

## “Learning the Ropes”: An Exploration of BDSM Stigma, Identity Disclosure, and Workplace Socialization

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**Abstract:** Relationship development is a key factor for workplace socialization. People with stigmatized identities often choose to (not) disclose experiences or identities due to potential consequences. A perceived need to not disclose stigmatized, BDSM-related activities or identities can restrict relationship development at work, which should concern human resource development professionals.

*Imagine that you are in the middle of a divorce, and your partner is suing for sole custody of your children. She/he has argued that you are an unfit parent because you like to beat your sexual partners. Though you both know that in all circumstances your sexual partners have consented to the abuse during sex, your partner attempts to argue that you are sick and abusive—you should not be raising children. Your coworkers have offered to be a support system for you. How much detail about your situation would you provide?*

Organizational socialization, or the process of “learning the ropes” (Schein, 1988, p. 54), refers to how new employees are taught what is important in their new organization and how they learn the values, norms, and expected patterns of behavior (Schein, 1998). Socialization shapes personal relationships in the work place and establishes guidelines for everyday conduct (van Maanes & Schein, 1979). Organizational socialization provides a framework through which employees come to identify with their new organization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) and can make or break an individual’s career (Schein, 1998). Relationship building can be the primary driver of the socialization process, and work groups are the primary context in which it takes place (Korte, 2009). Relationships develop through the sharing of details about personal experiences, dispositions, past events, and future plans (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). Such personal sharing is generally referred to as disclosure and may be restricted if an individual feels stigma regarding the information they choose to share.

Stigma is “an undesired differentness from what [is] anticipated” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). This sense of “differentness”, which is encouraged and perpetuated by society, can become internalized by individuals labeled as “other.” Identities that are stigmatized can become a source of conflict and tension, perhaps marked by failure, shame, or abnormality (Goffman, 1963). Individuals who are members of stigmatized groups, and who therefore experience stigma themselves, must often decide whether to disclose personal information to other people.

In order to participate in relationship development, individuals with stigmatized identities must often decide whether to explain their experiences and identities to others or to hide, mislead, or lie about their experiences. Considering that organizational socialization is crucial to an organization’s success, that relationship building is a driving force of the socialization process, and that relationships are developed through personal sharing, the choice to not disclose personal information could have a negative impact on organizational success. This would be of interest to supervisors, managers, and human resource development (HRD) professionals.

The mission of HRD has been described as intended to provide employee development focused on performance improvement related to a current position, career development focused on performance improvement for future assignments, and organizational development focused on optimal utilization of human potential and improved human performance (Gilley & Egglund, 1989). Laura Bierema (2009) suggests that the dominant philosophy, practices, and research of HRD negatively affects female practitioners and recipients of HRD and argues that a focus on performativity has “clouded HRD’s focus on human development and sharpened its focus on productivity, performance, and profit” (p. 73).

Workplace socialization, through which workers learn expected patterns of behavior, and a focus on performativity, productivity, and profit instead of human development, situates employees with stigmatized identities in environments where they must perform well while appearing “normal”. Their concentration may be on performance and hiding stigma, instead development. The purpose of this paper is to explore factors related to BDSM stigma and reasons for (not) disclosing BDSM-related interests, identities, or behaviors to others at work. An aim is to demonstrate why human resources professionals should be aware of the factors.

### **Background**

Some adults engage in non-normative sexual behaviors and, as a result, experience stigma that affects their ability to develop relationships with others. One such preference or identity relates to bondage (B), domination (D), submission (S), sadism (S), and masochism (M), collectively known as BDSM. Engaging in BDSM is a lifestyle choice that places practitioners outside of heteronormative standards (Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984; Langdridge & Barker, 2008). Historically, BDSM practitioners have been marginalized and stigmatized by mental health professionals and society (Klein & Moser, 2006) as being both pathological and anti-feminist (Dworkin, 1974; Linden, 1982). Individuals who engage in BDSM may experience discrimination, violence, loss of child custody, and loss of jobs and promotions due to sexual activities (Wright, 2006). BDSM practitioners strategically determine whether to disclose their involvement in BDSM (Bezreh, Weinberg, & Edgar, 2012; Brown, 2010; Wright, 2008).

As employees develop relationships at work, they choose what to disclose, often knowing that disclosure of a stigmatized identity or behaviors may lead to discrimination and/or harassment. HRD professionals should be concerned with fairness and equal treatment in the workplace for all employees, and seek to discourage harassment and discrimination. Furthermore, because HRD professionals should be concerned with the relationship development, team dynamics, and the overall socialization of their employees, it could be helpful to understand if, and why, employees choose to disclose or not disclose personal information with colleagues and supervisors.

### **BDSM**

Researchers estimate that approximately 5-10% of the U.S. population “engages in sadomasochism for sexual pleasure on at least an occasional basis,” most of which is either mild or lacks “real pain or violence” (Reinisch, Beasley, Kent, & Kinsey Institute, 1990, p. 162). Studies have estimated that 14% of men and 11% of women have experienced sexual sadomasochism (Janus & Janus, 1993). Another study of students at a Canadian university estimated that 65% have fantasies about being tied up and 62% of tying up a partner (Renaud & Byers, 1999).

BDSM is a sexual orientation, dynamic, or activities among two or more consenting adults, which typically includes the use of physical and/or psychological stimulation that produces sexual arousal and satisfaction. Bondage refers to restraining someone’s movements or

the material used to restrain. Domination and submission, or Ds, refer to a relationship based on power exchange, where an individual gives to someone else a negotiation level of control, perhaps over decisions, actions, or attire; the submissive partner gives up the control and the dominant partner accepts it. Ds is considered by many to be the psychological and emotional underpinnings of BDSM. Sadism and masochism refer to the utilization of pain, sensation, humiliation, and/or power exchange for erotic enjoyment. An individual who likes to give the pain, humiliation, etc. is perceived as a sadist; the person who likes to receive it is a masochist. The terms “S/M” or “S&M” are often used in place of BDSM and practitioners often use “kink”. This paper uses BDSM as much as possible, and often refers to individuals as practitioners.

BDSM-related behaviors span a wide range of activities and roles, such as the use of blind folds, spanking, bondage, role play, voyeurism, urination, leather fetish, and many more; however, there are some common themes. Weinberg, Williams, and Moser (1984) perceived five features that tend to be present in most BDSM interactions. One is dominance and submission, or the appearance of rule and obedience, usually of one partner over another. Another is consensuality, or the voluntary agreement to enter into a BDSM interaction and to abide by established limits (ground rules). Yet another is sexual content, or the presumption that the activities will have a sexual or erotic context. The other features are mutual definition, or the assumption of a shared understanding that the activities are somehow BDSM-related, and role playing, or recognition that the roles assumed are not reality. Although BDSMers are not a homogeneous enough group to be considered a unity (Stoller, 1991); there appears to be enough commonality to suggest that BDSM has a frame within which individuals distinguish their actions and behaviors as pretend, and which has some basis in the credo of “safe, sane, and consensual” (Weinberg, 1987).

Safe, sane, and consensual is considered by many to be essential guidelines in BDSM activities. Safe means being knowledgeable about and acting according to the techniques and safety concerns related to the activities. Some people have compared BDSM to other potentially risky activities, such as wearing protective gear when playing competitive sports and having a partner when scuba diving. Sane means being knowledgeable about the difference between fantasy and reality and distinguishes between mental illness and health. One type of relationship dynamic is known as a master/slave relationship, where one partner has a certain (high) level of control of a partner’s behaviors and activities; yet, these relationships are consensual and can be ended by either partner at any time. Consensual means respecting the limits established by each participant at all times. The type and parameters of the control and activities are agreed upon by everyone, and the consent must be ongoing; just because consent for an interaction was given once, that does not imply continuing consent. Many people consider consent to be a key difference between rape and consensual intercourse and between abuse and some BDSM activities or dynamics. Because children are not considered able to give consent, consensual BDSM activities must be between adults. As in any population, risk, mental illness, and abuse exist in the BDSM population, but in itself, consensual BDSM is not a sign of psychiatric concerns. It is voluntary, consensual, informed, negotiated, enjoyed, and as safe as possible.

### **Sexual Stigma**

Sex is used as a political agent and as a means to repress and dominate society, particularly persons whose sexual orientation or inclinations deviate from the societal norm (Foucault, 1984; Rubin, 1984). Sex is institutionalized and shapes society by establishing expected patterns of expression and performance; a sexual hierarchy exists, which created a metaphorical line dividing “good” sex from “bad” sex (Rubin, 1984). Good sex is heterosexual,

married, monogamous, procreative, and non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, within the same generation, in private, without pornography, and with bodies only. Bad sex is homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, and commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, with pornography, with objects, and sadomasochistic (Rubin, 1984). Sexuality is “organized into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities” and punishes and suppresses others (Rubin, 1984, p. 171). Legislation, moral expectations, and social norms establish how sexuality, and even desire, should be performed, experienced, and monitored.

### **BDSM Stigma**

BDSM practitioners have been marginalized and stigmatized by mental health professions and society as both pathological, criminal, and anti-feminist. Although no significant differences have been found between BDSM practitioners and the general population on measures of psychopathology, depression, anxiety, or OCD (Connolly, 2006), involvement in BDSM can have an impact on individuals’ personal and professional lives. No scientific evidence indicates a reason for refusing employment, adoption rights, custody rights, or other social rights to BDSMers; however, BDSM discrimination occurs in the workplace, criminal court, and family court (Klein & Moser, 2006; Weinberg, 2006; White, 2006; Wright, 2006). Many BDSM practitioners experienced stigma in four distinct ways: through negative public portrayal, value diminishment, mockery or shunning, and discrimination (Brown, 2010).

In his work as a sex therapist and a doctor, Charles Moser (1999) found that patients reported recurring types of problems related to BDSM. The most common issue his patients asked was, “Am I normal?” They were often anxious that their BDSM interests indicate pathology and the potential to commit heinous crimes. Another issue his patients often asked was “Can you make these desires go away!” as a more mundane sexual lifestyle might be easier to handle. Couples who engage in BDSM behaviors commonly blamed the S/M aspect of their relationship for their problems, leading to the issue of “The S/M is destroying our relationship”. Patients also frequently experienced a sense of “I cannot find a partner,” especially when it is hard to identify who else might have similar interests. While Moser found that BDSMers are not interested in BDSM activities unless their partner is willing, anxiety still exists regarding “Is it violence or S/M?” particularly related to questions about sexual harassment, abuse, and rape.

Fear that discovery of their sexual preferences might result in the destruction of current relationships, along with a general fear of discrimination often prompted BDSM practitioners to become secretive, such as having pseudonyms and post office boxes, and to living a double life (Moser, 1999). The stress and dissatisfaction resulting from such behaviors, and denial of BDSM interests, can lead to dissatisfaction with their non-BDSM lifestyle and a feeling of “I cannot lead this double life anymore”. Another potential consequence is that BDSMers might hesitate to discuss health concerns with a health care provider, such as a woman who has vaginal tear from fisting or a man who develops numbness and weakness in his arms from bondage (W. & Wright, 1999). In spite of this all, Baldwin (1991) wrote about a kinky “second coming out”.

### **BDSM Stigma Management and Disclosure**

BDSM practitioners manage stigma through techniques of disengaging from mainstream society, reappropriating negative labels, concealing, and disclosing (Brown, 2010). Some people who engage in BDSM do come out and, in fact, live out, while others do not. Although no recognized “coming out” model exists for BDMS practitioners, research is being done to explore when, why, and how they come out about, or disclose, their interests or involvements in BDSM (Wright, 2006; Brown, 2010; Bezreh et al., 2012).

Self-disclosure involves sharing personal information about oneself to another person, who can then disclose that information with others. Disclosure may also result in an expectation of reciprocal sharing at the same level of intimacy (Derlega et al., 1993). Sharing such personal information implies a level of trust that the information will remain confidential (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Additionally, when people disclose information in certain ways, the recipient of the disclosure may be expected to redefine the nature of their relationship with the discloser (Derlega et al., 1993). In a recent study of BDSM disclosure and stigma management, Bezreh et al. (2012) found that respondents often considered BDSM as central to their sexuality and that, in the absence of information to reassure them that they were not alone, some experienced a phase of anxiety and shame. Not surprisingly, respondents expressed that disclosure was integral to dating situations. Outside of dating, decisions to (not) disclose were complex, “balancing desire for appropriateness with a desire for connection and honesty” (Bezreh et al., 2012, p. 37). One consideration was integrity, “Being myself and exploring myself without shame and encouraging others to do likewise” (p. 47). Others included: that life is easier and has less angst if you don’t have to worry about keeping a secret; being asked directly; being able to talk about a relationship with a friend; and political activism. Respondent’s worried about unwanted or inappropriate disclosure, which might be burdensome to the recipient. Most expressed resignation in relation to the norm of not talking about BDSM.

### **BDSM in the Workplace**

BDSM practitioners have been denied leadership positions, jobs, and promotions after someone expressed disapproval of their sexual activities (Brown, 2010). How the disclosure of a stigmatized identity is received, perceived, and acted on by people with more power can make a difference in how someone approaches a new learning opportunity or work situation and seeks relationships, including mentorship (Chelune, 1979). Wright (2008) reported data about the prevalence of violence and discrimination experienced by BDSMers and polygamous individuals. Many of the 3,058 respondents were employed: 1,417 (46%) full-time, 344 (11%) part-time, and 639 (21%) self-employed. Of the 2,893 respondents who answered “Are you out about your involvement in BDSM/Leather/Fetish practices?” 1,651 (57%) said yes. The 1,242 (43%) who said no provided reasons such as: family disapproval (68.2%); job repercussions (58.1%); public disapproval (52.2%); friend’s disapproval (47.7%); fear of harassment (37.8%); loss of child custody (11.2%); and partner’s disapproval (9.3%). However, responses to the question “Who are you Not out to?” indicated that even some of the people who answered “yes” about being out are not out in all environments. The 3,058 respondents who answered “Who are you Not out to?” listed several responses: job 1,825 (59.7%); family 1,820 (59.5%); non-BDSM friends 1,262 (41.3%); BDSM community 239 (7.8%); and other 357 (11.7%).

### **Stigma Disclosure in the Workplace**

Disclosure in the workplace of a deviant, and therefore stigmatized, identity such as being lesbian, gay bisexual or transgender, involved in BDSM, a convicted felon, or having a disability, can be required, forced, or chosen, or the option of nondisclosure may be possible (Rocco, Collins, Meeker, & Whitehead, 2012). Disclosure would be required when the individual must disclose in order to be hired or for other human resource functions, such as if it would come up in a mandatory background check. It can happen by choice when the individual voluntarily discloses, such as when establishing or maintaining a relationship, seeking medical treatment or counseling, or when desiring a sense of openness. It might be forced if someone is “outed”, as when a picture or a video is seen which reveals the individual’s identity or if the individual is arrested for an alleged crime. Nondisclosure is an option when the individual

chooses to be silent about their stigmatized identity, such as when choosing to avoid stigma, loss of livelihood, potential harm, or negative effects on personal relationships.

### **BDSM Disclosure in the Workplace**

People who participate in BDSM experience discrimination, harassment, lawsuits, and criminal proceedings based on their BDSM interests and identities. A recent example of how consensual BDSM can cause problems in the workplace occurred when Royal Canadian Mount Police (RCMP) Corporal Jim Brown was placed under investigation for possible misconduct after photos on a social networking site for kinky people showed him holding a knife to a woman who was naked and bound. Calls for action were made regarding the violent and pornographic images. Richman RCMP Assistant Commissioner Randy Beck stated that “While we must strike a balance between an individual’s rights and freedoms when off-duty and the RCMP code of conduct, I am personally embarrassed and very disappointed that the RCMP would be, in any way, linked to photos of that nature” (RCMP officer, 2012, “Investigation underway”, para. 5). Interviews with other people, including psychologists, professors, and community members refer to the images and Brown’s behavior as severely degrading, shameful, and abnormal, even if they are consensual. Erica Pinsky, who has conducted training in another branch of RCMP and who teaches about respect in the workplace, said that an officer’s deviant sexuality, as in Brown’s case, can become the employer’s business (RCMP officer, 2012). One of her concerns, echoed by many in the community, is that Brown’s role playing involves violence against and degradation and sexual abuse of women; how then can he perform his job, when it involves investigating the same?

Another situation was when Harvey John “Jack” McGeorge II was outed publically for his BDSM involvement. McGeorge was a munitions analyst for the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission and a high level leader and advocate in the BDSM community. In 2002, the Washington Post (Grimaldi, 2002) printed an article highlighting McGeorge’s involvement in the BDSM community, in what he believes was an attempt to discredit himself and/or the agency for which he worked. In a presentation titled *Weathering the Storm of Public Controversy* (2003), McGeorge mentioned lessons learned through his experience. One lesson was that “Being out is philosophically comfortable but fraught with personal and professional risk”. Another was that a lack of criminal allegations is significant in aiding crisis management. Two more were realizing the importance of identifying sources of emergency funding and people willing to and capable of coordinating the actions of other people on your behalf. McGeorge was fortunate in having resources available. However, not all BDSMers have the same background, knowledge, or support networks.

These two situations demonstrate many of the fears that BDSMers have regarding their activities and identities. For individuals who want to live authentically and develop relationships through shared stories – or who just don’t want to lie about who they are – disclosure is an option fraught with professional, financial, personal, and spiritual risks.

### **BDSM Stigma and Disclosure in the Workplace: Implications for HRD**

This paper began with a scenario in which an employee going through a divorce had to choose what information to share about their case, particularly regarding BDSM activities, which may be seen by coworkers as abusive and violent. In another scenario, imagine that a colleague sees you on your lunch break reading the book *Fifty Shades of Grey* and asks what you like about the book. The answer is the hot sex scenes, which have opened your eyes to a new world of physical and psychological possibilities. How much would you share? How much would you share if it was your boss asking? How can HRD professionals be proactive and better-prepared

for handling such scenarios, while supporting work environments that are safe and welcoming for all, and which discourage harassment and discrimination?

Since self-disclosure contributes to relationship development and team dynamics, it makes sense that employees, including those with stigmatized identities, would want to disclose information in the work place. Since HRD professionals work to promote organizational success, they would want to encourage relationship development and positive team dynamics, which might include creating environments where employees can safely, and appropriately, share personal information. HRD professionals can also support the mission of HRD by helping employees to develop as professionals in their own right.

HRD professionals can support employees by encouraging skill development in terms of understanding when, how, and why to (not) disclose personal information. They can provide diversity training initiatives in the workplace; not just surface level discussions, but by using current events and popular media to prompt realistic conversations about what is appropriate – legally, professionally, and culturally within the organization. HRD professionals can also seek ongoing training on topics related to stigma and disclosure, and how to address such issues when they arise in the workplace. Additionally, employee assistance programs can be promoted in the workplace, including opportunities for confidential counseling.

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