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Erotica as Public Pedagogy: Learning Identity through Popular Cultural Sources

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Abstract: Women who are feminist and submissive struggle to learn about and navigate their identities. This study found popular cultural texts played a key role in identity construction for these women.

Keywords: BDSM, feminism, identity navigation, public pedagogy

Popular texts and sources provide a potential site for people to consider their identities through different lenses. One provocative example is women who identify as both feminist and submissive. These women often struggle to integrate and reconcile these potentially paradoxical identities (Prior, 2013) whether due to their own internal dialogue or expectations placed on them by others. Many women who are feminist and submissive struggle to navigate the meanings, expectations, and cultural borderlands (Anzaldúa, 2007) between feminism and submission. Seeking new information from different perspectives and critically engaging with these ideas can lead to new knowledge about themselves, their identities, and their communities outside of a formal learning framework. Such an exploration can be transformative and emancipatory (Brookfield, 1985).

With conflicting identities, how do these women begin to construct their identities? Where do they first learn that their identity characteristics are different than the women around them? American educational philosopher John Dewey (1938) believed that students must interact with their environment to adapt, learn, and grow. Although the field of Adult Education has long been interested in how adults learn outside of the classroom, recent literature has taken up issues with the pedagogy of the public sphere. The scholarship of public pedagogy explores “spaces, sites, languages of education and learning that exist outside of the walls of the institution of schools” (Sandlin, Shultz, & Burdick, 2010, p. 1). One area of learning that occurs largely outside of textbooks and schooling is identity. Public pedagogy offers “spaces of learning” in which “our identities are formed.... Master narratives of adult identity—who we are with regard to race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on—are portrayed to us and perpetuated through various public pedagogies” (Sandlin, Redmon Wright, & Clark, 2011, p. 5). Consuming popular culture helps to teach us who we are, what roles we play in society, and how we should behave.

As women navigate the intersecting meanings of feminism and submission, some struggle to reconcile their feminist politics and submissive practice (i.e., belief in equality and desire to yield authority). Bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and sadism/masochism (BDSM) has been examined through diverse feminist lenses, including radical feminism, postcolonial world-travelling, and a sex-critical approach. However, scant empirical research focuses on the intersection of feminist and submissive identities. This study is part of a larger project investigating the intersection of feminist and submissive identities. For this paper, we pose the following research question: How do women who identify as feminist and submissive, and who are active in the BDSM community, learn about their feminist and submissive identities from popular cultural texts? This research contributes to the knowledge about self-directed learning and public pedagogy as useful tools for understanding the intersections of feminism, submission, sexuality, and identity.

Conceptual Framework

Public pedagogy is an evolving concept and scholars are still working to situate, define, and theorize it as a unifying concept (Burdick, Sandlin, & O'Malley, 2014). The term "Public pedagogy" was first used in the literature in 1894, though its meaning has evolved. When the term first appeared, it was used to describe the education one needed to acquire to be a good citizen (Sandlin, O'Malley & Burdick, 2011). Over time, different understandings of the term emerged. Through a review of the literature over a 116-year period, Sandlin, O'Malley and Burdick (2011) found five different sites of public pedagogy: (a) citizenship within and beyond schools, (b) popular culture and everyday life, (c) informal institutions and public spaces, (d) dominant cultural discourses, and (e) public intellectualism and social activism. The authors acknowledge the concern that using "public pedagogy" to describe any site of learning outside of a traditional classroom is dangerous and that such a wide usage risks rendering the concept as unusable. Such broad usage of public pedagogy could diminish "its usefulness as a sensitizing concept for researchers interested in learning and education outside of schools" (Burdick, Sandlin, & O'Malley, 2014, p. 3).

Yet theorizing the concept further is important given how much of our life's learning occurs outside the classroom and how little scholarship focuses on this type of informal learning. Even the word "public" must be further scrutinized. Savage (2014) outlined three distinct publics: *Political publics* are generally spatially-bound and "a collective political body" (p. 81), our common understanding of a democratic society. *Popular publics* describes the consumption of popular culture through everyday life and "are less likely to be spatially referenced, because they *come into being* through processes of cultural distribution and consumption that often transcend specific geographical or political fields" (p. 84; emphasis in original). *Concrete publics*, also spatially-bound, are specific physical institutions of cultural learning (e.g. museums, zoos) or events (e.g. theatrical performances or protest rallies). Savage (2014) stresses that scholars need to clarify the type of public to which they are referring for the concept to hold any proactive analytical prowess.

Cultural artifacts pervade every aspect of our lives and shape who we become as people. Therefore, studying popular culture illuminates who we are and how we construct our identities. Popular culture can be thought of "as the broad range of texts that constitute the cultural landscape of a particular time and/or place, as well as the ways in which consumers engage with those texts and thus become producers of new negotiated meanings. We view a text as any artifact or experience that we can read to produce meaning" (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015, p. 369).

In the last decade, public pedagogy scholarship has begun to uncover the wide array of cultural institutions and spaces through which people learn outside of the classroom. However, issues of how it is practiced has not received enough research and the concept itself is still under-theorized (Burdick, Sandlin, & O'Malley, 2014). More research about the methods of practice for public pedagogy is needed.

Research Design

A phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) was used to explore the essence of the intersection of feminist and submissive identities. Interviews were conducted "to share in the understandings and perceptions" of how the women and explore how they "structure and give meaning to their daily lives" (Berg, 2001, p. 7) as feminist and submissive. Participants were selected to provide in-depth, rich information and insights into the phenomenon. They were identified through prior contact with the first author, as a researcher, snowball sampling, and criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). A sample of 23 participants met the following criteria: they

were 18 years or older; identified as a woman, as a feminist, and as a submissive in the context of dominant/submissive relationship, involved in the BDSM community, and lived in Florida. The mean age of the participants was 41, with the youngest 23 and the oldest 62. The mean length of time involved in the BDSM community was 12 years, with a range of 1 year to 30.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to learn about the participants' perceptions of their feminist identity and experiences, submissive identity and experiences, and navigation of the two identities. The interviews consisted of 27 open-ended questions and the mean length of time was 49 minutes per interview. Each participant also answered background/demographic questions before their interview, and follow-up questions were asked after all of the interviews were completed. Interviews were recorded on a digital recording device and transcribed verbatim with light editing. Then, the transcripts were analyzed using NVIVO software.

Data analysis was an ongoing process, through which the content of the interview transcripts were coded and analyzed for themes of similarity and difference (Boyatzis, 1998). The first author identified significant segments/quotes in each transcript, developed codes from quotes, cluster codes into themes, and used themes common across transcripts to create composite experiences. After an initial review of the transcripts, an email was sent to each participant asking that they respond to 17 follow up-questions to clarify or deepen the understanding of a concept. The participants answered the follow-up questions through a Qualtrics form and entered their alias, so that their new data could be matched with their interview transcript.

Findings

The average age of the participants at the time of the interview was 41. The average age of when participants first recognized their submissive identity at age 24 (with a range of 10-50). However, most of them experienced submissive desires or behaviors at a younger age; the desires were present, even before they understand them or had language to describe them. The participants recalled their initial submissive desires and behaviors in four distinct ways: as inherent; as a part of becoming sexually active; as unwittingly played out in their intimate relationships; and/or as beginning with erotica or pornography. This last way is the focus of this paper.

Six participants specifically discussed their submissive identity as inherent and always existing; they could not recall a time when they "discovered" it. Five participants recognized their submissive identity when they become sexually active; as a natural part of being a sexual being. Five participants recognized their submissive identity when reflecting on their behaviors and patterns of communication within intimate relationships, where one or both partners engaged in forms of D/s without awareness, negotiation, or emotional support.

Seven participants recognized their submissive identity and recalled being turned on while reading erotica and watching pornographic movies. This included memories of being 12 or 13 years old, reading their mothers' romance novels in which aggressive heroes overwhelm shy maidens, and wanting to be tied up by *Charlie's Angels* or *Wonder Woman*. Ophelia first experienced submissive desires through erotica when she was 13. When talking about it, she expressed concern that the types of "heroes" in her books are not the nicest people. Frances also recalled reading her mother's romance novels at age 12 or 13. While she accepted her submissive identity and desires, she worried about how young women will develop as healthy individuals, with healthy relationships if they cannot speak openly and learn about their desires and issues of consent and communication with knowledgeable adults. The participants found pleasure in

viewing these resources, yet expressed concern about what such books, images, and desires can do to a young person who is discovering her sexuality, especially if living in an environment where sexuality, sex, and kink are taboo subjects. Women struggled the most with their attraction to erotica and pornography, because they became sexually aroused by images of women being dominated in situations where consent was not explicitly given and where activities were not negotiated. Many of the women recalled being turned on by their mother's romance novels, where the swashbuckling pirate takes a "captive bride." The women worry that these types of novels contribute to readers' ignorance regarding consent.

All of the participants learned about submission and BDSM through books, videos, and television. Common sites of learning included "the standard" resource books: *Different Loving* (Brame, Brame, & Jacobs, 1996) and *Screw the Roses, Send Me the Thorns* (Miller, Granzig, & Devon, 2004). Frances shared a story about the first time she spoke with her mom about being a submissive, "I remember the first time we really talked about it. My mom saw a book on my coffee table – I think it was *Screw the Roses, Send me the Thorns* – and she asked if I was okay, if I was safe. I said 'yes,' you know, 'I'm okay, I know what I'm doing/' That book, along with two other books, *When Someone You Love is Kinky* (Easton & Liszt, 2000) and *The S&M Feminist: Best of Clarisse Thorn* (Thorn, 2012) helped Frances to better understand and talk about her desires and relationship dynamics. This was especially useful when the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2011) books became popular; Frances was able to pull from her personal knowledge of D/s to share concerns about safety and consent that she found problematic in the series. In fact, 10 participants emphasized the importance of women "doing their research" especially when new to BDSM. Safety is a key concern, as is understanding their interests and what they are willing to engage in. Five women emphasized the value of a BDSM activity checklist, where individuals can indicate responses such as "like to do," "want to try," and "will never do."

Another participant, Gloria, began learning about BDSM and her submissive identity based on the recommendation of friendly "gentleman dominant," who contacted her through FetLife, a popular social networking platform for people into BDSM. The gentleman helped Gloria understand that D/s is more than just dungeon play and asked her to read two books (Brame, Brame, & Jacobs, 1996; Brame, 2000). When reading them, he asked her to read the entire book without browsing or skimming, and to notice how she feels when reading each section. The books opened up a new world of possibilities for Gloria; she read a lot that resonated with her experiences, and she found words to describe something that had been missing in all of her intimate relationships: consensual power exchange within a D/s dynamic.

Discussion

Individuals act in ways to verify their identities, where perceived meanings are consistent with identity standards, or set of meanings that define the character of an identity (Burke, 2007). When identity standards have oppositional meanings, the standards must shift, as identities change to remove conflict. When activated simultaneously, the identity higher in prominence and commitment will guide behavior (Burke, 2007). This research advances the discussion about learning, identity, feminism, sexuality, submission, and BDSM. It provides insight for professionals, care givers, friends, family members, and women themselves, and can be applied to AE and HRD through incorporation into coursework, training, and policy.

The BDSM community is a thriving site of public pedagogy where practitioners learn through a variety of formats, including books, such as *Different Loving: The World of Sexual Dominance and Submission* (Brame, Brame, & Jacobs, 1998), *Domination and Submission: The*

BDSM Relationship Handbook (Makai, 2014), *Playing Well With Others: Your Field Guide to Discovering, Exploring and Navigating the Kink, Leather and BDSM Communities* (Harrington & Williams, 2012), and *The S&M Feminist: Best of Clarisse Thorn* (Thorn, 2012). Books also provide guidance for people outside of BDSM, such as *When Someone You Love is Kinky* (Easton & Liszt, 2000) and *Health Care Without Shame* (Moser, 1999). Additionally, the blogosphere provides a wealth of posts and reader comments about BDSM, submission, and feminism; for example, *The Pervocracy: Sex. Feminism. BDSM. And Some Very, Very Naughty Words* (Pervocracy, 2017) and *The Submissive Guide: Helping You Find Yourself* (lunaKM, 2017). In fact, one of the most comprehensive blogs about BDSM (Ranai, 2011) provides content in 23 languages, and 38 links to resources in English about feminist perspectives. Many of these resources direct people to find more information and groups through FetLife “the Social Network for the BDSM, Fetish and Kinky Community.” FetLife has various online groups for feminists, including: BDSM and Feminism, 21st Century Feminism and Womanism, Feminist Submissives, Feminist BDSM Lesbian femmes and butches, and regional groups, such as Feministas BDSM Brasil and Glasgow Feminist Munch. These resources provide a wealth of information for women who want to understand themselves better. Research can explore how women access these and other resources to better understand their identities, desires, and limits and claim their BDSM sexuality. Research on women’s experiences within the BDSM community can inform our knowledge about how group involvement and education impacts women’s identities, development, and awareness. This knowledge, in turn, can be useful for service providers who work with the women and the women’s families.

Research and practice can focus on reducing BDSM social stigma through education. The need for professionals to be educated about BDSM has been recognized by the BDSM community, as demonstrated by the Kink Aware Professionals Directory (NCSF), where individuals can find psychotherapeutic, medical, legal, and other professionals who are sensitive to diverse expressions of sexuality. Research can explore the challenges that BDSM practitioners experience while learning about their identities and desires and while engaging in them. Awareness of BDSM can be applied in the field of adult education through incorporation into curriculum and training for psychologists, doctors, nurses, attorneys, and law enforcement officers. Continuing education, as provided by associations such as the American Psychological Association and the Academy of Human Resource Development, also provides sites for increased awareness. Additionally, this knowledge can inform educational platforms for parents, friends, and colleagues who interact with BDSM practitioners, and can be significant to all members of the BDSM community, in terms of understanding multiple identities. In addition to the research and policy work being conducted by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (e.g., Kink Aware Professionals Directory; Violence and Discrimination Survey; Consent Counts, comprehensive analysis and education about current laws and court decisions, development of legal arguments, participating in court cases, and grassroots activism) other researchers can focus on exploring BDSM in non-pathological ways, from a wide array of frameworks.

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