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Sadomasochism According to Freud's Psychosexual Stages of Development Theory

By Elizabeth Ehrmann

According to Freud, the combination of children being sexual, and perhaps the repeated act of spanking, whipping, or beating, is believed to lead to a life of sadomasochism. If Freud's theory is correct, children who have experienced spankings or whippings will tend to be, or would tend to want to be a sadomasochist. Through Freud's psychosexual stages of development theory, a better understanding of the sexual deviation, "sadomasochism" will ideally be reached. The six psychosexual stages of development are oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital. Through each of these different stages, Freud believed that sexual outcomes originate. Perhaps Freud's conclusions are true, but other social factors such as repression and knowledge of the social norm, allow sadomasochism to become better understood. Although supposedly uncommon, a better understanding of both the origins and the practice of sadomasochism, can allow it to become more socially acceptable and not such a taboo, allowing for more equality and less sexual preference profiling. Through a greater understanding and knowledge of both the history and the participants of Sadomasochism we as a society could come to a universal acceptance of this mysterious alternative lifestyle.

There is a hidden world that some do not dare enter. It is mysterious and erotic, and to many, twisted and sickening. This is the world of sadomasochism and many forms of it are incredibly unusual according to today's society. Sadism is being aroused by the act of inflicting pain upon others, and masochism is being aroused while being inflicted with pain. "Sadism is named after the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), a French nobleman and soldier, who spent many years in prisons and asylums, much of it for sexual behavior that was considered abhorrent. He also wrote novels describing scenes of sexual cruelty. Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895), a German novelist whose characters took pleasure in receiving

pain, lent his name to masochism." (Westheimer, 2000) The real mystery is the origin of this sexual deviation, and through Freud's psychosexual stages of development theory, a better understanding will ideally be reached. A considerable amount of research on sadomasochism has been done by famous writers of both homosexual and heterosexual sadomasochism practices, such as Freud, Kinsey, Krafft-Ebing, Spengler, Ellis, Faulk, and Stekel, but much of it has been by a purely observational standpoint. "Kamel (1980, 1983) gathered his data in several ways: through tape recording interviews with S&M people whom he met while he was employed in an adult bookstore, through a perusal of S&M literature, and through

informal ‘conversational interaction’ in leather bars throughout the United States and Europe. In these conversations he took the role of ‘potential participant’ in S&M interaction.” (Weinberg, 1987)

Whether we know it or not, sadomasochism is a common practice. The reason this statement is not obvious to us today is because it is not often discussed and sadomasochism has a very wide spectrum of practices. “Sadomasochist (SM) clubs are probably the most prevalent type of fetish clubs in the U.S.A. today, although very few of the members could be defined as having a true SM fetish or paraphilia..... Charles Moser (1988) estimates that approximately 10 percent of the adult population are SM practitioners.” (Francouer, 1999) The statistic in that quote says 10 percent, but there were many couples who enjoy spanking, biting, role playing, or scratching, and physical restraints during sexual activity that are overlooked during that statistic. Because sadomasochism has become such a common practice, these “mild” cases are disregarded, but if included, would raise the statistic dramatically. This leads to the topic of what is the “social norm” (as to what is acceptable sexual behavior and what is marginal). Until the 1940s, sex education and discussion was inadequate, so knowledge of social norms was limited. Alfred Kinsey, and his Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (1948), opened the door to the realization that there are no social norms. Through his personal interviews, he discovered and disclosed a number of anonymous sexual perversions, acts, and preferences that allowed individuals both then and now to know that there is no, “normal”, for we are all different.

Hard core Sadomasochism practices tend to need lots of equipment, depending on the preference or the degree of pain needed to experience pleasure. Stocks, ropes, masks, boots, whips, black stockings, bras, and much more are sometimes needed accommodate an individual’s satisfaction. But what is not widely known, is much more goes into a sadomasochism practice than expected. “Everyone we interviewed who sells sadomasochism insisted that, before having sex, they have a long talk with the potential client to determine his or her specific requests. There are also clubs where individuals meet to act out sadomasochistic scenarios. Those who seek out action are, in the literature of sexology, classically seen as purging themselves of guilt; some claim that it feels good to test themselves. Sellers of equipment for dominance/bondage whom we interviewed, and magazines that promote sadomasochism, claim that at least 8%, and probably 10%, of American homes have S/M equipment” (Janus, 1993)

Although sadomasochism is enjoyed by both males and females, the predominant enjoyers of this practice are homosexual males. “In these studies, with few exceptions, the vast majority of the participants have been males. They have been found to be mainly socially well-adjusted individuals practicing a wide range of sexual activities, usually engaging in sadomasochistic sexual behavior after other sexual orientation issues have been resolved. The well-being of these men has also been found to be connected to their level of integration in sadomasochistic subcultures. Due to a small number of females in the subject pool or the commercial character (i.e., prostitution)

of their sexual practices, fewer conclusions about female sadomasochistic behavior have been drawn” (Sandnabba, 1999).

Sadomasochism is typically a gradual practice. In fact, there are six stages in the career of a sadomasochistic practitioner, each of which involves increasing involvement in the subculture and commitment to a sadomasochistic career. “The first of these is the disenchantment stage, during which the individual becomes disillusioned with the gay world, especially because most of the men he meets do not appear to be masculine enough. Second, some men experience a depression period, isolate themselves, and retreat into ‘a second closet’. Third, the man’s curiosity may be stimulated by stories about the hyper-masculinity of the leather-sex subculture, and he may leave his closet to explore tentatively its mysteries. Fourth, during the attraction stage, the individual learns some of the norms and values of the S&M world and starts to see that S&M may be part of his own erotic possibilities. In the fifth or drifting stage, the man may attempt to involve himself actively in S&M by searching for partners. He becomes socialized through actual participation, learning such things at the importance of acting ability in mutually sustaining a partner’s fantasies. In the final stage, limiting, the individual discovers what does and does not fulfill him” (Weinberg, 1987)

Sadomasochism can be traced as far back as the 18th century, but it was also incredibly prominent in China with the practice of feet binding.

Stoller presented a Chinese painting of a couple making love when one of the woman’s feet, bound in an ornate shoe,

was the focus of the painting. The aesthetically embellished shoe was, in that era and culture, an erotic stimulus. However, the binding of the female foot was a flimsily disguised act of brutality. Women’s feet were crushed so that women could be unable to walk normally; thus they remained under the control of men. However, this practice was a cultural norm, not a perversion, as with individuals in our culture who are able to become erotically aroused by disfigured women. A more normal version of this same dynamic underlies the custom of women wearing high-heeled shoes, which hobble them but sexually stimulate men. (Berg, 1990)

Sadomasochism is prominent in today’s media society. “Faulk and I attempted to tease out S&M themes in popular culture. We noted that novels and poetry that are explicitly S&M can be traced at least as far back as the 18th century. In addition, spanking and humiliation scenes with sexual undertones were part of a number of movies made in the 1940s and 1950s. Present-day movies, television music videos, and records are much more explicitly S&M.” (Weinberg, 1987) Along with being prominent in the media, sadomasochism tools are being used for fashion purposes instead of sexual purposes. “Still, it is obvious that an additional problem for feminists resulted in part from Punk’s appropriation of styles from sadomasochistic subcultures. The one area in which Punk had immediate and lasting impact on the mainstream United States is the fashion. Here punk styles like black leather ‘fetish’ clothing, dog (or slave) collars, wrist restraints, cock rings worn as bracelets, chains and elaborate piercings, all borrowed from S/M rituals, rapidly begin to define

rock'n'roll hipness. For punks S/M was a parodic metaphor for the irredeemable corruption of desire by externally imposed structures of dominance and submission" (Siegel, 2000).

Freud's Theory

"From his observations of patients and their neuroses Freud developed a model of five overlapping stages of psychosexual development: oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital" (Collins, 2005). The oral phase begins at infancy when a baby derives gratification from sucking on the mother's breast. Because of this phase, the mouth and lips become the first erogenous zones on the human body. Gradually throughout this stage, the baby's teeth begin coming in and a baby explores the world by grasping things and putting them into its mouth in order to bite or suck. Because it is unsure whether to bite or suck, the baby is ambivalent, and according to Freud, this uncertainty is the prototype for love and hate.

During the anal phase, Freud believed that the libido of the child becomes concentrated on the energy of the anus for gratification. Not only is the child fascinated by its feces, and enjoy playing with it, children feel gratified after their feces has been released, and while it is being released, children believe that their feces is another body part. The child only learns that feces are bad, after it sees the negative facial expression on its mothers face. "The role of this early memory trace or psychic imprinting upon baby can hardly be overestimated in the course of individual development. Excrement becomes negative, associated in the child's mind with the smelly, dirty 'bad me.' The clean 'good me' of the child is rewarded with parental smiles

and verbal acclaim for not soiling its clothes. Toilet training is the beginning of civilization in the individual. The seeds of society and repression are sown by teaching the child self- (that is, bowel) control" (Collins, 2005).

The phallic stage of psychosexual development is the stage when the child discovers the genital erogenous zone as a source of pleasure. The female clitoris and the male penis become the primary organs for sexual satisfaction. "Freud understood the initial sexual instincts of childhood to be largely objectless or 'autoerotic.' The key stage of development is the phallic, at which the Oedipus complex emerges, for this is the point at which sexual drives become firmly attached to an external object... Freud theorized that the young male desires his mother and fears his father. (For the female child, he expects the process to be the reverse.) The male child resolves this conflict by repressing the wish to kill his father; he identifies with him instead and makes him his personal ego-ideal. Thereafter, the internalized father (or superego) punishes the child by making him feel guilty whenever he wishes for something forbidden. The external punisher has taken up residence inside the child's own mind" (Collins, 2005).

Freud believed that sexual interests submerge during the latency period between the ages of five and twelve, and then reappear at puberty in the genital or adult stage of sexual organization. Between the phallic stage and puberty, the child learns from its social environment, from family and friends, and school how to channel its sexual feelings into socially acceptable forms of behavior.

According to Freud sadomasochism originates at childhood. The article *The First Pronouncement on the Theme of Infantile Sexuality* states "We do wrong entirely to ignore the sexual life of children; in my experience children are capable of all the mental and many of the physical activities." (Jones, 1953) The combination of children being sexual, and perhaps the repeated act of spanking, whipping, or beating, Freud believes leads to a life of sadomasochism. "The phantasy is of peculiar interest because of its offering great difficulties in the analysis. It is accompanied by very considerable shame and guilt, and it is hard to obtain any further details than the simple statement 'a child is beaten,' an idea which in all cases is accompanied by pleasurable sensations relieved by masturbation... With girls there are three phases in the genesis of the phantasy. The first of them, which had once been conscious, is of a non-sexual character. It expresses the wish that her father would beat, or otherwise show his displeasure to, another child of whom the subject was jealous. In the second phase, which is entirely unconscious, this wish has been changed into the fantasy of being beaten by the father, and this is accompanied by masochistic pleasure. In the third, conscious phase the father has been replaced by a teacher or person of similar standing and the child being beaten is now a stranger. The latter is often a boy because of the subject's repression of the incestuous wishes frequently sets up a regression to the earlier masculine wishes of the girl. The beating is therefore not only a punishment for the incestuous genital wishes, but a regressive (sexual) substitute for them" (Jones, 1955).

Freud's Biography

Sigmund Freud grew up a child prodigy in his Viennese home. As a young child, his parents so much favored him over his little sister that when she was practicing the piano, they made her stop because it was disturbing his studies. He began reading Shakespeare at age eight and at a very young age, dreamed of becoming a great general like Napoleon. He graduated summa cum laude from High School, and ranked so highly in college that teachers and fellow students rarely questioned his answers. As a Viennese Jew, his social class job options were those of industry, business, law and medicine. After much indecision, he decided to enter the world of medicine and studied as a medical student at the University of Vienna in the autumn of 1873. He received a grant in 1876 and began to live with and be mentored by physiologist, Ernst Brücke. In 1881, Freud passed his final medical examination and for three years practiced as a doctor of residence at the Vienna General Hospital working in surgery, internal medicine, dermatology, and psychiatry.

Freud became famous in 1900 after his publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. His first famous discovery was that every individual lusts and hates. This was well known among the lower classes, but the upper class was outraged by such an image of them. His greatest discovery was the phenomenon of repression. The entire structure of psychoanalysis is based upon the foundation of repression and according to Freud, random thoughts, dreams, slips of the tongue, irrational symptoms, and daily mistakes all have meaning. "Freud evolved several major explanatory systems during the course of his career:

(1) the theory of primary and secondary processes; (2) the theory of stages of sexual development; (3) the libido theory; (4) the Trinitarian theory of the psychic apparatus; and (5) the theory of Eros versus the death instinct” (Collins, 2005).

Freud discusses the origins of sadomasochism as childhood experiences such as being spanked; manifesting themselves into something sexual that later in life becomes erotic. Other psychiatrists and sociologists have differing opinions about the topic of sadomasochism. “Similarly, he illustrates the idea that sadomasochistic games (master-slave, parent-child fantasies) do not typically involve real acts of punishment but rather offer an arena in which past suffering, pain and humiliation can be enacted (this time with happier endings), and thus underlines the theatrical and mastery elements in erotic life.” (Davidson & Layder, 1994) In addition there is a theory that sadomasochistic practices as adults do not come from any origin. There is simply a population that requires pain to become aroused. “Several studies exploring sexual behavior and social adaptation of sm-sex practitioners have shown them to be generally well adjusted. This suggests that childhood experiences of sm-practitioners will not in the large majority of cases reveal pathological patterns of family interaction, although a number of clinical case reports have suggested this to be the case.....Likewise, the question of whether childhood abuse experiences have etiological significance for sadomasochistic behavior has largely been ignored. Because of the complexity of sadomasochistic sexual behavior and

the significance of social influences on it, it is unlikely that any simple associations between childhood abuse experiences and later sm-sex will be found” (Sandnabba, 2002).

One might agree that Freud, being by far one of the world’s most famous psychologists, is entirely correct in his sadomasochism theory. In fact, it would not be uncommon to doubt his hypothesis because many don’t. In high school and college, he was rarely questioned, and according to several, times have not changed. One of the problems with Freud is that he did not follow through with his hypothesis. O’Connell Davidson and Layder’s (1994) theory about sadomasochism being a practice with a happier ending is a very positive one. For individuals who prefer cause and effect in their lives, this could be the perfect explanation for the alternative sexual practice. In addition, Freud leads us to believe that everyone in this world, no matter who it is, has emotional problems and is beyond help. Perhaps a more optimistic view of life could brighten things up for firm Freud believers.

In 1924, Freud published a study of masochism, which was also full of theoretical conclusions called “The Economic Problem of Masochism.” In this study, Freud distinguished three forms of masochism: erotogenic, feminine and moral” (Jones, 1957). Freud regarded the first two forms of masochism as secondary to sadism, and a turning inward of this upon the self because you enjoy having pain inflicted upon yourself. The third kind, moral masochism, is different because it is not obviously erotic, not physical and has no special relations to significant persons.

According to Freud, it is the suffering or self-injury itself that matters, no matter who inflicts it, weather some person or fate. The moral form of masochism plays an extensive part in social life because it is an abusive internal monologue, and in analysis it represents perhaps the most difficult problem to solve.

Freud's psychosexual stages of development are a very interesting key for discovering the possible origins of our own repressed feelings, emotions, and desires. Through his research it can be possible to direct certain instances such as spankings or beatings that might have happened in childhood and perhaps come to conclusions. The theory of repression ties closely along with the psychosexual theory of development, and if the repression is exposed, the fetish, sexual preference, or sexual practice may reveal itself. On the other hand, Freud's theory could be completely untrue; because he is Freud we often hold his theories at a higher caliber than others when it is, in fact, still a theory. There are no identified origins of sadosomochism, and for many, fetishes or sexual preferences also have no beginning.

Analysis

There are many theories and beliefs about sadosomochism, from its origins, to its members to its spectrum of practices. Because of this, sadosomochism is not only deemed socially unacceptable, it's looked down upon and considered taboo. With a greater understanding of this secret world, perhaps this growing sexual practice will expand and become more socially acceptable. Freud's research on sadosomochism, in addition to his

psychosexual stages of development are excellent keys to helping us learn more about the origins of this sexual deviation, as well as many others. Freud was the pioneer for many psychological topics and ideas. Because of him, the theory of dream meaning, repression, sexual development, the Oedipus complex, etc. all started and continue to be finished by many that follow in his footsteps. Now many believe that he was in some ways narrow minded, and focused too much on sexual acts, and subconscious sexual desires, but because of him we are now more aware of sexuality and how prominent it really is. In addition, Freud opened the door for sexual freedom and open discussion about taboo topics that otherwise would never be discussed.

Through Freud's psychosexual stages of development theory, a better understanding of the sexual deviation, "sadosomochism" will ideally be reached. The six psychosexual stages of development are oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital. Through each of these different stages, Freud believed that sexual outcomes originate. According to Freud, the combination of children being sexual, and perhaps the repeated act of spanking, whipping, or beating, is believed to lead to a life of sadosomochism. If Freud's theory is correct, every child who experienced spankings or whippings should be, or wants to be a sadosomochist. Perhaps that statement is true, but because of repression and knowledge of the social norm, thanks to the genital stage, sadosomochism is not typically an issue. Although supposedly uncommon, a better understanding of both the origins, and the practice of sadosomochism, can allow it to become more socially

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sexual preference profiling.

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