

# Gender & Sexual Diversities

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When someone is confused or afraid to talk about their gender, ashamed of their sexual orientation, or is afraid of being judged about the way they approach sex or relationships it can be isolating, disenfranchising and may prevent them seeking support.

Transgender is still considered to be a mental disorder<sup>1</sup> and sexual diversity is often little understood by medical and psychotherapeutic professionals generally, little taught as part of the standard curriculum in those professions and frowned upon as taboo by a significant proportion of society despite feverish excitement around publications such as 50 Shades. Little wonder then that many will shy away from talking about their feelings, thoughts and desires relating to sexuality and/or gender.

This presentation will look to provide a basic overview of:

- What gender and sexual diversity is - some of the common classifications, labels and terminology;
- A brief overview of kink and BDSM;
- A brief overview of Power Dynamic Relationships;
- Implications and suggestions for the therapeutic relationship

This topic is **vast** and I couldn't possibly hope to convey a thorough understanding within the scope of this presentation. All I can hope to do is pass on a little information, encourage you to seek more and signpost you to where that information may reside.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(16\)30165-1/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(16)30165-1/abstract)

# What is Gender and Sexual Diversity? Some common terminology

## Gender Identity

- Female
- Male
- Intersex (Hermaphrodite)
- Trans (identifies as other gender than that of social norms)
- Gender Variant (does not conform to any gender label)
- Gender Fluid

## Sexual Identity / orientation

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual (emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to male/men and females/women)
- Pansexual (not limited in sexual choice with regard to biological sex, gender, or gender identity)
- Sapiosexual (finding intelligence sexually attractive or arousing)
- Asexual (having a lack of (or low level of) sexual attraction to others and/or a lack of interest or desire for sex or sexual partners)
- Kink/BDSM (alternative sexual preferences)

## Relationship Style/Lifestyle

- Power Dynamic Relationships / M/s / D/s
- Polyamory and non-monogamous relationships
- Family / Household structures (Multiple persons in a structured relationship that may or may not include sexual intimacy)

## A brief overview of Kink and BDSM

**BDSM** - Bondage/Discipline | Dominance/submission | Sadism/Masochism - an acronym developed in the 1980's as an umbrella term encompassing many erotic and consensual activities, behaviours and preferences that often involve some kind of power dynamic.

**Kink** - A broader term that includes Fetishism, BDSM, and almost everything in-between.

Both of these terms are often used interchangeably and frequently in the scene. Everything that takes place within these constructs **must be consensual**.

## Consent

In recent years there has been some significant work around defining exactly what consent means for the context of kink and BDSM activities. The **National Coalition for Sexual Freedom** (NCSF) conducted the Consent Counts Programme, part of which was to provide a Statement of Consent, defining what the community deemed to be acceptable as informed consent.

*Consent is... an informed, voluntary agreement by two or more people to engage in a particular BDSM activity or to enter into a BDSM, D/s or M/s relationship. Consent is an essential element in BDSM, both as an ethical concept and as a legal concept, and it is important to distinguish between the ethical principles and the legal rules governing consent.*

<http://bit.ly/consentstatement>

In the US consent is very relevant in a court of law - if an act is consensual it isn't usually prosecuted depending on the State. In legal terms in the UK consent is largely irrelevant - and individuals can and have been prosecuted for assault, causing actual bodily harm to their partner in consensual activities. In December 1990 in the UK, 16 gay men were given prison sentences of up to four and a half years or fined for engaging in consensual SM activity. SM is not itself 'illegal'. However, if the police discover individuals have engaged in SM activities which have caused injury, the individuals could be prosecuted for assault.

In the UK, "Harm" or "injury" constitutes a mark that lasts longer than 10 minutes. It is unsurprising then that many people keep their BDSM activities very private from the general population.

## **BDSM Ethical Frameworks / Philosophies**

Along with **consent being vital** to BDSM, there are also frameworks or philosophies surrounding ethically acceptable behaviour in BDSM, kink, and alternative sexuality communities that practitioners adhere to.

The first of these was **SSC - Safe, Sane and Consensual**. Safe means that the risk of activities should be understood by all participants and either eliminated or reduced as much as possible. Sane refers to the need to approach activities in a sensible and realistic frame of mind, and with an understanding of the difference between fantasy and reality.

Consensual means that all participants have freely consented to the activity and were in a state of mind to do so.

Because not all BDSM activities are actually safe an alternative philosophy was developed as **RACK. Risk-Aware Consensual Kink** - Risk-aware means that all the participants

know the risks involved in the activity. Consensual means that all the participants have freely consented to the activity, and that no one has been coerced. Kink refers to alternative sexual activities.

Later another alternative philosophy was developed: **Personal responsibility, informed consensual kink (PRICK)**. This philosophy emphasizes the personal responsibility of participants involved in risky sexual behaviours who must individually consent to the behaviour after personally understanding and considering its risks.

*Definitions from Kinkly.com*

## **De-pathologising alternative sexual preferences and activities:**

### **DSM IV versus DSM 5**

In the DSM IV paraphilias were defined as sexual disorders - paraphilias being “abnormal sexual desires”. It is interesting to note that in DSM I and II homosexuality was listed as a paraphilia and therefore was considered at that time to be a sexual disorder. By DSM III homosexuality was removed as a paraphilia and in DSM V there are significant changes that are relevant to those with alternative sexual preferences.

DSM 5 (2013)

*Through careful consideration of the research as well as of the collective clinical knowledge of experts in the field, several important changes were made to the criteria of paraphilic disorders, or paraphilias as they have been called in previous editions of the manual.*

*Most people with atypical sexual interests do not have a mental disorder. To be diagnosed with a paraphilic disorder, DSM-5 requires that people with these interests:*

*feel personal distress about their interest, not merely distress resulting from society's disapproval; or have a sexual desire or behaviour that involves another person's psychological distress, injury, or death, or a desire for sexual behaviours involving unwilling persons or persons unable to give legal consent.*

*To further define the line between an atypical sexual interest and disorder, the Work Group revised the names of these disorders to differentiate between the behavior itself and the disorder stemming from that behaviour (i.e., Sexual Masochism in DSM-IV will be titled Sexual Masochism Disorder in DSM-5). It is a subtle but crucial difference that makes it possible for an individual to engage in consensual atypical sexual behaviour without inappropriately being labelled with a mental disorder.*

With this revision, DSM-5 clearly distinguishes between **atypical sexual interests** and *mental disorders* involving these desires or behaviours.

### **Research relating to positive aspects of BDSM**

*"We showed that the psychological profile of BDSM participants is characterized by a set of balanced, autonomous, and beneficial personality characteristics and a higher level of subjective well-being compared with non-BDSM participants.*

*These results, in line with the more recent literature on psychosocial and clinical characteristics of BDSM participants, falsify the view that BDSM practitioners are psychologically disturbed or characterized by maladaptive psychological processes*

*or even psychopathology, and suggest it is unlikely that having experienced one or more traumatic (sexual) experiences is a major cause for developing a preference for BDSM activities. We therefore conclude that these results favour the view of Newmahr that BDSM may be thought of as a recreational leisure, rather than the expression of psychopathological processes.”*

*Andreas A.J. Wismeijer, PhD and Marcel A.L.M. van Assen, PhD*

## **The Kink / BDSM community - more than just finding a tribe.**

The kink community not only provides a place of acceptance for many people but it also serves a purpose in safety. Exploring any activity that may pose a risk to the health and safety of a person is riskier if it is practiced in isolation. The community provides education, a sounding board, willing teachers and mentors, onlookers and policing. This of course has potential to be either positive or negative or both but being part of the community is often seen as being vital to a healthy engagement in any activities that may pose risk - either psychologically or physically. Those who isolate themselves or others from the community when practicing BDSM or kink can be seen as being most at risk of harm.

*In the public “SM community” that I studied, SM can best be understood as a serious leisure endeavour. This community is a rich and complex social organization constructed around an immersive recreational pursuit. It provides for members a safe space and strong sense of belonging and identity, a place to learn and express highly specialized skills and competence, and generates a deep and meaningful identification. SM participants also reap the “durable benefits” Stebbins finds in serious leisure pursuits*

*Rethinking Kink: Sodomasochism as Serious Leisure - Staci Newmahr (2010)*



My personal observations of the positive aspects of the community include:

- Less opportunity for abusers to go unnoticed.
- Safety in learning from others
- Safety in having people looking out for each other in terms of welfare
- Reduced isolation and increased social engagement for even the most marginalised of society

...and the negative aspects include:

- The community has become so “inclusive” it has become “exclusive” - i.e. if you’re into anything you’re into everything right?
- Peer pressure
- Poor “teachers/experts” posing a risk to health and safety - narcissistic traits are prevalent.
- Mandatory acceptance means those with genuine problems can go unchallenged or unhelped.
- If feeling isolated from, or rejected by this most inclusive community - where is there left to go?

**Munch:** A munch is a social gathering of kinksters usually in a vanilla environment (a meet up at the pub for kinky folk). Often seen as the place to go for new people to the scene or people exploring their sexuality. Usually plenty of friendly folk willing to chat and support others and avoids people exploring potentially embarrassing, confusing or dangerous activities in isolation. Munch locations can usually be found on Fetlife.com. Pretty much every city has at least one per month!

## Fetlife

Fetlife.com is like Facebook for kinky people. Members often use Felife to locate other people with similar interests, groups, meetings and parties in their local area and to share and discuss their experiences with each other.

A person who is exploring their sexuality may find it a useful place to learn protocols and safety aspects but also to feel less isolated and marginalised. It is however, to be used with the same caution as anything on the Internet - with personal responsibility for ascertaining the provenance of information found there and with recognition of differing opinions.

**FetLife is the Social Network for the  
BDSM, Fetish & Kinky Community.**  
Like Facebook, but run by kinksters like you and me.  
We think it is more fun that way. Don't you?

Already a member?  
[Welcome Home](#)

Email  
Email Address  
Date of Birth (DD/MM/YYYY)  
DD / MM / YYYY  
[Join FetLife](#)

5,078,532 Members are sharing 26,041,654 pictures and 296,740 videos, participating in 6,341,370 discussions in 105,123 groups, are going to 466,426 upcoming events and reading 2,358,308 blog posts. *Kinky heaven!*

## **A brief overview of Power Dynamic or M/s relationships**

More than a sexual activity or identity, people living in a relationship of this nature see it as a paradigm of living and whilst it is often lumped under the same banner of sexual diversity as other BDSM or kink involvement I like to see it as something that may sit outside of this banner or under it depending on the individual relationship.

It is based upon a chosen, consensual, negotiated power dynamic. It can be fluid in balance and variable in intensity. Even within the community definitions and meaning vary greatly and how each relationship is defined will be unique to the relationship itself although usually one of the individuals in the relationship adopts a dominant role and the other(s) a submissive role. The roles are not gender specific. The dominant role is sometimes defined as the “Master”, “Sir” or “Mistress”, “Maam” and the submissive might be called the “slave”, “boy”, or “girl”.

These terms are controversial and indeed inflammatory to some cultures because of their similarity to human trafficking, historical or modern non-consensual forms of slavery. The two should not be confused - non-consensual forms of slavery are something quite different to the consensual Master/slave relationship. The key differentiating factor is consent. The Master/slave relationship is a consensual relationship between adults. Make no mistake - all parties in a PDR have equal value as individuals and within the relationship.

Another common misconception is that Master/slave relationships must involve some form of sadomasochism, however it is entirely possible to live in a Power Dynamic Relationship and it have nothing to do with kink, sex, sadism, masochism, pain, or suffering. A PDR is merely based upon a dominant and submissive dynamic which runs through various [agreed] aspects of the lives of those within it.

This type of relationship is described by some as an authoritative style rather than egalitarian style of relationship. Those who enter into a PDR or M/s relationship usually do so on the basis of a highly committed and long-term relationship and again, most importantly, always with consent.

It is not uncommon for this type of relationship to be branded an abusive one by onlookers based on preconceived notions and little understanding of what the relationship and terms mean for the individuals involved and/or the concept of informed consent.

*“There is no reason to believe that these “slaves” need saving or freeing. There is no indication that they are more likely to be abused than in other relationships. It would appear that some of the shock from disclosing participation in this type of relationship relates to the terms used to describe the relationship, rather than the actual behaviour within the relationship.”*

*Dancer, Peter L., Kleinplatz, Peggy J. and Moser, Charles(2006)*

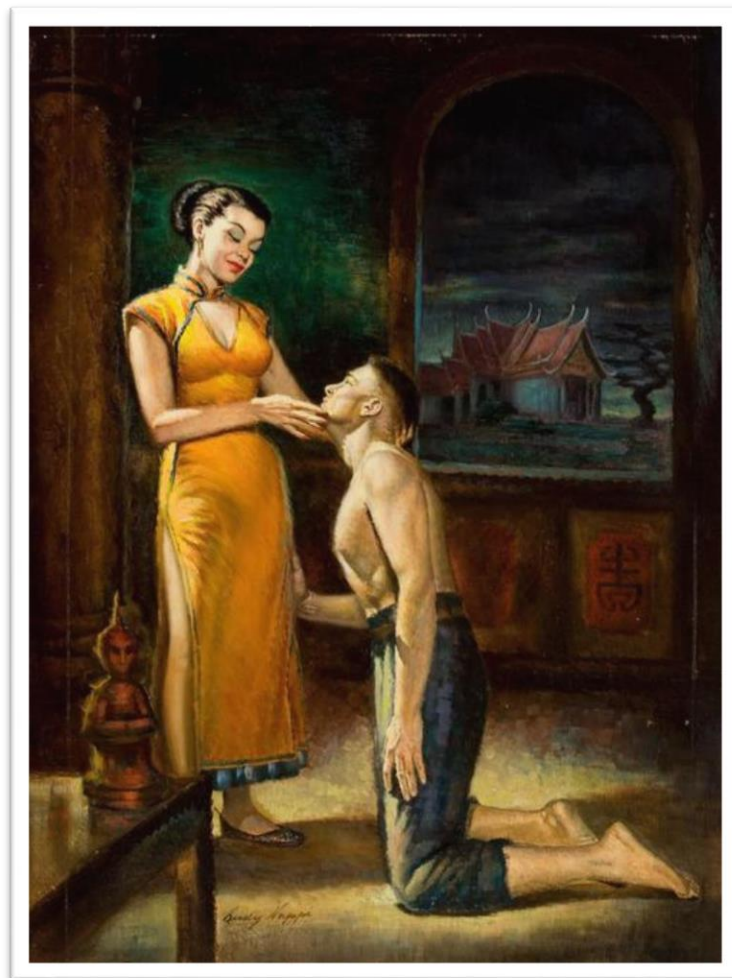
*'24/7 SM Slavery', Journal of homosexuality, 50:2, 81 [http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J082v50n02\\_05](http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J082v50n02_05)*

Often a highly dedicated and structured relationship, those in a M/s or PD relationship may spend an extraordinary amount of time working to understand themselves, their partner, the needs and wants of each other and the relationship itself. It is often based upon a foundation of honesty, respect, trust and communication and built around transparency and authority. Each party will generally have specified and explicitly agreed responsibilities within the relationship and these are usually taken very seriously.

This type of relationship may indeed seem to be an oddity in modern society and as such those that choose to live in this way can often feel isolated and misunderstood. With the

development of the Modern Slavery Bill in 2014 and changes to the law regarding domestic abuse, simply using some of the terms and descriptions when talking about a relationship of this kind could lead to unwanted interest from the authorities.

It is widely considered within the kink community that D/s is a “part-time” version of “M/s” - that those choosing a “D/s relationship” do so perhaps in the bedroom only or for only certain activities, where those living in M/s relationships extend the dynamic to every part of their lives and relationship. **However, there is no consensus on this definition so it is best to ask the individuals what it means to them in their relationship.**



## Implications and suggestions for the therapeutic relationship

My opening statement may have been the most important in this presentation.

*“When someone is confused or afraid to talk about their gender, ashamed of their sexual orientation, or is afraid of being judged about the way they approach sex or relationships it can be isolating, disenfranchising and may prevent them seeking support.”*

Despite the research, despite revisions to the DSM, despite living in a time when we’re reportedly more accepting and open-minded. Despite all this - it is still difficult to talk about this stuff without fear of judgement.

Research shows that therapists often hold biased attitudes towards atypical sexualities and project these onto their clients.<sup>2</sup>

I have heard from people who are in therapy that their therapist saw the D/s, the BDSM, the masochistic activities, etc....as **the** problem. Either their preferences and activities are presumed symptoms of some undisclosed deep rooted trauma or abuse, or the person’s problems stem from the activities themselves.

*“I was told that my depression was due to my participation in BDSM activities and lifestyle practices. That if I stopped the 'negative' behaviors then I would feel better. Instead I stopped seeing her and continued to full recovery.”*

*“I was told by several mental health professionals that my desire to inflict pain on another, albeit willing participant, was deviant and I needed to deal with my anger and bigotry issues.”*

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence A.A., & Love-Crowell J. (2008) Psychotherapists’ experience with clients who engage in consensual sadomasochism: A qualitative study. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 34, 67–85

*"The therapist refused to continue to see me until I acknowledge that I was being 'Abused'."*

NCSF

I have also heard many times *"How will I tell my therapist I'm a slave and I have a Master? How will I tell my therapist I'm into BDSM?"* - for the client it's becoming **the problem** in their experience of therapy!

However, therapists working with BDSM clients often find that most clients present with problems much like any other person or couple might.

*"One should not turn the focus onto that instead of what they really came for, which may not be anything to do with their BDSM practices."*

*Lawrence A.A., & Love-Crowell J. (2008)*

## My suggestions as a “kink knowledgeable” therapist

1. Become kink aware; Educate yourself - Relate have a free short course on sexual diversity online <http://learn.relate.org.uk/relate-courses/gender-and-sexual-diversity/>  
- Pink Therapy have a number of workshops and courses available and a useful group on Facebook (see appendix). (*Reading 50 Shades of Grey doesn't really count as education in the field!*);
2. Don't turn focus to a client's BDSM activities instead of what they've really come for help with. The presenting issues may have nothing to do with their BDSM practices.
3. If a client uses any term like BDSM, sadist, masochist, fetish, Master/slave, D/s, submissive, lifestyle, etc. please ask them what the terms mean to *them*. It won't mean the same to each individual;
4. If a client discloses they are “into” something - ask the client to tell you about what it means for *them* - perhaps encourage them to leave the labels out and talk about the relationship, the feelings, the thoughts, the experience;
5. Understand that it can be difficult to articulate WIITWD (what it is that we do); Sensitive and careful questioning may help the client to put “it” into words;
6. If someone has a BDSM “partner” or a “submissive” or “slave” or “Master” or “Mistress” this does not necessarily mean they have a romantic or intimate relationship with that person. They may never have had nor ever will have sexual intimacy with them at all. There are plenty of people in the scene who are actually asexual; It is **not** all about sex!
7. Does your client engage in the kink community? This is generally a good thing but understand that the community has its own dramas which can have a significant impact upon its members.
8. There are many nuances to kink and BDSM in the different parts of the world. If you read something from the US it may or may not relate to the UK BDSM / kink /



sexuality culture. For example, references to “*The Leather Scene*” - something common to the US and some other countries but not common in the UK except within the gay community.

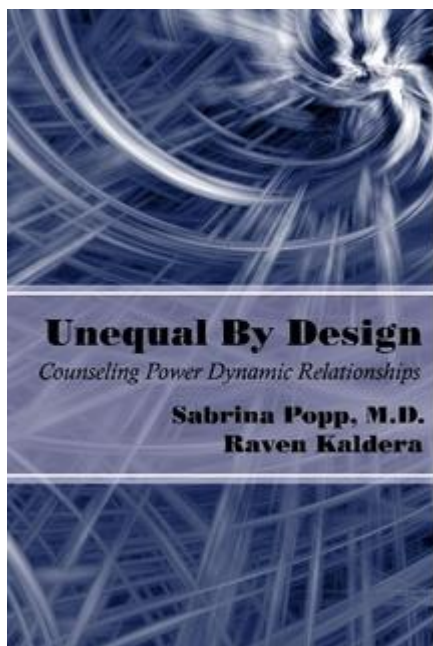
9. If you feel the need to refer your client there are plenty of kink aware and sexuality affirmative therapists out there. Look for Kink Aware Professionals on the NCSF website there are listings for the UK:



<http://bit.ly/KinkAwareProfessionals>



## Suggested Reading / Resources



### **Unequal by Design** - Counselling Power Dynamic Relationships

by *Raven Kaldera and Sabrina Popp MD*

Power dynamic relationships – meaning deliberately negotiated unequal relationships – are often misunderstood by mental health professionals as inevitably abusive. This anthology of essays by kink-aware therapists explodes that myth, and gives solid, practical advice for effectively counseling couples in these alternative relationships. Edited by a psychiatrist and a professional educator on power dynamic relationships, this book should be a cultural-competency reference for any mental health professional, because you never know who might be sitting on your couch someday.

£2.45 PDF format available from Lulu:

<http://bit.ly/unequalbydesign>

### **“Becoming a Kink Aware Therapist”** Coming soon (October 2016)

By Peter Chirinos MA LPC NCC DCC and Caroline Shahbaz BBSM(Hons), MPsych., MA

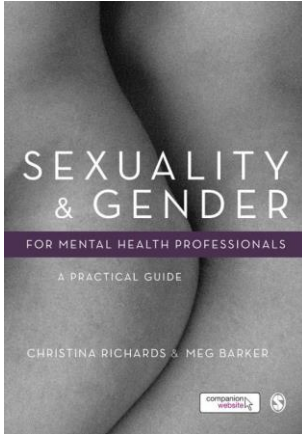
The primary objectives of this book are to provide psychotherapists with an introductory understanding of the culture and practice of BDSM, presenting specific therapeutic concerns related to common misconceptions whilst provide a practical clinical process for identifying and mitigating therapist countertransference. It outlines a behavioral checklist therapists can apply as a guideline to discern healthy from unhealthy expressions of BDSM, and provides clinical best practices when working with clients who practice BDSM.

Publisher: Routledge.

Pre-order from Amazon: <http://bit.ly/kinkawaretherapist>

## Sexuality & Gender - For mental health professionals

By Christina Richards and Meg Barker



Questions of sexuality and gender affect everyone and therefore have an inevitable relevance in the consulting room. Yet with interpretations and manifestations of both varying greatly from person to person, understanding the inherent complexities of sexuality and gender can be a daunting task for the health professional. Breaking down these complexities this practical guide familiarises the reader with all of the common and many of the less common sexualities, genders and relationship forms, and explains experiences and issues relating to each.

The book contains:

- Explanations of various forms of sexuality, gender and relationship structures
- Common concerns relating to specific groups
- Key practises relating to specific groups
- The treatment of specific groups in contemporary Western society
- Details of some rules and ideals that are commonly found within specific groups
- Suggestions for professional practice with these groups

**Pink Therapy** (Website and Training): <http://www.pinktherapy.com/>

(Facebook Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/143121662383294/>)

**The Science of BDSM** (Website): <http://www.scienceofbdsm.com>

**Kinkly** (Website): <https://www.kinkly.com/> **Fetlife** (Social Network): <http://www.fetlife.com>

**Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities (CARAS)**

(American-based research and education organisation - <https://carasresearch.org/>)

**Investigating bias in psychotherapy with BDSM clients** (Kolmes K, Stock W, Moser C.)

<http://www.drkkolmes.com/docs/JOHkolmes.pdf>

**Psychotherapeutic issues with 'kinky' clients: clinical problems, yours and theirs**

(Margaret Nichols PhD)

<http://bit.ly/issueswithkinkyclients>



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