
Sex roles in a sample of self-identified BDSM practitioners

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Introduction:

Virtually everything that is known about sexual sadism and sexual masochism is based on observations of a select sample of men who have come to clinical attention due to the commission of sex crimes or psychiatric referral. Since most sex crimes are committed by men and since most psychiatric referrals due to concerns about sadomasochistic interests involve men, very little is known about women with these sexual interests. While the DSM-IV lists “sexual sadism” and “sexual masochism” there is a growing recognition of the existence of a many variations including sexual interest in consensual “bondage”, “domination”, “submission”, “sadism”, and “masochism” (BDSM).

Introduction (continued):

Clearly, if there is any hope of advancing knowledge about BDSM, investigators will need to look beyond prison cells and psychiatric institutes. The purpose of this study is to report of new findings from a web based survey of self-identified BDSM practitioners with particular emphasis on comparisons between men unselected for criminal behavior or psychopathology and the even more rarely reported group consisting of women with BDSM interests or behaviors not previously selected for criminal or psychiatric problems. The results of this study should be considered as an extension of results reported from an earlier, more limited survey (Fedoroff et al, 2000). They are independent of a completely separate and independent web based survey also reported at this meeting (Bienvenu et al, 2003).

Method:

Data from a previously collected anonymous, web-based survey of men and women who self-identified as practitioners of some aspect of the “BDSM scene”. This study sample consisted of 1,872 people (822 men and 1,050 women) who voluntarily completed an anonymous 50 page questionnaire, posted on the web with links to a number of established BDSM web sites, all accessible free of charge through internet connections. Data were analyzed to explore similarities and differences between men and women on a pre-selected number of variables.

Results:

Significantly more men than women identified themselves as Kinsey 0 on the homosexual orientation scale (exclusively sexually interested in the opposite sex) (men: 48.5% vs women: 22.9%, $p < 0.001$). Applying an analogous 7-point scale for sexual roles independent of sexual orientation, women were found to be significantly more likely to positively endorse the following questions: “never sexually sadistic” (men: 16% vs. women: 30%; $p < 0.001$) and “never sexually dominant” (men: 8.6% vs. women: 22.7%; $p < 0.001$). In contrast, men were significantly more likely to positively endorse the following questions: “never sexually masochistic” (men: 19% vs. women: 8.1%; $p < 0.001$), “never sexually aggressive” (men: 5.4% vs. women: 3.9%; $p < 0.001$), “never sexually passive” (men: 7.4% vs. women: 4.6%; $p < 0.05$) and “never sexually submissive” (men: 14.2% vs. women 3.4%; $p < 0.001$).

The anomalous finding of more men claiming to never be sexually aggressive was further explored by analyzing the effect of sexual orientation. Men who rated themselves as Kinsey 0 (exclusively attracted only to opposite sex) rated themselves as significantly more aggressive than men who rated themselves as Kinsey 6 (exclusively attracted to the same sex) ($p < 0.05$). In contrast, exclusively heterosexual (Kinsey 0) women rated themselves as significantly less aggressive than exclusively lesbian women (Kinsey 6) ($p < 0.005$).

Conclusions:

Conclusions from this study are limited by the fact that the survey was anonymous. However, they support other studies which indicate that men are more likely than women to report exclusive heterosexual interests. In addition, men in this study were found to be more likely to endorse interest in “assertive “ sex roles including “sexual sadism” and “sexual dominance”. An anomalous finding was the claim by significantly more men than women that they are never “sexually aggressive”. This finding appeared to be mediated by sexual orientation. This findings support a need to further explore the characteristics of men and women with non-criminal unconventional sexual interests with particular attention to the roles of gender identity and sexual orientation.

Table 1. Sample Demographics

	Men (n=822)	Women (n=1,050)	p
Mean Age (SD)	40 (11)	36 (8)	<.001
Mean Yrs School (SD)	12 (2)	12 (1)	NS
Mean Age 1st masturbation (SD)	12 (3)	11 (6)	NS
Mean Age 1st Intercourse (SD)	18 (5)	16 (4)	<.001
% Never married (n)	33 (270)	23 (241)	<.001
% Employed (n)	93 (763)	88 (927)	<.005)

Table 2. Dimensional Sexual Variables

% Sexual Variable (n)	Men (n=822)	Women (n=1050)	p
Kinsey 6 (sex interest in same sex only)	18 (148)	7 (72)	<.001
Never Sadistic	16 (131)	30 (313)	<.001
Never Masochistic	19 (155)	8 (85)	<.001
Never Aggressive	5 (44)	4 (41)	<.001
Never Passive	7 (60)	5 (48)	<.05
Never Dominant	9 (70)	23 (237)	<.001
Never Submissive	14 (117)	3 (36)	<.001

References:

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