


2018

# Productive Paddles and Productive Power: An Exploration of Transgender Individuals' Negotiation of Identity Through BDSM Practices

Riley Zahn

*Minnesota State University, Mankato*

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Productive Paddles and Productive Power: An Exploration of Transgender Individuals'  
Negotiation of Identity through BDSM Practices

By  
Riley Zahn

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Arts  
In  
Communication Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, MN

April 2018

April 25, 2018

Productive Paddles and Productive Power: An Exploration of Transgender Individuals'  
Negotiation of Identity through BDSM Practices

Riley Zahn

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's  
committee.

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Dr. Justin J. Rudnick, Advisor

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Dr. Kristen P. Treinen, Committee Member

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Dr. Jaime Madden, Committee Member

### **Abstract**

Productive Paddles and Productive Power: An Exploration of Transgender Individuals' Negotiation of Identity through BDSM Practices by Riley Zahn is a thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication Studies from Minnesota State University, Mankato in April of 2018. It explores the ways in which transgender individuals negotiate their identities through BDSM practices. To collect data, eight semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted revealing four key themes: BDSM as identity negotiation, BDSM as power enactment, embodied confirmation, and BDSM as trauma survivorship. The study concludes with a discussion of the implications, limitations and future avenues of research for this project.

## Acknowledgements

This project would never have been possible without for the support of many people in my life. Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Justin Rudnick. Your feedback, unwavering encouragement, and patient understanding of my mental health issues were all invaluable. You made me a better writer and provided a model of mentorship I hope to emulate for others. Thank you to Dr. Jaime Madden and Dr. Kristi Treinen for your guidance and feedback that helped make this project what it is. Also, thank you to Dr. Nick Clarkson, for discouraging me from taking on a different project that would have been disastrous for my mental health and introducing me to the Stryker (2008) article that inspired this project.

Thank you to my family, Ralph, Peg and Whitney Zahn. Your love, support and encouraging helped propel me through this project. You are, and have always been, my biggest supporters, both academically and personally. I would not be getting a master's degree without you. Thank you to my partner, PJ Glover. Over the past year, you have been my rock, my biggest cheerleader, and the person I trust more than the anxious thoughts in my head. Also, thank you for letting me write about our sex life. Finally, thank you to the 11 people who reached out to me when I posed a concerning message about my mental health. There have been times in the past year where I wasn't sure if I would live to see the end of this project. You, and everyone previously mentioned, helped me get here in some way or another.

Last, and least, thank you to the transphobic “feminists” of GenderTrender.com. Your body shaming, moral disgust, and sexual harassment made me a stronger, more resilient person, and proved valuable in shaping my analysis for this study.

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## Chapter One: An Introduction

*“I own you now, baby girl.”*

*The ex-girlfriend who said this to me was the first person I had a sexual relationship with since publicly coming out as transgender. She is the first sex partner who never knew me as a man, and also, the first person I experimented with BDSM with. It struck me how naturally a submissive sexual role came to me. Heteronormative sex has always been an experience of self-denial: go slower, think about baseball, don't come too fast, and most of all, don't let a straight girl know how submissive you want to feel during sex. With each swing of the riding crop, all of the pressures and expectations of masculinity fell away. I didn't have to be strong or stoic, I didn't have to be in power, and most of all, I didn't have to be a man. I felt like myself.*

When I reflect back on this event, I wonder if it is a story of liberation. On one hand, I was subverting the expectations placed on those who were assigned male at birth, and because I identified as a man, these pressures have shaped me in profound ways. To submit sexually to another person is a profound rejection of these expectations. On the other hand, I was moving into the social space of womanhood, which carries with it an opposite set of pressures and expectations. A white, middle class woman is expected to be submissive. Was I subverting the expectations placed on my body, or giving in to them? Or both? Or neither? My interest in BDSM, an umbrella term that encompasses practices of bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and sadomasochism, has been the source of countless questions about my identity, and how I understand it. These questions have no easy answers.



### **Purpose of Study**

My purpose in this study is to explore the ways in which transgender individuals use BDSM practices to construct and negotiate identity. While statistics about the number of trans people who practice BDSM are not kept, a social group for trans BDSM practitioners in Minnesota on FetLife, a social networking site for people in the BDSM and fetish communities, boasts over 500 members, indicating a sizable interest from the trans community. I wanted to know if my own experience with BDSM mirrors that of other trans people, and what sorts of identity work other trans people accomplish through BDSM.

### **Literary Foundations**

My study is grounded in literature of both identity formation and BDSM. In terms of identity formation, it builds on literature that elaborates on the several ways in which identity is formed and shaped by the social environments we inhabit (Berger & Luckman, 1989; Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). I begin by unpacking the way we are socialized to perform various roles in society, and move on to the way identity is performatively constructed. As Butler (1990) notes,

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (p. 179)

Finally, I discuss how identity is formed through negotiation, and the ways in which we “project an identity, to be assumed by other(s) with whom one is in interaction, which is congruent with one's own goals” (Weinstein & Deutschberger, 1964, p. 454). In terms of BDSM, my study furthers research about BDSM in general, as well as how other marginalized groups besides transgender individuals use it to construct identity, and the potential it holds for healing from trauma. My study builds on both bodies of research by synthesizing them, and exploring the ways in which BDSM practice shapes, affects, and actively facilitates the formation of identity in a specific, marginalized population.

### **Significance of Study**

This area of study is significant because BDSM and gender variance are both widely taboo and stigmatized. As such, further understanding of the individuals who inhabit both groups could help to lessen the stigma faced by both. Additionally, understanding how the construction of identities that transgress gender norms, and sexual practices that transgress sexual norms, relate to each other could provide a theoretical and practical blueprint for disrupting cisheteronormativity. Also, my own positionality as a transgender woman adds to the significance of this study. As Namaste (2009) explains, there is a history of cisgender academics using trans bodies to pose their own questions about gender with little regard for the actual lived realities of trans people. My membership in the population I am studying, in addition to my use of qualitative methods, helps to ensure that my participants are speaking, rather than being spoken for.

### **Objectives of Study**

The primary objective of my study is to explore the ways in which transgender individuals construct and negotiate identity through BDSM practices. To accomplish

this, I gathered data through eight semi-structured, qualitative interviews. The communicative messages my questions focused on included all the communicative acts involved in BDSM “scenes,” as they are called. These include a rich variety of verbal and nonverbal actions and culturally recognized symbols to create and maintain roles being played during BDSM scenes. My questions also sought to prompt my participants to reflect on the significance of these communicative acts, and how they affect their own identities.

I chose to study the population of transgender individuals for two reasons. First, I sought to understand my own experience. As a transgender woman who practices BDSM, I am a member of the population I am studying. Part of my motivation for choosing this area of study is gaining insight into my own lived experience, and perhaps coming up with answers to the many questions that arose from reflecting on how my own BDSM practices shape my identity. Furthermore, the intersection between BDSM and the trans community is undertheorized and represents the convergence of two populations that, by themselves, are both stigmatized. I hope to use my own lived experience and positionality as a researcher to amplify the voices of my participants, and hopefully, lessen the stigma faced by both groups. These objectives necessitate the following research question:

RQ: How do transgender individuals use BDSM practices to negotiate identity?

### **Precis of Chapters**

In this chapter, I have given a brief overview and introduction to my study. In the next chapter, I situate my study within the body of relevant literature. Chapter three is an overview of my methodology used to collect and analyze data for my study. In chapter

four, I present the findings of that analysis through the presentation of four themes.

Finally, chapter five concludes my study, including a discussion of the implications, limitations and future directions of my research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

*“I’m proud of you, Baby Girl”*

*I look up into her eyes, panting and exhausted. My ass cheeks are glowing a warm, red from the longest scene of my life. I giggle uncontrollably from the endorphins my brain released in response to the pain. She holds me close and strokes my hair and whispers soft affirmations to me. Everything about this moment felt warm. I’ve never been entirely comfortable with other people taking care of me. I always hated being sick, not because of how I felt, but because I had to rely on other people to do things for me. I’ve always been more comfortable taking care of other people, running to the store for soup at 2 in the morning, or being the calm presence during a mental breakdown. Their joy in her voice is audible as she waxes poetic about how much she enjoyed my submission. I think that is where the warmth is coming from, from knowing I made her happy. I didn’t just enjoy her approval, I craved it. I sometimes wonder if I measure my love by my ability to make my partner happy. I try not to think about how unhealthy this is.*

*She marveled at how much pain I was able to endure. “I was swinging as hard as I can, and you just arched your back and stuck your ass out more. You’re so strong, baby girl.” I had never thought of submitting as an act of strength.*

*I sometimes wonder if I measure my own strength in terms of how much pain I can endure. I try not to think of the implications of this.*

Before I analyze my data, I will first trace the theoretical foundation for this study. I will do so by reviewing the relevant literature pertaining to identity formation, as well as BDSM. The communication discipline has a rich history of elaborating on the

ways in which identity is constituted through communication. However, the communicative aspects of BDSM tend to be undertheorized, and as such, most of my research draws from other disciplines such as psychology, sociology and gender and women's studies.

### **Identity Formation**

Academic scholarship provides a wide variety of perspectives on what identity is, as well as how it is formed. My study is informed by a school of thought commonly understood as social constructionism, which maintains that identity is not a fixed, inherent aspect of our lives, but rather is actively constructed and shaped by the social environment we inhabit (Berger & Luckman, 1989; Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). The formation of identity begins with those who raised us as young children. Berger and Luckman (1989) explain,

Every individual is born into an objective social structure within which he encounters the significant others who are in charge of his socialization. These significant others are imposed on him. Their definitions of his situation are posited for him as objective reality. (p. 131)

Essentially, the formation of our identities begins with the social environment created by those who raised us at young ages. This social environment consists of a collection of definitions, beliefs and attitudes that are all socially constructed, but make up a view of reality that can seem objective. This shaping of our identities by others begins at a very young age, a process known as primary socialization, and continues through our lives, a process known as secondary socialization.

## The Process of Socialization

The primary socialization process begins with the formation of the generalized other, or an “abstraction from the roles and attitudes of concrete others” (Berger & Luckman, 1989, p. 133). Mead (1934) furthers,

If the given human individual is to develop a self in the fullest sense. . . he must take the attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another, [and] take their attitudes toward the various phases or aspects of the common social activity. . . in which . . . they are all engaged. (pp. 154-155)

When an individual prefaces a commonly stated idea with “you know what *they* say,” they are invoking the idea of a generalized other. This amalgamation of the perceived attitudes and expectations of others impacts what we perceive as being acceptable behaviors in general, and what we perceive as being appropriate ways to express our gender, specifically. Cooley (1902) explains how these perceived attitudes of others shape our own self-perceptions, essentially, we view ourselves how we expect others to view us. He identifies three steps to this process: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Cooley, 1902, p. 184). Basically, the generalized other we internalize gives us a sense of what people see when they look at us, and what kinds of judgements they form based on what they see. This, in turn, creates a positive or negative feeling in the individual, which can lead to changes in the way that individuals communicate their identity.

For transgender individuals, this process is contentious. The expectation of disgust and disapproval from others at being visibly transgender leads many of us to stay

closeted. Further, prospect of being read and recognized by others as their identified gender can put pressure on trans individuals to adopt ways of communicating that are stereotypically associated with masculinity, femininity or androgyny.

Primary socialization provides the foundation upon which secondary socialization is built. Secondary socialization is “the internalization of institutional or institutional-based ‘subworlds’” (Berger & Luckman, 1989, p. 138). In essence, it is the process by which we learn to be members of various groups within society. Primary socialization teaches a person how to be a person, whereas secondary socialization teaches people more specialized roles, like how to be a student or employee. Goffman (1959) furthers, “A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well-articulated” (p. 75). The internalization of these secondary subworlds involves learning a complex set of norms and expectations of the members of said subworld. While the roles of socialization tend to be profoundly shaping, the degree to which individuals internalize these roles varies. In the case of individuals who transition to another gender, gendered socialization that occurs in secondary socialization can be internalized to a greater degree than that of primary socialization.

### **Identity Negotiation**

Communication scholarship often portrays identity as a product of negotiation between the individual and the society. This framework began with Goffman (1959), who notes

Together the participants contribute to a single overall definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real



agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured. (p. 4)

Goffman refers to this agreement as a “working consensus.” The idea of the working consensus establishes the idea of aspects of a society arise through negotiation. This idea can be applied to identity. The working consensus implies that identity is not formed solely by the self-definition of the individual, nor the society’s definition of said individual. Instead, Goffman conceived of identity as being subject to some kind of social agreement—a kind of negotiation between interactants—that laid the foundation for the identity negotiation metaphor others have built on.

Weinstein and Deutschberger (1964) built on Goffman’s work by developing a theory of altercasting. They define altercasting as “projecting an identity, to be assumed by other(s) with whom one is in interaction, which is congruent with one's own goals” (p. 454). In identity negotiation, this generally takes the form of using culturally recognized symbols to portray an identity to others that aligns with one’s own self-concept. For example, I, a trans woman, will often wear dresses and present in a stereotypical manner when meeting new people to reduce the likelihood of being misgendered.

This tension between self-concept and recognition by others was clarified by Swann (1987), who elaborated on the tension between two competing aspects of identity negotiation. The first aspect is behavioral confirmation, or “a process whereby the expectancies of some individuals (perceivers) channel social interaction so as to cause the behavior of other individuals (targets) to confirm perceivers' expectancies” (p. 1038). Essentially, individuals come to embody and perform traits ascribed to them by others. Swann illustrates this with the examples of a person being labeled as being hostile

showed more aggressive behavior, and those labeled as being extroverted being more sociable. The second competing aspect of identity negotiation is self-verification, when the target persuades the perceivers to see them in a way that matches their own self-concept. This negotiation framework advanced by Swann accounts for individuals who actively resist the labels ascribed to them by society and allows for individual agency in the formation of identity.

Occasionally, behavior confirmation and self-verification come in conflict with each other when the perceiver sees the target differently than the target sees themselves.

Swann & Ely (1984) found that

Self-verification also tended to occur when both perceivers and targets were uncertain of their beliefs. Behavioral confirmation tended to occur only when perceivers were certain of their expectancies and targets were uncertain of their self-conceptions. At the end of the experiment, perceivers had generally abandoned their expectancies, but targets revealed no self-rating change. (p. 1287)

In this sense, identity negotiation represents the battle ground in which discrepancies between behavioral confirmation and self-verification are settled. This conflict can be seen in the way individuals are treated when they communicate their identities outside of normative expectation of gender. “Gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler, 1990, p. 1978). For transgender individuals in particular, gender can be a common source of this conflict, as individuals experience a disconnect between their own gender identity, and the gender they were assigned at birth, and frequently communicate

their gender in ways that fall outside of normative expectations. The process of identity formation takes on a unique form when gender is involved.

### **Construction of Gender Identities**

Gender itself is an example of an aspect of identity that is actively constructed. Berger and Luckman (1989) argue, “Biological factors limit the range of social possibilities open to any individual, but the social world, which is pre-existent to each individual, in its turn imposes limits on what is biologically possible to the organism” (p. 202). This points to a complex, reciprocal relationship between nature and nurture in determining the conditions of our lives. In the case of gender, individuals are assigned a gender based on certain observed biological characteristics. However, Spade (2011) argues for the de-gendering of these biological characteristics, asserting,

As feminists and trans allies, we continue to work to dispel myths that body parts somehow make us who we are (and make us “less than” or “better than,” depending on which we may have). But feminists and trans allies sometimes (often inadvertently) prop up these sexist and transphobic ideas just by using language that is shaped by biological determinism. (p.1)

So, while the construction of identity is shaped by social interaction, the way in which our bodies are read by others shapes these interactions, pointing to a complex relationship between the embodied and the discursive.

Gender has been theorized as being performative. Allen (1962) describes two functions of language in his speech act theory. The first function is to describe things, or constitutive language. The second function is to change things, or performative language. He explains, “The uttering of a performative is, or is part of, the doing of a

certain kind of action, the performance of which, again, would not normally be described as just 'saying' or 'describing' something (Austin, 1962, p.5). Essentially, a performative speech act is one that accomplishes a task, rather than simply describing the state of things. Butler (1990) is largely considered a definitive authority on the production and contestation of gender conceptualizes gender as a performative speech act, rather than a stable identity. She argues,

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (p. 179)

Essentially, gender is actively constructed and reconstructed by patterns of actions that are repeated. Gender is not a static identity, but rather, a temporary one that is constantly disappearing and needing to be rebuilt, so to speak. Butler's theory allows for the possibility that by enacting a slightly different set of stylized, repetitive acts, one can reconstruct their gender in a subtly different way. This conceptualization of gender as being a dynamic, ongoing part of people's lives can explain how sexual practices can be used to reconstitute their gender in a slightly different way. Butler (2005) further discusses how the actions and symbols that are used to constitute gender are outside of the control of individuals,

The very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in

character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our “singular” stories are told. (p. 21)

While individuals are free to express themselves as they see fit, only certain expressions correspond to the cultural expectations that are placed on certain genders. In order to be “recognized as,” individuals must embody these norms.

Gender can also be thought of as the internalization of a certain role. Goffman (1959) argues, “in a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves- the role we are striving to live up to. . . becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality” (pp. 19-20). By performing, or not performing, the cultural expectations of a certain gender, we begin to internalize that particular role as part of our identity and internalize the expectations associated with it. For transgender individuals, this can come with great difficulty when the society as a whole refuses to recognize their identity. Mead (1934) argues, “The only way in which we can react against the disapproval of the entire community is by setting up a higher sort of community which in a certain sense outvotes the one we find” (p. 168). In essence, we can overcome the identity categories we are cohesively assigned by the society we live in through social interaction. By surrounding ourselves with individuals who are affirming, trans individuals can form communities that allow them to inhabit roles denied to them by the society at large and its normative expectations. BDSM practitioners often form communities with their own distinct subculture, and BDSM practice mostly happens in private settings. This sense of apartness from the general society could allow for BDSM to be a unique way to counter dominant and repressive narratives.

## BDSM

BDSM is a blanket term used to refer to a host of sexual or non-sexual practices including bondage and discipline, dominance and submission and sadomasochism (Connolly, 2006). Its practitioners engage in a wide range of consensual erotic behaviors, often but not necessarily involving sexual behavior, the exchange of power, restraint or pain (Weinberg, 1995). On their surface, many BDSM practices resemble violence and abuse; however, there are fundamental differences between healthy BDSM practice and violence. Jozifkova (2013) elaborates on these differences:

BDSMers engage in their sexual behavior voluntarily. They declare their sexual desire to their partner/partners, claim their consensus, and respect the consensus or rejection from their partner/partners. They discuss their sexual preferences beforehand and the development of the sexual interaction during the activity (e.g., they discuss the scene). Practitioners use a *safeword* (a word or a gesture) signaling their wish to terminate the activity. (p. 2)

Jozifkova's discussion of the practices of ongoing consent in BDSM highlights an important aspect of the power dynamics present in BDSM: they are largely surface level, and undermined by the continued commitment to consent and respect. The presence of negotiation and safe words afford the submissive partner a great deal more power than a casual observer might expect. The underlying deep structure of communication necessary to establish ongoing consent and safety separates BDSM from abuse, which is fundamentally an act of non-consensual control aimed at intimidating one partner into accepting a position of powerlessness in a relationship (Cory & McAndless-Davis, 2000,

p. 30). However, despite this distinction, BDSM and its practitioners face a great deal of stigmatization by larger social forces.

The exchange of power is often central to BDSM practice. While power is traditionally thought of as being a force of subjugation and repression, Foucault (1980) argues against what he refers to as the “repressive hypothesis”:

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (p. 119)

Within the context of a BDSM scene, the authority one partner is generally given to control what happens to the other person's body during a scene functions as a productive power. Through the control and repression of the submissive partner's body, pleasure is manufactured for both, or all, participants. However, the productive force of BDSM goes far beyond pleasure. Weiss (2006) argues,

SM draws on the existent power dynamics, but restages, makes visible, or re-creates these social relations. This reiteration also disturbs tidy analytical categorizations of sexual/non-sexual, dominant/nondominant, liberating/constraining, and real/play . . . SM relies on, yet also resignifies, stable structures of social inequality that co-produce subjects in relation to social difference and power. (p. 2)

BDSM produces disruptions to analytic categories and social structures of inequality. By revealing the true nature of certain social relations, BDSM provides the space to negotiate identity.

While there is clearly a degree of repressive power working against transgender individuals who practice BDSM, Foucault (1978) reminds us that power can be generative in his evaluation of the “repressive hypothesis,” or the idea that sexuality was actively repressed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage . . . Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny . . . The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (p. 43)

The advent of “the homosexual” in the nineteenth century shows how sexual practices can become entrenched into identity categories, which both produce new identities and enable a new kind of discipline for those identities. Reconstituting a sexual practice as an identity category carries with it a unique set of tensions that affect the stigma placed on it. As Foucault mentioned, the sexuality of the homosexual became all encompassing, moving same sex sexual activity from something that could be compartmentalized, to something that is the defining characteristic of the individual.



The policing that results from making sexual acts into identity categories has specific applications to BDSM. BDSM practices tend to be placed on the bottom of the heteronormative, western sex hierarchy described by Rubin (1993):

Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top erotic pyramid. Clamouring below are unmarried monogamous heterosexuals in couples, followed by most other heterosexuals. Solitary sex floats ambiguously. The powerful nineteenth-century stigma on masturbation lingers in less potent, modified forms, such as the idea that masturbation is an inferior substitute for partnered encounters. Stable, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability, but bar dykes and promiscuous gay men are hovering just above the groups at the very bottom of the pyramid. The most despised sexual castes currently include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models, and the lowliest of all, those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries. (p. 151)

Transgender individuals who practice BDSM find themselves multiply stigmatized by this hierarchy, as they subvert both the heteronormative sexual ideal and the gender they were assigned at birth. This stigma manifests in a variety of forms, including employment discrimination, harassment, assault, and lack of sex education (Wright, 2006).

### **BDSM as a Stigmatized Practice**

In most Western societies BDSM practices are stigmatized. A stigma is a term “used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting. . . not all undesirable attributes

are at issue, but only those that are incongruous with the stereotype of what a given type of individual should be” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). It is important to note that since the stereotypes of how an individual should be are socially constructed, stigmas are not naturally occurring, but rather, arise through social interaction. Link and Phelan (2001) elaborate on this process of stigmatizing those who fall outside of the normative by identifying four steps. First, individuals differentiate and label human differences. Second, labeled individuals are connected to adverse cultural stereotypes. Next, labeled individuals are placed in distinct groups that separate them from the non-stigmatized individuals. Finally, labeled individuals experience "status loss and discrimination" resulting in material inequality. Through this process stigmatized, individuals are not only ostracized, but denied access to resources.

In most areas of Western society, BDSM falls outside of the stereotype of what proper sexual practice entails, resulting in stigmatizing attitudes aimed at those who practice BDSM. Much of the stigma that surrounds BDSM stems from early research that looked at it from the lens of pathology. The earliest writings on BDSM described the practice as both a “perversion” and an “affliction” (von Krafft-Ebing, 1965, p. 5), casting it as a disease that needs to be cured, rather than a legitimate source of pleasure. This pathologizing continues today, as the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Illness lists sexual sadism and sexual masochism both as diseases (APA, 2013).

These sexual stigmas affect the stigmatized individual in a variety of ways. Herek (2007) identifies four ways in which this stigma manifests itself. First, structural stigma, or, the way “society’s institutions and ideological systems legitimate and perpetuate sexual stigma and the differentials in status and power that it creates” (p. 907), second,

enacted stigma, or, “the overt behavioral expression of sexual stigma through actions such as the use of antigay epithets, shunning and ostracism of sexual minority individuals, and overt discrimination and violence” (p. 908), third, felt stigma, or the ways in which “the knowledge that enacted stigma can occur under certain circumstances often motivates people to modify their behavior in order to avoid such enactments” (p. 909), and finally, internalized stigma, or “an individual’s personal acceptance of sexual stigma as a part of her or his own value system and self-concept” (p. 910). For transgender individuals as well as BDSM practitioners, this stigma has results ranging from legal discrimination to personal harassment to feelings of guilt and shame to a desire to conceal their stigmatized attribute.

These cultural stigmas have a shaping effect on how the sexual practices are experienced. Foucault (1978) argues that sexual desire is not static and intrinsic, but rather is shaped by the cultural scripts of a society and the associations that exist between certain sex practices and things like behaviors, emotions, gender, age, race and class. Similarly, stigmas are not naturally occurring, but rather, arise from social determinations that certain attributes are bad. The malleability and arbitrariness of both sexuality and stigma suggests they might have a reciprocal relationship. The stigma surrounding BDSM shapes how practitioners experience the act, and given the productive power of BDSM, the practice of BDSM can actively shape the cultural stigma assigned to it. This way of looking at desire provides space to conceptualize BDSM practices, as ways of negotiating social space, rather than just inherent desires that a person is born with and will never change.

## **Navigating Marginalized Identity Through BDSM**

There is a variety of literature discussing the impacts BDSM practices have on marginalized identity categories. Stryker (2008) draws upon autoethnographic data to theorize about the impact BDSM has on trans people, arguing that BDSM provides a space of agency. She writes:

So much that constitutes me I did not choose, but, now constituted, I feel myself to be in a place of agency. I occupy a critical space . . . in which through my presence I gain the capacity to choose which patterns I will repeat, or which new patterns I might envision and enact (p. 45).

Stryker suggests that BDSM can be a way to actively resist the cultural meanings that are assigned to her body. She invokes Butler's idea of identity being performatively constructed through patterns of behavior and argues that BDSM offers the opportunity to envision new possibilities for the performative construction of her own identity. Here, Stryker unpacks the transgender related identity work inherent in her own BDSM practice, theorizing a direct link between BDSM and the formation of gender.

BDSM can also be used by trans individuals to negotiate gender related identities in a variety of ways. "BDSM role-play in queer contexts makes the exploration of one's own gender identities possible. Such practices may lead to the reassignment and reinvention of body parts, of body-self-relationships and of body images" (Bauer, 2015, p. 1). Trans people can use BDSM practice to negotiate gender identities as they relate to their bodies. By playing with the conceptualizations and meanings assigned to certain body parts, trans people can negotiate their gender with normative expectations. For some, this reinvention of body parts leads to body modification, for others the reinvention

of body parts renders body modification obsolete. In doing so, the trans individual engages with normative gender expectations, either resisting them or coalescing to them, giving or taking.

BDSM also provides an experimental space that allows for identity negotiation. Bauer (2008) also notes, “another motivation for trans people to engage in BDSM is that . . . in BDSM spaces, one can consciously choose and navigate roles and identities for play” (p. 234). BDSM allows the freedom to try on different identities, so to speak, to see what fits and what does not, and to envision new possibilities for the identities they inhabit. This sense of choice and agency suggests BDSM provides a way to subvert the societal factors that constrain the formation of identity. Bauer (2016) illustrates this process in his discussion of queer masculinities formed through BDSM,

Trans masculinities emerging in les-bi-trans-queer BDSM practices could be a temporary sexual adventure, when crossing gender lines or intentionally making use of gender stereotypes could provide a kick. At other times or for other individuals, gender-based play in BDSM resulted in more permanent attachment to masculinities, as for Tony who started working out a boi identity in BDSM practices that entailed a series of sessions in which a boyish masculinity was co-constructed with hir partners. (p. 241)

BDSM provides the social space where various gender identities can be co-constructed with a partner through experimentation. These identities can be cemented to varying degrees and could turn into permanent aspects of the individual’s identity, or simply a temporary pleasure.

Additionally, the rich potential BDSM practice holds for the negotiation of identity can be seen in how BDSM is used to negotiate various gender and sexual identities. While commonly thought of as a sexual practice, BDSM is also practiced by asexual individuals. Sloan (2015) notes,

BDSM provides asexual individuals with uniquely effective tools for setting unconventional boundaries and reformulating dominant scripts about how sexual desire should manifest and be valued, in effect creating spaces where they can express affections that do not implicate sexual attraction. These tools enable asexual practitioners to create relationships that they experience as non-sexual through behaviors conventionally associated with sexual desire, or even by having sex. (p. 550)

Sloan's findings suggest that asexual individuals use BDSM as a form of identity negotiation. The expectation that romantic relationships necessarily be sexual in nature represent a significant barrier to asexual individuals forming these relationships. BDSM gives these individuals the opportunity to constitute their own asexual identities in a way that resists this emphasis placed on sex, experiencing sexualized practices in a non-sexual way. For trans individuals, much of the identity negotiation they undergo involves similar processes of resistance and reformulating scripts, and BDSM provides a fruitful avenue for accomplishing this.

In addition, BDSM could potentially provide a means of identity work for disabled individuals. Tellier (2017) reviews the relevant literature of BDSM, sexuality and disability, arguing that more research is needed about this intersection. She asserts, "Given that these two populations [BDSM practitioners and disabled individuals] share

common traits, further research could facilitate a healthier, more satisfying and therapeutic sexual development of persons with disabilities” (p. 491). The traditional, heteronormative, genital focused idea of sex is, for some disabled individuals, unattainable. The research Tellier calls for could reveal BDSM practices to be a rich avenue for disabled individuals to construct identities of sexual persons that resist this dominant conception of sex. Negotiating the identity of the sexual being in a way that resists the expectation for genital focused sex would be of particular interest to trans individual who experience discomfort and dysphoria surrounding their genitals. In addition to navigating marginalized identities, BDSM can be an avenue of identity work for those who have had past traumatic experiences.

### **BDSM as Healing**

While popular stereotypes surrounding BDSM paint it as a violent and painful experience, some literature suggests BDSM can be a means of healing from painful experiences. Wielle (2002) notes, “when certain kinds of conditions (loving, playful, symbolizing, paradoxical, ‘homeopathic’, etc.) are present, there is a potential for using these psychodramatic sexual scenarios in the service of both relational and intrapsychic growth” (p.157). The idea that BDSM might be loving or playful falls far outside of the stereotypical representations of BDSM. There is a fair amount of literature attempting to counter these stereotypes. Baker, Gupta, and Iantaffi (2007) found “healing narratives” on a variety of BDSM websites and literature, as well as outside representations in the media.

The use of BDSM as a means of healing takes a variety of forms. Lineman (2011) interviewed pro-dominnes (women who dominate others as a form of sex work) and

identified four ways in which BDSM can be a healing experience for participants: “They discussed sessions as healthful alternatives to sexual repression, as atonement rituals, as mechanisms for gaining control over prior trauma, and (in the case of ‘humiliation sessions’) as processes through which clients experience psychological revitalization through shame” (p. 156). Lindeman’s findings show BDSM to be a means of easing and navigating the burdens placed on people by individual and societal trauma, whether that be the pressure repress stigmatized desires, a way of processing a painful experience, or the processing of the pain an individual inflicted on another person.

In this chapter, I have defined identity, and reviewed how identities are negotiated in a socially constructed, ongoing, dynamic process. I have also defined BDSM and discussed how BDSM provides the social space to for identity formation through the navigation of marginalized positionalities, as well as healing from trauma. This body of research provides the basis for my research question:

RQ1: How does BDSM influence the identity formation of transgender individuals?

I have laid this foundation by arguing that identity is socially constructed, and that one of the forms it takes on is negotiation, and also that BDSM is a means of identity negotiation. In the next chapter, I will outline the methodology I used to collect data for this study.



### Chapter Three: Methods

*“Bad slut!”*

*I’m laying on the floor, wedged between the bed and the wall. The 19-year-old transmasculine person I was hooking up with was laying on the bed, expressing their disapproval at my limitations. We’re in a hotel room in the middle of rural Iowa. They had just twisted my nipples in a way that hurt, and not in a good way. They had done this three times prior, and I safe worded out every time. They respected my no for about 15 minutes, then would twist my nipples again. For two weeks, I would have scabs on my nipples that would constantly remind me of that weekend in fucking Iowa. With each twist, I began to realize my “no” was only a temporary suggestion. By the end of the night, I laid in the bed, motionless, with my eyes closed as their hands traversed my body. As their mouth went back and forth between my neck, mouth and genitals, I prayed that I would fall asleep. I never did.*

*As I drove up highway 35, struggling to see the road through tears, I kept asking, “why didn’t I leave?” I had a car; they didn’t. They didn’t even know where I live. If I left, they wouldn’t be able to find me, so why did I stay?*

*There is a part of my brain that understands how problematic it is to define womanhood by oppression and suffering. How can you be empowered if victimization is so core to your identity? However, there is also another part of my brain that desperately clings to the receipts from every experience of sexism and misogyny I face, hoping this will be the proof I need to show cis women I am one of them. At the drop of a hat, I can recall stories of strange men following me to my car, being hit on by men twice my age, and objectification by men (and cis women. Being visibly trans is a bitch.). I*

*don't know why I stayed, but as I drove home, part of my brain kept telling me, "welcome to womanhood."*

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the relevant literature pertaining to how identity is formed and socially constructed, how this identity formation process manifests in transgender persons, the literature pertaining to BDSM itself. This body of literature provided the theoretical foundation for my inquiry into how BDSM influences the identity formation of transgender persons. In this chapter, I outline the methods I used to generate data for my study. First, I review my approach to qualitative methods. Second, I reflexively analyze my own positionality in relation to the topic of transgender identity formation and BDSM. Finally, I detail the methodological choices made in this study.

### **Qualitative Research Methods**

Methods of qualitative research are most applicable to my study. Lincoln & Denzin (2011) define qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world . . . a set of material, interpretive practices that make the world visible” (p. 3). This approach to research is aligned with my own goals in the project because I sought to make sense of the subjective experiences of my participants and interpret them using my own subjective analytic lens. To do so, I drew upon Geertz’s (1973) idea of thick description in ethnography. He argues that the ethnographer must not only provide an account of the practices they observe, but also figure out the greater cultural significance of what they observe. While my method differed from those used in ethnography, I will still be trying to explain the greater cultural meaning of the experiences and symbols they discuss.

Guba & Lincoln (1994) outline three areas of philosophy that guide research paradigms: ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Ontology refers to the study of existence and explores questions like “what is the nature of existence?”. Epistemology refers to the study of knowing, exploring how knowledge is created and the relationship between the knower and the known. Axiology refers to the study of values, what is good or bad, important and trivial. In keeping with this three-pronged approach to understanding research, I ascribe to three different meta-theoretical assumptions that made qualitative research methods appropriate to my project.

In terms of ontology, I fall into what Tracy (2013) describes as the interpretive paradigm, which focuses on the ways in which reality is socially constructed. The interpretive paradigm maintains that truth is partial, rather than objective. The objective world does not exist apart from our perceptions, and I believe that we can never view it independent of our own perceptions. In essence, we can only view the world through a lens that is produced by discourse. Qualitative methods are most related to this position because they seek to produce knowledge by highlighting partial perspectives, rather than quantitative research, which seeks to find more objective truths. Assuming that reality is subjective, it follows that all research involves a degree of bias, and that bias is not something to be ignored but learned from through reflexive research practices, a hallmark of rigorous, qualitative practice.

In regard to epistemology, I believe knowledge is produced, rather than discovered. Positivist, quantitative paradigms of research maintain that knowledge exists out in the world, and the goal of research is to discover it. I disagree with this conceptualization, instead subscribing to the perspective that “Meaning is not discovered;

it is constructed through the interaction between consciousness and the world” (Scotland, 2012, p. 11). The physical objects that inhabit our world do not contain any inherent meaning apart from the meaning we assign to them. If one is to assume that meaning is constructed, rather than inherent, it follows that meaning can be constructed in different ways by different people, and thus, an objective knowledge of the world is impossible. This paradigm justifies qualitative methods of research so these various, differing constructions of knowledge can be understood.

My axiological position is that research is inherently value laden. Gonzalez (2013) summarizes this position in arguing that “Science is a human activity developed under the direct influence of values” (p. 1503). It is impossible to be completely objective or impartial in research, because the researcher is the one who decides what questions get asked and which ones do not, which involves an implicit value judgement: this research topic is more significant than others. This decision is not only guided by the researcher’s own subjectivity, but it has the potential to directly impact how power and resources are distributed in society. In my study I desired to work with a group that has been historically silenced to reduce the stigma put upon them. This axiological underpinning has been present from the beginning. While being aware of the implicit values in research can be part of a quantitative paradigm, it is more heavily emphasized in qualitative research. In addition to my philosophical positions, my identity as a researcher was also a significant factor in this study.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

For the purposes of reflexive, qualitative practice, I will interrogate my own positionality in regard to the topic. “Positionality is. . . determined by where one stands in

relation to ‘the other’” (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Lee, Ntseane, & Muhamad, 2001, p. 411). Because my work is qualitative in nature, the data provided by my participants was interpreted by me, the researcher. My beliefs, values and lived experiences provide a lens through which I view the world. Bourke (2014) elaborates,

The identities of both researcher and participants have the potential to impact the research process. Identities come into play via our perceptions, not only of others, but of the ways in which we expect others will perceive us. Our own biases shape the research process, serving as checkpoints along the way. (p. 1)

Because my own identity and experiences have such a profound shaping effect on my interpretations of the world around me, I will elaborate on what my own positionality is comprised of, as theorize the ways my own positionality has affected this study.

In her work on intersectionality, Crenshaw (1991) uses the case study of violence against women of color to argue that systems of oppression are intersecting, and that persons who have multiple, marginalized identities experience a unique, synergistic form of oppression. For example, the sexism faced by black women often has a racial component that separates it from the sexism experience by white women. Similarly, the racism experienced by black women often has a gendered component to it that separates it from the racism experienced by black men. As such, the experience we have from a certain identity category can never be neatly isolated from the experience we get from others, and a holistic view of positionality is necessary. I am a white, middle class raised, trans woman, who practices BDSM—and all of these positions (and many more) affected my approach to the project and the meaning I generated from the data I collected.

Initially, I am a transgender woman. I was assigned male at birth and lived in that role for the first 24 years of my life, at which point I began transitioning. In this period, my experiences were different from, but overlapping with, how cisgender men in our society are socialized. Although I did not internalize many aspects of this socialization, it has affected me to an extent. I began my transition two years ago, and my gendered experience has been rapidly shifting and difficult to pin down since then. I am familiar with the stares and attention that go along with being visibly transgender, but I currently experience a moderate amount of passing privilege, or the advantages that go along with being perceived as being cisgender. Making sense of this dynamic experience has been a major motivation for conducting this study, and more generally, for my academic interest in trans identity. My experience as a trans woman gave me first hand empathy with my participants, to an extent. A lot of the experiences conveyed by my participants, like that of the physical discomfort they experience for their bodies, or insecurities about how they are perceived by others, resonated deeply with me. However, my ability to relate to my non-binary, trans man, and trans masculine participants was much more limited. For example, I found that one of my interview questions was framed from a binary perspective that excluded certain nonbinary identities. The question “are you ever aware of your gender identity during a BDSM scene?” was met with annoyance by my one participant who was agender, or did not identify with any gender category. After they pointed out that there was nothing to be aware of, I quickly apologized for the oversight and moved on to the next question. This story highlights the limitations of my own perspective as a trans woman, and the potential for overlooking important aspects of my data from people who were not trans women. The trans community is as much of a

coalition as the LGBT community, and I was only able to relate to some of my participants' experiences in a general sense.

Another aspect of my identity I share with my participants is my practice of BDSM. I have engaged in a variety of practices involving bondage, discipline, power exchange, and pain. I identify as a submissive leaning switch, meaning I have performed both dominant and submissive roles in BDSM scenes, though I more strongly identify with the latter. My interest in BDSM and other kinky sexual practices predates my awareness of my trans identity, and I am very interested in making sense of the connection, if there is any, between my gender and my sexuality. Further, as noted before, both transness and BDSM carry a societal stigma that greatly impacts members of both communities. I hope that a greater understanding of this intersection can help lessen both stigmas. This experience gives me a general familiarity with what my participants are talking about, which allowed me to ask fewer clarifying, follow up questions. Further, my experience in BDSM helped facilitate discussion in my participants. I was candid with my participants about the fact that I practice BDSM, and most had a degree of comfort discussing their own practices in a candid and open manner. These two facts are likely, to an extent, connected. Also, I was able to use self-disclosure about my own practices as a prompt for discussion. Several participants asked me about my own experience or motivations for doing this study. I would answer these questions honestly, and my responses often spawned responses from my participants that were unique from, and often more useful than, anything prompted by my questions.

My other positionalities, in some cases, separated me from my participants in ways I was conscious of during the study. Initially, I am white. As such, I benefit from

the many privileges outlined by Macintosh (1989), including things like freedom from racial harassment and discrimination, the option to remain ignorant to racial oppression, and ample representation of members of my race. Also, fatal violence against trans women overwhelmingly affects trans women of color. I was also raised middle class, with parents who were able to provide a great deal of financial stability and pay for my college tuition. For example, my one participant of color discussed issues of generational trauma that I did not have a frame of reference to fully understand. As a current graduate student, I have experienced economic anxiety, but I do not experience the lasting effects of having grown up with it. This is significant since trans people are twice as likely to experience poverty than the general population (Edmonds, 2016). While the ways in which BDSM-related identity negotiation intersect with class did not explicitly come up during my interviews, my partial class privilege limited my ability. All of these facets of my identity influence how and why I conducted my study.

### **Participants and Recruitment**

My target demographic for my study were people who identify as transgender, practice BDSM, and are over 18 years of age. I chose this group because they have first-hand experience in the two phenomenon I wish to study. I interviewed a total of 8 participants: 3 identified as trans women, 2 identified as trans men, 2 identified as nonbinary, and one participant was agender. In terms of race, 7 of my participants were white and one was mixed Native American and white. Participants ranged in age from 18-35 years old.

To recruit my participants, I utilized a combination of convenience and snowball samplings. According to Tracy (2013), convenience sampling refers to recruiting



participants from an area that is readily accessible, and snowball sampling refers to the practice using current participants to share my recruiting message with other potential participants (p. 136). I did this by posting recruiting messages on the Facebook pages of both The Twin Cities Queer Exchange, as well as The Minnesota Transgender Health Coalition, and made announcements at the transgender support group I attend. In these messages, I encouraged people to share my recruitment message with others who may be able to participate but who might not have been part of these groups. This approach was ideal for two reasons. First, since I had limited resources for travel to conduct my research, I limited my participants to within the geographic area of the Mankato and the Twin Cities areas, or those with the ability to interview over skype. Second, Tracy (2013) notes that snowball sampling is a useful way to recruit participants from tight-knit or marginalized communities (p. 136). The trans community fits both of these descriptions.

After a potential participant contacted me to indicate their interest, I followed up with them via email or phone call. At that point, I discussed the purpose of the study with them, the eligibility criteria, what their participation would entail, and sent them the consent form to review and the recruitment message to pass along to other potentially interested individuals. If the individual still wanted to participate at that point, I asked them to schedule an in-depth, interview in a location that was convenient and private for them. Second, when I met with the individual for the interview, I reviewed the consent form and had them sign it. I brought paper copies of the consent form to face-to-face interviews. Once I had the consent form, I conducted the interview, for which the time

commitment ranged from 16-54 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded, with participants' permission, and transcribed.

### **Interviewing Practices**

To generate data for this study, I conducted respondent interviews. Respondent interviews are useful when participants “all hold similar subject positions and have appropriate experiences, which attend to the research goals” (Tracy, 2013, p. 141). After obtaining IRB approval, I conducted a total of 8 interviews lasting a total of 292 minutes. I used a combination of open and closed ended questions in my interviews. I began with basic questions about identity and BDSM practices such as “how would you describe your gender identity?” and “what sorts of BDSM practices do you engage in?” to get a sense of who my participants were and what sexual practices they engaged in. I then moved into open ended questions that got my participants to reflect on their experiences with BDSM, giving them broad discretion in terms of what they talk about, such as “could you tell me about a specific experience or relationship involving BDSM?” Then I moved on to questions that got my participants to connect their sexual and gendered experiences through questions like “When are you most aware of your gender during a scene?” and “What are the sexual expectations of a member of your gender?” Finally, I asked questions that expanded the focus to other identity categories, in anticipation that, for my participants with multiple marginalized identities, the construction of their gender identity may not be distinct from their race, class, or other identities.

To generate data for analysis I transcribed my interviews into a document of 38 pages. To analyze my data, I engaged in a process of thematic analysis. Aronson (1995) outlines the procedures of thematic analysis, which involve “identifying all data that

relate to the already classified patterns . . . combining and cataloguing related patterns into sub-themes . . . and building a valid argument for choosing the themes” (pp. 2-3). This approach was well suited to my study because I anticipated commonalities among how my participants use, or don’t use, BDSM practices to construct their identities. It allowed me to find patterns in the partial experience without having to generalize beyond their experience.

To analyze my data, I conducted a thematic analysis using a process of inductive analysis. Braun & Clarke (2006) explain, “Inductive analysis is . . . a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions. In this sense, this form of analysis is data-driven” (p. 83). Throughout the coding and analysis process, I used bottom-up approach of beginning with the data, and moving to larger ideas, rather than starting with larger theories and applying them to my data set. This proved to be particularly useful because the data collected from my participants differed from my expectations. Initially, I expected to investigate the ways in which the gender identity of trans individuals was negotiated through BDSM. My data, however, suggested that much of the identity work that is done through BDSM is not gender related, and some participants explicitly separated their BDSM practice from their gender. As such, I ended up slightly adjusting the way I framed my research after the coding process.

After transcribing my interviews, I began initial coding, assigning a descriptive code to each participant response. I did this using a process Charmaz (2006) calls incident by incident coding (p. 52). Incident coding refers to assigning a descriptive code to chunks of dialogue that fit together and discuss the same idea, so to speak. After

assigning the initial codes, I then combined said codes to make larger themes, which try to illustrate “something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). I combined my important descriptive codes into a list of 8 potential themes, which I then combined and narrowed down into five initial themes: BDSM as identity work, BDSM as fantasy, embodied confirmation, enactment of power, and BDSM as trauma survivorship. I later combined BDSM as identity work and BDSM as fantasy into a single theme, making the latter a subtheme of the former. Finally, I settled on four themes that best depicted the experiences of my participants, *BDSM as identity work*, *BDSM as power enactment*, *embodied confirmation*, and *BDSM as trauma survivorship*.

## Chapter Four: Analysis

*“Yes, Daddy.”*

*It was the first time I wore a collar and leash, and I was feeling submissive. I enjoy being bratty, teasing and disobeying my dominant, testing the limits of how far I can go until I get punished. This time, I was too horny to be a brat. I was completely and unquestioningly theirs. With every pull of the leash, I was at their attention. I moaned with pleasure as they squeezed my nipples, making sure not to twist. I would have done anything to please them. I wasn't carrying that weekend in fucking Iowa with me, I was free. They would occasionally check in and ask if it was ok to do something, and I would always answer with “whatever you want to do to me.” For the first time in months, I completely meant that.*

*One of my biggest worries at this time was that I would never be submissive again, and that submissive headspace that used to bring me so much joy would be just a distant memory. For the first time in my life, I would zone out during sex, and would struggle a lot to stay in the moment. I would get bored when we made out, which would only remind me of that night in Iowa. Only a few weeks prior, I safe worded out of a scene. My partner stopped the scene immediately, like they always do, and cradled my head against their chest. My heart started pounding against my ribcage. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I didn't feel upset, but my body had its own agenda. Something about that collar and leash allowed me to leave all that behind. The person from Iowa hadn't stolen my submissive side. I took it back. It's fucking mine.*

In previous chapters, I have reviewed the relevant literature about BDSM and identity formation and outlined my research methodology for this study. In this chapter, I

will discuss the results of my interviews. The ways in which trans persons use BDSM practices to construct and negotiate identity can be broken down into four themes: BDSM as identity negotiation, enactment of power, embodied confirmation, and BDSM as trauma survivorship.

### **BDSM as Identity Negotiation**

As I have previously argued, certain aspects of BDSM, such as role playing and power dynamics, make BDSM a potentially rich avenue for the construction and negotiation of identity. Negotiation is an apt metaphor with which to conceptualize the identity work done through BDSM. At its core, negotiation is both cooperative and competitive. Participants work together to come to an agreement while advocating for their own interests, which are often at odds with the interests of the other negotiating party. Negotiations have winners and losers. Similarly, BDSM is necessarily an interaction between two (or more) people. Troy (he/him), a 19-year-old, trans man, echoed a sentiment expressed by most of my participants when he defined BDSM as “Anything that is relatively kinky that involves more of power dynamic within the sexual encounter than what is generally typical of a vanilla situation.” This aspect of power allows participants to take on symbolic roles that often invoke power imbalances in society, as well as the tension between the individual’s desire to define themselves, and the definitions society imposes on them. This personification of society allows participants to symbolically negotiate with the forces that seek to control and constrain them. Throughout my interviews, my participants demonstrated how BDSM can be used to negotiate identity through escaping roles imposed by society and playing with identities.

### **Escaping Roles Imposed by Society**

To begin, my participants used BDSM as a means of identity negotiation by escaping. BDSM provides a place of respite, a compartmentalized space where participants can rid themselves of the pressures and expectations placed on them in their daily interactions. Essentially, participants agreed to certain identities imposed on them, but got some vacation time in the negotiation. For some, escaping involved the performance of personality traits that were the opposite of their daily, public persona. For example, while discussing what it feels like to engage in BDSM Andrea (she/her), a 34-year-old, white, trans woman explained, “It feels freeing. I’m very much a take charge, control person. I have a lot of things on my to-do list, and I work diligently to cross them off and it’s nice to let someone else take the wheel for a while.” Andrea is a military veteran, current employee of the Social Security Administration, and a single mom. Here, a sexually submissive persona functions as a vacation, if you will, from the many obligations and responsibilities that come with a professional career, as well as parenthood.

Similarly, L.J. (they/them), a 24-year old, white, lower middle class, agender person whose aesthetic can be comfortably described as punk, noted, “I give off this fuck off/bitch vibe, but be a sub in the sheets. I’ll beat the shit out of someone who looks at me wrong in the streets, but in bed, beat me up for once.” L.J. contrasted the submissive role they play in BDSM with an intimidating public persona. BDSM provides L.J. with a safe space to show vulnerability, a space where the pressures that necessitate such an imposing presence do not exist. Both participants, through the creation of a submissive persona, created a social space where they can escape the expectations of their daily lives.

The escaping of societal pressures and expectation was particularly important for people who reported being neurodivergent. Petra (she/her), a 22-year-old, white, trans woman and college student, for example, discussed having autism and severe ADHD, and the struggles she has with picking up on social cues and norms, as well as productivity. While discussing what motivated me to take on this project, she noted,

It's not as much as not having to be a guy, as not having to be a functional human being, a functional adult human being. Being so not in control that I don't have to worry about any sort of executive function or complex thought and I can just be.

For Petra, BDSM provides a space to escape an identity that is mandated for her, that of an adult human. The identity of adulthood in a capitalist society carries with it a host of obligations and responsibilities ranging from meeting deadlines of productivity, to running errands, to tuning out background stimuli, to decoding nonverbals of other people. For neurodivergent people, these expectations can be prohibitively difficult. The idea of using BDSM as a respite from the expectations of an ableist society was also expressed by Korra (she/her) a white, trans female:

It's very relaxing. It's very freeing in a way. The parts of my mind that are always busy and stressed can kind of shut down. I thought about it and I don't know if it's just, I'm stuck right now and none of those other problems matter now. I have some anxiety issues. I do a lot of stressful work. I worry about a lot.

My findings suggest that the fantasy space of BDSM provides a temporary respite from those expectations, allowing participants to “recharge the batteries” so to speak, and renewing their emotional energy for performing the identities that are mandatory.



Finally, L.J. brought up the idea of BDSM as escape when they expressed frustration with the expectation that they engage in stereotypical gender play, “A lot of people, particularly binary trans people, don’t actually see us as we are, particularly agender people. We’re expected to pick one for the scene when there is not one to pick.” For people who exist outside of the gender binary, the constant assigning of gendered meaning to their clothes, actions and nonverbals can be a deeply disempowering experience. By placing a hard limit on stereotypical gender play, L.J. is able to escape the pressures of a society that does not allow individuals to opt out of gender. By constructing places of respite through BDSM, my participants were able to negotiate the identities that they could not choose to opt out of as part time, rather than full time, giving them the occasional, much needed vacation.

### **Playing with Identities**

In addition to escaping ascribed identities, my participants used BDSM to perform a sort of identity play. BDSM provides a compartmentalized, proverbial safe space where different roles and identities can be tried on, similar to how a person would try on an outfit before buying it from a store. These identities range from to possible, to the impossible, from the uncontroversial to the radical, from political to pleasure driven. The identity play of BDSM allows practitioners to, in a sense, see which of the identities fit, and which, if any, they want to incorporate into their more public persona. As such, these identities can be temporary or cemented into more permanent parts of the individual’s sense of self. Troy, for example, explicitly discusses the idea of taking on a persona:

It's fun to take on a persona, which I think is probably typical. Mine is a bit more feminine, and I sort of throw gender out the window when it comes to sex because I feel like it doesn't need to play a role.

Earlier in the interview, Troy discussed how he typically communicates his gender to others. He contrasted a more masculine performance at work and with strangers, with a slightly more feminine performance with friends and people he knows are supportive. BDSM provides Troy with a safe supportive space to play with identity. He constructs a persona that matches the identity he communicates when he is with supportive, understanding friends, and has the most choice in how he presents. Further, BDSM offers a context in which the femininity he embodies is not used to invalidate his manhood, which it often would in a more public setting. For Troy, the persona he plays with in BDSM occupies a space outside of the everyday pressures faced by men who perform femininity, suggesting that playing with identity represents a pull factor that works in tandem with the push factor of needing to escape everyday pressures to lead transgender people towards BDSM practices.

The use of BDSM to play with masculinity and femininity was also seen in my interview with Bill (he/him), a 27-year-old, white, trans man who works in construction.

As Bill explained,

In a lot of scenes, I play a male figure, I do role play, and it's always been a more masculine figure. I do also I explore feminine qualities in myself as well. I realized in being comfortable as a male, I also became comfortable in my femininity as well. Whereas, before, I feel like my femininity was something I

had to hide. Now, I'm being myself and those feminine qualities are part of me, but they're not bad.

For binary trans people, the toxic mixture of insecurity, and societal gender assignments can create an intense pressure to rid oneself of all markers associated with one's assigned gender. Bill's response demonstrates how BDSM can be used to navigate this pressure. He played with male roles that exhibited a mix of so called masculine and feminine traits, thereby, widening the range of possibilities invoked by the term man, ever so slightly. The role Bill played with in BDSM became cemented in the form of an increased comfort with both his maleness and the feminine qualities he has.

The use of BDSM as identity play can also be seen in Andrea's discussion of the relationship between the submissive role she plays in BDSM scenes and her gender identity. She conceptualized the two as being separate, but also noted,

When it comes to play, sometimes it can be fun to play with those gender roles, even if they're not flattering or empowering or feminist. I think that kinda goes back to the fact that I just like to play with gender in general. I just like to fuck with gender in general. So playing with those gender roles in intimacy is an extension of me just having fun with gender.

Andrea's response reflects a great deal of negotiation in terms of identity. She actively separated her womanhood from the sexually submissive role she plays with but is still forced to engage with the cultural stereotypes of women being naturally submissive. She negotiates this societal attitude by conceptualizing her BDSM practice as a way of influencing, or "fucking with" the concept of gender, rather than her BDSM practice being a result of her gender identity. This reversal constructs both identities outside of

dominant cultural understandings and demonstrates the negotiation that takes place in BDSM related identity formation. Additionally, she plays with an identity that she views as being opposed to the empowered, feminist identity she performs publicly, showing how some identities put on during BDSM do not become cemented and permanent, but remain compartmentalized and temporary.

BDSM can also be used to play with identities that are not available to participants in a more permanent, public manner. This could be seen in Bill's discussion of his practice of age play, or role play involving an adult/child dynamic,

With impact play, I do also take the position of daddy or parental figure. I have worked with littles before. At first, I was a little adverse about them. I myself am not a little, but I don't mind taking care of them. I actually kind of enjoy it. I really enjoy nurturing, I guess. The littles I have dealt with I really do enjoy being there for them and just kind of taking care of them. Some, depending on the age range, it's kind of... it's a safe way to play with the idea of having a child.

For Bill, BDSM gave him the space to explore lived experiences of a parent, which are usually not accessible to people who do not have or take care of children. This allowed him to cultivate a nurturing aspect of his personality. In doing so, he asserts his gender in a way that pushes back against a society that stereotypes the nurturing of children as feminine and denies men the social space to be nurturing. Bill's practice of age play shows how BDSM can function as a testing grounds for identity, where identities can be tried on to see what fits, so to speak. Through age play, he explores qualities associated with the identity of a parent, an identity he does not currently occupy, but may occupy in

the future. Bill also mentioned identities that would be physically impossible to embody in daily life,

My results have shown that BDSM practices gives trans individuals the social space to engage in identity play, to try on different roles, and see which fit the best. This allows participants, to continue the metaphor, to decide which roles to wear out in public, and which to wear only in private. As my participants have demonstrated, through BDSM practices, transgender individuals are able to construct and negotiate various identities. On one hand, society places pressures and expectations on them. BDSM becomes a place of respite where trans individuals can escape these expectations. Conversely, BDSM is also used as a safe, compartmentalized, testing ground where new identities and roles may be tried on and experimented with. In this sense, the identity play done through BDSM involves a sort of metaphorical migration. Moving away from where society has placed us, as well as a moving to a place we may want to occupy. Now that the connection between BDSM and identity formation has been established, I will discuss three different ways this identity formation manifests itself through the BDSM practice of trans individuals: Enactment of Power, Embodied Confirmation, and BDSM as Trauma Survivorship.

### **Enactment of Power**

*I recently changed the settings on my Tinder account so I would start matching with men, mostly as a social experiment. I would swipe right on everyone, just to see how many people I would match with and holy shit, straight boys are thirsty. Add a line here about how many or what kind of guys you were matching with. I had the intention of sending ridiculous messages to the men I matched with, just to fuck with them, but mostly,*

*they seemed like nice enough guys, or were men of color and probably had enough with bullshit from white people, and I didn't have the heart to do it. However, there was a brand of macho, hyper-masculine, white man who goes to the gym in a cutoff tank top and drinks from a gallon jug of water. They were the men I choose to mess with. My usual opening line to them was "send nudes."*

While identity can be thought of as a negotiation, this negotiation does not happen exclusively between individuals, but rather is shaped by the societal context a person lives in. In addition to the individual and their interaction partner(s), society functions as a proverbial third person in the room, who is actively negotiated with in communicative encounters. Power is rarely distributed evenly throughout a society. Therefore, negotiating one's identity with this third person in the room involves negotiating with dominant structures in society that serve to privilege or oppress individuals. My data suggest that the identity work and play that happens through BDSM are not politically neutral. Instead, BDSM actively engages in practices that resist dominant structures of power in society and empower those individuals who are most denied power by society. This resistance, in turn, allows the participants to construct their identities in a way that disrupt the level of privilege or marginalization society places on them. The negotiation with dominant structures of power can be seen through a maintaining of geniality for marginalized partners, as well as a suspension of geniality for white, cisgender men.

### **Not Punching Down: Maintaining Geniality with Marginalized Partners**

In standup comedy, there is a saying that is often used to gauge whether or not humor is socially responsible: "Don't punch down." This saying means humor should be used as a tool of liberation, and the butt of the joke should be those who hold power in a

society. “Punching down” refers to using humor to mock someone who is more marginalized than the humorist, making the humor a tool that reinforces societal oppression, rather than disrupting it. This metaphor of “punching down” provides a useful framework for understanding how my participants enact power in their BDSM related identity work.

**Maintaining geniality with non-white partners.** In the context of BDSM, identity is formed not just through the practices participants engaged in, but also, the ones they chose not to engage in. Overall, my participants expressed a degree of discomfort with play that replicated societal power structures in terms of a privileged person dominating a more marginalized person. For example, when asked about race, several of my white participants cited the specific, hypothetical example of a white person topping or dominating a person of color. As Petra, a 23 year old, white, autistic, lesbian, trans woman expresses her hesitation to top, or play the dominant role in a BDSM scene, with a black person, “As a white person, that gets problematic again. At least, it would be hard for me to top a black person, but I would have no problem bottoming to one or submitting to one in a d/s [dominant/submissive] relationship.” This sentiment was echoed by Bill, who explained:

A part of me feels uncomfortable when I see a white person dominating a person of color. For me, that really does bother me, even though the person of color may want it. If I walked in and saw a white person doing impact play on a person of color, I would automatically think of history.

As a white person myself, I certainly understood this discomfort. While interviewing Bill, who was the first participant to raise this issue, I audibly gasped at the image of a slave

and slave owner that popped into my head. However, the choice to not top a person of color goes beyond empathetic discomfort. White people in the United States are not actively limited by their race. By enacting a hard limit on dominating people of color, my white participants chose to limit their erotic opportunities specifically because they are white, thereby renouncing a small part of the privilege they benefit from and constructing an identity of the responsible white person in a racist society.

The hesitation to replicate societal oppression by my white participants was also shared by my one participant of color. The hesitation to engage with racial dynamics is also evidenced by Sarah (she/her) a mixed white/Native American nonbinary person and graduate student, who expressed her frustration with white men suggesting certain race play scenes upon learning about her Native American heritage.

Pocahontas was a young child who was raped by young settlers and removed from her home. There's nothing attractive about that. The act of sexual violence or coercive sex acts against non-white people by white people is a tool of genocide. That's the very reason why I'm a mixed native person. Someone in my family used coercive arrangements in their lives to try to exploit native people from wherever we came from. You can't tell someone with that kind of trauma in their life, that you want them to braid their hair.

Similar to Petra and Bill, Sarah also constructed a racial identity through the enactment and enforcement of hard limits based on race. She actively chooses not to replicate the historical atrocities that were used to erase native peoples throughout their history.

Further, the white men she enforces this boundary with become a stand-in for the white men who committed the historical sexual violence that shapes her own racial identity.



This recasting resists the dominant narrative of Native Americans being victims who no longer exist, to one of agency and empowerment.

By enacting hard limits based on the race of themselves and their play partners, my participants negotiated their identities in a way that actively subverted the privilege or marginalization they are assigned by society. In doing so, my participants create a social space that resists the historical and current structures that serve to unevenly distribute power across society.

### **Maintaining geniality with non-men partners.**

The hesitation to punch down also extends to gendered power dynamics. My participants expressed a general aversion to scenes where men were dominating women. This aversion was expressed both by participants who were men and women. Bill, for example, explained:

I have noticed, from myself, when it comes to things like impact play, I have a harder time doing it with cis females or trans females just because, I don't know if it's this idea I have in my head that it's not nice to hit a girl, but it's something that's there.

Similarly, Petra stated: "One of the reasons I don't submit to men is. . . I understand it's not sexist if that's what the woman wants, [but] for me, I associate it as such. It feels sexist to me." Even Sarah, a nonbinary individual, said "I've always been creeped out by a man hitting a woman in the face. It's one of those things I've been like, 'wow, never.'"

All three of these participants described a BDSM context that, on its surface, resembles patriarchal forms of violence and abuse, distancing themselves from this uncomfortable association while pointing out the underlying consent that separates

BDSM from abuse. In doing so, they recognize the choice and free will of the women participating in such scenes. In the balancing of their own awareness of patriarchal violence and aversion to it, with the desire to respect and acknowledge the agency of the women participating in these scenes, all three participants attempted to construct various feminist identities. They chose not to replicate the societal gender roles that places women in a submissive and subservient position to men, stopped short of declaring it uniformly problematic, granting women the social space to participate in it, if they so choose.

Through the enactment and enforcement of sexual boundaries, transgender individuals construct socially conscious identities through the choice to resist enacting power over those more marginalized, or to refuse others who are more privileged to enact power over them. By maintaining or insisting on this geniality, participants resist and subvert the social hierarchy that places more marginalized individuals at the bottom. Conversely, there is willingness to enact power over individuals who are perceived to be more privileged.

### **Punching Up: Suspending Geniality with Cisgender White Men**

Just as my participants expressed a resistance against replicating power imbalances that target women and people of color during their BDSM play, they also showed a great willingness to “punch up” or take on more dominant roles with sexual partners who identified as cisgender, white men. This tendency towards feeling more dominant with partners who are cis white men was specifically mentioned by several participants. Perhaps this desire represents a hidden commitment to “fucking the

patriarchy” by casting cis white male partners in submissive roles that subvert the power from which they typically benefit. In our interview, L.J. explained:

I’m more dominant with cis men. It’s really easy to act like you are better than them when you feel you truly are better than them. I charge cis men \$20 to talk to me online, and if they want to meet, it has to be at the restaurant of my choice, pay me \$40, and tip well, 20%. I’ve gotten many a meal that way.

L.J. consciously rejects the social hierarchy that places cis white males at the top, to the extent that the cis men are required to pay money for the privilege of talking to them online. They do this through a general attitude of superiority to the men they date, as well as an assertion of dominance over the terms of the relationship, thereby, claiming power that is traditionally assigned to white, cis males. Further, the United States has developed a culture of “the customer is always right,” where those who are spending money on a good or service are given a great deal of power over those who are providing that good or service. L.J.’s treatment of the men they date subverts this capitalist power imbalance, and shows a commitment to punching up.

In addition to increased feelings of dominance, there seemed to be a willingness to suspend the limits of geniality for cis white men. I can assure you, demanding nudes in the opening Tinder message is not something I would do to a non-man or non-white person. The amount of time I have lived as an openly, visibly trans woman has taught me how exhausting and draining it can be to deal with cisgender people and their microaggressions, and has made me more sensitive to the microaggressions that might make me exhausting for others to deal with. For cis-hetero white men, however, there are

not microaggressions to worry about. They don't exist. Sarah also touched on this contrast in her interview, stating:

The very few times I've engaged sexually at all with people who aren't white, it's that much more care that goes into it. From the get go. [But] with white people, it's like, take it as it comes. I'm trying to not feel bad about this, but I just no-holds barred don't care about thinking about what's a no-go or not with cis-het white men. It's more likely that I'm controlling the situation than them.

The level of geniality Sarah extends to her play partners corresponds to her perception of the amount of privilege the partner benefits from. Non-white partners are more likely to be exposed to traumatic situations stemming from their marginalized position in society, so she puts more thought and care into playing with them. White partners are more likely to be insulated from such experiences, so she de-emphasizes practices that maintain and establish active consent, assuming that whatever she wants to do is fair game.

On the surface, this suspension of geniality makes sense. The societal privilege cis white males benefit from serves to insulate them from a lot of the sources of trauma faced by those who are more marginalized; in a sense, there are fewer proverbial landmines to worry about stepping on when playing with a cis, white man. Beyond that, this suspension of geniality represents a resistance to the societal expectation that cis, white men's feelings and egos are paramount and worthy of protecting. In the U.S., marginalized people are expected to act with sensitivity to cis, white male feelings, which are notoriously fragile (DiAngelo, 2017). For example, women are pressured to "water down" their personalities so as not to emasculate the men around them, and people of color are expected quietly accept racism because accusations of racism might hurt white

feelings. Ignoring the feelings of a cis white man and dominating them runs counter to this expectation, and is a way of constructing any trans, non-white, or non-male identity in a way that is more empowered and wields more agency.

My participants actively negotiated their identities through the enactment of power. This enactment of power manifested itself in terms of a maintaining of geniality and increased amount of care given to marginalized partners, as well as a corresponding suspension of geniality for partners who are white, cisgender men. In doing so, my participants subvert the societal hierarchy by flipping it on its head and privileging the most marginalized individuals at the expense of the most privileged. In doing so, they negotiate their identities in a way that opposes and subverts the way power is distributed throughout society.

### **Embodied Confirmation**

The formation of transgender identities represents a point of conflict. On one side is a society that assigns and reassigns gender based on genitals and secondary sex characteristics. On the other side is the individual struggling to assert their own agency over their bodies and resisting the cultural meanings assigned to their body parts. This conflict can be seen in Sarah's response to being asked to describe her gender identity. She initially said, "a fucking mess," and later clarified, "I mean, I guess if I had, like, smaller breasts, that would be cool. I would really like that. Just to be more androgynous would be pretty fricking cool, just to be able to pick and choose. I guess I would say nonbinary." Her desire to appear androgynous conflicts directly with the gendered, cultural association of femininity attached to larger breasts.

As such, the trans body becomes a contested site of identity negotiation. Individuals are free to identify as they see fit, but in order to have their trans identity recognized, many trans people often have to modify their bodies and appearances in order to look the part, so to speak. As Koyama (2001) argues, physical gender dysphoria, or the depression and mental pain caused by an incongruence between who a person views themselves as and how their physical body is configured, stems directly from dichotomous gender roles. Koyama asserts that if it were not for these gender roles, physical dysphoria would be less prevalent, perhaps nonexistent. My participants navigated the contested meaning placed on their bodies by de-gendering bodies, selecting affirming partners, and eliciting embodied reactions that enable identity negotiation.

### **De-gendering Acts of BDSM**

My interview participants navigated the contested meaning projected onto their bodies through BDSM in a variety of ways. Some participants navigated this by dissociating their gender from the BDSM acts they participate in, oftentimes by moving the locus of their gender to other areas besides the symbols and acts that are traditionally gendered. For example, when discussing their frustration with being expected to engage in stereotypical gender play, L.J. asserts, “clothes don’t define my gender. I dress high femme because I like that aesthetic, not because I’m a woman.” L.J. effectively resists the gendered meanings that are assigned to their clothes as well as the expectations placed on their body as a result of wearing them by refusing to engage in certain types of play.

Troy also demonstrated de-gendering when asked if he ever felt aware of his gender during a scene, stating:

Gender for me, is all about the social aspect, and sex is more of a biological thing to me. I really don't feel gender when I'm in a sexual situation. I don't have any bottom dysphoria because it's not really visible to other people. I do have a lot of top dysphoria, because people can see my breasts, and that's one of the big things, but when I'm in a sexual situation I'm with someone who is aware of my gender and aware of the situation and it doesn't matter what my body is at the time.

Troy pushes back against the coercive assignment of gender in two ways. First, he refuses to internalize gender in a sexual setting, conceptualizing it as social and separate from the biological activity of sex. Second, he plays with partners who are aware of his gender, and presumably do not reinforce the cultural meanings assigned to his body parts. Conversely, Troy experiences more gender dysphoria in social settings, where he has less control over who he interacts with, and directed at his breasts, which are more visible and more likely to be gendered. By resisting the gendered meanings associated with the acts of BDSM they engage in, L.J. and Troy both negotiate their identities against these expectations. The significance of scene partners leads into my next subtheme.

### **Selecting Affirming Partners**

Through the selection of partners who reinforce their gender identity, trans people can negotiate their gender identities in ways that resist their gender assigned at birth. This can be seen in Bill's reflection on his relationship with a prominent dominatrix in his local BDSM community:

I've been serving [performing personal tasks for as an act of submission] Mistress Margaret for over a year now. When I first started serving with her, I was afraid to go out topless because of my breasts and the fact that I can't afford top surgery

right now. But over time, because of the people, because of them, I go out in public now and have my chest exposed, and I am still identified as a male, despite some of my physical, what people consider physical recognitions of gender. I guess that's really comforting.

Bill's response speaks to both the push and pull of the identity negotiation involved in transgender identity formation. He notes how having affirming partners has made him more comfortable with body parts that are heavily gendered by society, but still references future plans to undergo top surgery, thereby removing the body part that is heavily gendered. Bill strikes a compromise between resisting the coercive gendering of his body and altering his body to avoid said gendering.

Having affirming partners is a benefit to the construction of trans identity. Conversely, partners that are not affirming can constrain for formation of trans identity and reinforce cisnormative gender assignments. Andrea, for example, explained:

Sexual intimacy is somewhat difficult for me. I'm a person whose genital configuration doesn't line up with how I perceive myself and how I wish to be perceived in intimate encounters. So, I guess I'm especially sensitive to any indication that my partner may not be seeing me as fully female. Usually it's just me being super paranoid or whatnot, but it's usually on my mind in some way.

Andrea's response demonstrates two major roadblocks to trans identity formation: the reinforcement of cisnormativity by romantic partners, as well as the anticipation of cisnormativity in others. Andrea's discusses her fear over being perceived as male due to her genitals but qualifies it by saying she is usually just paranoid. Her response shows how her identity is constrained not only by the play partners who do not affirm her self-



image, but also by her own perception that a partner may not be affirming, regardless of how accurate that perception is. In Andrea's case, the identity negotiation is done not only between her and her current partner, but also includes past partners, and the scars their lack of affirmation has left. The fact that penises are euphemistically referred to as one's "manhood" speaks to how heavily gendered that body part is. For trans women and trans feminine people who have not had bottom surgery, how their genitals are referred to or interacted with has the potential to invoke these cultural meanings and invalidate the gender that individual is trying to assert. Andrea's decision to use the phrase "genital configuration" was likely a conscious choice done for precisely this reason. The partner a trans individual plays with can either create a space that is free of these cultural meanings, or saturated with them.

### **Eliciting Embodied Responses**

In addition to de-gendering their own body parts, and seeking out affirming partners, my participants also constructed identity through BDSM practices that elicited a certain embodied experience. For some participants, the incorporation of symbols that carry a high degree of gendered meaning into BDSM practice can create an embodied response that shapes a person's sense of self. Roxas (they/them), a white, 24 year old, neurodivergent, fluidly gendered, nonbinary person explained,

The only time I really feel aware of my gender is when my girlfriend is sucking my dick. I just feel a lot more masculine in that moment, and my orgasms feel different as well. They feel deeper, they don't really reverberate as much. It might just be a psychological thing, since I'm aware of that being how you get

orgasms if you're on testosterone. It's also really funny because there's no nerve endings in my cock. It's purple and sparkly and I keep it in my nightstand.

The phallus, as I have previously discussed, is rich in cultural associations with men and masculinity. The use of this symbol in the form of a strap-on dildo gives Roxas an internal feeling of masculinity, leading to a corresponding change in the embodied experience of orgasming. BDSM practices seems to create a kind of feedback loop, where participants engage in practices that create a certain embodied response. This embodied response affects their sense of self, which in turn, impacts how their bodies react to the BDSM practices.

The potential for BDSM to create an embodied response that shapes the identities of trans individuals can also be seen in Korra not participating in feminization related hypnosis play:

I know there's a crossover with the hypnosis community: people trying to explore their femininity through using hypnosis to help them get into that headspace, but that's never really a road I went down. I did talk to my girlfriend about, when I was trying to understand who I was, maybe trying to help me feel my body differently. She explicitly refused because she didn't want to unintentionally influence me when I was in a suggestible state. If I came to this point that this who I am, that it's entirely who I am.

Hypnosis play involves placing the submissive in a suggestible state that allows the dominant partner to exert a great deal of control over the submissive's actions and state of mind. As Korra notes, hypnosis can be a powerful tool for eliciting embodied reactions, such as feeling one's body differently, which, in turn, could affect the

individual's sense of self. However, the suggestible state of the submissive partner takes a great deal of identity negotiation power away from the submissive partner. Korra's girlfriend refuses to engage in feminization related hypnosis play for the same reason one might hesitate to negotiate a contract with someone who is currently too drunk to consent to a legal agreement.

For some, trans related identity work led them to certain BDSM practices. For example, Petra explained:

As part of transition, I was getting laser hair removal, which hurts a lot. I realized, there are people called masochists who enjoy pain. Maybe I can enjoy that trick?

I started by pinching myself and trying to dissociate pain from the negative feel.

Worked fantastically.

Laser hair removal represents a piece of identity work on the part of trans individuals through the removal of secondary sex characteristics that are commonly gendered as male. In this case, Petra's identity work—specifically, the embodied experience of pain during laser hair removal—led her to an interest in BDSM, suggesting the relationship between BDSM and trans identity work may be reciprocal.

BDSM affords trans individuals an opportunity to negotiate the cultural meanings that are superimposed on their bodies, through de-gendering, the selection of affirming partners, and eliciting certain embodied reactions. The cycle begins with an action, a specific act done in a BDSM scene. This action is used to negotiate identity through the cultural meanings assigned to it, as well as the embodied reaction it creates. These two factors act on each other in a reciprocal relationship. The meanings associated with an act influence how to feels, and how the act feels shape the meanings that are associated

with the act. The scene partner the trans individual plays with affects both the associated meanings and embodied reactions, and functions as a negotiation partner of identity. The partner can either work with or against the trans individual, resisting the gender they were assigned at birth, or reinforcing it.

### **BDSM as Trauma Survivorship**

The construction of the identity of survivor of trauma is a balancing act. On one hand, the survivor must acknowledge the traumatic event, as repressing and refusing to process a traumatic event is rarely an effective coping strategy. On the other hand, the survivor must find a way to transcend their experience, and not let it define them. My interviews highlighted how BDSM can be a rich avenue for the construction and negotiation of survivor identities. In essence, BDSM allows the space for the processing and healing of trauma that allows individuals to transcend their painful experiences. The idea that BDSM can be an avenue of growth and transcendence of trauma is summed up by Bill, who explained:

The reason people do BDSM is not to be broken down, it's to expose yourself in a really vulnerable way with someone, and sometimes through role play, and work through something within yourself. I feel like BDSM is something that should build you up and help you grow.

My participants were able to achieve this growth and construct identities of trauma survivors by doing two things. First, they reenacted the traumatic event, or an event that is reminiscent of the traumatic event. Second, they add a wrinkle to the scene, a change that separates the scene from the traumatic event that makes the experience more

empowering. This two-step process of replication and modification allows the individual to process and transcend the trauma.

Initially, because many BDSM practices are dangerous if not done correctly, practitioners use a system of safe words to establish and maintain consent. These usually take the form of a red/yellow/green system, green meaning the scene may continue, yellow is used to stop the action and discuss something that is not working, and red is used to end the scene immediately. For Roxas, this consent system provided the wrinkle they needed to construct an identity of survivorship on their own terms.

Basically, when a lot of my PTSD things were happening, I was taking a sexual assault advocacy course, and I was trying to incorporate trauma informed care and sex practices into my sex life. The other partner really wasn't reciprocating it in a lot of ways. A lot of the reasons why I constantly check in on people, and I check in to make sure people are ok, is because of past experiences. [pause] I know while we're in this scene, it feels like I've given up control or they've given up control, but at any moment, we can stop this, we can do something else, and it, ironically, creates this strong sense of safety, that I don't get in relationships that don't involve heavy BDSM practices.

For Roxas, BDSM gave them the structures and norms to revisit an experience that is similar to a traumatic event, in this case, sex with a significant other who did not respect their consent, with the wrinkle of having the red/yellow/green system to establish consent. This change allowed Roxas to revisit sex in a way that ensures their bodily autonomy through the use of check-ins and safe words, thereby restoring the agency denied to them by their previous abusive relationship.

Additionally, the bodily sensations involved in BDSM practices can serve to separate a scene from the original traumatic event. When I asked L.J., who had experienced a five year long abusive relationship, about why they engage in impact and pain play, they noted,

Is it edgy to say it's actually nice to feel something for once? Vanilla sex has me dissociating most of the time, and that tends to break me out of it. I'll dissociate through an entire vanilla sex session, but with pain, I'll be present.

Dissociating during sex is a common coping mechanism associated with sexual trauma (Bird, Seehuus, Clifton, & Rellini, 2014). The individual will mentally check out, rather than be mentally present for a traumatizing experience as a means of self-preservation. In this case, the addition of pain to sex allows L.J. to bypass a coping mechanism that has become ingrained in them, but is no longer needed in more supportive relationships. L.J. constructs the identity of survivor by actively shedding the coping mechanisms associated with being in an abusive relationship.

Further, the playing of roles enables the construction of survivor identities. Bill talked extensively about the religious trauma stemming from being a pansexual trans man growing up in a conservative home and having a minister as a father. Bill was able to find healing through religious themed role play:

I'm not catholic, I wasn't raised catholic, but it's such a good symbol for the Christianity I was raised with, [so] I do use it: dressing as a catholic priest, basically doing lewd acts. I had one where it was a reverse witch burn. I was accusing the witch, and instead they forced magic on me and I was put on a St. Andrews cross and I was tortured, basically. It was a witch, or femininity getting

back at white male, religious power. I enjoy that probably because growing up and having to do ridiculous religious things to meet the expectation that was unobtainable, so basically being able to throw it to the wind was really comfortable for me. I know I'm not corrupted, but people who knew me way back then would consider that.

In this scene, Bill uses the symbol of the Catholic priest to reenact and challenge the religious upbringing he experienced. He subverts this experience in a variety of ways. First, he reverses the patriarchal structure of the religion he grew up with by having the witch burn the priest. By having the religious symbol end in defeat, so to speak, he resists a religious ideology that, to a child, seems insurmountable. Second, he plays the role of the religious symbol. This gives him control over how the religious symbol is portrayed, and subverts it through parody, like how a political satirist might take on a conservative or liberal persona to mock conservative or liberal ideology. These two wrinkles together serve to subvert the oppressive ideology he internalized growing up, and to construct the identity of a survivor of religious trauma who was able to transcend his painful experiences.

While BDSM provides a context in which the construction of survivor identities is possible, I found that healing was not guaranteed to happen from BDSM scenes. I have observed a similar phenomenon in writing poetry. Writing poetry can be a healing experience, or it can be an excuse to shovel the trauma back on yourself, so to speak, for the sake of art. Dwelling on trauma without trying to process or transcend it is not particularly healing. Similarly, Petra described a situation in which BDSM failed to provide healing from traumatic experiences:

I went through a phase where, due to productivity issues (I also have horrible ADHD), I felt worthless, so my fantasies went towards 24/7 master/slave, relationship in which I basically had no rights and pretty much no free will. That was my fantasy. The reason being was that it was all I was good for. Needless to say, that was not healthy.

Petra's fantasies recreated the lack of self esteem she experienced from her neurodivergence preventing her from accomplishing tasks. The problem is her fantasy was too pure a representation of her trauma. The fantasies did not have a subversive wrinkle that separated them from the actual negative feelings. As a result, Petra basked in her trauma rather than transcending it, and was not able to construct a survivor identity.

Healing can fail to happen in a BDSM scene if it is too similar to the source of the trauma. Additionally, a BDSM scene can have a significant wrinkle, but it will not be effective for constructing a survivor identity if the wrinkle is not a source of personal empowerment for the participant. Sarah, who never discussed BDSM in particularly empowering terms, describes her interest in BDSM as a byproduct of trauma, rather than a means of healing from it.

I wasn't given much attention as a child, so you can see where that's going. My parents weren't really involved. They provided for me fine, for the most part. But not very affectionate or caring or anything. I wasn't hugged enough as a kid, I wasn't emotionally cared for enough as a kid, and so, any attention I get, no matter if it's aggressive or not, I developed this starving need for.



Sarah describes recasting the trauma through BDSM with a wrinkle: the affectionate play partner takes the place of the neglectful parent. However, the difference is not necessarily healing, as she notes that the attention can be aggressive and negative. This negative attention does not leave her in a place of empowerment, and therefore, does not aid her in transcending the traumatic experience.

BDSM offers trans individuals a rich avenue for healing from trauma, and cementing “survivor” as a major identity. By referencing the source of the trauma, and changing it in an empowering way, the individual is able to transcend their painful lived experience, whether it is the addition of consent practices that give the individual more agency, changes to the embodied experience of a scene, or the use of role play to personify negative experiences. However, as my analysis shows, having the structure in place for healing does not guarantee healing, and BDSM can be a tool for reinjury as much as a tool for healing.

More broadly, these findings may seem surprising. Most popular stereotypes about BDSM involve images of violence and degradation. To an outsider, BDSM might seem like the cause of trauma, rather than a solution to it. However, BDSM allows a space to engage with the extreme, the violent, the taboo. This extreme range of possibilities is precisely what makes it so well suited for healing. Through BDSM, just about any painful, traumatic, or fucked up thing a person can experience can be replicated, and given an empowering little twist.

\* \* \*

In this chapter, I outlined four ways in which transgender individuals negotiate identity through BDSM. First, I argued that BDSM provides a space for identity

negotiation through a compartmentalized space where everyday pressures can be escaped, and new identities can be experimented with and explored. Second, I discuss the ways in which transgender individuals negotiate identity through the flipping of societal hierarchies of power, maintaining genitality with marginalized partners, and suspending it from cisgender, white men. Third, I discussed how BDSM is used to negotiate the tensions projected onto trans bodies through de-gendering BDSM acts, selecting affirming partners, and eliciting embodied responses through BDSM acts. Finally, I analyzed the ways in which trans individuals use BDSM to practice to negotiate identities of trauma survivorship. In my next chapter, I will conclude my study.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

*“Yes, Miss Riley”*

*My partner was being a fucking brat and fondling my ass. I shot them a pointed glance and asked “did I say you could do that?” I enjoyed the sensation, but they were disobeying me, and I just couldn’t allow that, so I tied their wrists to the bedposts. It wasn’t exactly a punishment for them, as I could see by how they moaned and pulled against the restraints. They shuddered with pleasure as my fingers trace the inside of their thigh. I would start massaging their clit with my fingers, and when they were right on the brink of orgasm, I would stop, leaving them writhing in frustration and desire and desperation. I held their pleasure in the palm of my hand. Every orgasm was mine to give, or in this case, withhold. It surprised me how easily I took to this dominant role with someone I love.*

In the previous chapter, I discussed and analyzed the four major themes that emerged from my data: BDSM as identity negotiation, enactment of power, embodied confirmation, and BDSM as trauma survivorship. In this chapter, I will discuss implications that stem from my analysis, account for the limitations of my study, and finally, theorize future avenues for research.

### Implications

#### The Process of Identity Negotiation

Initially, my findings elaborate on research regarding the process of identity negotiation. In my analysis, I theorize BDSM as a compartmentalized space that functions as a respite from societal pressures, and an experimental grounds for the testing of new identities. Essentially, BDSM allows individuals to move away from old roles,

and to new possibilities. Most of the literature on identity negotiation focuses on interactions that utilize cultural scripts that communicate identity in ways that are intelligible to others, framing the identity negotiation process as one of engaging with the societal expectations placed on us. As Butler (2005) reminds us,

The very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our “singular” stories are told. (p. 21)

However, my analysis adds a new layer to this process: perhaps, some of our identity negotiation work can actually occur when we remove ourselves from those cultural scripts and “play” with boundaries otherwise unavailable to us. If engaging with cultural scripts as a means of identity negotiation is seen as identity work, perhaps the escape from these cultural scripts represents a distinct facet of identity negotiation. I coin the phrase “identity play” to refer to distinct facet. BDSM represents a fruitful avenue for identity play through a compartmentalized space. In this space, identities can be experimented with free of the confines society places on what performances are intelligible.

### **Reconciling Perception and Reality**

Both my data (Bill, Roxas, L.J.) and the literature (Baker, Gupta, and Iantaffi, 2007; Lindeman, 2011; Weille, 2002) support the assertion that BDSM can be a space of healing. However, this idea of BDSM being healing is at odds with many popular perceptions of BDSM, which tend to focus on stereotypical images of pain and humiliation that serve to tear individuals down, rather than build them up. In fact, when

discussing my findings with colleagues, many were surprised by this particular aspect. On top of these stereotypes, media portrayals of BDSM like that of *Fifty Shades of Grey* serve to further muddy perceptions of BDSM. As Bersaglio (2015) points out, the BDSM relationship portrayed in the novel and movie display 10 distinct signs of abuse.

This discrepancy highlights the importance of BDSM narratives of healing in two ways. First, narratives of healing serve to bridge the gap between perception and reality. Showing BDSM as being loving, productive, or even healing serves to disrupt narratives that BDSM is inherently destructive and violent and challenges the conflation of healthy BDSM practice and abuse. This disruption would go a long way towards lessening the stigma surrounding BDSM and its practitioners that results in employment discrimination, harassment, assault, and lack of sex education (Wright, 2006).

Second, healing narratives of BDSM provide a model of healthy BDSM that can be emulated by individuals who are new to BDSM. As my analysis showed, BDSM has the potential to be healthy and healing, but not every BDSM scene is going to fit those two criteria. When done improperly, BDSM carries a risk of physical injury, and like any non-BDSM relationship dynamic, the potential for abuse exists, as can be seen in my account of the “weekend in fucking Iowa” to begin Chapter 3. Highlighting narratives of safe, healthy, BDSM practice counters the toxic and abusive media portrayals and provides a model for new community members that can actively make BDSM communities safer.

### **Unpacking the Politics of Power Enactment**

In chapter four, I discussed the ways in which trans individuals negotiate identity through the enactment of power. I found that my participants sought to construct various

social justice oriented identities by creating a space in which societal power relations were reversed. This manifested in both a hesitation to dominate partners that are more marginalized, as well as a suspension of genitality for cisgender white men. These findings inspire two implications for the politics of power enactment.

Initially, the enactment of power as a reversal of societal hierarchies carries the risk of restricting marginalized bodies. In my interviews, when I asked about playing with partners of a different race, a number of white participants expressed an extreme hesitation with dominating a person of color generally, or a black person specifically, citing discomfort with someone of their race replicating the historical (and current) oppression enacted on raced bodies. My white participants' hesitation and discomfort surrounding dominating a person of color can be understood as a form of white guilt, which can be a double-edged sword. Iyer, Leach, and Crosby (2003) provided a helpful conceptualization of white guilt:

White guilt was based in self-focused beliefs in racial inequality. Thus, guilt was associated with belief in White privilege and resulted from seeing European Americans as perpetrators of racial discrimination. Just as personal guilt is associated with efforts at restitution, White guilt was predictive of support for affirmative action programs aimed at compensating African Americans. White guilt was not, however, predictive of support for noncompensatory efforts at promoting equality, such as affirmative action programs that increase opportunities. (p. 117)

This conceptualization of white guilt as a self-focused emotion serves to complicate the enactment of power by white, trans BDSM practitioners. On one hand, they resist the

social hierarchy that places them above people of color. On the other hand, the enactment of hard limits on dominating people of color seems to be motivated primarily by the white individuals' feelings of discomfort, rather than the well being of the potential partner. These hard limits effectively function to police the erotic possibilities of people of color, and involve white people deciding which BDSM scenes are racially problematic and which are subversive, thereby constructing a sense of the white racial ally at the expense of people of color.

Furthermore, my data showed that BDSM practices can be deep sources of healing of societal, sexual, and religious trauma, but the hesitation to dominate people of color has the potential to close off an avenue of healing from racial trauma. Lindeman (2011) found that one of the ways BDSM is used for healing is through race play. The scenes he describes often incorporate racial slurs, overt racism, and explicit reenactment of historical oppression. In chapter four, I conceptualized the healing identity negotiation that is done through BDSM as a two-step process of replication and empowering modification. First, the individual undergoes a scene that is somehow reminiscent of the original source of the trauma, and second, the individual adds a wrinkle that makes the scene more personally empowering. For a scene to allow a person to heal from a negative event there have to be a certain number of parallels to the original source of the trauma. This means, for some individuals, being dominated by a white partner can be a necessary aspect of replication. The personal feelings of guilt that would result from my white participants serve to constrain not only the erotic possibilities of people of color, but also the possibilities for healing from racial trauma.

Second, the suspension of geniality from cisgender, white men is not an exact science. In her groundbreaking work on intersectionality, Crenshaw (1991) uses the experiences of violence against women of color to argue that the experiences of race and womanhood intersect. As such, the sexism they experience is racialized, and distinct from what white women experience, and the racism they experience is sexualized, making it distinct from what men of color experience. This suggests that marginalized positionalities are interwoven and cannot be analyzed in isolation from one another. This conceptualization of identity as being an inseparable whole, rather than a collection of separable parts, highlights another area of complication with how my participants enact power: no one is really suspending geniality from those who are most privileged. Rather, they suspend geniality from those they *perceive* as being the most privileged. These perceptions tend to be shaped by the most visible identity categories, such as race and gender. While race and gender are arguably the most significant factors that shape the amount of privilege a person enjoys, they tell an incomplete story. For example, a white, cisgender person could be disabled, neurodivergent, a religious minority, of a lower socio-economic status, a survivor of sexual trauma, or a whole host of other identities that carry with them a degree of oppression not readily evident visually.

To be fair, in many cases, the perceptions someone's privilege are reasonably accurate, as whiteness and maleness can serve to shield individuals from many forms of oppression, but in the case of cisgender, white men with hidden marginalities, the suspension of geniality runs the risk of subverting racial and gender hierarchies while reinforcing other hierarchies. Suspending geniality from play partners can be both a subversive and an oppressive act. This becomes troubling when we consider the



historical practice of ascribing privilege to marginalized persons. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was a 1920 text that supposedly outlined a Jewish conspiracy for world domination. Despite the text being a hoax, it created a perception of Jewish people being all powerful and privileged that was used to justify countless acts of antisemitism including the Holocaust and its subsequent murder of six million Jewish people.

On a more recent and admittedly less dire note, geniality is actively suspended from trans women on account of the perception that we are male and benefit from male privilege. After learning that I had been doxed<sup>1</sup> by transphobic feminists, I had the difficult task of reading through comments about a recent poetry performance of mine made on a prominent, transphobic feminist blog. As an act of self-care, I will not retype their words here, but the comment section was a buffet of body shaming, damaging stereotypes, and explicit references to my genitals and perceived sexuality that, had they been said about a cisgender woman, would have been clearly seen as sexual harassment. This was all rationalized by invoking my supposed male privilege. If I was a male who enjoyed the full benefits of cis male privilege, their comments would have been less damaging. They wouldn't be reinforcing all the societal transphobia I had internalized, they wouldn't be perpetuating stereotypes that are used to deny trans women access to services and spaces they desperately need, and they wouldn't make me feel disgusting in a way no shower could fix. While being a jerk to a play partner is unlikely to lead to the next holocaust, and may not even be a painful experience for the person on the receiving end of it, it does reinforce a practice that can have dire consequences for marginalized peoples, and can be harnessed to actively further their marginalization and oppression.

## **Limitations**

As with every research project, my findings should be interpreted within the constraints of my own research practices. After discussing the implications of my findings, I will now unpack the limitations of this study. Factors that limited the results of my study include a sample size that was demographically homogenous, the cultural stereotypes that may constrain trans people discussing sexual matters, and my own skill as an interviewer.

## **Demographics**

First, my group of interview participants was more demographically homogenous than I would have liked. Being a graduate student working on a time crunch, I did not have the time or resources for an extensive search process to increase the diversity of my participants. While there was a variety of gender identities and social classes represented, all but one of my participants identified themselves as white. This could have been an issue of self-selection, or, as Bill noted in his interview, a result of the Minneapolis kink scene being predominantly white. Although I did have one interview with a person of color, my data predominantly illustrate how white trans individuals use BDSM to negotiate identity. Having more non-white perspectives would have given me a more robust understanding of how power is enacted, for example, by providing more data for how trans people of color negotiate identity through the enactment of power.

Further, my participants were entirely under the age of 35. Having more variety in age could have yielded valuable insight into how the identity negotiation process might look different for someone who transitioned later in life, grew up with a different set of cultural assumptions, or spent more time being recognized as their assigned gender. It is

difficult to speculate about what these differences might be, but those differences matter and might well have led to a richer analysis.

Finally, all but one of my participants were from metropolitan areas of Minnesota. While necessary for researchers who do not have access to many resources, convenience sampling is always limiting. Minnesota is a relatively liberal state which is, all things considered, fairly trans friendly. Participants from a state that has enacted a trans bathroom law, for example, may have had different responses due to a slightly different set of cultural constraints.

### **Cultural Stereotypes about Trans People**

Another potential limitation of my study is the cultural pressures that are placed on trans people. For example, since Blanchard's (1989) paper on autogynephilia, queer trans women have historically been pathologized and their identities reduced to a sexual fetish, while trans men and transmasculine identities are routinely theorized as being internalized misogyny. These stigmas place real constraints on how trans individuals, such as myself, talk about our lived experience, especially with regards to sexuality. While none of my participants seemed to directly engage with these stigmas, it serves as a potential hidden constraint that may have affected how candid these participants were with me, and how much, if any, of their experience they filtered out to counter these narratives. Conversations like my interviews do not occur in a vacuum, so unfortunately, it would be impossible to conduct this study without this potential limitation.

### **Interviewer Skill**

The final limitation presented in my study is my own skill as an interviewer. I had always believed my 11 years of competing in speech and debate gave a great ability

to talk to people, but I soon realized: perhaps the skill I learned was better described as talking *at* people. This study was my first time conducting interviews, and my inexperience showed. When transcribing my interviews, I often found myself thinking of follow up questions I wished I would have asked but did not think of in the moment. For example, when transcribing Bill's interview, I wondered about his choice to play the priest in his religious play scenes, and why he chose not to have the other person play the priest. Having asked these sorts of follow up questions would have given me deeper, more robust data on which to base my analysis. Similarly, I had several interviews last fewer than 20 minutes, and I did not know what to ask to get the participant to open up more and elaborate on their answers.

The effects of this lack of follow-up questioning are somewhat mitigated by my positionality as a member of the population I am studying. My experience as a trans woman and BDSM practitioner means I require less background and explanation of jargon that might necessitate follow up questioning for other researchers, and my lived experience gives me a frame of reference that helps me understand the experiences of my participants. Nonetheless, more follow up questions would have ensured that I would not have to rely on my own experience to interpret certain answers and given me a richer set of data.

### **Avenues for Future Research**

After posing some implications for my study, and exploring its limitations, I will direct my attention to the future of this research. The findings of this study highlight two areas of future research: exploring hard limits and balancing bodily autonomy with critique of desire.

### **Exploring Hard Limits**

Most of the literature on BDSM focuses on the practices that individuals engage in. However, one of the most interesting trends I observed was participants discussing not what they do, but what they choose *not* to do. My participants often discussed their hard limits, and I found that these limits were a rich source of identity negotiation. From this, I see two potential avenues of research. First, more specifically, a study could be done about the identity work that is done through sexual boundaries, and how individuals construct and assert various identities through the people they choose not to engage with, and the acts they choose not to engage in. To explore this, interviews could be conducted with BDSM practitioners that focus explicitly on what their hard limits are, and why they have these limits. Second, and more broadly, a study could be done exploring the ways in which identity is constructed through *inaction*, rather than just action. This future research could further elaborate on the identity negotiation process, showing it to be not only something that is actively “done,” but also “done” through inaction or absence.

### **Balancing Bodily Autonomy with Critique of Sexual Practices**

My discussion of the politics of hard limits prompts a much larger question: to what extent are people’s sexual practices subject to critique? On one hand, everyone agrees individuals have bodily autonomy, and should be free to do what they want with their bodies, so long as it doesn’t harm others. No one worth listening to is arguing that anyone is required to have sex with anyone else, under any circumstances. However, the sexual choices we make can be actively shaped by societal oppression. As Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1981) argued in their controversial critique of heterosexual feminism,

No act of penetration takes place in isolation. Each takes place in a system of relationships that is male supremacy. As no individual woman can be ‘liberated’ under male supremacy, so no act of penetration can escape its function and its symbolic power. (p. 9)

The assertion that hetero sex is inherently damaging was met with anger from many heterosexual feminists. The idea that the sexual choices we make can be motivated by, and reinforcing of, societal oppression is controversial, especially to those being critiqued. A more recent example of this is the YouTube video by Dennis (2017) arguing that racial and genital dating preferences are partially motivated by racism and transphobia, respectively. The comment section of this video showed considerable controversy, with commenters calling the video “manipulative” and “rapey.”

The example of my white participants’ discomfort with dominating people of color illustrates this tension. On one hand, a white person is not obligated to engage in a scene that makes them uncomfortable. On the other hand, their sexual decisions may be motivated by problematic attitudes, and discussing these attitudes is often interpreted as being inherently disrespectful of the individuals who possess them. More theorization is needed regarding several questions: How significant are individuals’ sexual practices in the bigger picture of social justice work? Is critique of sexual practices and preferences a fruitful means to further social justice? Is our attention better placed elsewhere? It seems unclear to me the extent to which opening up personal, sexual choices to political critique is beneficial.

\* \* \*

*There is a trans exclusionary radical feminist that lives on my shoulder, accusing me of male privilege. She is all of the TERF blogs I have read, all of the violent transphobia I've faced, coalesced into a sort of anti-conscience. Imagine Jiminy Cricket, constantly telling Pinocchio he will never be real. Most of my daily interactions are done with her in mind. I worry a lot about being too domineering or taking up too much space, anything that could be chalked up to "male socialization." There is a trans exclusionary radical feminist that lives on my shoulder, but while I was dominating my partner, I didn't hear a peep out of that bitch. I didn't feel any need to prove my womanhood. I didn't think about myself at all, for that matter. All I could see was this person looking up at me with that mischievous, crooked grin and eyes that held so much love. I didn't think about the political implications of a woman like me ordering someone around, I just enjoyed the vulnerability of their submission. Due to past sexual trauma, my partner hadn't been able to do edging like this for almost three years. The gravity of this was not lost on either of us. It wasn't just their pleasure that I held in my hands, but their safety. I felt this overwhelming need to take care of them: to nurture and heal, and to protect them from danger. The masculine and the feminine were woven together, coexisting perfectly. I didn't think about any of this though. All I could see was my partner.*

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## Appendix

### Consent Form

**Title:**

**Investigator:** Riley Zahn, Department of Communication Studies, MSU, Mankato

**Description:** The purpose of this research is to understand BDSM sex practices impact the identity formation of transgender individuals. Specifically, participants in the study will be asked to complete an in-depth interview. Riley will discuss this form with you at the time of your interview, and you will have the opportunity to ask any questions you might have about study and your rights as a participant. For in-person interviews, you will be able to sign a written version of the form at the time of the interview. For Skype and phone interviews, Riley will ask you to sign, scan, and email the form to her.

**Confidentiality:** Your answers will be kept confidential, as your name and any personally identifying details will not be included on the transcript, demographic surveys, or in any write-ups of the research. Consent forms will also be kept separately from the data. All data will be kept either in Dr. Kerber's locked office or on a password-protected flash drive that she alone has access to. With participants' permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. *Please note:* Recorded audio will be retained for one year and then destroyed. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, the interview can still be conducted and Riley will take notes on the conversation.

My initials following this statement indicate I agree that the interview may be audio-recorded. \_\_\_\_\_

**Time Commitment and Payment:** There will be no compensation for your participation in the study. I anticipate it will take 5 minutes to complete the demographic survey, and 45-60 minutes to complete the interviews for this project.

**Risks and Benefits:** You may develop greater personal awareness of your experience as a result of your participation in this research. Additionally, the potential benefits for research may be the opportunity to work with a trans researcher to tell their stories. The anticipated risks of participating in this research are minimal, but may include some emotional discomfort from discussing your sexual experiences. Should you experience such discomfort, please contact Dr. Kerber as soon as possible.

**Right to Withdraw:** Your participation in the research is entirely voluntary. Participants have the right to end the interview if they experience discomfort or no longer wish to participate in the study. Your decision on whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship to MSU, Mankato; nor will a refusal to participate involve a penalty or loss of benefits. You will be provided with a copy of this consent form for your records.

If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact Riley Zahn at [riley.zahn@mnsu.edu](mailto:riley.zahn@mnsu.edu) 262-794-2273.

Additionally, if you have questions about the rights of research participants, please contact Dr. Barry Ries, Administrator of the Institutional Review Board at (507) 389-1242 or [barry.ries@mnsu.edu](mailto:barry.ries@mnsu.edu).

**Statement of Consent:** By signing this consent form you agree that you are at least 18 years of age and are willing to participate in the project entitled, “Communication Surrounding Chronic Illness or Health Condition Identities at Work.”

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Signature

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Printed Name

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Date

**Date of MSU IRB approval**

### **Recruitment Message**

**Who:** Riley Zahn (Minnesota State University, Mankato) is seeking transgender individuals who practice BDSM to take part in a study about how these sex practices impact their identities.

**What:** Participation in the study involves taking part in a confidential 45-60 minute interview via a medium of your choice (face-to-face, Skype, or phone).

**Eligibility:** To participate in the study, potential participants must be 18 years of age or older, be transgender, and engage in BDSM sex practices.

**Please feel free to SHARE with family and friends who might be interested in participating in this study.**

For more information, contact:  
Riley Zahn, [riley.zahn@mnsu.edu](mailto:riley.zahn@mnsu.edu) or 262-794-2273.

**IRBNet ID Number: ???**

### **Email Response to Potential Participants**

Participation in the study will involve a confidential 45-60 minute interview, which can be conducted at a time and medium of your choosing (face to face, or via phone or Skype).

If you meet the criteria (outlined above) and are interested in participating in the study, please contact me via phone or email to arrange the details for the completing the interview and survey. Once we schedule your interview, I will be sending you a consent form that discusses the study in more detail and outlines your rights as a research

participant. We can talk about this more document when we meet, and I can answer any questions you may have about it then.

Additionally, I am still looking for others who meet the study criteria! Please feel free to share the attached recruitment message with others who may be interested in participating in the study.

I look forward to talking with you. If you have questions, please contact me via the contact information listed below.

Best regards,

Riley Zahn, Minnesota State University, Mankato  
[Riley.zahn@mnsu.edu](mailto:Riley.zahn@mnsu.edu) , 262-794-2273

**IRBNet ID Number: ???**

**Email/Phone Script**

**Phone/Email Script to Potentially Interested Subjects**

Greetings,

Thank you for your interest in being part of my study. As you may already know, you must be at least 18 years of age or older transgender, and engage in BDSM sex practices. Do you meet these criteria?

Additionally, you should know that participation in the study will involve a confidential 45-60 minute interview, which can be conducted at a time and medium of your choosing (face to face, or via phone or Skype). Given this information, are you still interested in participating in the study?

When might it be convenient for you to take part in the interview? And, how would you prefer to meet with me? (face to face, or via phone or Skype)

Before we meet, I'd like to send you a consent form that discusses the study in more detail and outlines your rights as a participant in research. We can talk about this more when we meet, and I can answer any questions you may have about it then. What is the best way for me to get these forms to you?

Additionally, I am still looking for others who to participate in this research! If you know of others who meet the study's criteria, please feel free to share my contact information with them.

I look forward to talking with you soon. Please don't hesitate to call me if you have any questions or concerns in the meantime.



Best,

Riley Zahn, Minnesota State University, Mankato  
riley.zahn@mnsu.edu, 262-794-2273

**IRBNet ID Number: ????**