Bondage and Discipline

The terms bondage and discipline are the first two components of the well-known acronym BDSM that refers to bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism. Although bondage and discipline are often associated with sadism and masochism, BDSM is not an all-encompassing concept. However, most scholarly research has synthesized these four concepts into one overarching concept of BDSM. Bondage is the act of an individual(s) in control of another willing individual(s) by physically restraining them through the use of a restraint device(s) for the mental pleasure of all participants. The individual taking control is referred to as the dominant, and the recipient is referred to as the subordinate. Discipline is the act of a dominant inflicting pain onto a subordinate for the primary purpose of mental enjoyment for both participants. These demonstrations are constructed and enacted through the use of “scenes,” referring to specific sessions of bondage and discipline. One of the common stereotypes associated with bondage and discipline is that it is sexualized in nature; however, the primary purpose is mental enjoyment with the sexual component coming second – if at all. Both bondage and discipline typically accompany one another in a reciprocal relationship among participants.

The practice of bondage and discipline operating as an organized -- somewhat public -- activity emerged following the conclusion of World War II. This activity was attached to the motorcycle and leather scene that first appeared in the 1950s and grew stronger in the 1960s. This activity soon became attached to the homosexual identity during this same time period and grew in strength during the 1960s and 1970s. Although there were multiple organized segments of BDSM enthusiasts throughout the U.S. -- predominantly in large metropolitan areas -- the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s served as a uniting force among these segmented groups, leading to the eventual formation of several national groups (i.e. Eulenspiegel Society, National
Coalition for Sexual Freedom, etc.). As a result, bondage and discipline became a more publicly-known activity than it had been in the decades prior to the early 1990s.

The activities of bondage and discipline are what allow sadomasochists and masochists to express and/or receive their desired actions/results. Bondage can take-on several primary forms. The most prominent form involves using a restraint device – typically made of rope, leather, or handcuffs – to control the subordinate from moving their hands, feet, or entire body. The purpose is to remove all self-control from the subordinate in order to succumb to the absolute control of a dominant. Subordinates often report feeling mentally free because they are exempt from making active choices while being controlled. By being under absolute control, individuals report feeling mental and sometimes sexual satisfaction by having their free-will removed. Another common form of bondage is using a blindfold either by itself or in conjunction with restraints. Blindfolding is a form of sense deprivation where it further inhibits the subordinate’s ability to actively have control, further contributing to the loss of control that subordinates often seek.

Discipline is an essential component in bondage by providing the realm within all action that is to occur. However, activities within discipline are not as straightforward as they are in bondage. Initially, discipline refers to the construction/establishment of rules for all individuals that are participating in the scene to follow. Some of the common forms of rules are “safe words” (i.e. words that will stop the scene), types of objects used to inflict pain, where/where not to hit, etc. These rules establish the sphere for all actions within the scene to take place, thus establishing an alternate reality. The physical acts of discipline may take multiple forms. Some of the most common physical manifestations of discipline are using whips and striking an individual with one’s hand. Other physical manifestations of discipline include non-lethal electrocution and breath-control (i.e. controlled suffocation).
Very little is known regarding the participants of bondage and discipline. Demographic characteristics of participants remain one of the primary gaps in existing literature. However, it has been found that participants of bondage and discipline are traditionally individuals that have had difficulty fitting-in with traditional segments of society with many reporting being bullied throughout adolescence. This difficulty in fitting-in usually arises from individuals having androgynous physical characteristics (i.e. males too short, females too tall, and/or both sexes being overweight) and/or having poor social skills. Participants also report being/perceiving themselves to have a superior intellect over others. Studies have also found that those participating in the submissive role of bondage and discipline often tend to be individuals in positions of power in traditional society.

The enactment of bondage and discipline generally takes place in private settings such as one’s residence; however, public clubs do exist. These clubs typically operate within large metropolitan areas, and on a fairly stringent set of rules that establish overarching rules in which the individual scenes can be constructed and enacted. Originally, clubs were among the few places that individuals interested in bondage and discipline could freely enact these activities. However, individuals that are interested in this behavior but are afraid of the stigma attached to this behavior either did not participate at all, or have had very limited participation. Recently, the advent of the internet has led many to connect with others interested in bondage and discipline in online communities, thus increasing the concealment of one’s identity and reducing potential stigmatization. The internet seems to be exposing more individuals to bondage and discipline, thus potentially influencing individuals to partake in these activities that may have not done so otherwise. The influence of the internet may have serious implications for the future of BDSM in how it currently exists and operates.
Further Readings


