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An Examination of Sex- Differences in Emotion Identification as Influenced by BDSM Negotiations

By
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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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Abstract

Abstinence-only sexual education curriculums are dominant in the USA, which leads the younger generation to seek sexual health knowledge from the next most readily available source—the media (Leistner & Mark, 2016); mass media portrayal of bondage-discipline/dominant-submissive/sadist-masochist (BDSM) relationships borders on the pathological. The present study sought to destigmatize BDSM practitioners through the use of empirical data. Participants of this study read a half page vignette of a conversation (to be imagined between them and a sexual partner) pertaining to either a sexual history overview, an adrenaline producing activity, or a BDSM-scene negotiation. Immediately following, participants viewed a self-progressed slide show of the seven culturally universal emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, fear, contempt and surprise) at a rate of .1 seconds each, and judged which emotion they saw in which face. It was predicted that participants having read and imagined the BDSM-scene negotiation would have better emotion detection scores than participants in either the sexual history or adrenaline activity discussion and that women would be better able to accurately identify emotions, as compared to men. Predictions failed to receive support from the data analysis.

Keywords: BDSM, emotion-identification, emotional intelligence

An Examination of Sex Differences in Emotion Identification as Influenced by BDSM Negotiations

The widespread popularity of the *50 Shades* franchise has brought bondage-discipline/dominance-submission/sadism-masochism (BDSM) more predominantly into the spotlight (Pillai-Friedman, Pollitt, & Castaldo, 2016). BDSM's newfound place in the mainstream has been met with the same rigid, negative assumptions that have always been held: BDSM is only for pathological people (Leistner & Mark, 2016). There is scarce research into possible personality traits or psychological mechanisms that may or may not be correlated in any way to BDSM participation. The present study sought to explore the relationship between pre-BDSM-scene negotiations and emotional intelligence; specifically the facet of emotional intelligence concerned with identifying emotions in others' faces.

BDSM is the experience of power exchange, either verbally, physically, or both, and is oftentimes sexual in nature, while it may not specifically involve the act of sex (Wiseman, 1996). Two or more individuals first engage in a negotiation that outlines specific hard and soft limits¹ of what they each are willing to do and would like done to them. Typical BDSM encounters will involve a 'dominant,' 'dom,' or 'top,' as well as a 'submissive,' 'sub,' or 'bottom'; and contrary to popular belief, the submissive is understood to hold much of the power involved in the experience, not the dom, as the submissive themselves will indicate the correct amount of pain desired for pleasure. The very nature of BDSM suggests a practitioner will have greater than average opportunities for emotion detection, in that they engage in negotiations involving concern of another

1. Hard limits are activities a practitioner would absolutely never consider doing or have done to them, while soft limits are activities that a practitioner might not have a preference for, but will consider if it is something their partner is interested in.

person's interests and boundaries more often than non-BDSM practitioners (Devon & Phillip, 1995; Pillai-Friedman, Pollitt, & Castaldo, 2016; Wiseman, 1996; Leistner & Mark, 2016).

Emotional intelligence is the ability to express, recognize and understand emotions in oneself and others (Alkhadher, 2007; Onur, Alkin, Sheridan, & Wise, 2013). High emotional intelligence has been correlated with increased measures of agreeableness, decreased neuroticism and higher self-reports of subjective well-being (Prati, Douglas, Ferris, Ammeter, & Buckeley, 2003); greater resiliency to stress (DiFabio & Saklofske, 2018); less depression and stress and greater self-esteem, positive moods, optimism and life satisfaction (Lizeretti & Extremera, 2011); and thus is a highly beneficial trait to cultivate. One activity of importance to this study, in relation to emotional intelligence, is the negotiations experienced by BDSM practitioners: before engaging in a scene, whether five or fifty minutes in length, all BDSM practitioners engage in a negotiation of the activities about to commence (Devon & Miller, 1995; Wiseman, 1996). In these negotiations the explicit goal is to lay out exactly what each party expects and desires in this situation; each situation is unique and as such requires a utilization of the frontal lobe, in order to collaborate with their partner for each specific scene. It is the continued exposure to such unique mental negotiations that interests the present researcher.

Recent psychological studies have delved into the personality traits of BDSM practitioners with surprising results when one considers the negative public opinion of BDSM. Wismeijer and van Assen (2013) examined the personality of Dutch BDSM practitioners, utilizing the widely used Big-Five personality measure. Participants who

identified as dominant were found to have lower agreeableness, but also lower neuroticism and higher subjective well-being than participants who identified as submissive. Submissives have also been found to be consistently more extraverted than both their dominant counterparts and individuals who did not practice BDSM (Herbert & Weaver, 2014). Dominants and submissives alike have shown increased conscientiousness and were seen as more open-minded to new experiences and have shown equal levels (to each other and control groups) of empathy-altruism, as opposed to the general public's imagined decrease in empathy-altruism associated with practicing BDSM (Herbert & Weaver, 2014; 2015). Connolly (2006) compared published norms on 10 psychological disorders with BDSM practitioners' scores and found BDSM practitioners exhibited lower levels of anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, borderline pathology, psychological sadism or masochism, paranoia, and depression. It seems that contrary to the widely vocalized belief that BDSM is dark and inherently wrong, empirical work shows that BDSM practitioners may have better subjective well-being—which could be in part due to BDSM participation. These studies highlight the contrast between the picture of BDSM practitioners that the general academic society has come to understand and the picture mass media has fueled (e.g., most notably in recent media with the *50 Shades* franchise; Leistner & Mark, 2016). Truly, “even if one cannot wrap their mind around the way SM [sado-masochistic] lifestylers...engage in relationships, the example they set should be highly respected” (Starr, 2011, p. 6).

Due to the empathetic nature of BDSM negotiations it is plausible the continued exposure to such negotiations would increase accurate emotion detection in practitioners. In the present study participants either read a sexual conversation, an arousing

negotiation (non-sexual in nature), or a pre-BDSM scene negotiation and were then asked to identify seven emotions depicted in photographs. It was predicted the participants who read the BDSM negotiation would accurately identify more emotions in the photos than participants in the other two conditions, and that women would accurately identify more photos than men. Furthermore, an interaction was predicted, in which women who experienced the pre-BDSM scene negotiation condition would accurately identify emotions in the greatest number of photos and the men who experienced the sexual history and non-sexual negotiation conversations would accurately identify emotions in the fewest photos. Finally, it was predicted that participants' BDSM experiences/attitudes would be positively correlated with their emotion identification scores.

Method

Participants

68 participants (53 female, 15 male) were recruited through the online research platform SONA, utilized by the Psychological Sciences department of Western Oregon University. The mean age of participants was 21.39 ($SD = 3.79$). Participants average score regarding BDSM experience/attitudes was 13.17 ($SD = 7.99$; see below for measurement detail). Participants received extra credit in a Psychology course through their participation in the experiment.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were directed to read and sign an informed consent form, which outlined the voluntary nature of the experiment, the risks and benefits of participation, and states that participants may cease participation at any time. Immediately following, participants were instructed to complete a demographic questionnaire; the researcher

stood outside the room while these two forms were completed. Current BDSM participation and attitudes towards future BDSM participation were measured in the voluntary demographic survey. BDSM behaviors were measured using three questions, each regarding the use of a common BDSM behavior noted in current sexual health studies (Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin, & Matuszewich, 2009; Brown, Roush, Mitchell, & Cukrowicz, 2017). BDSM experience was measured through the use of restraints, infliction of pain, or sensory deprivation used in a sexual setting; each behavior was marked as previously experienced or not. If the behavior had not been experienced previously, participants were asked on a scale from 0 to 8 how willing they would be to try the behavior if it was something their sexual partner was interested in. A 'yes' answer was scored at a 9, such that the highest score of 27 would indicate a participant has actively used all three measured BDSM behaviors, while a score of 0 would indicate a participant has never participated in BDSM, nor would ever be willing to participate in such activities in the future. The consent form was turned over and placed next to the participant for the duration of the experiment; at this point the participants indicated to the researcher they were prepared to move forward with the study. Participants read a vignette (see Appendix A): this vignette detailed either a general sexual history discussion, operationally defined as the control sexual condition; a discussion about participating in an exciting, non-sexual activity, operationally defined as the control negotiation condition; or a pre-BDSM scene negotiation, operationally defined as the sexual-negotiation condition. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these three conditions and asked to envision the vignettes as a conversation they were having with their significant other/sexual partner. The control sexual condition was a conversation

between partners regarding one's personal sexual history, but not a negotiation. The control negotiation condition involved a negotiation regarding an adrenaline-producing activity that was the non-sexual equivalent to the negotiation aspect of the sexual-negotiation condition (e.g. going paintballing). The sexual-negotiation condition was a simulated negotiation where one partner was asking the other partner's preferences regarding what many consider to be sexually deviant behaviors (Leistner & Mark 2016). The aim was not to incite arousal, but rather to convey the empathetic exchange that unfolds in a pre-BDSM scene negotiation.

After reading the vignette, participants were tasked with identifying emotions in photographs. The photo set titled, "Unmasking the Face," depicts each of the seven main culturally universal emotions: anger, fear, disgust, happiness, sadness, surprise, and contempt (see Appendix B; Ekman, 1970; Ekman & Freisen, 1971). Each photo was presented to the participants for 10ms through Microsoft PowerPoint, and a white screen was shown in the interim between photo presentations. The participant controlled the presentation of the stimulus, such that pressing the space bar/forward arrow key prompted the 10ms presentation of each photograph. The participant recorded what emotion they felt was displayed, and then pressed the key again to advance to the next photo. Participants were instructed to record the previous emotion shown to them prior to moving on to the next stimulus. These emotions are expressed in the same manner across cultures, so the accurate identification of them should have nothing to do with cultural background and should ideally only have been affected by the experimental condition the participants were placed in for the current study. Participants had with them an Emotion Detection Worksheet (see Appendix C) that lists each of the seven emotions with a blank

space next to them; participants wrote the number of the photo (in terms of sequence shown to them: such that the first photo that flashed on screen would be recorded “1” and the last photo shown to the participant would be recorded “7”) next to the emotion they saw in each face.

Data was collected regarding which condition participants were in and the accuracy of emotions identified and analyzed using SPSS statistical program. A correct emotion identification was scored at a value of “1”, whilst an incorrect emotion identification was scored at a value of “0”; following presentation of all seven photographs the participants’ overall score was recorded and compared to other participants’ scores, such that the highest possible score in emotion detection was a “7,” and the lowest possible score was “0”. Demographic data was collected on participants’ sex, age, ethnicity, relationship status and BDSM experience/attitudes towards trying BDSM. After viewing and identifying all seven photos, participants read a debriefing form that explicitly stated the purpose of this study. If participants still consented to participation (i.e., having their data points analyzed), they placed their informed consent to participate form upside down in a random location within a folder, to protect their anonymity. The entire experiment took fewer than 15 minutes to complete.

Results

To test the prediction that envisioning a BDSM negotiation would affect men’s and women’s emotion identification, a 2 (participant sex: female, male) X 3 (vignette condition: control sexual condition, control negotiation condition, sexual-negotiation condition) Analysis of Variance was run. No interaction effect between participant sex and vignette condition was found, $F(2, 62) = 1.52, p = .23$ (see Figure 1). In addition, no

significant results were found for a main effect of sex $F(1, 62) = .08, p = .77$. Men ($M = 4.33, SE = 1.54$) did not significantly differ from women ($M = 4.49, SE = 1.88$). No significant result was found for the vignette condition, $F(2, 62) = .83, p = .44$. The control negotiation vignette ($M = 4.34, SE = 1.79$), control sexual vignette ($M = 4.56, SE = 1.67$), and the sexual-negotiation vignette ($M = 4.45, SE = 1.99$) did not significantly differ from each other. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between participants' BDSM experience/attitudes and their emotion identification scores. There was no significant correlation between the two variables, $r(67, n = 45) = 0.11, p = .48$.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to explore whether there existed a relationship between BDSM negotiations and enhanced emotion identification skills. Results from the present study failed to find any significant effects of pre-BDSM scene negotiations on emotion identification scores; however, the results of this study illuminate several directions for further research.

Participation in BDSM has been shown, when experienced positively by the participant, to reduce cortisol levels in participants (i.e., it is the persons own perceptions of the experience that determine whether the participant will benefit from BDSM participation or not; Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin, & Matuszewich, 2009). In an interview one BDSM practitioner described his partner as “flog[ging] the stress right out of [him]” (Herbert & Weaver, 2015) and yet BDSM is still labeled as deviant behavior (Brown, Roush, Mitchell, & Cukropwicz, 2017; Yarber & Sayad 2019), a stigma that discredits individuals (Stiles & Clark, 2011) and could potentially lead to

suicidal ideation (Brown, Roush, Mitchell, & Cukrowicz, 2017), as stigma stress is positively correlated with both lowered self-esteem and increased hopelessness (Xu et. al., 2016).

Due to the harmful nature of stigma, the aim of the present study was to destigmatize BDSM. The predictions failed to receive support, and this could be for many reasons. The main limitation was obviously sample size, specifically the lack of male participants. With only 15 male participants, compared to 53 female participants, the sample sizes are largely skewed and are therefore not representative of the overall population. Another limitation could be the presentation of the stimulus; the participants often seemed unprepared for the picture to flash for such a short period of time, and would sometimes click through multiple photos before recording an answer on any emotion, or hold down the key for longer than intended (in an attempt to prompt the stimulus to stay on the screen longer). A study re-design could include a note in the Emotion Detection Worksheet, designed to clearly forewarn participants of how quickly the pictures would flash. Even still, it could be that the photos were not in exactly the same position on the screen each time, and so a participant could have been focused in a different area than the stimulus's face. The study of Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin, and Matuszewich (2009) that found positively perceived BDSM scene participation was correlated with lowered cortisol levels took place at a pre-planned local kink-community gathering; thus the study was able to measure BDSM in a more natural state. Perhaps the present study would benefit from re-locating to measure emotional intelligence in a more typical pre-BDSM scene negotiation setting. It is also possible the utilized stimulus simply was not properly simulating the facet of BDSM which might

correlate with emotional intelligence, in which case no effect would be apparent in analysis. A redesign would benefit from looking at the natural occurrences of BDSM and measuring its effects on-scene, in addition to taking measurements at different junctures of the BDSM scene.

A review of the empirical literature paints BDSM in a more positive light than non-BDSM practitioners understand it to be (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013; Herbert & Weaver, 2014; Herbert & Weaver, 2015; Stiles & Clark, 2011; Brown, Roush, Mitchell, Cukrowicz, 2017). While the present study failed to contribute to the body of literature associating BDSM with positive life effects such as increased self-esteem, subjective well-being, and ability to cope with stress, more research is still needed. Future research compare BDSM practitioners' level of emotional intelligence with that of non-BDSM practitioners, or alternatively, it could aim to determine what facet of BDSM specifically is correlating with higher subjective well-being: the negotiation before-hand, the actual scene that takes places, or the aftercare that involves intense emotions. It would be difficult to compare aftercare results to any scene without aftercare, as it is a necessary and essential part of any healthy BDSM practice: however, a future study could be developed which somehow speedily measures emotional intelligence at points before and after each segment (e.g., segment 1: negotiation, segment 2: scene, segment 3: after-care).

The purpose of the present study was to destigmatize BDSM preferences with empirical data positively correlating BDSM negotiations with emotion identification scores. While the present study failed to support the growing body of research in support of BDSM, the future directions may prove beneficial for further researchers to consider.

With the widening spotlight on BDSM, more empirical research is needed to truly understand BDSM's effect on those who practice it.

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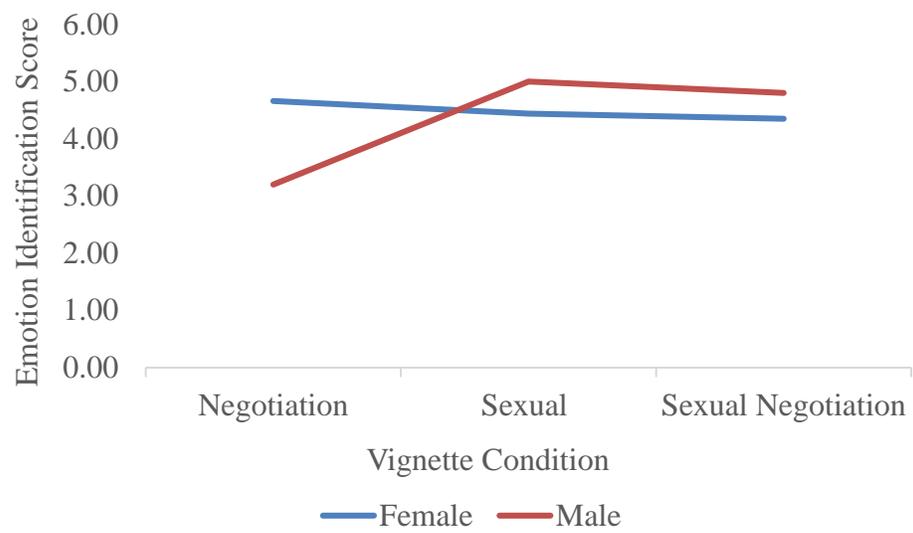


Figure 1. Mean emotion identification scores across participant sex and vignette condition.

Appendix A

Vignettes

Control Negotiation Condition:

Imagine you are having the following conversation with your significant other and/or sexual partner. While these behaviors may be out of character for you personally, we ask that you simply imagine yourself as having this conversation for the sake of the experiment. Your continued participation is much appreciated.

You are sitting down with your significant other/sexual partner. They've been wanting to speak with you all night; they have a new interest they'd like to talk to you about.

Your partner: Would you ever go paintballing?

You: I haven't ever thought about that, no.

Your partner: Would you go paintballing with me tonight?

While you have never considered this activity before, you see the delight it brings you partner and want to explore his or her new interest together.

You: If that is something you want, sure!

Your partner: I would like to try it if you are game!

You: What gear would we use to protect ourselves?

Your partner: I actually bought a set of protective goggles and arm gear last week and it just arrived.

You: So this is something that means a lot to you, huh? Would I be able to back out?

Your partner: Absolutely, my love! If you didn't want to do it, we can leave anytime!

You: That's reassuring. Where would you like to go specifically?

Your partner: I say we start small, just us two at the local arena for now.

This doesn't seem too out of the box, so you decide to give this a try. You and your partner continue speaking until you iron out every last detail.

Control Sexual Condition:

Imagine you are having the following conversation with your significant other and/or sexual partner. While these behaviors may be out of character for you personally, we ask that you simply imagine yourself as having this conversation for the sake of the experiment. Your continued participation is much appreciated.

You are sitting down with your significant other/sexual partner. They've been wanting to speak with you all night; they have a new interest they'd like to talk to you about.

Your partner: Have you ever tied someone up?

You: I haven't ever thought about that, no.

Your partner: Have you ever considered tying me up?

You: Not particularly, no.

Your partner: Have you ever used a blind fold during sex?

You: I haven't ever experienced that, no.

Your partner: Have you ever been spanked during sex?

You: Yes actually, that is my favorite thing to have done to me in bed.

Your partner: Have you ever used a safeword in bed?

You: No, but that sounds exciting!

Your partner: Have you ever used rope in any way during sex?

This doesn't seem too out of the box, so you decide to answer. You and your partner continue speaking until they have gotten a comprehensive view of your sexual history.

Sexual-Negotiation Condition:

Imagine you are having the following conversation with your significant other and/or sexual partner. While these behaviors may be out of character for you personally, we ask that you simply imagine yourself as having this conversation for the sake of the experiment. Your continued participation is much appreciated.

You are sitting down with your significant other/sexual partner. They've been wanting to speak with you all night; they have a new interest they'd like to talk to you about.

Your partner: Would you ever tie someone up?

You: I haven't ever thought about that, no.

Your partner: Would you tie me up tonight?

While you have never considered this activity before, you see the delight it brings your partner and want to explore his or her new interest together.

You: If that is something you want, sure!

Your partner: I would like to try it if you are game!

You: What would I use to bind you?

Your partner: I actually bought a coil of hemp rope last weekend and it just arrived.

You: So this is something that means a lot to you, huh? Would we have a safeword?

Your partner: Absolutely, my love! Something out of the ordinary, like: pineapple.

You: Well that's certainly noticeable. What would you like bound specifically?

Your partner: I say we start small, just my wrists tied in front of me, ya know?

This doesn't seem too out of the box, so you decide to give this a try. You and your partner continue speaking until you iron out every last detail.

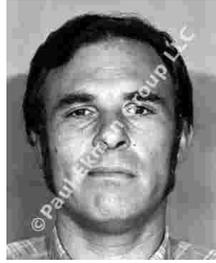
Appendix B

Unmasking the Face: Photo Set: Emotion Detection Task Stimuli

Paul Ekman Group, LLC.



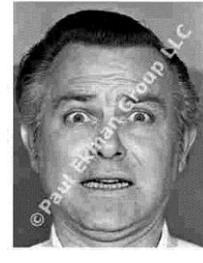
Anger



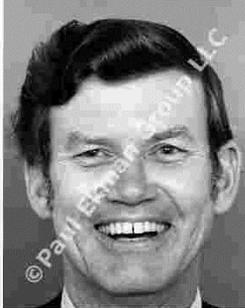
Contempt



Disgust



Fear



Happy



Sad



Surprise

Appendix C

Emotion Detection Worksheet

For this exercise you will be seated in front of a computer screen, with one hand resting on the space bar and one prepared to write with a pen. You will press the space bar to advance through the presentation, always advancing and never clicking back. You will be shown a total of seven faces, numbered in order of appearance (such that the first photo you see should be recorded as “one”, the second one you see should be recorded as “two”, and so on). Please indicate in the spaces provided below which emotion you believe you saw by writing the number of the photo next to the corresponding emotion.

Each emotion is only shown once.

ANGER _____

SURPRISE _____

FEAR _____

SAD _____

CONTEMPT _____

HAPPY _____

DISGUST _____