

Reflections on a career dedicated to the study of BDSM and diverse sexualities

Sexualities

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Charles Moser** 

Diverse Sexualities Research and Education Institute, USA

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Introduction

It is amazing to me that 50 years ago, in 1970, I graduated high school and started college. I knew then that I wanted to be a sex researcher, but the path was just not clear. It was like saying you wanted to be an astronaut, but a pre-astronaut training program did not exist. Four years later, I graduated college with a degree in physics, the beginnings of my efforts to study BDSM,¹ and a commitment to myself to study sex rigorously. I realized I needed a license and training to be a psychotherapist; an MSW was the easiest license to obtain. Somehow, I managed to focus my social work program on clinical sexology, though the term “clinical sexology” did not exist yet. In 1979, I finished what I believe was the first doctoral dissertation on BDSM and received a PhD in Sexology. My dissertation was the basis for three publications and the direction of my career was set. It was almost a decade later when the AIDS epidemic induced me to go to medical school. Throughout all my education and clinical training, I knew I wanted to study sex and help people with their sexual concerns.

In the early 1970s, Masters and Johnson published *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, the Gay Rights movement was gaining traction after Stonewall, and

Corresponding author:

Charles Moser, Diverse Sexualities Research and Education Institute, 45 Castro St Ste 125, San Francisco, CA 94114, USA.

Email: docx2@ix.netcom.com

homosexuality was no longer seen as a sign of mental illness.² People were experimenting with swinging, bisexuality, gender diversity, open relationships, among other aspects of sexual, gender, and relationship expressions that were the anathema of the dominant culture. It was an exciting time and, in many ways, more sexually free than any time since.

The Till Eulenspiegel Society (TES),³ the first BDSM social and support group, was founded in 1971 and was an excellent setting to start my research. It is not uncommon for BDSM activities to occur in semi-public spaces, so one could observe the interactions. I remember some of those observations vividly today. Early in my career, I was invited to observe at a BDSM party as unobtrusively as possible. The party, which occurred in a commercial loft, had been planned to start after a support group meeting. When the support group meeting concluded, I was surprising to see most of the people depart, leaving about 20 people for the party. As soon as the party started, a man immediately began undressing the woman with whom he came and tying her to a post in the room. Without any foreplay, he began caning her, at first lightly but quickly escalating to a serious beating. I had heard that sort of thing happened but had never observed it. As the caning intensified, I started to become quite uncomfortable, thinking he was going to injure her seriously. What was I going to tell the police? That I watched this man assault her and did nothing? The other attendees watched intently, but I seemed to be the only one who was worried. The beating went on and on, as I was becoming more and more uncomfortable. The caning was reaching a fever pitch, becoming frenzied and more intense. I felt that I had no choice but to act. As I took my first step towards the couple, the woman erupted with an obvious and incredibly intense orgasm, the first of many that evening. I smiled to myself about how I had almost made a fool of myself by intervening! At the end of the evening I overheard the woman ask her partner if they could repeat the caning after they went home. To say the least, I was fascinated.

I tell this story to emphasize how our own internal beliefs color our interpretation of what is happening. Having an open mind and being ready to accept someone else's experience as valid helps change your own perception.

Thinking like a sexologist

Neil deGrasse Tyson, the astrophysicist, once said, "Knowing how to think empowers you far beyond those who know only what to think" (19 May 2012).

In high school, I had a math teacher who would tell us in a booming voice that the author of a math problem had to do 90% of the work or you would not be able to solve the problem. A trick in sexology is posing a question in a form such that 90% of the work is already done. Sometimes, we do not even know enough to do that. However, as a thought experiment, assuming a solution to see if it can illuminate the answer sometimes eliminates other possibilities—this process helps you work backwards to the answer. For example, I wrote a paper entitled *Lust, Lack of Desire, and the Paraphilias* (Moser, 1992), which assumed there was a process

which led to one's sexual interests, without even hazarding a guess on what that process was. It partially explained how we develop unusual sexual interests, or no sexual interests. I did not have the language then, but it predicted asexuality.

My training in physics (and I do have a degree in physics) also influenced my approach. Physicists often ask what happens at the extremes to see if and where their theories break down. Much of what I do involves taking current beliefs about sexuality and applying them to their logical extremes. I often take the words of my critics and show their logical inconsistencies and reinterpret their data, to demonstrate that their data do not support their conclusions. Sometimes I propose new definitions, but usually I just challenge the original authors to reexamine their own definitions. The establishment does not give up, continuing to wordsmith new diagnoses that remain essentially flawed without questioning their underlying assumptions.

I was captivated with the nonjudgmental approach to sex of Havelock Ellis (see *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*) and Magnus Hirschfeld (see *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress*). Their attitudes contrasted with the pathologizing approach of Krafft-Ebing and other early sexologists. I appreciated how Kinsey invented techniques to overcome the limitations of research, asking questions that assumed everyone did everything, sampling 100% of groups to counter the people who declined to be interviewed.

I have had too many mentors to name them all here, but each helped to solidify my approach, to think nonjudgmentally, and to maintain a rigorous nonjudgmental approach. I co-authored many papers with Peggy Kleinplatz, who insisted quite correctly that my writing be tighter. I owe her a tremendous debt. Slowly, I solidified my approach to sex research. Like Ellis and Hirschfeld, my initial approach was descriptive: to describe what I saw, and what my subjects said and did. Over my career, I increasingly spent time critiquing those who pathologized the paraphilias and gender, exposing the flaws in their thinking. That focus did not make me a lot of friends, but it was necessary.

A career in sexology

My decision to study BDSM was made quite early. My dissertation led to three publications, and after that it was clear that I was going to study BDSM. That was a fateful, but conscious, decision which I have never regretted. Nonetheless, I suspected that studying BDSM meant that no mainstream university would ever hire me. I have published over 80 peer-reviewed articles in the academic literature, written book chapters, guest edited journal issues, and given numerous lectures, among other academic achievements. My intellectual independence was more important to me than having an academic position. I do not compromise easily. Too many promising young researchers have been enticed away from their preferred focus that is from the study of BDSM.

I advise students who want to research BDSM to make that decision carefully. I warn young researchers to be cautious when others ask whether they have personal

interests in BDSM and what drew them to study this area. If one admits to any personal interest in BDSM, critics will dismiss one's research as biased. Scholars who deny any personal interest will be dismissed as clueless. Refusing to say, forces readers to examine the merits of one's work per se. How gay and heterosexual researchers avoid *ad hominem* criticism is a topic for another day. When people persist in inquiring about my personal sexual interests, I suggest, mostly in jest, that seducing me is their best course of action. . . but so far, no colleague has taken me up on the offer. For the truly persistent, I start asking probing questions about their diverse sexual practices. It reinforces the point that the researchers' sexual interests should not be used to discredit their research.

My last general comment concerns the personal attacks BDSM researchers are bound to receive. When others cannot criticize your research, they will denigrate you personally. I have always felt that *ad hominem* attacks were a compliment; if your research were too solid to criticize, the critics would go after you personally. On the other hand, if criticism of the research is valid, then it is incumbent on the author to learn from the criticism. After I "finish" a paper, I re-read it imagining how it might be criticized. I try to respond to those prospective criticisms in the next draft of the paper, either by acknowledging flaws or bolstering my arguments. I cannot emphasize enough how important that exercise is.

Colleagues are often ambivalent about learning about BDSM. Whenever I have been scheduled to give a presentation on BDSM, numerous conference attendees would tell me how much they would love to hear what I said, but just could not attend my session because. . . Instead, they asked for a synopsis of my research. This almost never happened when I presented on a non-BDSM topic, such as the effects of hormones on gender diverse patients. I still take their coy behavior as a compliment, and it does help to spread my research. After all, I got into this research, because I wanted to understand BDSM.

Sometimes, it is not easy to get published. One article pertaining to sex workers was rejected because I reported their income in dollars—rather than specifying US dollars—which was my error. I responded to the editor that this was an easy fix, but the editor never replied. The article was ultimately published in another journal with the US dollar correction. In other instances, reviewers skewered my work for the "obvious biases" that permeated my papers, while remaining oblivious to their own biases. Given that the articles were factually and methodologically sound, perhaps I did not find what reviewers expected or wanted me to find. It is easy to become discouraged, but it is better to be criticized than ignored. To get published it may be useful to ask the editor if the journal would welcome a submission. It is also helpful to check where similar articles have been published. I have been approached by editors soliciting a submission after giving a presentation at a conference.

Sometimes critics have gone to great lengths to single out and denigrate what is conspicuously my research without actually citing any of my publications in their reference lists. Perhaps, they did not want others to read my articles and draw their own conclusions. Or perhaps, they did not want me to write a letter to the editor

pointing out the errors in their analysis. Others have attempted to undermine my work by attributing opinions to me that I do not hold. If that happens to you, I suggest correcting the record publicly. As dismal as all this may sound, I believe that my work on the paraphilias has had its intended impact.

Fighting BDSM oppression

Prejudice against LGBTQ individuals is well known, but few people are aware of the discrimination directed at BDSM practitioners. BDSM-identified individuals have been assaulted and lost and continue to lose custody of children, jobs, and security clearances. They report discrimination in seeking healthcare, legal services, and employment. They are also defamed, stalked, and harassed. Over the years, the situation has improved, but the stigma and its consequences remain ubiquitous.

My research on the BDSM community has led to my becoming an expert witness for child custody and employment discrimination cases. I recall one case which illustrates how vulnerable BDSM practitioners are: The DSM-III-R diagnostic criteria for sexual sadism required that the paraphilic interest cause marked distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. The opposing “expert” insisted that the sheer fact that the father was now forced to defend his BDSM activities in a child custody proceeding constituted *ipso facto* evidence of impairment by virtue of the legal entanglement occasioned by the respondent’s interest in sexual sadism. The judge agreed with the opposing expert and the father lost custody. That was the moment I committed myself to the fight to remove the paraphilias from the DSM.

It seems naïve now, but I thought that removing the paraphilias from the DSM would be easy. In my work, I demonstrated that the various definitions of the paraphilias as mental disorders were not logically consistent. In the DSM-5, the paraphilias are listed as a category of mental disorders. So, it is surprising that the definition of a paraphilia does not meet the definition of a mental disorder. Even more surprising is that except for pedophilia, none of the paraphilias meet the DSM-5’s definition of a paraphilia. The DSM-5 is supposedly evidence-based, but there are no studies which demonstrate that the paraphilias are psychiatric disorders. On the contrary, the research demonstrates that individuals with a paraphilia are indistinguishable from the general population, except for their sexual interests.

Crimes are not ordinarily classified as mental illnesses; the exception are “sex crimes”. Acting upon one’s nonstandard desires is regularly diagnosed as paraphilic. Repeatedly embezzle money, and there is no embezzlement disorder. Repeatedly assault your partner, and there is no assault disorder or even a spousal abuse disorder. What other crimes are automatically deemed to be a mental disorder? It seems obvious to me, but not necessarily to others, that designating a crime as a mental disorder creates a very slippery slope. It can and has led to the involuntary hospitalization of political or social dissidents. The so-called Sexually Violent Predator laws have been used to institutionalize people with paraphilias for

life. This is a human rights issue and an egregious example of morality posing as science.

There are people who believe to their core that BDSM is *ipso facto* evidence of mental illness and are not above spreading falsehoods about my work to bolster their own position. One of their common tactics is to fabricate and promulgate the lie that I support the decriminalization of child sex abuse (as chronicled, for example Kleinplatz and Moser (2005)). I want to be quite clear—I have never advocated for the decriminalization of sex acts against children. Sex acts against children are odious crimes. Individuals convicted of these crimes should be punished as provided by the laws in the jurisdiction in which these crimes occurred and have penalties imposed as prescribed by the applicable law and sentencing guidelines.

Future research

Over the years, my work has strayed from descriptive research on BDSM to the study of paraphilias and their classification as psychiatric diagnoses. I do hope to resume research on BDSM and other kink interests. For example, I want to study and understand how humiliation and degradation become sexually arousing to some participants. In the BDSM community, some people like “thuddy” and some like “stingy” stimuli. Maybe such preferences are no different from some people liking broccoli while others do not; I think it would be interesting to explore how malleable those interests may be. If sexual arousal is paired with acts that are not sexual interests for the individual, does that act eventually become a sexual interest? To be clear, there is much to be discovered about increasing the breadth of one’s sexual interests, and the whole domain remains fascinating to me.

I continue to be interested in the intensity and malleability of specific sexual interests, how these interests change over time, and how individuals come to define their sexual or gender identities. I am interested in applying the concept of sexual orientation to other sexual interests. I tend to be fascinated by outliers. I think we can best understand the norm by looking at the extremes.

In the end, I am surprised that I have done enough to have reflections. Nevertheless, I am not done yet. I look forward to understanding sexuality better and answering more of these questions. I am brought back to Havelock Ellis who once said, “The relation of love to pain is one of the most difficult problems, and yet one of the most fundamental, in the whole range of sexual psychology”. His words are still true today.

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ORCID iD

Charles Moser  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5120-6362>

Notes

1. BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism). At that time, it was called S/M (sadism and masochism) and a related interest was known as B/D (bondage and discipline).
2. Though it would take until 1987 for it to be removed from the DSM completely and formally.
3. Now called The Eulenspiegel Society or TES, <http://www.tes.org/whats-tes/about-tes/>

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Charles Moser is a physician in San Francisco, CA, whose practice is devoted to Sexual Medicine (the sexual aspects of medical concerns and the medical aspects of sexual concerns). He has written extensively on sexual medicine, gender diversity, diverse sexualities, hypersexuality, paraphilias, and of course BDSM. He is Founder and President of Diverse Sexualities Research and Education Institute, <https://dsrei.org>. His complete CV can be accessed at <https://docx2.com/charles-moser-phd-md/>.