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Attitudes About Sadomasochism Scale

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Attitudes About Sadomasochism Scale

Megan R. Yost, Dickinson College

The Attitudes About Sadomasochism Scale (ASMS; Yost, 2010) assesses stereotypical and prejudicial attitudes about individuals involved in consensual, sexual sadomasochism. Sadomasochism (SM), in this context, refers to the safe and consensual sexual activities of an adult subculture that practices bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, and masochism as part of their sexual interactions (Scott, 1980; Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984). Many SM activists claim that identifying as a sadomasochist is similar to identifying as a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual, in that SM is an identity that defines their sexuality and their preferred manner of sexual interaction (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Others argue that SM is best conceptualized as a set of sexual practices or activities, with no implication for identity (Langdridge, 2006). In either case, prejudicial attitudes about such individuals have begun to be documented (Wright, 2006), just as prejudice and discrimination against individuals based on sexual orientation have been well documented over the past few decades (Herek & Capitanio, 1996).

Psychotherapists reporting discomfort working with clients who engage in SM (Ford & Hendrick, 2003), and reports of therapist bias from SM practitioners seeking therapy (Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006), indicate a need for greater understanding about SM within the mental health professions. Furthermore, recent custody cases in which a parent’s involvement in SM is used as evidence of unfit parenting (Klein & Moser, 2006), and raids in which police charge consenting adults with lewd behavior, nudity, and assault for engaging in SM in semiprivate settings (Ridinger, 2006), demonstrate anti-SM bias in the legal system.

The ASMS is a multidimensional measure of prejudicial attitudes about sadomasochism, which provides a reliable and valid means of assessing such prejudice. It is a useful tool to examine the prevalence of anti-SM attitudes, particularly among populations that come into contact with SM practitioners in settings where discriminatory attitudes could have serious consequences. By using the ASMS to survey these attitudes, educational programs could specifically address the anti-SM bias held by psychotherapists, lawyers, judges, and the police. More broadly, this measure is a useful tool for sex researchers and social scientists interested in discrimination against sexual minorities.

Description

The ASMS is a 23-item measure that was developed using a sample of 213 participants and validated using a sample of 258 participants. In the first sample, 58 items were administered and explored through factor analysis. After deleting items that lacked variance or loaded highly on multiple factors, an exploratory factor analysis yielded four subscales: Socially Wrong (the belief that SM behavior is morally wrong and socially undesirable); Violence (linking SM activity to violence against an unwilling partner); Lack of Tolerance (suggesting that SM can be an acceptable form of sexuality among willing partners [reverse scored]); and Real Life (the belief that SM practitioners carry their SM interests into their daily lives). Confirmatory factor analysis using a second sample further supported the structure of the ASMS, with fit indices above .90 indicating that the four-structure model adequately fit the data.

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Response Mode and Timing

Response options range on a Likert-type scale from 1 (Disagree Strongly) to 7 (Agree Strongly) with a neutral midpoint of 4 (Neither Agree nor Disagree). The instrument can be completed in 10 minutes.

Scoring

So that higher scores indicate negative attitudes about SM or SM practitioners, the four items phrased in a positive direction (all items in Lack of Tolerance) are first reverse coded. Then items within each subscale are averaged to form a subscale score.

Reliability

To measure internal consistency, reliability analyses were conducted using all 471 participants. Cronbach’s alpha for each subscale ranged from .78 to .92, indicating very good internal consistency for each subscale.

Validity

Validation analyses using all 471 participants showed that the ASMS demonstrated good concurrent validity at the subscale level by correlating in expected ways with other established scales. All subscales were positively correlated with prejudicial attitudes about lesbians and gay men, and with a measure of general sexual conservatism, suggesting that prejudicial SM attitudes are an extension of more general sex-negative attitudes. The Socially Wrong subscale was most strongly correlated with a measure of right-wing authoritarianism, which would be expected given that the items in this subscale are closely related to moral judgments and society’s role in maintaining order. Lastly, the only subscale significantly correlated with a measure of rape myths was Violence, showing that participants who supported inaccurate beliefs about rape (such as blaming the victim) also believed inaccurate statements associating SM with rape.

However, a multiple regression analysis showed that over half of the variance in the ASMS (58%) remained unexplained by the four established scales, indicating that the ASMS measures specific attitudes about SM and SM practitioners that cannot be accounted for by social and sexual conservatism alone. In other words, the ASMS captures a set of attitudes specific to SM that do not overlap with already-developed attitudinal scales.

Finally, the ASMS demonstrated validity through its ability to discriminate between groups of participants (based on their prior knowledge of SM, their self-identification as being involved in SM, and friendships with SM practitioners). The more participants knew about SM prior to this study, the more positive their attitudes, consistent with the idea that knowledge creates a more accurate perception of SM practices. Also, participants who identified themselves as involved in SM had more positive attitudes, consistent with social psychological research on in-group favoritism showing that group members perceive others in their group in positive terms, even if the group is stigmatized in the broader society (Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998). Lastly, participants who had a friend who was involved in SM also had more positive attitudes, consistent with the contact hypothesis of stigma reduction (Allport, 1954), which explains that positive attitude change occurs when intergroup contact takes place under optimal circumstances.

References

Exhibit

**Attitudes About Sadomasochism Scale**

Instructions: For each of the following statements, please note whether you agree or disagree using the following scale:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disagree</strong></td>
<td><strong>Disagree</strong></td>
<td><strong>Disagree</strong></td>
<td><strong>Neither</strong></td>
<td><strong>Agree</strong></td>
<td><strong>Agree</strong></td>
<td><strong>Agree</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly</td>
<td>Moderately</td>
<td>Mildly</td>
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<td>Strongly</td>
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</table>

Use the following definitions when considering your responses:

Sadomasochism: sexual practices that involve dominance and submission (the appearance that one person has control over the other), sometimes involve role-playing (such as Master-Slave or Teacher-Student), and are always consensual (all partners participate willingly and voluntarily).

Sadomasochist: someone who deliberately uses physical stimulation (possibly pain) and/or psychological stimulation and control to produce sexual arousal and to achieve sexual pleasure.

Dominant: someone who always or mostly is the person in control during an SM sexual encounter.

Submitive: someone who always or mostly is the person who does not have control during an SM sexual encounter.

**Factor 1: Socially Wrong**

Sadomasochists just don’t fit into our society.

Practicing sadomasochists should not be allowed to be members of churches or synagogues.

Sadomasochism is a perversion.

Sadomasochistic behavior is just plain wrong.

Sadomasochism is a threat to many of our basic social institutions.

I think sadomasochists are disgusting.

Sadomasochistic activity should be against the law.

Parents who engage in SM are more likely to physically abuse their children.

Sadomasochism is an inferior form of sexuality.

If I was alone in a room with someone I knew to be a Dominant, I would feel uncomfortable.

SM rarely exists in a psychologically healthy individual.

If I was alone in a room with someone I knew to be a Submissive, I would feel uncomfortable.

**Factor 2: Violence**

People who engage in SM are more likely to become involved in domestic violence.

A Dominant is more likely to rape a romantic partner than the average person.

A Dominant is more likely to rape a stranger than the average person.

A Dominant is more likely to sexually molest a child than the average person.

A variety of serious psychological disorders are associated with sadomasochism.

**Factor 3: Lack of Tolerance**

Sadomasochists are just like everybody else. (R)

Sadomasochism is erotic and sexy. (R)

Many sadomasochists are very moral and ethical people. (R)

Sadomasochistic activity should be legal, as long as all participants are consenting adults. (R)

**Factor 4: Real Life**

Submissives are passive in other aspects of their lives (besides sex).

Dominants are aggressive and domineering in other aspects of their lives (besides sex).