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Sam E. Greenberg

California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, California, USA

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Divine Kink: A Consideration of the Evidence for BDSM as Spiritual Ritual

Sam E. Greenberg

California Institute of Integral Studies
San Francisco, CA, USA

This paper reviews the limited empirical research supporting BDSM as a spiritual ritual that enables distinct altered states of consciousness. It expands upon Sagarin, Lee, and Klement's (2015) preliminary comparison of BDSM to extreme ritual by suggesting that BDSM bears in common with spiritual ritual elements of pain or ordeal, spiritual meaning, and transformative potential. An increasing interest in BDSM in the West is considered in light of the spiritual and ritual roles BDSM fulfills for many practitioners. The relevance of BDSM to transpersonal psychology is discussed and BDSM is considered as an area for further research in transpersonal psychology.

Keywords: *sexuality, transpersonal sexuality, BDSM, kink, spiritual kink, ritual, dance of souls*

People in the BDSM community have begun to realize that dramatic, intense, and even dangerous sexual practices can be used as spiritual tools for a variety of purposes. Sometimes this realization comes about by looking into the SM-like practices of older cultures . . . Sometimes it comes about more radically and personally, in the middle of a scene that was just supposed to be kinky sex, but suddenly became something much deeper and older and more connected to the Divine. (Kaldera, 2009, p. 1)

For centuries, cultures across the world have engaged in extreme ritual practices as a means of achieving spiritual and transcendent states and connecting to the divine. Throughout the history of Christianity, the pious practiced asceticism, self-mortification, and martyrdom to prove their spiritual devotion. Self-flagellation, the wearing of sackcloth, and ritual deprivation through fasting or abstaining from pleasures were common (Yates, 1999). The Roman Catholic church endorsed the religious and spiritual value of pain and suffering, and encouraged its use as mitigation for sinful action (Ignatius of Loyola, 1548/1968). Extreme rituals were also practiced by indigenous tribes and shamanic cultures

across the world. These rituals served to establish a connection with the divine, facilitate altered states of consciousness, and ensure community cohesion around common ends, as well as to provide relief from stress and a departure from the mundanity of daily life (Sahay, 2010). For example, in the Americas, the Plains Native American tribes practiced a ritual Sun Dance entailing piercing the flesh with skewers and tying the skewers to weights or a central pole until the skin tore free. This ritual was thought to bring about spiritual renewal through an act of sacrifice (Lincoln, 1994).

Some cultures practice extreme ritual in the modern day. The ritual of Kavadi, which occurs during the annual Hindu festival of Thaipusam, entails piercing the flesh with needles and skewers and dragging carts or heavy structures attached to the piercing (Xygalatas et al., 2013). Various modern cultures practice firewalking rituals, including ceremonial festivals in the Spanish village of San Pedro Manrique, firewalking ceremonies among the Sawau tribe of Fiji (Pigliasco, 2010), and the Orthodox Christian ritual of Anastenaria in Northern Greece, where participants dance on hot coals while carrying icons of the saints Constantine and Helen (Xygalatas, 2012). These extreme rituals share

in common spiritual motivation, the centrality of physical pain, discomfort or ordeal, and the facilitation of transcendent or altered states.

Scholars of religion, anthropology, sociology, and psychology differ on the definition of ritual and understanding of its purposes. At its most basic, ritual can be thought of as a symbolic action or set of actions, often repetitive, entered into with a kind of reverence or intention. From a Western perspective, ritual is sometimes thought of as an “inherently irrational action” where the intended outcome of the ritual is inconsistent with scientific explanation (Sax, 2009, p. 237). According to social theorist Lukes (1975), rituals are actions that intend to achieve ends that seem disproportionate to the means. Thus, ritual might be thought of as any intentional action for which the explanation of the action’s mechanisms of effectiveness falls outside of current scientific understanding. According to this definition, ritual is both distinct from and essential to religion. Likewise, extreme rituals, which contain an added element of risk of physical or psychological injury (Bromley, 2007), might exist within or outside of religious traditions.

Anthropologists have pointed to spiritual ritual as a human need that exists across cultures and serves important social and community functions (Durkheim, 1912/2008; Hocart, 1935; van Gannep, 1960; Vohs & Yaijin, 2012). Ritual is thought to promote social bonding, reinforce a culture’s belief systems, strengthen collective conscience, and reinforce the social order (Durkheim, 1912/2008; von Shreve, 2011). Extreme rituals specifically have been shown to create prosociality in the form of willingness to donate to charitable causes (Fischer & Xygalatas, 2014; Olivola & Shafir, 2013; Xygalatas et al., 2013), and have been shown to result in a synchrony of biological markers such as heart rate among participants and observers, indicating a highly attuned bonding state (Konvalinka et al., 2011; Xygalatas, Konvalinka, Bulbulia, & Roepstorff, 2011).

In modern Western culture, extreme ritual and asceticism are largely absent, having disappeared along with the secularization of the West over the 20th and 21st centuries. Solomon, Fan, Lo, and Engelhardt (2012) have suggested that the increasingly de-ritualized cultures of the

West are susceptible to meaninglessness, absence of moral and ethical orientation, listlessness, and disconnection from community. In this way, the absence of ritual in the modern West may create a vacuum or a type of ritual hunger, wherein the culture subconsciously desires ritual in order to create the social bonding, cohesion, and spiritual connectedness that was historically present. It is in this cultural context that a common interest in the practices of bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism (BDSM) will be considered.

BDSM: History and Prevalence

BDSM is an acronym encompassing the terms bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism. The family of practices typically considered to fall under this acronym involve the consensual exchange of power, bondage, or pain usually with the intent to create pleasure or other positive experiences for participants. No single academic definition of BDSM exists, although definitions have been proposed by many authors (Barker, Iantaffi, & Gupta, 2007; Moser, 1988; Turley, King, & Butt, 2011; Weinberg, William, & Moser, 1984; Wiseman, 1998). Weinberg et al. (1984) distilled five distinct components common to BDSM, from observations of BDSM clubs, parties, and other locations, and interviews with practitioners conducted over 8 years. These five components include:

- 1) dominance and submission, or the appearance of rule by one partner over the other
- 2) role playing
- 3) consensuality, or voluntary agreement to enter into the interaction
- 4) mutual definition, a shared understanding of activities that constitute SM or another related term and
- 5) a sexual context (p. 4).

Weinberg et al. (1984) indicated that all five components need not be present in order for actions to qualify as BDSM, but that several components are typically observed together in BDSM practice. It is important to note a common misconception that BDSM is always an explicitly sexual practice, an idea resoundingly rejected by practitioners (Baumeister, 1988; Newmahr, 2010). For the purposes of this

paper, the following definition of BDSM, synthesized from several authors, will be used: BDSM is any activity that involves an intentional and consensual exchange of power and/or pain, humiliation, physical or psychological restraint, or other intense sensations with the intention of experiencing pleasure or desirable sensations (Barker et al., 2007; Moser, 1988; Newmahr, 2010; Turley et al., 2011; Wiseman, 1998).

The concepts sadism and masochism first appeared in Western psychological literature in the late 19th century in Austro-German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing's manifesto on sexual dysfunctions, *Psychopathia sexualis* (Krafft-Ebing, 1894). Sigmund Freud (1905/2017) wrote about sadism and masochism in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in which he named sadism and masochism as the most common sexual perversions of his day. In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association's Committee on Nomenclature and Statistics published the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM), which included sexual sadism as a classification under the broad category of sexual deviations (First, 2014; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1968). Sexual masochism was added as a second classification of sexual deviation in the DSM-II. The DSM-III introduced the concept of paraphilia, an umbrella category of abnormal sexual desire that included both sexual sadism and sexual masochism along with homosexuality and pedophilia (APA, 1987). The release of the 5th edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (APA, 2013), differentiated between paraphilia as an inclination or proclivity and paraphilic disorder, with the diagnostic criteria for paraphilic disorder requiring that sadism and masochism must "cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning." BDSM advocates considered this reclassification a victory, and a step in the direction of destigmatizing BDSM practice (Wright, 2014).

While clinicians referencing versions of the DSM prior to the DSM-V had the option not to diagnose BDSM as a mental illness if BDSM practices were not harmful to practitioners, BDSM and even the desire to engage in BDSM could be

and often was diagnosed as a mental illness, with sometimes significant implications on the lives of BDSM practitioners (APA, 2013, p. 694; Wright, 2006; Wright, 2014). Little information is available on negative consequences faced by BDSM practitioners as a result of paraphilia diagnoses prior to the release of the DSM V. However, results from surveys disseminated by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom in 1998 and 2008, with and 3,058 responses, respectively, indicated that between 36 and 37.5 percent of survey respondents faced discrimination as a result of their participation in BDSM, in the form of job loss, harassment, loss of child custody, and a number of other types of discrimination (Wright, 2006; Wright, 2008).

The prevalence of modern BDSM practice is difficult to predict with accuracy, as practitioners often use pseudonyms or remain anonymous to avoid potential discrimination (Wright, 2006). A popular website for BDSM practitioners, FetLife.com, has an estimated 3.6 million members (Millington, 2015). This provides only an approximation of the number of active BDSM practitioners as individuals may have multiple profiles within the site, and the site extends to additional fetishistic interests that do not fall under the BDSM definition used in this paper. Moreover, a significant percentage of BDSM practitioners may engage in BDSM solely within private relationships, and thus do not have accounts on FetLife.com or other websites. Despite difficulty predicting the prevalence of BDSM practice, a significant and possibly increasing interest in BDSM in the West is apparent, as evidenced by the recent emergence of BDSM in popular culture, such as the bestselling 2011 novel, *Fifty Shades of Grey* and popular 2015 film of the same name (Weiss, 2006).

BDSM and Spirituality

That BDSM can have a sacred, spiritual, or ritualistic component is commonly accepted in the BDSM community (Easton & Hardy, 2011a; Easton & Hardy, 2011b). A search for the term "spiritual" on FetLife.com's search feature in June 2018 yielded 672 related results for groups and forums. The search also yielded a list of 248 specific fetishes or sexual interests that includes Spiritual BDSM, with 14,287 members citing an interest. Some of the FetLife.com

groups related to spirituality include: Spirituality & BDSM (7,196 members), BDSM and Spirituality: The Spiritual Side Of Leather (3,294 members), Kinky Spirituality (809 members), and Spiritual BDSM (585 members). The description of the Kinky Spirituality group on FetLife.com cites transpersonal psychology in its description, as follows:

For centuries cultures all over planet Earth have been intertwining what most perceive as "painful" sensation and altered states of consciousness, spiritual insight, and trance states. This is studied in Trans personal [sic] psychology and anthropology as well as history. ("Kinky Spirituality: About & Rules," 2008)

Several popular books have been written on the topic of spiritual BDSM, including Miller and Devon's (1995) *Screw the Roses, Send Me the Thorns: The Romance and Sexual Sorcery of Sadoomasochism*, Easton and Hardy's (2004) *Radical Ecstasy, Spiritual Transformation through BDSM*, edited by Sensuous Sadie (2007), Lee Harrington's (2016) *Sacred Kink: The Eightfold Paths Of BDSM and Spirit of Desire: Personal Explorations of Sacred Kink*, and Raven Kaldera's (2009) *Dark Moon Rising: Pagan BDSM & the Ordeal Path*, which takes a more religious-focused approach.

BDSM practitioners also widely recognize BDSM's capacity to facilitate altered states of consciousness. In a discussion of counseling clients who practice BDSM, Nichols (2006) explained, "some people see BDSM sexuality as spiritual, not unlike Tantric sex" (p. 285). Drawing upon a 20-year career counseling clients who are BDSM practitioners, Nichols discussed the capacity of BDSM to enable altered states of consciousness without chemicals and reinforced this as a healthy expression of sexuality. These altered states, often considered spiritual or transcendent, are colloquially known as "sub space" and "top space" (Easton & Hardy, 2011a; Easton & Hardy, 2011b; Newmahr, 2010). The term sub space refers to the altered state or states of consciousness experienced by a BDSM "bottom," which is someone who is the recipient of pain, humiliation, restraint, or intense sensations within a BDSM interaction. Likewise, the term top space refers to the altered state or states

experienced by a BDSM "top," someone who is the wielder of power or administrator of pain, humiliation, restraint, or intense sensations within a BDSM interaction. In Easton and Hardy's *The New Bottoming Book* (2011a), they described sub space in the following way:

Many bottoms talk about a state of mind they call "bottom space" or "sub space," a kind of altered consciousness in which their relationship with their own minds, with their partners, and/or with the outside world becomes in some way different . . . [sub space or bottom space can] range from docile to passive to resistant and bratty to serene and transcendent" (pp. 19–20).

In *The New Topping Book* (2011b), Easton and Hardy described top space as containing elements of empathy, creativity, bigness, nurturing, control, bullying, competence, and self-knowledge. They described top space as a "'contact high,' the turn-on we feel in empathy with the bottom's response to the physical, emotional and sexual intensity of the scene. One top describes this feeling as getting to surf the bottom's sensations" (p. 11).

Baumeister (1988) discussed masochism as facilitating a temporary escape from the self. While Baumeister did not specifically refer to an altered state, he described masochism as "a systematic attempt to eradicate (temporarily) the main features of the self" (p. 34) and discussed the common experience of transcendence of psychological content through pain and other sensation. Newmahr (2010) delved further into the altered states experienced by BDSM practitioners in her exploration of BDSM as serious leisure. Newmahr suggested that the state of flow, a psychological state characterized by Csikszentmihalyi (1991) as entailing full absorption in an activity, loss of self-consciousness, merging of awareness with action, temporal distortion, and a complete sense of agency, is experienced during BDSM interaction by both tops and bottoms. Quoting one of her study participants, Newmahr further described the lived experience of sub space:

It was a very intense buzz. My body was very light, I didn't feel the weight of my body. I

didn't lose awareness of where I was, but my head cleared up completely which was really wonderful because I'm always thinking. I have a very busy mind and sometimes that gets the better of me . . . I'd describe it as more as a high than a buzz. The closest thing I can say is that it's like being drunk . . . so it was really amazing at that moment to be—all that I was, was the sum of my five senses. That was the thing that I most relished, being able to use my body to the utmost. (p. 328)

Although the role-specific altered state of consciousness sub space and top space and other spiritual aspects of BDSM have been described extensively by the BDSM community and have been explored theoretically in academic literature, very little empirical research exists on these states. In aligned studies, Ambler et al. (2016) and Lee et al. (2016) used identical measures and similar methodological approaches to investigate altered states of consciousness experienced during BDSM interactions and extreme ritual, respectively. Ambler et al. (2016) studied physiological and psychological indications of altered states of consciousness among BDSM switches, individuals who assume both top/dominant and bottom/submissive roles depending on the context, during BDSM interactions or "scenes." Lee et al. (2016) studied physiological and psychological indications of altered states of consciousness at an extreme collective ritual called the Dance of Souls. The Dance of Souls took place at the Southwest Leather Conference, which is an annual educational and community gathering of the leather community, an umbrella subculture encompassing alternative sexual expressions, chiefly BDSM and associated practices (Lenius, 2010; Peacock, Eyre, Quinn, & Kegeles, 2001). The Dance of Souls ritual is influenced by the spiritual rituals of Hinduism's Thaipusam and the Native American Sundance, that involves the piercing and pulling or weighing of the flesh (Lee et al., 2016; Reid, 2005). Lee et al. (2016) aimed to assess participants in the natural setting of the ritual, using both direct and indirect measures of altered states, as well as measures of affect, sexual arousal, intimacy with fellow participants, and physiological and psychological markers of stress.

Both Ambler et al. (2016) and Lee et al. (2016) drew upon Baumeister's (1988) theory of masochism as escape from the self through psychological release and Newmahr's (2010) exploration of BDSM as serious leisure to inform the selection of the studies' measures. Drawing from Newmahr (2010), Ambler et al. (2016) predicted that they would find evidence in BDSM tops of a flow state. Lee et al. (2016) predicted they would find evidence of flow in non-pierced participants in the ritual Dance of Souls. In order to measure flow states, both Ambler et al. and Lee et al. used the Flow State Scale. Ambler et al. administered the Flow State Scale (for validity and reliability, see Jackson & Marsh, 1996) as part of a post-scene survey administered at the end of BDSM interaction and Lee et al. administered the scale as part of a post-ritual survey following the Dance of Souls ritual. Drawing from Baumeister (1988), Ambler et al. (2016) predicted that they would find evidence among BDSM bottoms of transient hypofrontality, the state of downregulation of executive functioning caused by diverted blood flow from the prefrontal cortex of the brain. Transient hypofrontality has been theorized as the neurological mechanism responsible for many altered states of consciousness, including runner's high (Dietrich, 2003). Similarly, Lee et al. (2016) predicted that they would find evidence of transient hypofrontality in pierced participants in the Dance of Souls. As a proxy measure of transient hypofrontality, both studies used the Stroop test, an assessment of executive functioning wherein participants read a list of names of colors that are each printed in a different color than the word indicates, and scores are compared to control trials (for validity and reliability, see MacLeod, 1991; Penner et al., 2012; Strauss, Allen, Jorgensen, & Cramer, 2005). The Stroop test has been demonstrated to correlate to executive functioning deficits where a higher Stroop test score means lower executive functioning (Homack, 2004). Ambler et al. (2016) and Lee et al. (2016) used the Stroop test as a proxy measure of transient hypofrontality, based on the assumption that individuals experiencing a state of transient hypofrontality would demonstrate decreased capacity for cognitive processing. The Stroop test was administered before and after BDSM interaction in Ambler et al. and before and after

extreme ritual participation in Lee et al., with Lee et al. also administering a Stroop test mid-ritual.

Both studies also included measures of affect using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; For validity and reliability, see Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), measures of self-reported stress and sexual arousal measured by questions which asked participants to rate how “stressed” and “sexually aroused” they were on a scale of 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely), and measures of perceived relationship closeness assessed through the Inclusion of Other in Self Scale (for validity and reliability, see Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Ambler et al. (2016) focused on measuring perceived relationship closeness between BDSM scene partners, while Lee et al. (2016) focused on perceived relationship closeness with other ritual participants. Both studies also collected saliva samples from participants before and after the studied event, in order to measure physiological stress. In both studies, measures of affect, stress, sexual arousal, and perceived relationship closeness were administered both before and after the activity in question, with Lee et al. also collecting a saliva sample mid-ritual.

Methodology between the two studies differed in that Ambler et al. (2016) studied BDSM interaction in a relatively controlled environment while Lee et al. (2016) conducted field research at the Southwest Leather Conference. Recruitment for Ambler et al. (2016) occurred through announcements made by the host organization, the Arizona Power Exchange, a BDSM venue which donated space for the study, as well as through email to lists of people who had expressed interest in BDSM research, and through postings on FetLife.com. Participants included 7 pairs of BDSM switches, 14 individuals total. Recruitment for Lee et al. (2016) occurred at a table that was set up at the Southwest Leather Conference where researchers provided information about the study and gave informed consent forms to interested participants. Individuals who chose to participate were assigned a unique ID number to maintain anonymity. Participants included 83 participants in the ritual Dance of Souls, including 47 participants who were pierced with hooks as part of the ritual and 36 ritual participants who were not

pierced, including piercers and piercing assistants, drummers, spiritual leaders, and observers.

In Ambler et al.'s (2016) study participants were assessed on several measures at the beginning of the experiment prior to participation in BDSM interactions, called “scenes” by the BDSM community (Ambler et al., 2016). A pre-scene Stroop test was administered as a proxy measure of transient hypofrontality, and perceived relationship closeness with scene partner. Saliva samples were collected prior to the beginning of the scene, immediately post scene, then 20 minutes and 40 minutes later. Following the initial assessments, participants were randomly assigned to either the top role or bottom role in the BDSM scene. BDSM scenes occurred at the discretion of participants, with participants in each scene choosing the length of the scene and activities completed during the scene. Scenes varied in length from 37 to 79 minutes and activities performed in the scenes varied widely. When participants were ready, they completed a post-scene survey in which they were re-assessed on affect, self-reported stress and sexual arousal, and perceived relationship closeness with scene partner and were also assessed on any experience of flow during the scene using the Flow State Scale.

In Lee et al.'s (2016) study, participants who volunteered to participate provided demographic information and completed a baseline Stroop test upon enrollment. As with Ambler et al.'s (2016) study, additional pre-ritual measures included a saliva sample intended to measure cortisol as a marker of physiological stress and a pre-ritual survey, which included measures of positive and negative affect, self-reported stress, sexual arousal, and spiritual experience, and perceived relationship closeness with other ritual participants. Participants were asked for consent to be approached by the researchers mid-ritual to complete an additional Stroop test and provide an additional saliva sample. The Dance of Souls ritual lasted approximately four hours. Researchers approached participants to collect mid-ritual samples about one hour after the ritual started, ensuring that those they approached had been participating for at least 20 minutes prior to providing mid-ritual measures. Following the completion of the ritual at the end of four hours,

participants provided an additional saliva sample, completed a third Stroop test, and completed a post-ritual survey which included an assessment of flow states measured through the Flow State Scale. The post-ritual survey also included measures of affect, psychological stress, sexual arousal, and perceived relationship closeness with other ritual participants using the same scales and questions as the pre-ritual survey.

Results of Ambler et al.'s (2016) study indicated that both BDSM tops and bottoms experienced states of flow during their scenes. Tops and bottoms scored similar levels of flow on the Flow State Scale overall, with no significant difference between the roles in terms of the degree of flow experienced. Both tops' and bottoms' scores were consistent with elements of flow related to autotelic absorption, a dimension that includes the merging of action and awareness, temporal distortion, and loss of self-consciousness. Tops scored higher than bottoms on the specific dimension of flow related to optimal performance, which includes focused concentration on a task, a sense of control, and a balance of challenge with skill. BDSM bottoms scored higher on the Stroop test after the scene than before the scene, which is consistent with the hypothesis that BDSM bottoms experience temporary decreases in executive functioning potentially associated with altered states of consciousness during BDSM scenes. This finding supports transient hypofrontality theory, which suggests that decreased blood flow to executive functioning centers such as the prefrontal cortex, which occurs during intense physical experiences, results in decreased capacity to process information (Dietrich, 2006). Tops' scores on the Stroop test did not differ significantly from pre-scene to post-scene, indicating no presence of impaired executive functioning in BDSM tops. Survey results indicated decreases in self-reported stress and increases in sexual arousal and relationship closeness from baseline to post-scene for both tops and bottoms. Results from analysis of participants' saliva samples indicated that cortisol increased for bottoms, but not tops from baseline to post-scene. However, the increases in cortisol for bottoms were not statistically significant.

Ambler et al. (2016) posited that BDSM participants' scores on the Flow State Scale and

Stroop Test provide preliminary evidence that individuals engage in BDSM at least partially due to the altered states it can facilitate. Ambler et al. summarized their conclusions as follows:

Taken as a whole, BDSM activities appear to facilitate subjectively enjoyable altered states of consciousness, reductions in psychological stress and negative affect, and increases in sexual arousal. Furthermore, although the broad pattern applies to both bottoms and tops, there are role differences in the nature of the altered states and the timing of the changes in affect. (p. 13)

Lee et al. (2016) found that both pierced and non-pierced ritual participants in the extreme ritual Dance of Souls indicated that they experienced elements of a flow state. Pierced and non-pierced participants did not differ significantly on the elements of flow experienced. Both experienced elements of autotelic absorption, temporal distortion, and loss of self-consciousness. Both pierced and non-pierced participants also experienced elements of flow related to optimal performance, which includes focused concentration on a task, a sense of control, and a balance of challenge with skill. Both pierced and non-pierced participants experienced increased Stroop test scores from prior to the ritual to during the ritual, indicating impaired executive functioning, irrespective of ritual role. The degree of change in executive functioning was comparable for pierced and non-pierced participants, but non-pierced participants had lower baseline Stroop test scores, potentially owing to lower stress levels prior to the ritual. Survey results indicated that both pierced and non-pierced participants experienced decreased negative affect from pre-ritual to post-ritual, with a greater decrease experienced by pierced participants. Both pierced and non-pierced participants reported decreases in self-reported stress from pre-ritual to post-ritual and increases in sexual arousal and relationship closeness, as measured by the Inclusion of Other in Self scale. Results from analysis of participants' saliva samples indicated that cortisol levels increased for pierced participants from before the ritual began to during the ritual and decreased from during the ritual to after the ritual. Non-pierced participants' cortisol

levels were highest at pre-ritual and decreased afterwards throughout the ritual, reaching lowest levels at post ritual.

Lee et al. (2016) suggested that their results empirically demonstrate the existence of altered states of consciousness experienced during extreme ritual using the proxy measures of the Stroop test and Flow State Scale. Further, they emphasized that these effects extended to non-pierced ritual participants, albeit sometimes to a lesser degree, indicating that painful sensation may not be requisite to experiencing altered states of consciousness during extreme ritual. Lee et al. discussed the implications of their study as follows:

These altered states of consciousness findings... might help to further account for (a) the prevalence of extreme rituals, (b) the willingness of people to subject themselves to such rituals, and (c) the processes whereby some of the previously identified effects of extreme rituals might take place (e.g., the finding that extreme rituals increase prosocial behavior could be explained by the altered states of consciousness identified by our research). (p. 14)

Comparing the results of Ambler et al. (2016) and Lee et al. (2016), Sagarin, Lee, and Klement (2015) noted several parallels between BDSM and extreme spiritual ritual. Among these parallels are physiological indications of stress as measured by salivary cortisol, contrasted with reports of the subjective experience of decreased stress in both BDSM bottoms and pierced ritual participants. Sagarin, Lee, and Klement suggested that this contrast between physiological and psychological stress indicates an altered state of consciousness reached by BDSM bottoms and pierced ritual participants. They noted a second parallel between BDSM and extreme ritual related to the experience of flow, reported on the Flow State Scale by both BDSM tops and ritual piercers, as well as BDSM bottoms and pierced ritual participants. Impaired cognitive performance on Stroop tests among BDSM bottoms and ritual participants aside from piercers was an additional parallel. Finally, Sagarin, Lee and Klement suggested that BDSM experiences and extreme rituals both support intimacy and relationship

closeness, as indicated by reports on the Inclusion of Self in Other Scale. Further elucidating the parallels between BDSM and extreme ritual, they noted:

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 they get from being able to tell others (and themselves) that they have done so. (p. 32)

Both Ambler et al. (2016) and Lee et al.'s (2016) findings should be considered in light of limitations of the measures used. The a priori nature of the authors' predictions about the type of altered states they would find influenced the choice of the Flow State Scale and Stroop test as proxy measures of altered states of consciousness. This and the nearly identical design of the two studies may have increased the potential for experimenter effects. Further, the authors of both studies chose to use the Flow State Scale to identify elements of an altered state of consciousness aligned to flow, based largely on the findings of a single researcher (Newmahr, 2010). Choosing the specific measure of the Flow State Scale may have limited the scope of findings in both studies. For example, though both tops and bottoms in Ambler et al.'s (2016) study reported experiencing elements of a flow state, it is also possible that they experienced additional altered state qualities that were not measured due to the narrow focus on flow. Similarly, the narrow focus on transient hypofrontality may have limited more complex or compounded explanations for executive functioning impairment, such as ego depletion, which Ambler et al. (2016) and Lee et al. (2016) acknowledged is an alternative explanation for decreased Stroop performance. Furthermore, while the Stroop test has been shown in research to be a valid proxy measure for impaired executive functioning, an fMRI is the preferred method for detecting the condition of transient hypofrontality (Lee et al., 2016). Given the conditions of the studies, however, this type of measurement was not possible.

Specific limitations of Ambler et al. (2016) include a bias towards individuals who identify as BDSM switches, individuals willing to be randomly assigned to a dominant or submissive role. Little research has been conducted that acknowledges BDSM switches as a distinct category of BDSM practitioner and no studies have been conducted that focus specifically on switches. Consequently, BDSM switches may possess particular characteristics that may limit the generalizability of findings to the full population of BDSM practitioners. In addition, the participant pool of the BDSM study contained only 14 participants. In general, small sample sizes have lower statistical power than large sample sizes and are more prone to statistical errors such as overestimation of effect. Ambler et al. also noted that the post-scene survey measures were administered some time after the BDSM scenes ended, to allow participants to engage in aftercare, mitigating activities that often take place between partners after BDSM activity, such as hugging, cuddling, or talking. Administration of the post-scene measures following aftercare makes it difficult to separate which of the effects are attributable to aftercare rather than to BDSM itself. Finally, the authors noted high variability in the BDSM scenes, both in terms of length and content. As a result of this variability, the authors were not able to determine whether particular scene elements or particular lengths of scenes were correlated with more significant altered states.

Specific limitations of Lee et al.'s (2016) extreme ritual study include those typically associated with field research. The study did not contain any element of random assignment, but rather a convenience sample of extreme ritual participants. While the naturalistic setting provided ecological validity, it was vulnerable to a high level of self-selection bias. Further, since ritual participants had to wait in line to be pierced and could request for piercings to be removed at any time, it is likely that study participants engaged in the ritual for differing lengths of time. Lee et al. (2016) acknowledged that a small sample size for each category of non-pierced participants (piercers, drummers, observers) precluded robust statistical analysis of each role separately. A larger sample size

would be needed before definitively concluding that no differences exist between pierced and non-pierced participants in the Dance of Souls. Despite limitations, taken together, the results of Ambler et al. (2016) and Lee et al. (2016) suggest that participation in both BDSM and extreme ritual can result in measurable altered states of consciousness, regardless of one's role in the scene or ritual.

Additional similarities between BDSM and spiritual ritual emerge in Baker's (2016) phenomenological investigation of spiritual BDSM experiences. In order to address the gap in research on the spiritual aspects of BDSM, Baker explored the psychological meanings of spiritual BDSM experiences to distill their phenomenological similarities. Participants were recruited through a recruitment questionnaire that was emailed to participants who had previously expressed interest in BDSM research and was also distributed through social media on FetLife.com and Facebook.com. Targeted recruitment occurred through the distribution of the questionnaire on FetLife.com forums on the topic of "sacred kink." The questionnaire included questions about whether the individual had experienced spiritual elements during BDSM practice, and whether they were willing to be interviewed. Three participants were selected from an initial pool of 44 based upon the level of detail provided about their experiences and their perceived ability to speak coherently and with emotional stability about the topic (Baker, 2016). Of the three participants who were ultimately included, one identified as male-of-center/intersex, one identified as female, and one identified as gender fluid. In terms of BDSM role preference, one identified as a top/dominant, one identified as a bottom, and one did not identify their role. Two of the participants reported that their spiritual experience in the context of BDSM occurred spontaneously, and one reported that the spiritual experience occurred in the context of a deliberate spiritual ritual.

Data were collected through one hour telephone interviews during which participants were asked a single open-ended question: "Describe, in detail, a specific time when you had a spiritual experience while engaging in a BDSM scene"

(Baker, 2016). The researcher asked clarifying questions where needed. Interviews continued until participants felt they had shared a full description and the researcher had asked all outstanding questions. Interviews were transcribed and broken into meaning units with the aim of distilling the psychological meaning of the descriptions. The researcher used a process of imaginative variation to discern the psychological meaning of each unit from multiple angles. The researcher assumed the veracity of all statements shared by participants in order to focus the phenomenological analysis on participants' lived experiences. To identify key components of psychological meaning from the descriptions, the researcher looked for areas of overlap between participants. From areas of commonality, the researcher used a second process of imaginative variation to determine which components of psychological meaning were essential to an interconnected description of BDSM and spiritual experience.

Key components of psychological meaning related to spiritual experiences in a BDSM context were determined by the researcher as follows: ordeal, surrender, visionary experience, embodied sense of an energetic force, self-surrender/transcended state of consciousness, sense of spiritual presence, and deeply personal and lasting transformation (Baker, 2016). The author identified the component of ordeal, rather than pain or physically intense sensations, because two of the three participants described spiritual experiences associated with inflicting pain and sensation rather than receiving it. The author described ordeal as a situation in which "participants were compelled in some way to open themselves, emotionally, physically, and psychologically, to a new level beyond their normal expectations and perceived limitations" (Baker, 2016, p. 74). Surrender referred to the full capitulation of the ego or self, which was common to all three participants. Surrender of the self also included elements of surrendering to the moment, surrendering self-doubt, surrendering self-reflective tendencies and surrendering control to spiritual forces. The author used visionary experience to express the tendency of participants to describe their experiences in metaphorical

language. Aligned to definitions of mystical experience that emphasize ineffability, participants had a difficult time expressing their spiritual experiences at times, relying on symbolism and figurative descriptions. All participants described feeling an embodied sense of an energetic force, with each participant using the specific word "energy" or "energetic" to describe something they felt during their BDSM experience that was outside of themselves and had larger spiritual meaning. Each participant described entering an altered or transcendent state of consciousness that involved the surrender of the self. All three participants felt a sense of spiritual presence, which had the characteristic of otherness, or existing outside the self. This appeared as external deities or gods for one participant; a primal, universal, or cosmic force for the second participant; and for the third participant an essential force of dark energy that communicated messages. Finally, each participant experienced deeply personal and lasting transformation as a result of the experience. For one participant, the experience of being able to help another person release energetic and spiritual darkness through BDSM changed his relationship to BDSM from recreational to a spiritual calling. For another, the experience created a deep connection to the place where the spiritual BDSM event occurred and a desire to return to the place. For the third, the experience created a sense of strength and ability to transcend the limitations she imposed upon herself.

It is important to note that Baker's (2016) study was conducted as part of a dissertation project and carries all the associated limitations of dissertation research. Most notably, Baker as a single researcher conducted the entirety of recruitment, data collection, and analysis, including the distillation of meaning units. The participation of an additional researcher to independently analyze and distill meaning from the transcripts would have lent additional validity to the analysis, but this is not common practice in dissertation research. Since a dissertation study is the only phenomenological exploration of spiritual experiences in a BDSM context, the single researcher approach presents a significant

limitation to the state of research on BDSM and spirituality as a whole. It is also worth noting the small sample size in Baker's phenomenological study. Phenomenological investigations do not require a large sample size to be effective (Creswell, 2014). However, the small sample size of three presents challenges for the study in question because of the diversity of roles included within the sample. Since both self-identified tops and self-identified bottoms were included in the sample, the study did not allow for the possibility that spiritual experiences may be phenomenologically distinct according to BDSM role. In addition, the researcher used her own experiences as a lens through which to derive meaning units from the text of interview transcripts. While the process of imaginative variation likely partially mitigated bias by providing many perspectives in addition to the researcher's, it is likely that the researcher's perspective is woven through the analysis and interpretation. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that only one researcher participated in data analysis. Despite limitations, Baker (2016) uncovered phenomenological elements of spiritual BDSM experiences that align to elements of extreme spiritual ritual.

Implications

The results of Baker (2016), Ambler et al. (2016), and Lee et al. (2016) reinforce what has been long understood in the BDSM community and written in popular literature. The studies suggest that like extreme religious and spiritual rituals, BDSM can enable the entering of a liminal space, one that is not quite trance and not quite waking consciousness. Some BDSM practitioners describe this space as meditative (Baker, 2016) and some describe it as seeing God (Easton & Hardy, 2011a). Easton and Hardy (2011a) wrote, "The unbounded space we enter when we play [practice BDSM] is mythological: a land of archetypes, of mystery, of symbolic enactments. . . . The altered state of consciousness that we can enter into is known by many names: dreamtime, inner space, higher power, the place between worlds" (p. 155). Easton and Hardy went on to describe the ways spiritual aspects of BDSM are apparent in the ways practitioners set up and clean up their spaces, in chants practitioners

say to bless a space before engaging in BDSM, and in the unwritten understandings of how to speak, negotiate, and operate within BDSM spaces which are as well-known and deeply held as the tenets of a religion. They summarize, "A LOT of what we do in S/M qualifies as ritual in and of itself," (p. 155).

The results of Baker (2016), Ambler et al. (2016), and Lee et al. (2016) also highlight several parallels between BDSM and extreme ritual. The concept of ordeal, for example, is essential to the definition of extreme ritual (Bromley, 2007) and much of the literature on ritual uses the word ordeal to refer to the level of physical or psychological harm to which participants are subjected (Fischer & Xygalatas, 2014; Whitehouse & Lanman, 2014; Xygalantas et al., 2013). As with extreme rituals, BDSM contains elements of ordeal in the form of physical or psychological pain or risk. Altered states of consciousness are also mentioned in much of the literature on extreme ritual, and participants are commonly understood to achieve trance or altered states, particularly in high-ordeal rituals (Fischer et al., 2014; Jackson, 2009; Lee et al., 2016). As with extreme ritual, BDSM enables access to measurable altered states of consciousness (Ambler et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2016; Sagarin et al., 2015). It is likely that participants in BDSM, like participants in extreme rituals, often engage in the practice with the specific hope or intention to achieve these altered or trance states. Lasting transformation is often cited as an essential component of extreme spiritual rituals (Csordas, 1983; Morinis, 1985). Likewise, some participants in BDSM report being profoundly transformed by spiritual BDSM experiences (Baker, 2016). Extreme rituals and religious or spiritual experiences more generally are often said to have an ineffable or noetic quality and elements of transiency and passivity (James, 1902/2013). BDSM too can enable a quality of visionary experience, with a quality of mysticism or ineffability that is difficult to express (Baker, 2016). In addition, both BDSM and extreme ritual appear to result in the subjective experience of stress relief, regardless of physiological indications of stress, and both appear to result in increased feelings of relationship closeness with one's fellow participants (Sagarin et al., 2015).

Even apart from the comparisons that can be drawn between BDSM and extreme ritual, BDSM alone falls within a definition of ritual that emphasizes ritual as intentional action with expected ends that seem disproportionate to the means. Activities undertaken as part of BDSM experiences often do not appear to have a prima facie reason for being. There are few reasons for one to voluntarily agree to be bound and beaten, unless there are expected ends beyond the means. In the case of BDSM these expected ends are myriad: pleasure, sexual and otherwise, bonding with partners, the achieving of subjective stress relief, and the experiencing of altered states of consciousness (Baumeister, 1988; Easton & Hardy, 2011a; Easton & Hardy, 2011b; Turley et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The resemblance of BDSM to spiritual ritual across several domains raises questions about the sociocultural role BDSM serves. Beckmann (2009) suggested that BDSM may fulfill a particular “void” in Western culture that was formerly filled by ritual:

The lack of areas of spirituality that were formerly satisfied by religious rituals left a void in Western consumer societies. The filling of this void might be one of the broader social meanings that the increased motivation to engage in the ‘bodily practice’ of consensual ‘SM’ in contemporary consumer culture signals. (p. 183)

Historically, extreme rituals have promoted social and community bonding, enabled spiritual and altered state experiences, and reinforced a culture’s belief systems, as well as provided stress relief and escape from the mundane. BDSM has been shown to show similar purposes through increasing feelings of relationship closeness, enabling altered states of consciousness, providing stress relief, and enabling escape from the self (Ambler et al., 2016; Baumeister, 1988; Lee et al., 2016; Sagarin et al., 2015). It is possible that like extreme ritual, BDSM reinforces cultural belief systems such as by reifying existing social power dynamics between genders or by intentionally subverting those dynamics.

Given the spiritual role BDSM serves for some practitioners, and the association between BDSM and altered states of consciousness as indicated by the limited research, BDSM should be further explored by transpersonal psychology. If indeed transpersonal means “simply the transcendence of ego boundaries” (Daniels, 2005, p. 94), any practice that enables altered states of consciousness and is experienced as divine falls within the realm of the transpersonal. This is especially important given the field’s historical privileging of particular methods of ego-transcendence such as meditation over others such as dance, sex, and art. Wade’s (2004) in-depth research on transcendent sex demonstrated that sexual experiences are often a conduit for spiritual experiences, both intentional and unintentional. BDSM, as with other alternative sexualities, is worth exploring to investigate the ways it might enable distinct spiritual experiences.

Further research should focus on the spiritual role BDSM plays for practitioners. What spiritual beliefs and ritual practices, if any, are common to BDSM practitioners? What is the subjective experience of BDSM as a spiritual practice? Are altered states of consciousness associated with BDSM phenomenologically distinct from altered states of consciousness associated with extreme ritual, even if the physiological markers of those states appear to be aligned? Further research might also consider the biological markers of social cohesion among BDSM tops and bottoms to determine whether a synchrony of heart rate and other vitals occurs in alignment with Konvalinka et al.’s (2011) findings on synchronized arousal in extreme ritual. Finally, future research might consider whether altered states of consciousness similar to those found in BDSM practitioners are facilitated by modern rituals outside of BDSM. For example, gambling might be thought of as a modern ritual according to a definition that emphasizes ritual as intentional action with desired ends that are disproportionate to the means. So too might electronic dance music, as suggested by Redfield and Thouin-Savard (2017). Might gambling and electronic dance music also result in states of flow and transient hypofrontality? Might they constitute spiritual experiences for some?

The potential for BDSM to be a conduit for spiritual states is well summed-up by a portion of one research participant's story from the appendices of Baker's (2016) investigation of spiritual BDSM experience. The experience is worth reprinting here to conclude this analysis:

My energetic hand grew into the whip and using the whip I could reach in and take a scoop [of her chakra blockage] out. There's a movement that a lot of flogging tops do where between strokes we smooth out the tails [of the flogger] and untangle them and I used that movement to strip, strip it away and drop it through the floor into the earth. And so one little piece at a time. One stroke at a time I was getting it out of her and it went on for a couple of hours. . . .

I realized that I was not alone, that there were presences that were watching and were helping and had been watching and helping and in a lot of ways dealing with the garbage as I was pulling it out. And, there was not a full possession, but I could feel those presences, these deities who were watching, these gods of death and pain reaching through me through my hands and pulling that last pain out of her.

And then after it was over . . . I put my hands on her and I prayed and I said, "Please, whoever you are who are watching, whichever one of you are," and I got the feeling there was, there was multiple eyes on this, "Please use me. Use my hands as your vessel to put in, put back in something positive to fill up the space that I just stripped out of her." And I felt this flow through my hands, and it was not me. It was not energy that was any part of me or like anything that I am. It just came right through me clean into her . . . And I just sat there stunned . . . And that, I think was the turning point in my life from recreational to spiritual. (Baker, 2016, p. 105-113)

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About the Author

Sam E. Greenberg, MPP is a PhD student in the Integral and Transpersonal Psychology department at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Her research interests include sexuality and relationships, personality theory and ego structures, social power dynamics, and mechanisms for addressing implicit bias. Her dissertation research will examine intentional engagement with sexuality for the purposes of personal and spiritual development.

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