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Autism, Sexuality, and BDSM

Ariel E. Pliskin

This article will attempt to illustrate how neurological differences interact with the way others treat people with such differences to explain why autistic people may be particularly likely to get their needs met through BDSM. BDSM, which overlaps with kink, fetish and leather cultures, is a combination of the abbreviations B/D (Bondage and Discipline), D/s (Dominance and submission), and S/M (Sadism and Masochism). BDSM is often though not always sexual and may involve power exchange, pain, pleasure and other sensations (Brown et al., 2019).

This article will illustrate that by the 1990s, a BDSM culture emerged that was particularly well-suited to autistic people, resulting in greater representation than in the community at large. Perhaps the experience of recognizing and seeking accommodation for one's minority neurocognitive needs facilitates recognizing and seeking accommodation for one's minority sexuality or gender needs and vice versa. With increased neuronal hyperconnectivity (Markham & Markham, 2010) and diversity (Hahamy et al., 2015), autistic people are less likely to automatically perceive context in the way that allistic people do and more likely to attend to and organize details in an idiosyncratic fashion (Vermeulen & Myles, 2012). This article will illustrate several ways in which BDSM may help autistic people navigate and organize their often intense, chaotic and unpredictable experience of the world (Markham & Markham, 2010). Non-normative BDSM activity may fit well with autistic sensorimotor patterns. BDSM communication norms serve the autistic preference for literal and explicit language. BDSM learning paths fit the autistic tendency to go deep. Ultimately, the BDSM community may be a more inclusive and accessible environment than much of the world.

With interwoven standards of normative sexuality and neurocognitive performance (Walker, 2021; Barnett, 2015; Byers, 2013; Seers, 2021), researchers and health providers operating from the pathology paradigm have historically labeled sexual minorities as disordered (Brown et al., 2019) and conceptualized autism as a collection of neurologically-based deficits

(Walker, 2021). This article aims to join neurodivergent and alternative sexuality community members working to replace the sex negative pathology paradigm with a sex positive (Pliskin, 2020) and neurodiversity affirming (Walker, 2021) perspective, illustrating how individualized negotiation and consent in BDSM may allow autistic people to construct sexual scripts that work for them.

With the exception of direct quotation, this article will follow neurodiversity paradigm language standards, by using identity-first language (Keating et al, 2022), referring to non-autistic people as allistic and avoiding functioning labels, which are considered harmful (Savarese & Savarese, 2010; Milton & Lyte, 2012; Yergeau, 2010). This article did not require institutional review because it references existing literature and involves no original research. Of the studies referenced in this article that describe differences by sex or gender (Barnett, 2015; Byers, 2012; 2013; Cazalis et al, 2022; McNaughtan, 2019; Pecora et al, 2019; Schöttle, 2017), most conflate the two by interchanging between terminology of “male” or “female” and “man” or “woman.” Many researchers provide few details regarding exactly how they determined participant’s sex or gender designation. These methods may fail to accurately describe the complexity of sex and gender, by, for example, failing to specify between assigned sex at birth or gender identity. Therefore, the hypothesized generalizations this article will propose should be taken as tentative and future research should more accurately and precisely account for a broader variety of sex and gender expressions.

Researchers and community members have suggested that autism may be more common among BDSM participants than the general population (Boucher, 2018; Schöttle et al., 2017; Price, 2022; Seers, 2021). Researchers report higher levels of sadistic and masochistic paraphilia (a medicalized term for sexual desire deemed abnormal) among autistic people compared to allistic people (Schöttle et al., 2017). Boucher found that 5.7% of BDSM practitioners who responded to an online survey reported an autism diagnosis, which is more than 5 times the approximate 1% prevalence in the general population (2018). Through open-ended interviews with autistic women in Australia, Seers (2021) found that several respondents engaged in diverse and inclusive communities and “prided themselves on living an ‘alternative’ lifestyle such as ...participating in the ‘kink community’ where gender normative performance is less restrictive” (p. 6).

Price (2022) argued that BDSM as we know it today should be added to the niche geek cultures Silberman suggested were built by autistic people (2015). The next paragraphs will outline the parallel paths of BDSM and geek cultures through the twentieth century and share evidence of their convergence in the 1990s. Future investigators may explore whether autistic people were disproportionately involved in BDSM before the 1990's. Silberman suggested that communities built around science-fiction or amateur radio may have been more welcoming to autistic people than those built around sports or rock music because one could read or operate a radio in the comfort of one's home and these groups celebrated the accumulation of specific knowledge (Silberman, 2015).

Both BDSM and geeky practices were shaped by media technology that increasingly allowed people with common proclivities to form decentralized networks across geographic boundaries (Stein, 2021; Silberman, 2015). While people interested in both sci-fi and BDSM corresponded and met others with common interests through loosely organized networks connected to print publications during the early twentieth century (Silberman, 2015; Stein, 2021), these two threads of alternative culture took different paths. In the 1930s, youth who connected through sci-fi pulps started to meet in person (Silberman, 2015) while distributors of sadomasochistic media were jailed and private gatherings were kept underground (Stein, 2021). While autistic people may have increasingly felt at home at post-WWII fandom conventions or the emerging hacker cultures in places like Silicon Valley and MIT (Silberman, 2015), early stirrings of BDSM culture emerged more discretely at gay leather bars. In the 1970s, practitioners in major cities met each other through local print publications and created the first organizations dedicated to BDSM. These organizations were inclusive of all sexual orientations and drew inspiration from the gay rights movement, sexual liberation, and the gay leather scene (Stein, 2021).

The influence of California's overlapping hacker culture and sexually liberated counter-culture during the "naughty nineties" typified the emergence of a more autism-friendly BDSM lifestyle. During this decade, adventurous spirits presented fantastic personae at both gatherings like Burning Man and emerging virtual communities. Increased income and Silicon Valley's cultural influence raised the status of the geek, including autistic engineers of the Internet (Friend, 2017; Silberman, 2015). As internet

usage spread through the more sexually liberal 1990s and early 2000s, it became easier for all people to learn about underground sexual practices, interact virtually and gather in person (Tupper, 2018). Benefiting from the way that online communication makes it easier to talk about embarrassing sexual subjects while saving face (Rubinsky, 2018), the internet accelerated the growth of BDSM communities (Tupper, 2018). Online forums helped spread discussions of rape and promote norms of consent (Lieff, 2017), and the increased importance of virtual interaction was more inclusive to people who found it easier to write on their computer than meet new people in person (Tupper, 2018).

Sensorimotor Intensity and Stimming

This section will illustrate data from case studies and systematic analysis which indicate that autistic people may engage in sadomasochistic activity, including BDSM, as a form of stimming. Decreased likelihood of filtering out sensory stimuli that are unrelated to context contributes to the subjective autistic experience of intensity and chaos (Vermeulen & Myles, 2012). According to autistic psychologist Nick Walker, to repeat sensory-producing action, or “stim,” is “a means by which autistics are able to regulate their chaotic experience and avoid being overwhelmed by it” (2021, p. 106), sometimes accessing “exceptional human capacities such as flow states or experiences of profound communion and ego transcendence” (2021, p.107). Evidence of flow (Ambler et al. 2017) and transcendence (Harrington, 2009 Fennel, 2018) are observed and reported as results of BDSM play.

Autistic people may experience hypo or hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli. Through qualitative interviews with 24 autistic adults, Barnett (2015) found that sensory hypersensitivity can be dysregulating during sex (2015). According to one respondent, “My sensory processing differences make some kinds of touch too intense or even physically painful. I sometimes have trouble recognizing this in real time while it’s happening and/or communicating this to a partner” (p. 4.).

Fluctuating distinct sensory profiles mean autistic people are less likely to enjoy specific activities enjoyed by most people and more likely to have idiosyncratic preferences. Autistic people enhance sexual satisfaction by choosing accommodations and customizing sexual repertoire to each

person's needs (Barnett, 2015). BDSM provides a venue in which to try out, choose and engage in a wide variety of sexual and non-sexual activities (Brown et al., 2019).

Research has illustrated a relationship between autistic sensory profiles and sexual behavior. Kellaher (2017) aimed to “review published case reports of deviant sexual behavior in ASD” (p. 3). Drawing directly from 13 reports published 1992-2012, Kellaher identified that most reports included language describing some type of “visual or tactile attraction” and that authors suggested connections between autistic sensory needs and observed behavior (p. 5). “Visual” and “tactile” are included by Walker among a list of varieties of stimming (2021, p. 105).

Shifting from case studies to systematic quantitative analysis, researchers a few years later announced completing what they believed to be “the first study to explore gender-specific aspects of hypersexual and paraphilic fantasies and behaviors” in a cohort of autistic individuals and matched allistic control group (Schöttle et al., 2017, p. 390). Results from their sample of 132 US-based adults (44 reporting autism diagnosis) who completed an online survey indicated that autistic males had higher levels of both sadistic and masochistic fantasy and behavior than allistic males and than both autistic and allistic females (Schöttle et al., 2017).

The only empirical investigation I could find utilizing a sex positive neurodiversity affirming paradigm to specifically investigate sexual behavior outside of normative standards was the honors thesis of Boucher (2018). While Boucher critiqued Kellaher's (2015) deployment of sex negative conceptualizations of paraphilia, Boucher built upon Kellaher's suggestion that sadomasochistic or fetishistic behavior, reframed by Boucher within the terminology of BDSM, may be related to autistic sensory traits. Boucher solicited 504 online survey responses from BDSM practitioners. Respondents filled out demographic information, measures of ASD traits (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001; Barret et al., 2015) and surveys of BDSM and sexual behavior.

Boucher concluded that, for autistic people, sensory preferences shaped their BDSM activity preferences more than allistic people (2018). While allistic respondents indicated that “commands and demands” were the most important activity to incorporate into a BDSM experience, “bondage and

restraint,” was the most important to autistic respondents, which Boucher believed further evidenced the importance of sensory experience to autistic BDSM practitioners, given that bondage can involve sensory stimulus and deprivation.

Explicit and Literal Language to Create Structure

The second autistic trait which impacts sexuality is a preference for literal and explicit thinking and talking. This tendency may reflect differences in the way autistic people adapt the meaning of words to a particular context (Vermeulen & Myles, 2012). While the article does not include explicit mention of BDSM, every respondent to Barnett’s set of qualitative interviews (2015) described using what researchers called “literal declaration” as a verbal or written sexual success strategy. One survey respondent said “I am also learning to write on a paper what I like [sexually] ... and he [sexual partner] follows my INSTRUCTIONS ;) and he is EXCITED about it :)” (p. 6).

Commenting on the deficits of sex education, autistic respondents express a preference for explicit, direct, specific and detailed learning, saying for example, “I only learned about the obvious indicators of sexual assault (physical force, rape, etc.) and not the subtle indicators (grooming techniques)” and “I think autistic people should be given more specifics, instead of the vague generalizations” (Barnett, 2015, p. 5). Reviewing 13 studies on autism and sexuality, Gougeon cited a number of works, including Gougeon’s previous work (2009) indicating that autistic people might miss a “hidden curriculum” of appropriate behavior. According to Gougeon, for autistic people, “the socio-sexual mores that are learned naturally and incidentally for others must be taught explicitly” (2010, p. 355).

Given that autistic people who experience satisfaction in sex report preferring explicit negotiation of activities and planning through which they could engage their individual preferences (Barnett, 2015), BDSM communication norms may therefore appeal to autistic people. Within BDSM communities, practitioners, including disabled people (Kattari, 2015) engage nuanced negotiation in which each individual consents to activities that meet their specific needs, with an emphasis on honesty, respect and mutuality (Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Pitagora, 2013). These communication norms may explain why participation in alternative sexuality communities

is associated with increased comfort with sexual communication, which is in turn associated with sexual satisfaction (Rubinsky & Hosek, 2020). Direct communication has also been shown to replace inaccurate perceptions of partner sexual satisfaction caused by lack of emotional recognition (Fallis, 2012).

The structure created by delineated roles and clear rules in power exchange relationships may help autistic people function. One autistic dominant explained: “I love to dictate schedules and routines, and my structures are logical and make perfect sense (at least to me), so why shouldn’t I use them to run a whole house? I’m naturally a bossy-pants, and keeping control of a situation lets me structure it to remain as functional as possible” (Shea, 2014, p.105). Reflecting both similarities and differences, an autistic submissive expressed that “I find that I take a lot of words literally, so being in a relationship where someone else is in charge and helps set clear social boundaries and rules for daily living helps me function at my best” (Emma, 2015, p. 180).

Hyperfocus on Special Interests

BDSM can also be a good fit for autistic people by providing community and institutional support for life-long learning of communication and other skills. Special interest is a term used by many autistic people to refer to their intense, sustained focus on particular topics or activities (Nowell et al., 2020). Special interests may facilitate interaction with others, generate positive emotion, build coping strategies and promote feelings of pride and well-being (Nowell et al, 2020). Neurodivergent hyperfocus has features which overlap with flow, though doesn’t necessarily include the effective performance component of flow (Ashinoff, 2021). Hyperfocus can result in brooding rumination which exacerbates stress (Golan et al. 2022). BDSM can provide the skill and practice to channel hyperfocus on a special interest into flow. BDSM meets many attributes of serious leisure, as defined by Stebbins (1982): the opportunity to build a career over many years, community support, investment into learning specialized skills and experiencing durable benefit (Newmahr, 2010; Sprott & Williams, 2019). As a form of serious leisure, BDSM can fit well as an autistic special interest. The autistic tendency to focus greater portions of one’s attention and energy into certain activities while potentially avoiding or neglecting other activities means that autistic

behavior, including sexual behavior, is particularly idiosyncratic and is more likely to seem extreme relative to the rest of the population. The following paragraphs will illustrate how autistic idiosyncrasy may include particularly high or low rates of sexual interest, frequency, or satisfaction.

Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry (2020) searched for posts related to sexuality on the most popular Swedish-speaking discussion online forum for autistic people. Analyzing 186 selected posts from 2007 to 2017, researchers identified comments about intensity of interest (or lack thereof) in sex by autistic people. Using a term referring to Asperger Syndrome (a diagnosis subsumed within a single autism diagnosis in 2013 (APA, 2013)), one representative commenter from the Swedish discussion boards said,

. . . sex is another area where aspies can be extreme, one way or the other. Some are not at all interested in sex or body contact while for others sex seems to become something of a special interest. I also understand that ‘deviant’ sexuality is relatively common among aspies, as are paraphilias. And it is clear that an aspie who NEVER wants to have sex or who wants to have sex entirely on their own terms can be a problem in a relationship, in the same way as an extremely intense sexual or unusual sexual interest may be. Again—we aspies are bad at being ‘moderate.’ And when it comes to sex, this may either be great for the partner (if he/she finds the ‘right’ aspie), or on the contrary be an insurmountable problem. (Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2020, p. 333)

Commenters on the Swedish discussion board also noted that shifts from one extreme to another extreme (with regards to sex) can also occur for one individual at different points in time (Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2020).

Quantitative data seems to support the Swedish commenter: when it comes to sex (as in other areas of life), autistic people “can be extreme” (Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2020). While average responses for allistic males differ from allistic females, the distribution of responses within each allistic group more closely resembles the normal distribution of a bell curve, with a large portion of responses clustering near the mean. By contrast, both male and female autistic responses include many responses near the mean, but also larger amounts of responses near the extremes than allistic responses (Schöttle et al., 2017).

Double Empathy Problem

This section will illustrate several socio-sexual problems faced by autistic people and conclude with ways BDSM could alleviate those problems. According to the theory of the double empathy problem, allistic people do not accurately understand autistic people while autistic people also struggle to understand allistic people and social norms (Mitchell, 2021). The distinct autistic patterns of moving, thinking, focusing attention and behaving described earlier in this article result in coercion, rejection, discrimination and predation by those enacting or taking advantage of neuronormative standards. Social deficits associated with autism may result more from anxiety related to discrimination than from innate autistic traits (Fein, 2015).

While autistic people do report higher rates of asexual identity than allistic people (Attanasio et al., 2022), most autistic people are interested in sexual and romantic connection (Schöttle et al., 2017). Researchers have found that lack of contact with peers limits sexual learning and increases sexual anxiety for autistic youth, likely contributing to later sexual debut (Crehan, 2021; Gougeon, 2010), perhaps even more significantly than lack of social skills (Hancock, 2020). While differences in social cognition are observed amongst autistic youth, by middle age, many autistic adults do not differ from allistic peers (Price, 2022). Likewise, lower rates of sexual engagement characteristic of adolescent and young adult autistic males compared to autistic females are no longer evident amongst older adults (Byers, 2012; Byers, 2013).

Gender socialization is a complex process. Norms differ according to time and place, as well as cultural factors such as race and class. Socialization continues across the lifespan, as each individual responds to various influences in different ways at different times, with varying levels of successful and failed conformity and resistance (Price, 2021). Given the idiosyncrasies described in this article, autistic responses to socialization may be more varied than allistic responses. Autistic people may be more aloof from social norms or cling to them too rigidly. They may be more likely to be deemed failures at adhering to social norms. In some cases, aloofness from norms can result in an approach to the world characterized by critical thinking, personal integrity and independence from harmful social patterns (Spät and Jongsma, 2019), but in other cases, it can result in inadequate attention to the boundaries of others.

While both autistic people assigned female and those assigned male at birth exhibit higher rates of noncisgender (Wattel et al, 2022) and nonheterosexual (George & Stokes, 2018) identity than allistic people (DeWinter et al. 2017), the interwoven nature of heteronormativity with norms of neurocognitive performance help explain differential outcomes by sex or gender within autistic samples. For those operating within heteronormative scripts, women may reject the advances of autistic males because they are perceived as odd while autistic females may be more likely to be targeted by predators because their oddness renders them vulnerable. Sexual script theory (Gagnon and Simon, 1973) posits that individuals have both tacit and explicit expectations about the processes by which people pursue, initiate and have sex. These scripts vary by both individual and culture. Many people are socialized to follow what researchers call the traditional sexual script. Embedded with sexist, homophobic and transphobic assumptions, the traditional script delineates that men pursue sex with women, while women gatekeep the advances of men. The traditional sexual script is associated with violence of men against women (Byers, 1996).

One of the most striking gender or sex differences among autistic people is evidence that, especially among young adults, autistic females are more likely to have sexual experience than autistic males, but more likely to report that their experience was unwanted or later regretted (Pecora et al, 2019). Autistic females are targeted for sexual assault at much higher rates than autistic males or both allistic males and females, often resulting in post-traumatic symptoms and sexual disgust (Cazaliz et al, 2022). By contrast, there is evidence that autistic males, especially those who are young, cisgender and heterosexual, experience higher rates of sexual desire and lower rates of sexual experience than autistic females and both allistic males and females (Schöttle, 2017; Byers, 2012; Byers, 2013; Barnett, 2015). Perhaps for some autistic males, desire is amplified because they are not having as much sex as they want while for some autistic females, desire has been diminished through repeated unwanted, traumatic or dissatisfying sexual experiences.

Autistic people may be freer from gender norms than allistic people, resulting in both benefits and challenges. Reviewing 15 theories explaining repeated findings of high rates of transgender identity among autistic people, reviewers found the most evidence for explanations based on resistance to social norms and less pronounced sex differences between autistic people

(Wattel et al., 2022). While there is evidence that children in the general population are rewarded for gender conformity from a young age (Chapman, 2015), there is also evidence that autistic children conform less to gender role expectations than their peers (Kallitsounaki & Williams 2020). There is also evidence of less sex difference in brain structure of autistic people compared to allistic people (Beacher et al., 2012).

Autistic males who experience social and sexual difficulties may begin avoiding them altogether and withdrawing into isolation. McNaughtan compared the responses of autistic and allistic male and female adolescents to various descriptions of dating scenarios. Autistic males gave the widest range of responses. Responses to a scenario in which one character (Sally) initiates engagement and receives signs of disinterest from a coworker (Miles) illustrate this range. Reflecting the strategy of withdrawal, one autistic male suggested that Sally quit her job so she doesn't have to feel awkward when she sees Miles at work (2019).

Given that autistic people may be less likely to intuitively perceive aspects of social context deemed relevant by neurotypical standards, autistic people may identify and stick to explicit rules. This can contribute to success in some cases, but result in problems when those rules are adhered to without enough attention to context. Mainstream pornography has been associated with increased adherence to the traditional sexual script (Sun, 2016; Setyawati & Hartini, 2018; Vera-Gray et al., 2021) and concern has been expressed that autistic people might be more likely to attempt to apply lessons from porn in real life (Attwood, 2006). The role of pornography should be considered in a nuanced way as many people list pornography as an influence to eventually find the BDSM community (Walker & Kuperberg, 2021).

McNaughtan found that autistic males were the only group to invoke explicit rules, stating for example that a character should “wait until 4 dates, because its the societal norm to have sex on the 3rd date and it is important to know if they are sexually compatible before becoming a couple” (2019, p. 36). The autistic orientation towards explicit methods of understanding human behavior might have prosocial results such as superior performance on social psychology tasks (Gollwitzer et al., 2019), and may also attract young autistic males, who report particularly struggling with courtship (Barnett,

2015), to groups like Pick Up Artist culture who teach formalized methods of courtship, often in ways that are sexist (Chen, 2016; Jenkins, 2014).

Autistic people may exhibit sexual behavior which is deemed inappropriate for context or which fails to attend to boundaries of others, such as masturbating in public, nonconsensually touching strangers or behavior labeled as stalking (Beddows & Brooks, 2016; Kumar et al., 2017). McNaughtan found that autistic males were the only group to suggest that Sally should continue pursuing a coworker Miles after Miles' expression of disinterest (2019). Researchers distinguish this type of failure to perceive boundaries from the deliberate predation believed to characterize most sexual assault (Kumar et al., 2017). Much sexual assault offense is associated with psychopathic lack of empathy by cisgender heterosexual men (Cazaliz et al, 2022), as well as adherence to extreme versions of the traditional sexual script (Buchwald et al. 1994) and associated sexist beliefs (Klement et al, 2017). Characterized by low levels of empathic concern for others, these men are believed to exploit accurate understanding of social dynamics at the expense of vulnerable others (Cazaliz et al, 2022). While both consensual BDSM practitioners and sadomasochistic sexual offenders exhibit high levels of sensation-seeking, only offenders exhibit low levels of empathic concern and sexist beliefs (Dawson et al., 2016 ; Hébert and Weaver, 2014; Martin et al, 2015). While autistic people may struggle to understand what allistic people are thinking, they do not, on average, lack empathic concern (Blair, 2005).

Frustration with failed attempts to implement explicit techniques like pickup artistry matched with withdrawal and isolation may account for the phenomenon of autismcels, autistic males in the incel community (Speckhard, 2022). Short for involuntary celibate, incel culture has been associated with extreme sex negativity, sexism and, in some cases, violence (Williams, 2020; Srinivasin, 2021). As an alternative to being targeted for assault, failed attempts to connect in contexts of ambiguous norms or isolation, BDSM communities and practices may accommodate autistic differences by offering inclusion of diversity, relationships with atypical others who are more accepting and practices in which people explicitly express what they want, set boundaries and agree to shared sexual and nonsexual activities.

While BDSM practitioners may reproduce patriarchal or heteronormative scripts through play (Weiss, 2006; Potter, 2012), decades of scholarship illustrate how BDSM practitioners often utilize explicit negotiation to deconstruct traditional scripts and reconstruct liberated ones (Kao, 2013, p. 19; Rubinskiy, 2021; Decker, 2019), resulting in freedom from day-to-day roles (Hebert & Weaver, 2015), lower rates of sexist attitudes associated with rape culture (Klement et al, 2017) and greater sexual satisfaction (Botta & Nimbi, 2019).

Limitations and Future Directions

While many studies limited their sample to “high-functioning” autistic people or those without Intellectual Disability, this article did not explore those distinctions. Therefore, some conclusions may not generalize to the entire autistic population nor to limited speaking and non-speaking autistic people. Generally, empirical studies indicating a link between autism and BDSM are few, sample sizes are small, and varied definition of terms complicate comparison. Researchers in the future should challenge pathology paradigm and sex negativity bias and include more precise and accurate descriptions of gender diversity.

Conclusion

Dominant views of autistic sexuality illustrate the intersection of standards of normativity for neurocognitive functioning with standards of normativity for sexuality. Price argued that “when Autistic people are at the reins of event planning, we can craft environments [such as BDSM gatherings] that are tailored to our sensory and social needs. In small, mask-free subcultures that are created and maintained by Autistic people, we get a glimpse of what a society that truly accepts neurodiversity might look like” (Price, 2022, p. 202). A BDSM event organizer interviewed by Price commented, “people say that the internet is a world for Autistics, built by Autistic people...but most IRL [in real life] nerdy and kinky subcultures are, too. It takes an Autistic level of passion to put these things together. And a resolve to let one’s freak flag fly” (Price, 2022, p. 205). Especially given that those who participate in the BDSM community tend to be white and well-educated (Brown et al., 2019), further research should explore ways in which BDSM communities do and do not offer inclusion and access to all autistic people.

Neurodivergence can be innate, as in the case of autism, or result from experiences like long-term meditation, trauma or drug use (Walker, 2015). Given that engaging BDSM as serious leisure may cultivate social and emotional intelligence and result in beneficial shifts in personality (Pliskin, 2018), BDSM may both include high portions of people with innate neurodivergence and result in additional beneficial neurodivergence.

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