

The Alef Trust
MSc Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology
7504 ALEFTP Transpersonal Psychology
Assignment cover sheet

A. Students to complete

Module code & assignment title:	7504 ALEFTP Transpersonal Psychology essay	Student Name and signature:	Eva Harris 
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B. Assessor to complete

Aspect to be covered in essay	Assessor's comments
1. Sources of knowledge	
Appropriate sources of knowledge (literature and experiential) pertinent to the development of the area of study have been identified.	
2. Approach to the task	
The essay draws on relevant research and scholarship and builds an argument which reflects current models and theories in the chosen topic	
3. Analysis / evaluation	
The essay demonstrates that sources of information and ideas have been analysed and evaluated appropriately.	
4. Critical reasoning / argument	
The essay displays critical reasoning, has dealt with complex issues both systematically and creatively, and develops coherent arguments.	
5. Reflective skills	
The arguments developed in the essay show evidence of appropriate reflective skills, including reflections on the student's experience where relevant.	
6. Quality of communication	
The assignment is well-written using the appropriate academic style including the APA	

referencing system. Writing is clear, concise and persuasive.	
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Overall comments:

Grade awarded:

Assessor Name and signature	
Date	

Transpersonal Psychology
Term Essay
Eva Harris
ALEFTP7502

Shibari Bondage as a Transpersonal Experience

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Shibari Bondage as a Transpersonal Experience

Introduction

There are many different ways for humans to live out their emotional and physical needs as part of their mechanisms to cope with life in a playful way. When we choose our interests, we subconsciously feed our body and mind what it needs as an extension of our reality, what we are missing, or what we would like to add to our everyday routine. Sometimes these ways of transferring emotional and physical needs can take on the forms or reliving a part of our personalities that we are not able to fully live out in everyday life for numerous reasons such as social acceptability or lack of stimulation in “normal” environments and relationships. This is when some people turn to BDSM practices such as Shibari bondage that allows them to live out very stimulating forms of emotional and physical roleplay. The underlying assumption is that by living out an archetypal but suppressed part of oneself in a suitable environment, the human experience can be enhanced on a transpersonal level in a very primal and deeply rooted way. It is for this reason that I believe transformational properties can be found in such practices when applied in a conscious and safe way to bring up and heal deep emotional desires, traumas, and fears, that might otherwise remain suppressed and halt the emotional and spiritual growth of a person. This essay will explain the dynamics of BDSM practice and take a closer look at the particularly artistic practice of Shibari from a soul evolutionary point of view and investigate the ways and dynamics of how this bondage practice enhances the conscious human experience by inducing an altered state of consciousness that can bring about transformations, catharsis, and spiritual embodiment of the participants.

Let's Dive Deeper

According to the *Center of Advanced Studies in Mental Health*, transpersonal psychology “integrates the spiritual and transcendent aspects of the human experience with a framework of modern psychology” and defines the transpersonal aspect as an “experience in

which the sense of identity or self extends beyond the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos” (2019). It is safe to say that transpersonal psychology as a scientific discipline slightly deviates from traditional disciplines by looking into altered states of consciousness, mystical experiences, spiritual practices, and other expanded ways of experiencing life. It is therefore not surprising that BDSM practices have caught the interest of transpersonal psychologists in an effort to understand the underlying principles of the different practices and how they bring about individual and collective evolution. Recently, researchers have been drawing the parallels between BDSM practice and reaching altered states of consciousness with the conclusion that empirical data is still scarce and needs to be further explored (Greenberg, 2019). A common misconception is that BDSM practice is always connected to sexual interplay, which is challenged by Jay Wiseman’s (1996) definition of BDSM including both sexual and non-sexual motivations “using psychological dominance and submission, physical bondage, pain, or other related practices in a safe, legal, and consensual manner in order to experience erotic arousal and/or personal growth” (as cited by Sagarin et al., 2015). Ferrer (2008) adds that spiritual embodiment of body and soul is based on the integration of all human attributes, sexual and non-sexual.

BDSM practices such as bondage, role play, or other forms of power plays have been studied from a biopsychosocial perspective, giving clues as to when people engage in these practices and how altered states of consciousness manifest in neurological and hormonal changes (De Neef et al., 2019). Some aspects of BDSM practices can also have therapeutic effects on the participants helping to release trauma and increase overall well-being (Andrieu et al., 2019). This area of BDSM in relation to transpersonal psychology and transformation is much less researched while holding the potential for great insights into the human psyche and how to transform negative experiences into positive processing using mind, movement, and human interaction. It is unlikely that BDSM practices will make their way into modern medicine offices as prescribed treatments by medical professionals and yet, they do offer solutions to those who are open minded towards alternative consciousness practices and give options for mind expansion on a level that becomes increasingly accepted in society. After all, “For centuries various cultures have used these techniques as deeper ways to explore consciousness, power, and control, as well as the dynamics of masculine and feminine energies in relationships.” (Gould, 2020)

BDSM stands for bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and sadism/masochism and is still seen as a taboo in today's society (Gould, 2020). However, with popular literature such as *Fifty Shades of Gray* (James, 2012) and a generally growing interest, BDSM practices are slowly gaining acceptance and understanding in society and science alike. One of these practices is called Shibari and comes from an ancient Japanese custom of tying prisoners during the Edo era giving special meaning and symbolism to each tie. During the 13th century it transformed into the erotic Japanese art Kinbaku and later in the 1900's into performance bondage, using the intricate ties and rope formations as a way to provide safety for the actors as well as adding aesthetically pleasing elements on stage (Morris, 2020). Today, practitioners and followers of Shibari appreciate the intricate art that is produced by tying and restraining body parts in creative ways. With its original tying patterns and complex designs, frequently photographed and documented in mainstream and counterculture, Shibari has made its way into the realms of modern art today. According to Obara (2020), shibari practice "has a special place for creatives, adventurers, learners, or curious cats who constantly seek new and transcendental experiences" (p.4). It has therefore become an art form of its own with a multitude of ways to express oneself with the help of ropes in an interpersonal human experience.

In a typical shibari bondage play the *rigger*, top, or dominant part ties the *bunny*, the bottom, or submissive part into a partially planned, partially improvised piece of bondage art combining the process with elements of interpersonal play. The session itself is mentally and physically challenging for both parties. The rigger needs to assess every move they make with regards to the comfort of the bunny and take quick decisions whenever discomfort arises. It is essentially a game of control and release, push and pull, affection and pain that both parties play with one another giving each other intense focused attention while potentially reaching altered states of consciousness depending on the intention and intensity of the session. For those who practice it, it involves a deep sense of intimacy. It can become a meditative experience to be tied into an uncomfortable position or suspension working through the discomfort by means of self-control while staying in constant connection with the other party and oneself (Morris, 2020). Trust and communication between the participants are of the utmost importance to make a session a positive experience for both parties.

The bunny experiences a loss of control, however, he or she also becomes the center of the universe for the rigger as his only focus is to complete the piece of human art with precision, while ensuring the bunny's quasi comfort. Both participants are in a highly

concentrated state of mind while in the process of the interplay. It is notable to mention that it is not exclusively about the experience of the power and tension between the participants. A great amount of sensuality comes into play before and after a session. An experienced and attentive rigger will use the moments before the session to establish a connection and trust with the bunny. The ropes are used to slide across the skin before being tied into knots, provoking a sensation on the skin that is perceived as some sort of binding fore or afterplay. According to Morris (2020) “Shibari appreciates the contrast between the body and ropes, the way flesh sits against rope, the curves of bodies, and the intricacies of knots”, so every interplay is new and different, depending on the mood, surrounding, and state of mind of both participants. After the untying, the rigger and bunny share moments of gratitude thanking each other for the trust and process shared together.

Bondage Catharsis Anyone?

According to the *American Psychological Association*, catharsis in psychoanalytic theory is defined as “The discharge of previously repressed affects, connected to traumatic events that occurs when these events are brought back into consciousness and re-experienced” or simply put, “the release of strong, pent-up emotions” (APA, 2020). In Shibari bondage, the bunny is essentially put in a situation where there is very little choice but to deal with the current state of mind and situation in the present moment. Concentration on the dilemma is the focus with the goal being to relax into it, trusting that by letting go the stress will be relieved. This state of mind is experienced by many bottoms as a floating state of mind, being given the mind space to feel, experience, process, and to potentially heal. It is from discomfort that we experience growth, which is evident in any attempt to build up mental or physical strength through studying and exercise and facing life’s problems with grace and gratitude rather than bitterness and misery. In a successful session, the bunny can experience the power and strength to let go and surrender to the release of blocked energies based on fear, attachment, restraint, shame, self-judgement and uncertainty (Obara, 2020).

Feelings that are suppressed hold us back from evolving our full potential by storing anger and frustration inside. Using the extreme situation of being tied up in a trusting setting, can bring about a great realization and release of problems that were hidden underneath the surface. Facing one’s own fears and dealing with them head on, or upside down, can push the mind towards a release of emotions that can be described as a triumphant feeling of freedom and healing, presenting a heightened sense of transformative body and mind awareness (Obara,

2020). In his article, Thomas (2019) chooses the term “trauma play”, a concept that emerged out of psychoanalysis, to establish the healing properties that such a catharsis can support in BDSM practices. As he explains it “trauma play is the intentional playing out of one’s trauma or abuse” to cope with and to release it through a practice such as Shibari bondage. It is through the re-enactment and embodiment of one’s trauma that one can also re-script it and move on from the past event towards a future freed of the blockage of the abuse or trauma towards consciousness evolution. Naturally, it is up to the practitioner to decide which choice of BDSM practice works best for them and how deeply they wish to go into their subconscious mind to find and release any tension or trauma.

Shibari is a shared meditative experience that evokes mind and body revelations for both the top and the bottom. According to Ferrer (2008), “The integration of two humans entails a transformation of their essential energies”. As the rigger focuses intensely on re-creating the body shape following the lines of the rope, tying them into intricate patterns, the mind goes into a state of analytical alignment with all the energy channeled on the process and the other person. “Both the artist and the subject go through a journey of psychological alignment” releasing massive amounts of energies amongst each other and individually fostering good communication, confidence, power vulnerability, and coexistence between two partners, a team that relies on each other on creating a positive experience for one another (Obara, 2020). The rules of the game are defined by the players themselves, which creates the possibility of connection and intimacy between the players, as well as a safe container to access the darker side of one’s personality, experiencing personal freedom in the safe setting, which then translates into everyday life and consciousness transformation within the community (Andrieu et al., 2019).

Healthy Trauma Bonding

As there is a lack of research proving the harm BDSM may cause even in cautious and conscious sessions, researchers are now finding that certain practices might even increase mental and physical health and improve relationships when practiced safely (Gould, 2020). Undoubtedly, risks are involved in BDSM practices and should not be overlooked, serious participants will always engage in consensual play and not overstep their play partner’s boundaries. It was previously believed that people who practice any kind of BDSM were mentally disordered, however, new research shows that compared to non-BDSM practitioners, they might actually be better adjusted in life and less neurotic (Wismeijer &

van Assen, 2013). People who practice BDSM seem to have healthier communication skills, are in better physical health, and experience a deeper sense of trust in themselves and their partners (Gould, 2020). In his autoethnographic study, Jeremy Thomas (2019) highlights the positive outcomes of participating in BDSM practices as related to better self-care, resiliency, as well as risk and negotiation calculation.

Can altered states of consciousness be achieved by the interplay of bondage BDSM practice? According to Barušs and Mossbridge (2017), the phenomenon of consciousness gives meaning to reality and could be evidence of a spiritual dimension within people. An altered state of consciousness is often referred to a non-ordinary state that can include various states where the mind is aware but not in its usual condition. This can be achieved through a variety of activities such as yoga, meditation, hypnosis, dream stage, or other events (Smith, 2015). Rituals are one such activity where participants willingly enter altered states of consciousness through the particular practice their spirituality entails and it is commonly accepted in the BDSM community that BDSM practices can have sacred, spiritual, and ritualistic components to it (Greenberg, 2019). As mentioned before, in the shibari process of being tied and tying, the mind can go into a psychological state of flow, characterized by Csikszentmihalyi (1991) as “full absorption into the activity, complete merging with the action, and a loss of self-consciousness” (as cited in Greenberg, 2019).

From a neuroanatomic point of view, an altered state of consciousness is potentially due to transient pre-frontal cortex de-regulation with the pre-frontal cortex being the higher order brain structure performing integrative functions and sophisticated content. The altered state of our consciousness is the subtle modification of behavioral and cognitive functions that takes place in the pre-frontal cortex (Dietrich, 2003). Essentially, the multi layers of the pre-frontal cortex gives us the ability to shift between thinking modes and form complex and abstract ideas. The hyper-vigilant circuit of processing in the pre-frontal cortex can be interrupted by activities that disturb the cycle and induce a state of flow, or “taking the edge off” of life’s problems and thinking of the same. Dietrich (2003) examined this hypothesis based on the altered state of consciousness experienced during the runner’s high. The disengagement of the pre-frontal cortex to the hyper-awareness of the personal experience is influenced by the movement of the body and the intensity of the activity. Practices such as bondage in BDSM can induce this state of flow and lead the participant into such a state of perceived flow, self-renewal, and emotional liberation (Newmahr, 2010).

While the runner’s high might be the altered state experienced by the rigger in shibari when being physically active and highly concentrated, the bunny might engage in a state

closer to the one of hypnosis. With sensory input being lowered due to lack of movement and awareness of the surroundings, and the focus on one's own senses and experience, a state of relaxation, reduced anxiety, and lowered cortisol levels might be achieved. However, a study done during a more extreme BDSM ritual including piercings and trance dance showed increased levels of cortisol for the bottom participants before and throughout the ritual, while for the bottoms the cortisol levels increased before the ritual and decreased already during the ritual phase (Greenberg, 2015). Another study found the relation between increased cortisol and testosterone levels in SM bondage play to be similar, with bottoms showing increased cortisol levels and reductions in physiological stress to rise more during the session than for the tops. Female's testosterone level showed an increase when being tied. One study points out the decreased level of psychological stress during the increased level of cortisol under physiological pressure. This disconnection between the physiological and psychological might point further into the direction of an altered state of consciousness achieved in the body and mind of the participants (Sagarin et al. 2009).

Conclusion

In the attempts to live a fully embodied human experience, shibari bondage practice offers a plethora of opportunities to explore one's own boundaries, fears, and strengths, in order to connect with a higher sense of self through an altered state of consciousness. Once we see past the stigma of sexuality, safe shibari bondage and BDSM practices can be another vehicle towards self-awareness, growth, and spiritual evolution for any individual that chooses to participate. In some cases, it can help to relief and work through trauma in a therapeutic way. In combination with a chosen level of intimacy, shibari can help facilitate a fully embodied spiritual experience including the entire spectrum of the human experience, sexual and non-sexual. Further topics related to shibari practice such as the fostering of a place within community for the globalized individual, playing with traditional gender roles, and a deeper dive into the ritualistic aspects of BDSM should all be elaborated in further studies. As with all practices towards the exploration of altered states of consciousness, it is important to stay safe and practice consciously in a secure environment to have the most beneficial spectrum of experience. As transpersonal psychology is seeking cutting edge methods to expand the mind and the conscious experience of the human, I believe that more research on shibari bondage dynamics, its healing properties, and potential for altered states of consciousness could greatly enhance this scientific field in its effort to measure and stretch the transpersonal ways of catharsis, transformation, and embodiment. The interplay between

humans is what constitutes a greater understanding of one's own awareness in this world and it is this dynamic that brings the individual and the world in greater alignment towards the mystery of life.

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