

Stigma Squared: Understanding Kink in LGBT Communities

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Definitions

- **LGBT:** (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender)
- **BDSM:** (kink/leather, B&D, D&S, S/M)
 - Bondage & Discipline
 - Dominance & Submission
 - Sadism & Masochism
 - Tops, dominants, sadists, switches, bottoms, submissives, masochists.
- **Altsex** (inclusive term for kink/poly people).
- **Microaggressions:** “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of other races.” (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007).

1996 Intercultural Awareness Class (16 years ago):

- Focus on Lesbian and Gay people. (No readings on bisexual or transgender issues.)
- BDSM / polyamory not discussed.

My defining Moment: Presentation on LGBT Americans

- **Possible Countertransference** issues:
 - “promiscuity,” unfamiliar sexual practices, polyamory, HIV status, BDSM activity
- Visiting professor’s **critique**:
 - Fear/*Erotophobia* around BDSM inclusion/no other countertransference issue called out.
 - Desire to distance LGBT from “kink” (no more likely to be kinky? Why included?)
 - No data to support connection.
- Clinician’s intent in including this:
 - This is but one countertransference issue that **may** arise when working with queer populations.
 - Questions of what it means to have **dual status** in **two stigmatized sexual minority groups**
 - **Comfort** with language and **exploration** around sexual identity – **does this increase likelihood of disclosure to self or clinician?**

General Research about BDSM

- Janus & Janus (1993): up to **14% of American males and 11% of American females** have engaged in some form of BDSM sexual behavior. Need for more current large-scale research of prevalence.
- Since 2000, there has been more research looking at BDSM activities and relationships as a **subculture**.
- Kolmes, Stock, & Moser (2006): 175 BDSM people who had been in psychotherapy: **42% bisexual, 35% heterosexual, 19% lesbian, 5% gay, 5% transgender 3% bigendered**.
 - “At what age did you first self-identify as...Mean ages:
 - Heterosexual: 13 yrs
 - Gay: 18 yrs
 - Lesbian: 20 yrs
 - Bisexual: 23 yrs
 - **BDSM: 26 yrs**
 - Transgender: 27 yrs
 - Transsexual: 32 yrs

Politics of Inclusion: Where's the T in LGBT?

- Despite this well-intentioned umbrella acronym, there is very little research focusing on experiences of transgender people.
- It may be problematic to assume LGB experience = T experience.
- These politics of inclusion have not extended to kink/poly communities in conversations on sexual diversity. **Why not?** Is it possible that some kink/poly practitioners have more in common with LGB folks than some transgender people?
- **Altsex** people represent diverse sexualities, ethnicities, classes, and abilities. Who will embrace them?

Bisexual and Lesbian Women in the BDSM Community

- **Six face-to-face interviews** examined **subjective experiences** of lesbians who engaged in **public BDSM. (Matthews, 2005)**
 - **All:** interest for many years before getting involved in BDSM. All felt nervous anticipation prior to scene play and most negotiated.
 - **Tops** experienced hyperawareness during play, performance high, and exhibitionism.
 - **Bottoms** felt “in the zone,” and able to selfishly focus on sensation while feeling safe.
 - **Both groups** described **energy exchange, catharsis, sexual satisfaction. Fun, empowerment, connection w/partner & community** was pervasive. Some worried about other’s misunderstanding of kink.
- Empirical study of **31 women** (20-60 yrs). **Exclusion of privileged genders** (straight & gay non-transmen) in dyke BDSM scene creates **safe space to explore gender**. Results in valuing gender diversity on a community level, but does not translate to mainstream society **(Bauer, 2007)**.

Bisexual & Lesbian Women

- **289 lesbian and 58 bisexual** urban women surveyed on four kink behaviors:
 - **Bisexual women more likely to have engaged in any kinky sexual behavior and photo/video exhibitionism.**
 - **White women** more likely than women of color to engage in B/D.
 - **Younger** women more likely to have engaged in photo/video exhibitionism and breath play.
 - **Younger age of coming out correlated** to have engaged in any and each behavior. (Tomassilli, 2009).

Research on Gay Male BDSM

- Male homosexual encounters in Dutch highway rest area were examined. This study is notable for being one of the earlier studies to focus on gay male BDSM behavior. Looked at cruising strategies and meanings attached to leather cruising. No longer a silent community (**van Lieshout, 1995**).
- Sexual scripting theory applied to 31 male respondents in UK from 1950's – present. No single pattern or process to BDSM identity development, but three patterns emerged: **interrupted, late, and direct conversion. (Chaline, 2007)**.

Research on mixed LGB groups

- **Six empirical studies** on self-identified **BDSM oriented individuals (22 women, 162 men)** focused on **differences** between **gay and straight participants**. **Gay males were better educated, held white collar jobs and were more inclined towards Sadism, and had first experiences at an older age.** More focus on activities such as anal activity, wrestling, special equipment and uniforms. Preference for hypermasculinity. **Too few lesbians to draw conclusions (Nordling et al., 2006).**
- Reviewed pride movement and sexual behavior. Working within queer communities **requires clinicians to expand their sexual knowledge and learn about issues not presented in graduate training (Nichols & Shernoff, 2007).**

Mixed Research (cont.)

- Australian study of **19,307 people aged 16 – 59 years. 1.8% (2.2% men, 1.3% women)** had been **involved in BDSM** in previous year. More common in **gay, lesbian, and bisexual** people. **Males** who engaged in BDSM scored significantly **lower on a scale of psychological distress** than other men. **Engagement in BDSM was not significantly related to any sexual difficulties.** Concluded that **BDSM is simply a sexual interest and for most is not a pathological symptom of past abuse or problems with “vanilla” sex. (Richters, et al., 2008)**

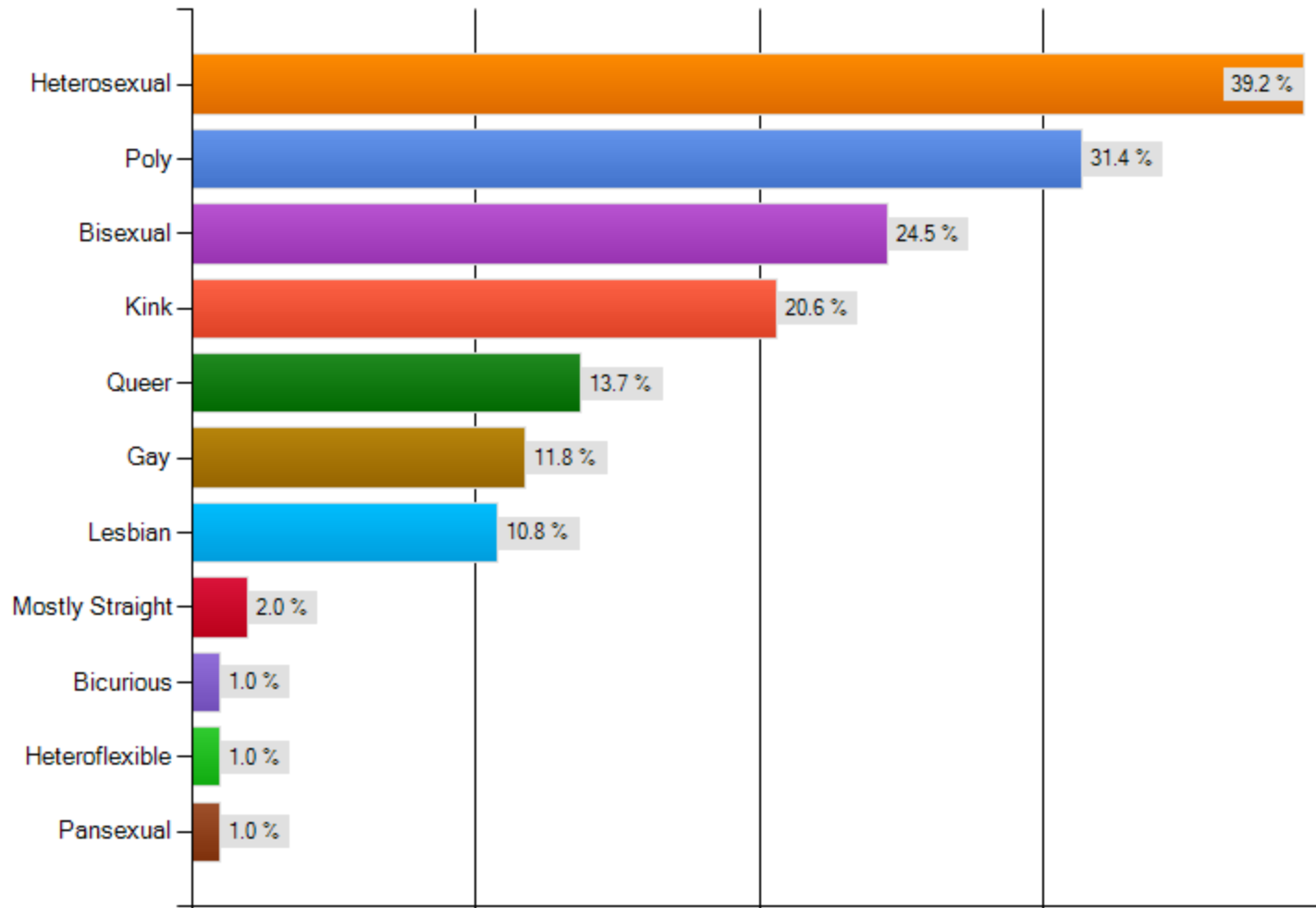
Themes from research

- Research themes: LGB people *may* be more inclined towards kink behavior. This may be influenced by the fact that people come out later after they come out as LGB (but not T).
- Worry about others misunderstanding kink.
- Coming out earlier may influence wider range of play. White women more inclined than women of color . Bisexual women more likely than lesbians to engage in some behaviors.
- Gay male participants more highly educated than straight males.
- BDSM doesn't = sexual difficulties or seem to stem from past abuse.

Open Minds – Psychotherapists Affirming Diversity in Gender and Sexuality

- **Clinicians, Trainees, Members & Allies of Sexual Minority Groups**
 - Lack of support in training program (class on cultural identity and awareness).
 - Clinician fears around speaking up –worry about being perceived as member of stigmatized groups, lack of professional respect.
 - How will **professionals** perceive me?
 - How will my **other clients** perceive me? (Website/marketing.)
 - **How do we respond to microaggressions in trainings regarding alternative relationships:** “these relationships don’t work/aren’t healthy.” (Kolmes & Witherspoon, 2012).
 - Experience as a queer woman working in LGBT clinic with poly & kink-identified clients. (Ophelian, 2008). **Do not conflate kink with poly or LGBT although they share common experience of being pathologized.**

Practice Stats: 2008 - 2012



Clients Selecting BDSM as sexual orientation at intake:

- **N = 22**
- Referral source:
 - 60% used **kink-aware professionals** to find me
 - 25% **Poly-friendly professionals**
 - 15% Other therapist, former client, physician
- Ages 21 – 70
- 12 identified as **LGBTQ**
- 10 identified as **Heterosexual**
- **Treatment issues:**
 - **Anxiety**
 - **Depression**
 - **Relationship concerns** (specific to kink issues: dealing with abuses of power in BDSM, clarifying fantasy vs. reality in 24/7 power relationships, coming out as kinky to self/partners, spirituality & BDSM, shame around desires.)

Recommendations

- **Need** more research on **transgender** BDSM participants.
- **Language of sexual diversity should include kink/BDSM to reduce stigma** & combat the idea that it will “taint” perceptions of queer communities.
- **Education and training** for psychologists in working with kink people, issues, communities, including addressing challenges of **community overlap** in treatment.
- Unless these **behaviors are normalized as common aspects of sexual experience**, kink-identified clinicians and allies, will continue to **fear identifying their practice as kink-friendly**.
- **Understand the harm of microaggressions and confront them in training and consultation.**

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