first-hand understanding of practices and norms within the BDSM subculture.
Qualitative methodology has been able to take advantage of many of the advancements in computer technology, and this research is no exception. We employed an asynchronous format for conducting our e-interviews. E-interviews eliminate the problems with setting meeting times and interviewing someone who lives far away (e.g., in another state, another country, or worldwide). In fact, our participants were spread out over the United States as well as some from other countries.

Sample

Selected descriptive characteristics of the study participants are presented in Table 1.

The participants in this study consisted of 42 women and 31 men who self-identified to be in the BDSM lifestyle. The majority of males (20) identified as predominantly or exclusively “dominant,” 10 identified as predominantly or exclusively “submissive,” only 1 identified as a “switch.” The majority of females (33) identified as predominantly or exclusively “submissive,” 7 identified as predominantly or exclusively “dominant,” only 2 identified as a “switch.” The age range of participants was 23 to 75 years with a mean age of 43 years. A large percentage (40%) of the participants have been practicing BDSM for more than 10 years.

| TABLE 1 Selected Descriptive Characteristics of Study Participants (n=73) |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| Variables                                    | %         | Number   |
| Gender                                       |           |          |
| Male                                         | 42        | 31       |
| Female                                       | 58        | 42       |
| BDSM Status                                  |           |          |
| Dominant                                     | 37        | 27       |
| Submissive                                   | 59        | 43       |
| Switch                                       | 4         | 3        |
| Length of Time Practicing                    |           |          |
| Less than 1 year                             | 0         | 0        |
| 1 year-3 years                               | 18        | 13       |
| More than 3 years but less than 6            | 19        | 14       |
| More than 6 years but less than 10           | 23        | 17       |
| More than 10 years                           | 40        | 29       |
Analysis

We utilized a grounded theory methodology to assess the experiences or anticipations of stigma, subsequent reasons for concealment, the strategies employed for concealing BDSM involvement, as well as satisfactions maintained within the subculture. Grounded theory is a descriptive qualitative methodology (Glaser 1976; Glaser and Strauss 1967) that focuses on the meanings of social phenomena based on the perspective of symbolic interactionist theory (Blumer 1969). Symbolic interactionism proposes that people construct meanings of phenomena based on their interpretations of interactions they have with others. Grounded theorists base their research on the assumption that individuals and groups experience shared social circumstances, and that meanings are generated from those shared circumstances. It is the role of the grounded theorist to explore and attempt to see the world from the perspective of one’s respondents, to articulate their meanings, thus making sense of their social experience. When possible the grounded theorist develops a theoretical understanding of the processes involved in those experiences. This is accomplished through use of the constant comparative method in which differences and similarities among the data are observed and a theoretical scheme is developed (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Credibility was established by having the results carefully reviewed and approved by several informants. There were a total of eight key informants. Moreover, utilization of both qualitative and observational data gathering techniques enhances credibility; prolonged time in the field, two years thus far; persistent observation; talking to those in the field; and peer debriefing (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Moreover, the lead researcher now has a confirmed, accepted, and trusted presence in the BDSM community. This study’s findings are offered as an in-depth, rich description of experiences of those in the BDSM subculture so that different insights and theoretical ideas can be generated.

Several themes related to concealment, secrecy, and stigma management emerged from the analysis. We thought it useful to use gender, BDSM status, and age to refer to the individuals whose quotes we used to illustrate our findings.
FINDINGS

Levels of Concealment

The secrecy surrounding BDSM activity and those involved in this subculture is a result of the stigma attached to this alternative lifestyle. Stigma management translates into secrecy or information management as a means of coping with a deviant identity concerning sexual activities and one’s BDSM identity, a discreditable trait. Deliberate concealment of a portion of one’s identity, perceived to be central to the self, entails the withholding or concealment of information that could be damaging to oneself if others discovered what they work hard to keep private. These individuals are aware of the potential for stigmatization to affect their lives. Thus, they carefully control what they tell others about their sexuality. However to tell or not to tell is not a simple decision. The control of this information is shaped by a variety of factors.

It is not surprising that various levels of concealment are linked to those in the lifestyle as well as their counterparts who are non-participants. The grounded theory analysis in this study resulted in the emergence of six levels of concealment for individuals within the BDSM subculture: absolute concealment, thorough concealment, scrupulous concealment, partial concealment, fractional concealment, and open.

The “absolute concealment” category encompasses those members who do not reveal their BDSM activity to any friends (outside of those also in the lifestyle), co-workers, or family members. This is descriptive of 38% of our sample respondents. Many of those involved in BDSM mention that they only have close friends who are also in the lifestyle. In other words, they do not maintain friendships with individuals not in the lifestyle. Many also mention keeping their BDSM activities quite separate from their public persona. In the following respondent comment an “absolute” concealer shares his response to questions regarding those who know of his BDSM involvement:

...my life in public is totally non BDSM. I guess coming up in the Army with the don’t tell don’t ask attitude for gays, that we just realized that our interests had to remain of the same idea. (male dominant, age 51)
The "thorough concealment" category encompasses those who tell only close friends. This is descriptive of 25% of our sample. Although there are many who choose not to tell family and co-workers of their lifestyle, there are others who are either estranged from family members, for reasons not related to BDSM involvement, or say they have no co-workers as they work in private practice or are not employed. In addition, those in this "thorough" concealment category, who tell close friends, generally do so in varying degrees, but the data indicates that they generally do not tell "all" of their close friends, as noted in the following responses:

With one exception, all of my friends, relatives and co-workers are totally unaware.... I have one special female friend who is vanilla herself but open-minded and curious about what others are into. I share everything with her about my desires, experiences and interests in the BDSM realm as well as other, non-BDSM sexual preferences. We have dated, and she knows me as a whole person, not just sexually. (male submissive, age 59)

I have told some of my gay friends of my interest in BDSM. They have dealt with it well, but I try to only tell those I think will cope well.... (male submissive, age 56)

Most of my friends are unaware, only a few close friends whom I knew would be accepting of it. None of my current co-workers, none of my family. (male submissive, age 37)

Most of my friends know. I don't tend to cultivate relationships with people who can't handle who I am. I do try to respect the degree of information people are comfortable with, however. People often ask questions they don't really want to know the answers to, or may be looking for a very basic response and not great detail. Some of my friends know, but we have never really discussed it much. Others have been genuinely interested in understanding better, and I have done a fair bit of education with them. (female submissive, age 31)

"Scrupulous concealers" encompasses those who have disclosed only to family members and is descriptive of 11% of our sample. Those in the "scrupulous" category are usually
selective of the family members to whom they reveal their BDSM activities as the following statement indicates:

I do not discuss my sex life with my parents. My brother and sister are both aware of my involvement in the scene. Having had to band together to deal with our parents as children, we are unusually close now. My children are not aware of my involvement. This is primarily because they really don’t want to know that their mother has a sex life at all. Similarly, my ex-husband is unaware because he is totally clueless on sexual matters, so there would be no point in telling him. (female submissive, age 51)

This reminds us that although the topic of sexuality is very accessible in American society because it is ubiquitous (on television, advertisements, newspapers, movies, music, books, and magazines), it is less so in families. Parents often take great measures to present themselves as asexual to their children.

The “partial concealment” category encompasses those who tell some friends and some family. This is descriptive of 18% of our sample respondents. Even though those in the “partial” category have disclosed to some friends and some family, they are also selective in doing so as noted in the following comments:

I keep this pretty much to myself. Only two friends, one I have known for a long time and one who I've known on-line. My wife also is aware. Other than that, I've kept this pretty much to myself. (male submissive, age 58)

I have close friends that know about my involvement in the lifestyle... unless they ask flat out, I don't bring it to their attention. My family doesn't know, only my sister. My mother is a counselor for abused women and children, and a very militant feminist. She strongly believes that women should have a lot of power, and use it. I'm pretty sure that the idea that her daughter was a willing slave might give her a heart attack. Since I'm in school full time, I don't discuss that aspect of my life with the people I go to school with, and as far as co-workers go, I've never discussed it with them. (female submissive, age 26)
Another noted:

Some friends and family know, some don’t. I decide who to tell on how open-minded they are. I don’t like to “flaunt” it and simply avoid the confrontation. (male dominant, age 39)

The “fractional concealment” category encompasses those who only conceal to one or two individuals. This is descriptive of 6% of our sample respondents. This category of individuals essentially say, “I do not conceal, ‘but’ I do not tell so and so.” Most from whom they conceal their identity are one or both parents, grandparents, other elderly relatives, or those who are very young. As one informant stated:

Yes, I am very open and out about my lifestyle. All of my friends and my daughter and son-in-law know about it. Even my brothers know…. I haven’t dropped the bomb on my father but I’m betting nothing much would surprise him. I’ve always been the rebel, however, we are not close and he doesn’t need to know, so why go there. My immediate bosses all know and I told them in the interview before they hired me that I was both a lesbian and a Leather Woman. I didn’t want it to come back and bite me in the ass later and I wanted to be out and proud of who I am. (female submissive, age 49)

Another disclosed:

I don’t say hello I am Debbie and I am a submissive but when anything about lifestyles comes up I share. The only person who I never told was my father. He was an assembly of God preacher and I did not want the lecture about how disappointed Jesus must be. My lifestyle is very common knowledge among friends, and people I have worked with. (female submissive, age 58)

Still another stated:

Most everyone I relate to knows; I am not afraid of discrimination—Indeed if someone would not wish to talk to me due to my interests, then I don’t want to know them!
The only people unaware are elderly relatives and my parents. (male dominant, age 44)

The last two levels are really nonconcealment categories. The “open” category encompasses those who do not conceal to anyone, but rather are open about their lifestyle to everyone including all friends, co-workers, and family members. Only one of our respondents falls into this category. This is 1% of the sample. The only person who says that she does not conceal to family, friends, nor co-workers sees herself as enlightening others and correcting their misunderstandings of those in the BDSM subculture, thus playing, from her standpoint, an educational role. Even though she says that she does not conceal her BDSM activity to anyone she does remain cautious as this statement indicates:

I do not advertise, but I am careful not to give off the wrong signals either. . . . I am pretty much open in generality, and do not try to purposefully hide, for I feel that I have a right to live as I wish. I have found that by being more open and taking subtle risks, that people tend to judge less, and accept my differences, knowing the type of heart/mind that I am as a person. If I appear too closed or guarded, then many will feel that I am ashamed of my life, or have something to hide that I am not proud of. It sends out the wrong signals, so I am careful about impressions. I do try to promote tolerance and free thinking among my circles, when opportunity presents itself, giving me an opening to gently slip something in. . . . I seek to always enlighten others to a different way of experiencing life, by throwing them a tender morsel of information that will make them stop and think. (female submissive, age 45)

Finally, there are individuals who have been exposed as members of the lifestyle against their wishes. These individuals fall into several of the levels of concealment preferences, but share in common the experience of accidental or intentional outing. Eight percent of the sample have experienced accidental or intentional outing from another. While this is a small percentage of those in the sample, the consequences have, with the exception of one case, had injurious effects, further revealing the importance placed on guarding one’s privacy by choosing to conceal. The
following statements reveal the devastation and/or embarrassment experienced:

My wife and daughter went out to dinner to celebrate my wife’s birthday. My daughter seemed stressed and as the meal ended she broke into tears and told us she had found my porn. It turns out she had found a couple of tapes of me giving Sandy phone spankings (I hadn’t met anybody in person yet at that point). She also found my file cabinet unlocked and looked through it, and discovered that I had a post office box and used it to send and receive BDSM stuff. My daughter didn’t understand in the least and was very upset. We were all seeing a counselor at the time off and on …nothing extraordinary, normal family issues…and she was actually not helpful at all with this crisis…. Over the three plus years since then, my daughter has seen our marriage endure and even strengthen…. She has in some fashion (like many teenagers she doesn’t confide things like this in us) come to terms with her dad either being or having been twisted and doing porn things with women over the phone… but the memory of that disaster is still painful for me and I’m sure my daughter and my wife as well. (male dominant, age 56)

My husband’s eldest daughter found out through one of his ex-girlfriends that dad was kinky and therefore anyone dad was with was kinky too. We invited her to breakfast, approached the subject with love, openness and honesty. She tried her best to be mature about it but at 19, it really ended up that she would rather not think about it much less talk about it…. (female submissive, age 34)

My husband was outed at work. My husband is in a very insular and interconnected field of work, and being outed did him no good at all, job wise. He’s been reasonably miserable at work ever since, and changing jobs won’t help since all the biomed industries in this area are inter-related in a lot of ways. (female dominant, age 54)

My 2 daughters have found my lifestyle by snooping around my computer. They are very unhappy about it. I have told them that it was my life and I plan to live it the way I see fit. They have thrown every argument from the culture, religion to mental illness at me but they can’t deny that I seem happier now. They actually told my mother about it. That was the hardest part to try to explain. (male dominant, age 56)
Someone I know from a part-time job in vanilla life... embarrassingly ran into each other at Boston's Fetish Fair Fleamarket a few years ago. Of course, neither one of us has mentioned it since. (male dominant, age 42)

REASONS FOR CONCEALMENT

Self-Protection

Afifi and Guerrero (1998) contend that the reasons that people conceal sensitive information can be dichotomized into two overarching categories—these are for reasons of self-protection and to protect others. According to Kroeger, disclosure management is about protecting or accommodating the self (2003). People automatically assume that others engage in “vanilla” (non-BDSM) sexual activity unless they have information indicating otherwise. Non-BDSM sexuality is believed to be prevalent. After all, this is the norm. Naturally, the concern one has when concealing BDSM activities or proclivities is that they may not be accepted by others if they reveal sexual practices that are not normative, are little understood, and are stigmatized by the majority of society. Downplaying or concealing a trait that others may perceive negatively allows one to blend into the mainstream.

From a social exchange theory perspective (Thibaut and Kelley 1959), individuals weigh costs of exposure and benefits of concealment. The benefits and consequences might partially be explained by anticipated consequences of what will happen if one's secret is revealed. Anticipated consequences may be based on reactions to previous revelations of stigmatized activity. The present research did find support for concealment grounded in concerns for self-protection as well as for protection of others.

As responses were analyzed, emergent themes corresponded to three categories of concerns for protection of self: fear of effect on one's job or the work environment; fear of its effect on friendships and/or family relationships; and overarching concern with the stigma attached to the lifestyle. Fear of its effect on one's job or the work environment is exemplified by the following revelations: "I suspect that if my work discovered
what I do that I would be let go.... Sooo the fewer people who know the better” (male dominant, age 60).

I am now half way to retirement with a large company working in upper management for a good salary.... The company I work for is very cutting edge leading the industry with diversity hiring, advancement, and support, yet they still have a “morality clause” in their hiring agreement. Since “owning” someone and controlling what rights they have and when, along with binding them for a whipping or flogging is frowned upon in today’s society, I would be terminated for doing that. (male dominant, age 53)

Should my husband lose his professional license (state licensing boards can be capricious), not only would our livelihood be threatened, but the jobs of his staff would be affected as well. (female submissive, age 49)

In terms of my career, being a teacher puts me in a very vulnerable position. I work in a very conservative community. That coupled with me being a teacher would probably make me a target for dismissal. (female submissive, age 40)

In the workplace, it could be disastrous, I work in a “macho-male” environment, and knowledge of my lifestyle would just invite ridicule. They already think of me as more-than-a-bit strange; that would just be too much. (male submissive, age 46)

Well, my employer does not know, and I would probably be fired if they did know. I am a pediatric RN. I don’t think people would let me take care of their kids if they knew. (female submissive, age 35)

Fear of its effect on friendships and/or family relationships is exemplified by the following statements: “Based upon the comments I have heard, I have no question that there would be a major change in friendships.” (male submissive, age 29)

I think some of my wife’s family would interpret BDSM as abuse, and that would either alienate them from us or else stress our marriage. (male dominant, age 49)

Only three members of my immediate family knows. With the rest of the immediate family I would probably be disowned. Some of our friends might run away screaming, others might quietly disappear, and still others would just see it as another of my (numerous) quirks. (male submissive, age 46)
If family found out, they'd probably experience distress and worry, and acquaintances...well, probably some distancing from me. (female submissive, age 41)

Fear of the overarching concern with the stigma attached to the lifestyle is based on the negative stereotypes that those in the lifestyle recognize that others harbor. People who conceal information about self that is stigmatizing risk that they will be evaluated negatively if this aspect of the self is discovered. While many recognize a multitude of misconceptions held by those not in the lifestyle, the vast majority of participants perceive the major stigmas to be those of abuse and mental illness. That individuals recognize the stigma attached to the BDSM lifestyle is exemplified by the following:

A misconception is that BDSM (S&M) is abuse. It is portrayed this way on many shows (CSI, NYPD Blue, The Inside). What is being portrayed is abuse and criminal and wrongly mislabeled as BDSM. Second, that people who participate in BDSM are mentally ill. BDSM is not considered a mental illness any more than homosexuality is (so I guess it would depend on who you talk to!). I have also heard that people (especially submissives) are acting out in this lifestyle things that happened to them as children. That is to say, if you are in the BDSM lifestyle, you must have been abused as a child. Further, that because we participate in this “extreme” sexual lifestyle that we would somehow be open to socially unacceptable and criminal activities such as children, etc. (female submissive, age 24)

There's a misconception that we are sick or crazy because we tie someone up and whip them. What kind of person would be excited by causing someone pain? They would also not understand how someone could control another person, or how that person could allow someone to control them. It must be due to threats and intimidation. (male dominant, age 53)

I think the biggest misconception people have about our community is that we are all a bunch of leather wearing freakish porn watching, beat each other up, and have sex with everyone perverts. (female submissive, age 34)

My former girlfriend was totally against the lifestyle and didn’t want to understand. She reached her own conclusions.
and determined it was violent, that sex was rampant, that all people did was whip one another, piss on each other or masturbate in groups. (male submissive, age 59)

I think that for those who are vanilla, BDSM is nothing but another name for sexual perversion. BDSM is mental sickness. Only people with low esteem get into this stuff. (male dominant, age 56)

As previously stated, an individual’s anticipated negative consequences of disclosure may be based on reactions to previous revelations of stigmatized activity. Our findings demonstrate support for this in that many individuals have previously disclosed information that is or has the potential to be stigmatizing, and as a result of the reaction from those to whom they disclosed prior behavior, have decided to conceal their BDSM involvement. The following responses are illustrative of the effect of prior disclosure on the reluctance to reveal one’s BDSM involvement:

As far as family goes, they are unaware. When they found out I was a lesbian, they did not speak to me for weeks. This was a few years ago. Today they know it but refuse to acknowledge it, thinking perhaps if it isn’t spoken about then it doesn’t exist. (female submissive, age 35)

My closest friends know, my family does not. I am also Pagan and have been through a lot with that in the earlier days. I feel the need to be a bit careful about this aspect of my life. I am very out as a Pagan and as a lesbian, maybe I feel that is about as much as I can expect people to try to understand. (female submissive, age 41)

Frankly, while I have told a number of people that I am gay (although only one of my sisters and no other member of my family or my late wife’s family); I have told very few of these same people of my BDSM interests. My oldest friend and I go back to 7th grade together. He was horrified when I came out to him and prefers to ignore this aspect of my life. Just last month when he visited, I offered to tell him more, saying as he was my closest friend, I didn’t want him to feel left out of this part of my life—at least in a conversational sense. He said most emphatically he wanted to know nothing. (male submissive, age 56)

As for family... I’m already the black sheep. They’d probably be even more convinced that I have sold my soul to
satan...they would be very judgmental and possibly verbally abusive. I've [previously] come out as queer, as pagan, as poly.... (female submissive, age 31)

**Protection of Others**

Kroeger (2003) contends that some may lie to themselves about the reasons they conceal, downplay, cover, or attempt to pass for something or someone other than who they are. The lie they tell themselves is that they are covering or concealing to protect others. That is, they are protecting others by making certain that others are not made to feel uncomfortable. However, we did find that many concealed out of respect or deference for the feelings or beliefs of others. Emphasis was on the costs of disclosure for the other person, rather than their own personal risks. Age was often cited as a reason not to tell; elderly parents wouldn't understand, neither would younger individuals. They were seen as incapable of understanding BDSM or appreciating the disclosure.

While the aforementioned reasons for concealment involve issues of self-protection, the following reasons for concealment are based on the concern for the protection of others:

Even though our intimacy is completely divorced from my husband's work, public knowledge or in-your-face activism could cause serious psychic harm to those he's helped and counseled, people who've rightfully trusted him and would see him as a stereotypical pervert even though it would be unwarranted, there would be a great sense of betrayal, I'm certain of it. (female submissive, age 49)

Well, since some of my activities are with very morally righteous groups such as Square dancing, which I am the president of the local club, and Special Olympics which me and my wife are the head coaches for the county, it would hurt a great many people, so I make sure that my interests stay behind closed doors with others that also prefer to keep things hidden. (male dominant, age 51)

In one of my jobs I work with a lot of teenagers...they are very much unaware of my lifestyle choices. Not only are they too young to understand the complexities of living in this
lifestyle, it simply isn’t their business. (female submissive, age 35)

My non-queer friends and co-workers *might* be a bit uncomfortable talking about it. (female submissive, age 32)

**Concealment as Enhancement**

The present research also finds that in addition to self-protection and the protection of others, concealment is a means of enhancing one’s experience. In other words, reasons for concealment can serve a positive function in several ways. First, when one conceals a secret from certain groups or individuals, but that secret is shared by those involved in the secret activity, it has the effect of creating a bond or building cohesion between them. This has the effect of delineating the “ingroup” from the “outgroup” (Petronio 2002). To maintain a secret reinforces one’s identity as a member of a group. Second, concealment adds excitement to one’s activity and makes one’s experiences within the subculture important (Altman 1976; Warren 1974). In fact, central to the very definition of a subculture is that there are values, behaviors, and physical artifacts that distinguish it from the larger culture. Several participants spoke of the pleasure of concealing secrets from outsiders:

We wear matching silver bands on our right ring fingers. Mattie’s says mistress on the inside, and mine says slave. We wear them all the time, kind of our little public private secret, flirting with disaster, perhaps, but we enjoy knowing what others don’t. (male submissive, age 46)

I don’t feel isolated in not being able to tell others of my BDSM interests...if anything it’s the I know a secret that would make your head spin...nananana kind of thing. (female submissive, age 24)

I like having something that I keep for myself considering I’m *out there* about so many other things (bisexuality, polyamory, gender queerness, political views, etc.). (male dominant, age 45)

The above analysis of reasons for concealment indicates a complexity that prior analysis did not recognize.
CONCEALMENT STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE INTERPERSONAL OUTCOMES

According to Blaine (2000:136), the first strategy of stigma management includes strategies for “improving interpersonal outcomes.” Many of those who are involved in the BDSM lifestyle, involving behaviors that are discreditable by the standards of many outsiders, choose to manage their public persona to appear like everyone else. Goffman referred to this as “passing” (1963). According to Blaine (2000) passing is a means of improving one’s interpersonal outcomes. The strategies used to conceal involvement in this potentially stigmatizing lifestyle are as varied and complex as the reasons for concealment. Moreover, they are by no means mutually exclusive since an individual may utilize one or many of these strategies in the effort to conceal their activity. The emergent themes can be delineated into four categories. Each of these strategies is used to make them more acceptable to others or to improve their interpersonal outcomes by decreasing the costs of the stigma.

Hiding in Plain Sight

The most common strategy is that of “hiding in plain sight.” Many behaviors and physical artifacts utilized by those in the BDSM lifestyle can be hidden in plain view from those who are not knowledgeable. Those in the lifestyle depend on the ignorance of those not privy to the subcultures norms nor symbolic items to maintain their privacy. The following statements illustrate this strategy:

We like to hide things in plain sight... it's like a private joke.
I designed a rack to play Rick on and he built it. It's made with PVC pipe, and is put together with bolts and screws. I've had it in several garage sales as a clothing rack. You would laugh to know the number of people that thought it was a brilliant idea for hanging clothes on. My father has helped me move it around. He thinks it's cool too. (female dominant, age 46)

I flag all the time in subtle ways... a simple leather cuff bracelet, a wide leather watchband with grommets... I feel a need to flag all the time. It has to do with integrity and my outside matching my inside. It's about subtle visibility... people
don't usually see what isn't already within the realm of what they expect to see. Being casual and at ease makes it fairly easy to be discrete in plain sight. (female submissive, age 31)

The house is furnished nicely and we are complimented on the decorating we do. To the eye of someone in the lifestyle they would notice the furniture can be used easily to bind someone and the curtain drawbars and hooks in the house have heavy duty screws instead of the standard 1" screws they come with. In other words I appear heterosexual vanilla to people who know me and visit me. (male dominant, age 53)

Male dominants and female submissives often hide their symbolic protocol since their power dynamics fit right into traditional gender roles:

The interaction between I and Cathy does not significantly change in front of anybody. When my mother came to visit us and stayed with us for 2 months, Cathy did most of the things for me just the way she does everyday which is primarily being submissive in nature... We were having breakfast in a restaurant. Cathy fixed my coffee, she put jam on my toast, she put eggs and hashbrowns in my plate and then served all these things to me. An older gentleman was watching all this. When she was done, he almost got up with excitement and complimented me how well behaved my wife was. I told him that she was my slave and said it with a straight face. He seemed to totally accept it. He was grinning ear to ear at all this. This is an example of how relatively easy it is to explain or to show the D/s interaction in front of non-BDSM people. I think it is culturally and religiously imbedded in most of our psyche to accept male as dominant and female as submissive, which makes it easier to explain this dynamics. (male dominant, age 56)

**Compartmentalization of Public from Private Behavior**

Individuals alter their behavior, dress, and their language when in public to keep the two separate. They often play the part of someone not involved in BDSM through the use of non-BDSM clothing and other markers to signify their status as just like everyone else. This is the displaying of
“disidentifiers” and/or avoiding “stigma symbols” (Anderson et al. 1994). The following quotes are typical of this strategy:

I don’t walk around publicly with a leash, nor would my Master require me to do something that would compromise my prestige. Above all, it is not necessary to make a show of one’s submissiveness in order to be that way, and I consider my sexuality the same as in a vanilla relationship. When I am with my Master, I call him Master, or I call him by his name in front of others, but “yes Sir” has slipped a few times … people think it is cute. (female submissive, age 47)

I make sure that the two lives are completely separate. My mistress never refers to me in a sub-like manner when we are outside the house unless it is part of a carefully arranged scene and we are both sure it is something that we want to do. (male submissive, age 29)

We (my Master and I) do not wear fetish clothes around town, or big collars with leashes, etc. I address him as Sir or Master but will refer to him by name when outside of “friendly” environments. (female submissive, age 24)

Moreover, as a means of compartmentalization, those in the BDSM lifestyle socialize with others in the lifestyle in places (clubs that are referred to as dungeons) separate from mainstream “vanilla” folks. This is a means of engaging in their specialized BDSM activities in a place where they can avoid people who would be prejudicial and discriminatory if they observed their activities. This provides an escape or sanctuary for these individuals. In fact, one of the prominent dungeons, in which we conducted our research, was named “Sanctuary.”

Out of Sight

Individuals often keep physical artifacts hidden and out of sight completely. Those not in the lifestyle, therefore, never view them. As one informant commented:

Visiting my home you would be hard pressed to see any signs of my BDSM interests. I have a dungeon room in the basement (painted all black) with hooks, cabinets with locks and the like. I also use the room for storage of paintings not
on display in the remainder of my house. When I created it, I said I was building a secure room with low light levels for my art collection. The locked door suggests that as well as the locked cabinets within it. I take the sling down and hang pictures from the hooks. (male submissive, age 56)

Another stated: "I don't leave toys laying around the living room or anything like that but that's because they don't match the paint" (female submissive, age 24). And another noted: "At home there is one room in our house that is always locked. Even my own children haven't entered that room in the ten years that I have owned my home and put the extra dead bolt lock" (male dominant, age 51).

Interestingly, one could even say that in this respect there are two levels of concealment operating. Not only are couples and individuals private about their activities as well as the fact that they cannot engage in activities in public, but the groups/conventions and even the locations in which they participate with others in the lifestyle are often concealed and private, although this might be less the case in some states such as California than in more conservative parts of the country. Most non-BDSM individuals would find it difficult to locate a BDSM dungeon, or would be hard pressed to recognize one in a large city. They are often very private, exclusive, and hidden from view. Furthermore, once in the dungeon, people meet, but do not really know each other outside of the BDSM activities in which they participate. In fact, instead of using one's real name, scene names are used for purposes of anonymity, and individuals rarely know about the private lives of the people they meet in the dungeons.

**Cover Stories**

Cover stories allow "kinky" individuals to pass as "vanilla" folks. This is not difficult to do since many "vanilla" individuals know very little about BDSM. What they think they know is often sensationalistic accounts from TV shows or movies. The lack of knowledge on the part of those not in the lifestyle, make cover stories easily convincing or believable. The following exemplify cover story responses:

I am visiting a "friend" when I go out to "play" with someone. I am hosting a "dinner party" if some guys come over
CONCEALMENT STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE PSYCHOLOGICAL OUTCOMES

According to Blaine (2000:136), the second strategy of stigma management includes strategies for “improving psychological outcomes.” The strategies for improving psychological outcomes are “cognitive in nature and involve thinking about one’s stigma and the experiences associated with it in ways that are beneficial to self-esteem and well-being” (p. 142). There are two main strategies used for improving how individuals participating in BDSM feel about themselves.

First, these individuals turn to one another as a source of support and companionship. The interactions in the aforementioned dungeons, serve the purpose of confirming who they are and that there are others who are like-minded. This association provides for a source of interpersonal validation for their activities and beliefs. These interactions and associations provide a space where those in the lifestyle can
construct positive identities. Interestingly, the participants meet each other, but really do not know each other. Sometimes figuratively, and sometimes not so figuratively, people put on masks or put on a front in order to develop an identity. We are also reminded that the social meanings attached to physical spaces are socially constructed by the individuals who interact within the given space. The way individuals act and the roles individuals assume in the dungeons versus public spaces can vary greatly. This is consistent with Goffman’s (1959) concepts of front stage and back stage behavior. Simmel (1903) believed that anonymity provided limitless opportunity for self-expression and reinvention, a very attractive way of life for many. Although the dungeons provide anonymous settings, there remains a tremendous amount of social solidarity.

Another means for those participating in BDSM to improve their own self-perception in the face of social criticism, is to reframe their activities and their lifestyle. Many BDSM participants often reframed their BDSM activities and lifestyle in terms of traits that were either inborn or traits they had since childhood, rather than something of which someone selected or chose. The belief is often touted that one is predisposed to the BDSM lifestyle. Thus, they are being true to themselves. This is a means of deflecting blame for the possession of such stigmatized sexual proclivities. Illustrative of this are the following statements:

I was aware that I had a tendency toward something, however indefinable or understandable, for I was barely into adolescence at the time I first began to realize what was occurring in my mind and body. At the early age of about 5, I was already identifying with my current nature. I had even formed an imaginary master in my head. (female submissive, age 45)

I’ve had these kinds of interests since I can remember, though not from a sexual perspective until after puberty. I knew it wasn’t something generally accepted in the “normal” society, but I wasn’t sorry about having them. Now I understand that the BDSM community openly embraces sexuality as a natural part of us, something that doesn’t need to be repressed. It lets people be their inner selves for once. (male switch, age 27)
Although increased exposure to the subject matter clearly brought my interests to the surface, it is my view that the underlying orientation was always there, "wired" into me. I can recall a conversation with a neighborhood girl and boy (all of us about age 10 or 11), in which we compared notes about methods used by our parents to physically punish us. The girl initiated the conversation. I can't speak for her or the others, but my contributions to the conversation were purely fiction, since my parents rarely spanked. I mention this, because the conversation was clearly titillating, or whatever word would accurately describe feelings at that age. In my mind, it showed that "something" was always there. (male submissive, age 59)

Reframing also occurs in terms of how they compare themselves to the "vanillas" sexually. Many in the BDSM lifestyle improve their self-concepts by suggesting that those who engage in vanilla sex have boring sex. Many go so far as to suggest that they are in tune with who they are sexually because they are so much more intelligent and more insightful sexually.

I think that BDSM sex is much better and more interesting. Within the BDSM community, you can freely and openly discuss sex to a degree that is generally not possible in the vanilla world. Playing with multiple partners is far more acceptable than in vanilla life. Nothing is off limits, as long as it is Safe, Sane and Consensual. I love the sex role reversal involved in activities such as forced bi and strapon sex and would likely not be able to do those things in the context of a vanilla relationship. (male submissive, age 59)

Vanilla sex is BORING! Lol. While I don't define it as strictly as the Catholic Church, "vanilla" to me means the usual, one man one woman, one or two positions, in the bed in the bedroom with the lights out, roll over and go to sleep type of sex. (male dominant, age 44)

**CONCLUSION**

Secrecy is deserving of theoretical attention for as Bok (1989) contends, secrecy is basic to being human and living among
others. Although the literature is replete with information on the possible consequences and the reasons for concealment of “secret” information, there are gaps in our understanding of stigma and concealment. Our findings help to fill those gaps by examining concealment and secrecy within the BDSM subculture. Our findings help to reveal how many conceal to cover up or hide what outsiders may consider immoral behavior. Others conceal as a means to create a distinction for themselves as part of a secret subculture. According to Simmel (1950), maintaining a secret creates a distinction between those who know and those who do not. Therefore, the secret is a form of knowledge that is unequally shared.

Many who identify as “kinky” and who associate and identify with others in this subculture do so in a revelatory manner. Many seem to enjoy the strategies used to conceal their identities and activities. This association with like-minded others serves to produce or reinforce new identities that are valued. It provides for meanings and affectual identifications expressed through shared feelings and understandings. This permits participants to feel as though they are living life more authentically at least as they reveal and share their true identities with one another. This is important since those who see themselves as marginal, different, or deviant are likely to understand the importance of associating with others sharing their alternative values, beliefs, and activities.

Moreover, the “secret” that is revealed only to trusted others, but concealed from mainstream society, does add excitement and a sense that this subcultural lifestyle is special, sacred, or distinctive. Perhaps this also explains why those involved often see themselves as the more progressive members of society in that, by their definition, they know and understand things that most people cannot fathom.

However, this identification with others managing the same stigma does not mean they experience only positive empowerment or distinctiveness. Some enjoy having secrets, but others see this as a negative. For many, the secrecy surrounding this subculture is not only a source of distinctiveness, but is also a source of conflict and fear. While many say they feel no isolation because they are able to share with
others in the lifestyle, many do fear the loss of their jobs and relationships, if the wrong individuals discover their secret. Therefore, concealment also means that something about one’s identity is disfavored or stigmatized in society and that things could go badly if others found out. So concealment is viewed as necessary, if one is to fit into mainstream society, but at the same time, the detrimental effects of concealment are such that doing so prevents many individuals from fully experiencing authenticity in their relationships. Furthermore, many still yearn for “acceptance” of an identity that they know violates the normative expectations of mainstream society. In addition, Yoshimo (2006) contends that concealment, or what he terms “covering” means that many groups are held back. He believes that having to conceal or cover is a threat to civil rights. One cannot acquire true acceptance if one must hide one’s actual identity. Yet everyone conceals at some time or another to win acceptance. That is, they have to protect themselves or they risk not being accepted by others, others who may not be accepting of BDSM activities.

Our findings also indicate that many conceal out of concern for the protection and feelings of others. Whether to create a sense of distinctiveness, to protect themselves, or for the protection and feelings of others, those in the BDSM subculture engage in a variety of strategies to manage their public persona or to disguise their vulnerability.

Our stigma management findings support the notion that sometimes stigmatized groups can manage stigma by attempting to minimize their spoiled identities while at other times attempting to highlight them. Concealment strategies are employed to improve both interactional outcomes as well as psychological outcomes.

As previously stated, some personal information cannot be hidden or managed. However, much personal information remains that can and is concealed or managed by individuals. As others have recognized, to engage in impression management (Goffman 1959), disclosure management (Kroeger 2003), or concealment and secrecy (Bok 1989; Simmel 1950) is crucial to human social interaction. This allows us to protect our identities and allows for some predictability and ease of social interaction.
REFERENCES


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