

Playing With Power

The Essential Differences Between Kink and Abuse

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A frequent critique of kink, especially hard kink that utilizes physical force (ex: slapping, whipping, etc.), is that it is indistinguishable from abuse, or is itself abuse. Without a thorough understanding of the dynamics of abuse, this perspective can be difficult to impossible to adequately refute. In this essay it is my aim to offer my own understanding of domestic violence as a DV researcher and theorist to refute this position and reveal how it is grossly reductive regarding how abuse actually functions and ultimately harms survivors both within and without kink communities.

Kink, as those who have engaged in various kink communities are well aware, is a vast umbrella term that encompasses an array of divergent sexual practices; *many* of which do not include any of the acts that will fall under the discussion here. When I use the term “kink” in this essay I am doing so in reference to the sexual practices that non-kinky critics of kink use to represent the whole of kink: primarily BDSM play and other sexual practices that involve physical force (slapping, hitting, etc.) and power play (dominant and submissive dynamics, degradation, etc.) This is not because I believe all kink can or should be reduced to these dynamics, but simply to make this essay legible for a broader, non-kinky audience, who are most responsible for the anti-kink rhetoric that equates all kink with abuse and most regularly confused by such rhetoric.

Context: Physical Force

Regardless of what framework or depth of understanding you have about kink, it is only possible to equate it with abuse if you are using an incorrect and reductive framework to understand abuse. With a full understanding of abuse — what it is and how it functions — this reduction is impossible. To equate the two is to reveal a shallow and incomplete analysis of abuse: you are stuck on identifying abuse with a checklist of individual actions divorced from context rather than an ongoing dynamic of coercive control. Abuse *cannot* be understood or recognized this way: by thinking of individual acts you see as *universally* abusive separate from their location within the context of the power dynamics of the relationship. Physical force can show up in an abusive relationship, but it can (and frequently is) wielded by both the abuser (as a means of domination and control) and the victim (as a means of liberation and self-defense). Divorcing physical force from its context will not allow you to see the abusive dynamic nor the nature of the power relation. To identify abuse we do not simply tally up blows or insults: we locate them within a context of power, analyze where the power resides, and in what way those behaviors either enforce the abusive context or seek to rupture it.

Understanding abuse as a context in which the abuser restrains, co-opts, and undermines the agency and autonomy of the victim, rather than a series of individual actions divorced from the context of the power relation, can very quickly reveal the weakness in the argument that kink or BDSM is inherently abusive.

Asking someone to hit me, insult me, or play-act a power dynamic in a specific and contained context in which I am safe and secure to withdraw that consent at any time is *far* different than a context of coercive control where my consent is constrained and my agency is bent to the whims of an abuser. To demonstrate this point, I find it helpful to momentarily detach from the judgement laden territory of sex and discuss other non-sexual activities that also include physical force among consenting participants. Let’s discuss the mosh pit and the boxing match.

Boxing matches and moshing are both activities that include physical force of some kind. We don't typically label them, however, as being *inherently abusive* exactly because of the context they are imbedded within that ultimately make them forms of play. In a safe mosh pit like in a good boxing match like in a boundaried BDSM scene there are established norms and practices that allow people to opt into an experience of receiving/applying physical force while being ultimately kept safe (with an acknowledgment of some physical risks inherent in the practice) by the other participants. In safe social scenes of all kinds, you can withdraw consent at any time: you can step out of the bounds of the mosh pit and enjoy the show without being assaulted further, you can withdraw from the boxing match, you can say no or use an established safe word and the scene will end.

That doesn't mean that there aren't social scenes in which the above is not true. If you are being coerced into participating in a boxing match under terms that make you feel unsafe and you expect to be punished if you do not comply, that is a situation we could and should name as abusive. Notice, though, that it's not the basic act of boxing, even though that act does include physical force (and often actual injury), that characterizes the abuse in the above scenario. It is the context of control, one's loss of autonomy and the ability to set boundaries, that makes it abusive. The role that physical force plays also *changes* between the safe boxing match and the coerced one. In the former, participants fully opt in, understand what to expect, feel protected by others, know the safe paths to withdrawing their consent, and generally enjoy the experience. In the latter, the coerced participant will feel the physical force as a violation. Not only that, but the physical force in the coerced situation will likely operate as an enforcing factor that pushes the victim to submit to the coercive context for fear of being hurt worse.

Taking anti-BDSM positions at face value — that their concerns about *all* forms of physical force are true and legitimate — ought to make us wonder why they do not level these same critiques at other social practices like mosh pits, boxing, wrestling, hockey, etc. that also incorporate physical force and much more frequently result in the actual injury of their participants. It is my argument that this singular focus on physical force as it appears in sexual play and not regarding other forms of play reveals underlying patriarchal values about sexual deviance and autonomy.

Context: Role Play

Another example that illuminates the fundamental issue anti-kink critics have with kink to be the expression of sexual deviance they find personally repulsive is that one of their claimed beliefs — that engaging in BDSM play reveals an inner desire to be abusive/abused — is not one they apply to other forms of roleplay. Do they believe as fervently that actors who desire to play evil and predatory characters in a screenplay have a secret inner desire to perform the same acts themselves? What about those who LARP (Live Action Role Play), or play role playing video games as evil characters who harm others or commit various atrocities in that play? In these scenarios are there no other conceivable reasons people might want to plat at doing evil things or play as evil characters in a contained fantasy other than an inner desire to do such things in real life? Certainly, we can think of others. In play we explore ideas, explore what-ifs. We play fight, play struggle, play kill, even play die. Not because we want to do so in all aspects of our lives. Frequently, just the opposite. We play to be something, or someone, different than we are in our everyday life. We want to build cities and set fire to them. We drown our Sims in the pool

to see grief, loss, or simply chaos in a safe and contained setting that can always be opted out from or changed completely. We play because it is fun!

Few, if any, anti-kink critics would assert that the only reason you role-play an evil wizard is because you have a sinister desire to do evil blood magic. Or that you have an inner compulsion to steal cars and ram them into pedestrians because you play Grand Theft Auto every evening. Or that because an actor aspires to the role of an unrepentant misogynist in a screenplay he must necessarily have an equivalent hatred of women. But when it comes to desire for sexual role play the participants are supposedly uniquely inclined to want to do, or have done to them, that which they play out in BDSM.

Just as with other forms of play, there are a whole host of reasons that one might want to play with a certain role within BDSM that are less neat or obvious as having a secret desire to do that, or have that done to oneself, outside the safe container of play. There are many dominants who genuinely enjoy playing that role within the context of sexual play who would find the same acts morally abhorrent and disgusting when done outside of that context/without the enthusiastic consent of the sub. Likewise, there are many submissives who derive pleasure from playing that role in sex who would loathe to have anyone attempt to exert *real* domination and control over them in other parts of their life. A key part of what makes the play pleasurable and fun for the participants is that it is *play*. Some kink advocates focus heavily on the reality that kink social scenes are replete with survivors who use sexual play as a safe container to explore acts that were out of their control in the context of an assault or abuse and bring them into their complete control through play. While this is true and worthwhile to include, past sexual trauma is not the only acceptable reason people might want to role play with power dynamics, no more than past trauma is the only reason people might want to role play in other, non-sexual contexts. Some enjoy it because they want to play a different kind of role than they tend to in their day to day life, some for personal exploration and experimentation, and plenty don't have a ready at hand reason to offer other than that it is fun or pleasurable, which is what play is for!

Deviant Sex

Patriarchal values characterize sex as something that must be inherently/uniquely humiliating to women, even when they consent, and outright denies the ability of marginalized genders to express their agency and consent to what they want while still having boundaries. In this broader social context, it is necessary to be extremely wary of political frameworks that cast sex had by “deviant” people as inherently more dangerous or corrupt. This rhetoric is doubly damaging, as it inversely suggests that “normative” sex and sexual relationships are inherently safer and more concerned with consent, have less sexual violence and abuse, and are less implicated in patriarchal ideals regarding sex and sexuality.

While kink communities are certainly not free from abusers (something we will explore in the next section), in many such communities there are robust social norms in place regarding discussing consent and boundaries, various ways to grant and withdraw consent, practices of aftercare and attentiveness to one's sexual partner(s) needs and boundaries. On the other hand, general and mainstream conceptions of “normative” sex and sexuality tend to incorporate far more consent violations into its basic practices and rituals. Domination, control, and adherence

to patriarchal values is the context within which much of what is considered “normative” or “vanilla” sex occurs, even when no evident physical violence takes place.

Much of the anti-kink position also rests upon the idea that abusers use BDSM and kink communities to “hide” their abuse. This, again, relies on a belief that abuse is an individual and obvious pathology that is generally rejected rather than the reality, which is that abuse is much of the hegemonic beliefs about love and relationships taken to their logical conclusions. Abuse does not live on the edges of society, seeking refuge among the most deviant. Abuse is the *fabric* of our authoritarian, patriarchal society. The logic of intimate authoritarianism proliferates, and the domination and control of the gender marginalized is the status quo. In this context, abusers have very little need to hide any but the most extreme aspects of their abuse, and often they need not hide even those aspects to be allowed to continue entrapping and controlling their victims.

Abuse Within Kink

Abuse can and does happen within kink communities, as the values of intimate authoritarianism are ubiquitous in patriarchal society. However, these abusers are not challenged by attempts to equate abuse and kink. In fact, they are *bolstered* by them, because it is the *same* message that they enforce upon their victims. It is their project to make their victims believe that abuse is intrinsic to kink, that they can only participate in sex they enjoy if they accept abuse and violation along with it. Agreeing with these abusers does not act as an intervention on abuse, it only serves to further isolate survivors in these scenes and make them aware that if they come forward about their abuse it will be weaponized against them, their subculture, and used to blame them for the abuse they suffered from.

Survivor Autonomy

Abuse cannot be challenged by paternalistically telling survivors what you have determined is best for them, nor by victim blaming them by placing the blame for their abuse on their own deviant desires you believe they must be shamed for and forcibly “rescued” from. Abuse is challenged by undermining intimate authoritarian values in *all* social spaces, undermining the power abusers wield, and expanding the autonomy and agency of their survivors. It is challenged by embedding robust social practices in all social spaces regarding communicating about consent, how that consent can be safely and freely given as well as withdrawn at any time, and a high social cost to any who chose to disregard consent for their own pleasure and gain.

Telling survivors that their kink is what makes them vulnerable to abuse IS NOT what advocating for and expanding their agency looks like. It’s victim blaming. It is not concerned with actual consent violations, but merely with optics and respectability. In this framework, deviant sex is attacked regardless of whether the participants desire and consent to the practice, and the abuse that appears in sexual relationships that pass as “normative” remains unseen and unchallenged. It becomes no longer about the victim’s agency or their ability to exercise it (including engaging with hard kinks if *they* choose to) but about paternalistically telling them that the source of their abuse is the supposedly corrupt nature of their own desires.

Conclusion

Framing kink as somehow more revealing of abusive tendencies than vanilla sex is a kind of abuse apologia. The reality is that abuse or sexual assault have many different guises, can look many different ways. Some overtly violent, some cloaked in appearances of “normalcy.” Fixating on getting people to demonstrate the appearance of sexual wholesomeness or purity (both conceptualizations that are highly informed by patriarchal hegemony) to show they are not abusive does not protect anyone from abuse. It only ensures that the abusers in your midst will be abusers who are adept at such performances while they continue weave contexts of control and domination to entrap their victims.

I do not think it necessary to place kink entirely out of the realm of analysis and critique. However, to be so grossly reductive regarding abuse in order to make shallow hits on kink is not only harmful to survivors within kink communities, but to survivors outside of them as well. Trivializing abuse by reducing it to a balance sheet of physical/verbal acts divorced from power, systems, context, and relationships only serves to obscure the real nature of abuse. Hitting/being hit by a partner, or engaging in power play in mutually consenting and negotiated sexual play is as similar to real sexual assault or abuse as participating in a boxing tournament is to routinely getting beat up on the street. Abuse is not about individual acts divorced from context, but about the imposition of hierarchy in the relationship and the loss of autonomy of the victim throughout the everyday aspects of personal and social life. It is a *context*, not an isolated event or even series of separate events.

It’s possible to *play* with the *idea* of power without real, actionable power being present. It is also possible (and common) for real, actionable power to be present in a relationship that looks “innocent” from the outside. Scenes end. Abuse and sexual violations do not. Abusers and predators do not need kink or BDSM to “hide” their behavior or motivations behind anything to get away with abuse and sexual assault because abuse and sexual assault is the fabric of the patriarchal status quo. If we truly wish to challenge abuse itself, rather than merely squash out expressions of sexual deviance and play, we must ultimately take our aim at the structures of patriarchal and authoritarian power that reduces and undermines the ability of people to express their own sexual agency and defend their own boundaries.

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