Sexual Masochism:

Untying Secretary

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Untying *Secretary*

Hollywood has sensationalized many abnormal behaviors, like the 2003 movie *Secretary*. But the real question is, is Hollywood portraying these behaviors and disorders accurately? In the movie *Secretary* (Shainberg, 2003) a woman, Lee Holloway, applies for a position as an attorney’s secretary. As the movie unfolds the audience sees Lee carrying out her typical job duties and she also succumbs to her dominating bosses control and performs masochistic behaviors for him. These behaviors involved humiliation; physical punishment like spanking, shackles, and being saddled like a horse; as well as controlling demands outside of the office environment like her dress, mannerisms, and eating habits (Shainber, 2003). How much of the masochistic behaviors Hollywood portrays her taking part in is accurate? And if these behaviors are accurate, is there research to support the behaviors, where they come from, and are these masochistic behaviors truly abnormal and need treatment? Hollywood may lack the accuracy to portray how communities may support instead of shun behaviors like Lee Holloway's. As an audience trying to learn the facts about Lee’s behavior it must be named and defined. Lee exhibits the behavior known as sexual masochism. So through researching sexual masochism there are many sources that define this behavior differently and whose criteria are different. Most sources define this behavior as abnormal, but there are also growing communities that support this behavior as normal.

Beginning research with *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, (Fourth Edition, Text Revision, DSMIV-TR, American Psychiatric Association, 2000), sexual masochism is defined as, “involves the act (real, not simulated) of being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer” (p. 572). The DSM-IV-TR also states that these behaviors must be re-occurring for at least six months and that the behaviors cause significant distress.
and/or social impairment and impairment in other areas of daily functioning (APA 2000).
Sexual masochism is also referred to as a paraphilic, “Literally translated, paraphilia means ‘love’ (philia) ‘beyond the usual’ (para)” (Oltmanns and Emery, 2011, p. 276). Oltmanns and Emery (2011), who provide this definition also go on to explain that paraphilias were previously called perversion or sexual deviations and discusses the DSM-IV-TR criterion for paraphilia, “…persistent sexual urges and fantasies that are associated with (1) nonhuman objects, (2) suffering or humiliation of oneself or one’s partner, or (3) children or other nonconsenting persons” (p. 377). This doesn’t give much insight into what these behaviors are and what it means to be a sexual masochist.

Oltmanns and Emery (2011) describes nonconsenting behaviors, but if two parties consent does that still make it a masochistic behavior and therefore abnormal. It seems the DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000) and Oltmanns and Emery (2011) have only begun to skim the surface when describing what it means to be and live as sexually masochistic. Also, if a viewer observes Lee and her behaviors they would wonder at Lees other self abusive behaviors, like her self-cutting and wonder if they also stem from the same origins as her masochistic behaviors (Shainberg, 2003); or if those behaviors are part of her masochistic behaviors.

Oltmanns and Emmery (2011) may briefly touch on the general biological, social, and psychological factors of the causes of sexual masochism; but it is a vague definition and does little to explain the finer points of masochism and from what it might stem. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in the mid 1900s wrote extensively on masochism and its origins. “Some authors have stressed the importance of anxiety in masochism (cf. Reik, Nacht). Punishment, in their view, would only figure so prominently because of its function in resolving anxiety and thereby making pleasure possible” (Deleuze, 1991, p. 91). This statement can be objectified and
dissected to approach masochism almost as a treatment for debilitating anxiety, making pleasure, sex, and intimacy possible where it might not have been. As may be the case with Lee, who self cut to relieve anxieties and this behavior was no longer needed once she became involved in a masochistic relationship. If masochism were to be looked at as a treatment to resolve anxieties that are so debilitating and procure some kind of sexual satisfaction is it still looked at as abnormal, or merely a form of treatment to lead to a normal sexual behavior?

A lot can be garnished from the writings of Deleuze (1991), who has extensively analyzed masochism and introduced readers to many psychoanalysts who have also extensively analyzed masochism.

In the field of formal psychoanalysis as applied to masochism, the work of Theodore Reik deserves special credit. He distinguished four basic characteristics of masochism:

1. The “special significance of fantasy,” that is the form of the fantasy (the fantasy for its own sake, or the scene which is dreamed, dramatized, ritualized and which is an indispensable element of masochism).
2. The “suspense factor” (the waiting, the delay, expressing the way in which anxiety affects sexual tension and inhibits its discharge).
3. The “demonstrative” or, more accurately, the persuasive feature (the particular way in which the masochist exhibits his suffering, embarrassment and humiliation).
4. The “provocative fear” (the masochist aggressively demands punishment since it resolves anxiety and allows him to enjoy the forbidden pleasure) (Deleuze, 1991, p. 74).

Theodor Reik was a mid 20th century psychoanalyst who studied under Freud (Deleuze, 1991). Reik has taken masochism to a more extensive definition then the DSM-IV-TR. Again, going back to Lee as if she were a case study; Lee takes part in extensive fantasy, sexual tension and the release of anxiety. Suffering, in which Lee at one point in the film admits to her suffering, and she encourages being punished by her partner (Shainberg, 2003). If Lee were to go to Reik in his era for therapy he may conclude that Lee is exhibiting masochistic behavior, and
may even try to treat what would have been considered abnormal behaviors. There are little
details on what treatment may have been available during Reik’s era.

Wilhelm Stekel, an Austrian physician and psychologist from the early 1900s, (Stekel, 2010) explores what he thought were to be some of the causes and ills of sexual sadomasochism. Stekel (2010) concludes that the definitive factor of Sadomasochism is gratification from pain and that for masochists it is the feeling of being humbled by one’s partner and being overcome of one’s own resistance and succumbing to one’s partner. Stekel (2010) goes on to explore the causes of sexual sadism and masochism, “It is characteristic that sadists and masochists are very sensitive to pains if they occur without affect; that is, if they lie beyond the zone of their sexual life. All sadomasochists are affect-hungry individuals. They are in constant need of an affective spectacle” (p. 8). In essence sexual masochists are so affected by their lives they act out these emotions in a sexual forum. This may explain Lee’s motives for her self-cutting have been replaced with her masochistic behaviors as a means of coping with her unhealthy family dynamics (Shainberg, 2003). Stekel (2010) also goes on to discuss masochism as a pressure relieving mechanism. Stekel (2010) concludes his book by saying, “So long as this world is sick, there will be sick people” (p. 320). Is it fair then to conclude Lee’s sexual masochism is more a product of her environment and relieving its pressures according to Stekel’s criterion?

This is modern era and it is more appropriate to use more modern terminology to define Lee’s behavior. In 2001, Dr. Moser published a book exploring the definition of Sadomasochism, which is the relationship and exchange between a person with sexual masochistic behaviors and a person with sadistic sexual behaviors. In Moser’s (2001) book sadomasochism is defined, “So what is SM? It is sometimes easier to say what it is not. It does not entail violence and it is not nonconsensual. That does not mean that an SM practitioner
cannot commit violence or nonconsensual act but that such acts are not part of SM” (p. 3).

Looking at Lee’s interactions with her boss, even though Lee feels exhilarated by these exchanges, others may view them as more violent than a sadomasochistic relationship because the issue of consent was never discussed between them (Shainberg, 2003). If Lee’s boundaries are never discussed than how do they know when they are being breached; and in essence how can these acts be more safe than an act of willful violence on Lee? Moser (2001) also authors her own set of criteria for what constitutes a sadomasochistic exchange, which would include the sexual masochist:

Some 20 years ago, one of the editors co-authored an article which has been cited widely (see Weinberg, William & Moser, 1984). It indicated that there are five components of SM. Not all five must be present in order to constitute SM, but they usually are found together. The five components are:

1. The appearance of dominance and submission; the appearance of rule by one partner over the other.
2. Role playing.
3. Consensuality, that is, voluntary agreement to enter into the interaction.
4. Mutual definition, i.e. a shared understanding that that the activities constitute SM or some similar term.
5. A sexual context, though the concept that SM is always sexual is not shared by all participants (p. 4).

Lee’s relationship with her sexual counterpart doesn’t meet many of these criteria. It is then reasonable to conclude that many doctors and modern professionals may look at her behaviors as less masochistic and more as an abnormal behavior that need more analyzing to identify and label them, and may further conclude Lee’s boss is more abusive than sadistic.

Lee’s boss, Mr. Grey is enacting violent behavior on her, clinically it could be labeled masochistic because Lee is exhibiting the DSM’s criteria of the act of being humiliated to achieve sexual release (Shainberg, 2003). But according to Moser, who is also qualified, Lee’s behavior is less masochistic and maybe more along the lines of a violent abusive interaction
because it breaches the boundaries of consent. Lee has not defined her comfort level and given permission for the masochistic exchange (Shainberg, 2003).

The issue of consensuality arises again and again in much of the resources discussing what constitutes sexual sadistic and masochistic behaviors. Gloria Brame, author and sex therapist, looks at these behaviors not as abnormal and something that requires treatment, but simply as a different kind of loving (Brame, Brame, and Jacobs, 1993). Brame, et. al. (1993) explore and repeatedly refer to the normalcy of these behaviors hinges on key elements, “The practices and attitudes of contemporary sexual dominants and submissives, in contrast, largely abide by the credo of ‘Safe, Sane, and Consensual.’ Partners emphasize equal and honest communication, negotiation, and consent; mutual trust is fundamental. A partner’s limits and preferences are respected” (p. 5). Brame, et.al. (1993) might find Lee’s behavior more risky, less normal, because she has not set consensual boundaries with her sexual partner. But instead of Lee needing to alter her behavior it might be suggested that she embrace her new different kind of loving and explore healthier boundaries with her sexual partner. In the film Lee at time displays discomfort during these masochistic exchanges, but also seeks Mr. Grey and his unconventional affections (Shainberg, 1993). Lee is exploring self-awareness and her new found sexuality. To some therapist, sex experts, and communities Lee may be encouraged to embrace her different kind of loving as Brame et. al. (1993) has termed it.

There are other prominent writers and sex therapist who also share Brame’s et. al. (1993) views that masochistic behaviors as simply a different kind of loving and are wholly acceptable forms of expressing affection. Pat Califia, also a writer and sex therapist who is a transgendered male, explores the person behind the behaviors, not only the pathos (Califia, 2000). He discusses sexual masochism using the terminology of Dominance and Submission, which focuses more on
the humiliation and control aspects of the masochistic exchange to reach sexual gratification, not only the act of physical pain to reach sexual pleasure (Califia, 2000). “Dominance/submission is, after all, a form of sex. And romance makes all kinds of sex so much better. When you know that loved one sees the truth about you-your secrets and fears-and still love does not fail, it eases some of the loneliness we all carry inside our skulls” (Califia, 2000, p. 238).

Lee shares this view of easing loneliness and finding love thru her relationship with her boss. Towards the end of the movie she confesses that her relationship with Mr. Grey eases her suffering. It is as if she has found a kindred spirit in Mr. Grey and her life has become more joyous because of their dominant and submissive exchanges (Shainberg, 2003). This then becomes a behavior less about harm and more about love and acceptance. Lee, in spite of exhibiting abnormal behavior that may have best served by a qualified therapist, she sought a relationship with a man who could love her the way she needed to be loved, and together explored their abnormal behaviors in a way that was right for them.

Arguably, this is the Hollywood portrayal: wrap it in a package that looks good or it won’t sell. In reality there are many cases where people need a qualified therapist to explore abnormal and deviant behavior instead of seeking exploration with another person who may need the same qualified therapist. With masochistic behaviors comes a very considerable risk of harm and abuse. Although, a little kink is becoming more culturally accepted, and in fact, s/m isn’t a dirty acronym referring to a behavior that needs automatic treatment even if participated in occasionally between loving partners, or hidden like it was 60 years ago, there are still behaviors that are abnormal and need the trained skills of a qualified therapist to work thru. In this instance sexual masochism may not be one of those behaviors, if following Califia’s professional opinion (Califia, 2003). But the root of what causes Lee’s distress may need to be explored, like what
causes her anxiety, and treatment options may need to be explored for the cause, not necessarily the actions.

Frequently the issue of consensual and to which degree the acts are carried out is discussed. In the textbook *Abnormal Psychology (Fifth Edition)*, Nolen-Hoeksema (2011) used in college classes discusses the occurrence of masochistic behaviors within the context of a relationship between trusting partners where the boundaries have been set and the behaviors are more simulated than any real inflicted pain, humiliation, or suffering. The text goes on to further explain the person who is the victim, which would be the masochistic role, may be a willing victim or a nonconsenting victim (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011). If this information is applied to Lee in analyzing her behavior then her willingness to participate as a victim to Mr. Grey’s sadistic behaviors (Shainberg, 2003) must be questioned. Again, consent was never discussed between them before the actions occurred; but pain, humiliation and suffering is inflicted on Lee as the exchange between her and Mr. Grey progresses throughout the movie. Although Lee does express her kindred spirit in Mr. Grey because of their shared suffering, the actions and behaviors cause her distress and physical pain that lead the behavior to be termed abnormal and something that would need addressed in a professional psychiatric environment (Shainberg, 2003).

It seems Lee presents a bundle of contradictions. According to the DSM-IV-TR, “The fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (APA, 2000, p. 573). Lee seems to blossom from her interactions with Mr. Grey. The acts cause her distress as she navigates Mr. Grey’s silence and reluctance to discuss their newfound relationship, but as far as her personal
and social life she seems to blossom as she becomes more assertive, colorful, and energetic (Shainberg, 2003).

In Noonan’s (2010) article the author discusses Lee’s sexually masochistic behavior in depth. Speaking of Lee’s behaviors Noonan (2010) exclaims Lee, “…delineates an evolution within Lee Holloway from the ‘destructive’ personality of self-harm to the ‘empowered’ status of sexual ‘submissive’” (p. 146). If Lee is in part participating in masochism to relieve her anxiety then that may explain her new found empowerment to be less anxious in her life and more assertive. This poses the question is Lee’s behavior really causing her distress. Noonan (2010) goes on to further explain about Lee’s life, “…then it is clear that Lee has been approaching the realm of masochistic aesthetics for some time. Her life so far is a tale of arrested movement” (p. 146). Even Lee herself expresses how freeing it is to be under Mr. Grey’s control as he has instructed her to walk thru the park instead of her mother driving her home after work. Lee expresses how freeing and comforted she is by Mr. Grey’s direction and she now feels she can finally do things in her own life (Shainberg, 2003). Mr. Grey’s control does not seem to be exerting any distress on Lee. She finds his control gives her permission to be freer with herself. Again, the question arises does their exchange of behaviors still fit in the criteria to be included as an abnormality. “Despite their differences, psychoanalytic and medical theorists agree that SM is symptomatic of sickness or maladjustment” (Noonan, 2010, p. 134). Referencing Noonan’s statement then means that the masochistic behavior is still a symptom of sickness, in spite of their being positive consequences in other areas of Lee’s life. Maybe it isn’t the masochistic behavior that has lead to her freeing feelings but she has found the attention in Mr. Grey that she was seeking. Much of the causes of Lee’s behaviors and progression thru the
film are a mere viewer’s speculation. More professional analysis would need to be spent on Lee and her behaviors, and more than a diagnosis of sexual masochism may be needed.

In 2006, William wrote a paper extensively exploring the diversity of sadomasochism. William (2006) begins discussing Moser in 1988, whom has been discussed in an earlier section of this paper, William references Moser and the difficulty in defining SM. “Moser (1988) reported that there is no commonly accepted definition of sexual SM behavior. Although admittedly difficult to precisely define, in the professional literature SM seems to represent a variety of possible behaviors related to power exchange and the application of pain in a sexual context "(William, 2006, p. 334). Lee is in a modern day environment where she is exploring a relationship that has an exchange of pain and humiliation.

It is impossible to stereotype Lee and Mr. Grey and their exchange to find a definition. Even Lee in the film expresses finding a love and a relationship that works for her (Shainberg, 2003), which is supported by William’s view that SM is very complex and diverse. It is agreed upon in the professional community that sexual masochism is a disorder. “Although it may be common to assume BDSM participants are psychosocially maladjusted, many have been found to be well-educated and well-adjusted” (William, 2006, p. 339). Mr. Grey is an example of this. Just because he participates in abnormal behaviors doesn’t mean that he can be a stereotyped person. Mr. Grey is well-educated and successful in his life (Shainberg, 2003). William (2006) does an adequate job discussing the intricacies of assessing Sadomasochistic participants.

“Indeed, assessing if and how a person’s behavioral patterns disrupt ‘healthy’ or ‘normal’ social functioning is a difficult task. People’s lives are varied and complex, and individuals have different needs, values, priorities and lifestyles. We influence those close to us in different ways. Clinicians may wonder how to discern when BDSM may be healthy and safe, and when it may be addictive and destructive” (William, 2006, p. 342).
Again, back to Lee, since her behavior is classified as abnormal and it meets the diagnostic criteria should her behavior and its resulting positive outcomes all be relegated to abnormal. It seems in the clinical world more questions are being posed than answers given when viewing a person with sexually masochistic behaviors.

Psychology is a diverse field with numerous schools of thought, therefore it is difficult to research Lee’s behavior and think that are definitive conclusions to be drawn. As William (2006) assesses there is no definitive definition for sadomasochism, it’s symptoms, a person’s exchanges, and behaviors. As put by Scoralli (2007), “For many reasons (the private aspect of sexual behavior, lack of strong theoretical models, lack of funding), however, it is difficult to gather data from large samples. This is especially true for rare sexual preferences and behaviors, that are often referred as ‘deviant’ or ‘bizarre’ and whose expression may be discouraged by society (in the scientific literature: ‘paraphilias’, ‘variant’, or atypical’ preferences)” (p. 432).

Sexual sadomasochism is a difficult topic to discuss and research. It’s diverse among the clinical community and it’s diverse among the many subcultures of people who have accepted it as their lifestyle preference. Again William (2006) discusses the complexities of SM and its subcultures, “BDSM is a complicated phenomenon, difficult to define, and can be hard for many people to understand. It can be viewed as engagement in a set of certain behaviors that are generally associated with eroticism or sexuality, at least for some, and it also refers to a lifestyle and subculture based around participation in such behaviors” (p. 343). Is it possible that as with the way of homosexuality and how it was viewed as will sexual sadomasochism go. “The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Fourth Edition (APA, 1994) continues to specify that many sadomasochistic and fetishistic practices are indicative of mental disorders, much in the same way as the DSM once pathologized homosexuality. The American mental
health profession’s record of understanding the diversity of healthy human sexual experiences continues to be poor” (Bettinger, 2002, p. 94). Will sexual sadomasochism be redefined to be concluded as a normal deviation of behavior, or is the risk and prevalence for harm too great for the behavior to be thought of as normal.

Human sexual interactions are very diverse and what may be normal for one person is abnormal and extreme for another. In 1995, according to Masters, Johnson, & Kologny, “About 10% of the U.S. population reports they engage in BDSM practices on at least an occasional basis…most commonly reports activities included flagellation and bondage” (Stockwell, 2010, p. 309). As modern America and the media culture brings things like sexual masochism into the light more people may see there are many nuances to the intricacy and details of masochism for many different individuals. But it is still no matter the intention, act, or love that is shared between partners sexual masochism is still distinctly abnormal due to the necessity of pain and humiliation to achieve sexual satisfaction.

This paper poses more questions than answers because there is very little conclusive research done to explore the diversity of this disorder. Secretary (Shainberg, 2003) rips the covers off stereotypes and introduces the mainstream to a different kind of loving, a loving that a growing subculture participates in. Many people are suffering with sexual masochism and need treatment for the causes and symptoms of it, but maybe they also need a community that will love them and support them as they explore themselves and what is right for them. Not all people feel distress from their desires and action like Mr. Grey in the film; some like Lee seem to embrace their desires and blossom and flourish (Shainberg, 2003) with their newfound identity as a sexual masochist.
References


Shainberg, S. (Director). (2003). *Secretary* [Motion picture]. United States: Lion’s Gate


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