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To cite this article: Sam D. Hughes & Phillip L. Hammack (2019): Affirmation, compartmentalization, and isolation: narratives of identity sentiment among kinky people, *Psychology & Sexuality*, DOI: [10.1080/19419899.2019.1575896](https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2019.1575896)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2019.1575896>



Accepted author version posted online: 05 Feb 2019.  
Published online: 22 Feb 2019.

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# Affirmation, compartmentalization, and isolation: narratives of identity sentiment among kinky people

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## ABSTRACT

With heightened cultural visibility and greater opportunities for connection, individuals with kinky sexual desires (e.g. BDSM, sexual fetishism, sexual role-playing) are increasingly constructing sexual identities that foreground their kink-oriented desires. However, we know little about how kinky individuals negotiate stigma as they construct sexual identities and engage in intimate practices which provide meaning and coherence to their sense of self. This study examined identity sentiment among an international sample of 265 kink-identified individuals. Participants were asked whether they feel negative, positive, or mixed about their kink identities. An exploratory latent class analysis of narrative data revealed four distinct types of stories: *unelaborated affirmation*, *elaborated affirmation*, *compartmentalization*, and *isolation*. Stories revealed that stigma, concealment, isolation, and self-pathologization represented sources of stress and negative self-evaluation. Involvement in a kink community and viewing one's kink identity as a journey of growth and exploration were described as helping participants develop resiliency against societal stigma and mental health challenges. Implications of these findings for social psychological theories related to stigma, narrative, and minority stress are discussed.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 September 2018  
Accepted 24 January 2019

## KEYWORDS

Stigma; sexual identity;  
latent class analysis; BDSM;  
minority stress; community

Once widely pathologized, intimate practices associated with BDSM (i.e. bondage/discipline, domination/submission, sadism/masochism), sexual fetishism, and sexual roleplaying have become increasingly visible and recognized as legitimate forms of sexual diversity (e.g. Hammack, Frost, & Hughes, 2018). These practices include a substantial variety of consensual intimate, sensual, erotic, and sexual behaviors, such as erotic spanking, entwining a partner in rope, exploring electrical or tickling sensations, roleplaying an interrogation, licking a partner's boots, covering a partner in whipped cream, or modeling an intimate relationship around a 'Master/slave' power dynamic. From the proliferation of online communities through sites such as Tumblr, Recon, or FetLife, to popular accounts such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2012) (though the latter has been substantially criticized by many in the kink community, as well as in the academic literature; see Downing, 2013), individuals with kinky sexual desires now have potential access to some affirming narratives of their desires, practices, and identities. Kinky sexual desire, however, continues to be formally classified in clinical contexts as a pathology through the label of 'paraphilic disorders' (Khan, 2015), and cultural stigma and legal prohibitions, even against consensual BDSM practices, endure (Weinberg, 2016; Wright, 2006, 2014). Individuals with kinky sexual desires thus continue to negotiate conflicting cultural discourses surrounding the meaning of their desires and practices. On the one hand, a narrative of

pathology endures that denigrates elements such as fetishism, consensual violence, and power exchange that are central to many kinky sexual practices. On the other, a counter-narrative that frames kinky practices as legitimate and exciting forms of sexual diversity, long documented in social science research (e.g. Bienvenu, 1998; Kamel, 1980; Rubin, 2013) is now widely accessible through kink communities and subcultures (Turley, King, & Butt, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to examine how self-identified kinky individuals are currently navigating these and potentially other competing discourses as they construct sexual identities. Our theoretical framework is rooted in the concept of narrative engagement (e.g. Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Hammack & Toolis, 2016): that individuals make meaning of their identities through engagement with 'master' narratives about social categories (e.g. race, gender, sexual identity) accessible in cultural discourse. They develop personal narratives that provide a sense of meaning and coherence in reference to these master narratives, making decisions (conscious or otherwise) about how to embody and express their social identities (Hammack, 2011). In the context of stigma, individuals must negotiate the potential 'contamination' of stigma in their life stories and may either internalize stigma, resulting in a host of potential psychological problems (Meyer, 2003; Szymanski & Mikorski, 2016), or construct personal narratives that affirm their identities. These narratives, in turn, can provoke social change through the way in which individuals draw on multiplicity and variability as they narrate their stories to different audiences (Blackburn, 2009). With this theoretical framework in mind, we examined narratives of identity sentiment (i.e. how a participant thinks about, feels about, reacts to, and/or evaluates their own identity) among 265 kink-identified individuals. Our aim was to explore the way in which these individuals narrated sentiment in the context of potential contamination due to stigma.

### *The pathology narrative*

Forms of kinky sexual desire and practice have been pathologized since the birth of sexual science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Relying on problematic methods of clinical observation, von Krafft-Ebing (1886), Ellis (1903), and Freud (1962) all viewed practices associated with BDSM as indicative of disordered or unhealthy sexuality. This pathology narrative mirrored that of homosexuality, which has since been discredited in clinical and mainstream cultural contexts in the United States and much of the world (see Hammack, Mayers, & Windell, 2013; Herek, 2010).

Early explicit challenges to the pathologizing view of kink appeared in writings, advertisements, and pamphlets from kink-affiliated organizations and researchers in the United States in the latter half of the 20th century (e.g. Kamel, 1980; SAMOIS, 1987; Weinberg, 1994). The sources of these narratives spanned the sexual orientation spectrum, including SM-groups for lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual people. While bisexual and other queer people were often included in these studies via gay, lesbian, and heterosexual groups they belonged to, few exclusively bisexual or explicitly 'queer' SM-groups existed and were not well-studied. These emerging narratives of resistance often relied on drawing analogies to LGBTQ rights, as well as expressing support for personal freedom and expression.

In spite of considerable critique (e.g. Connolly, 2006; Moser, 2005; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2005; O'Donohue, 2010; Singy, 2012), kinky sexual practices (if accompanied by clinically significant distress or impairment) continue to be classified as forms of pathology known in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* as 'paraphilic disorders' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The existence of paraphilic disorders in the DSM-5 has been justified on the basis of their usefulness for working with forensic populations (Krueger, 2010b) preventing autoerotic asphyxiation and promoting research (Krueger, 2010a). Similarly, the reasoning that kinks deviate from the 'function of facilitating pair bonding which is facilitated by reciprocal affectionate relationships' (Spitzer, 2005, p. 114), and the need to avoid a 'public relations disaster for psychiatry' (Spitzer, 2005, p. 115) have also been cited as justifications for paraphilic disorders in the DSM. However, to accommodate the critiques of the

diagnostic category, an additional criterion was added to the DSM-5 requiring the potentially diagnosed person to experience clinically significant distress (or acting on the desires with a non-consenting person) in order to qualify for the diagnosis of 'paraphilic disorder' rather than paraphilia. Echoing the past replacement of homosexuality as a mental disorder with 'ego-dystonic homosexuality' (Smith, 1980), distress is often interpreted as evidence of pathology even though, like other sexual minority groups, much of the distress experienced by kinky people can be the result of social stigma (Lin, 2016), discrimination (Wright, 2006), the legal prohibitions on many kink activities (Khan, 2014) and minority stress processes (Waldura, Arora, Randall, Farala, & Sprott, 2016). Likewise, acting on kinky desires with a non-consenting person is considered a disorder, while acting on vanilla (i.e. non-kinky) sexual impulses with a non-consenting person is not interpreted as a disorder, even though both are obviously harmful to survivors (Dunmore, Clark, & Ehlers, 2001; Krakow et al., 2002; Ullman & Brecklin, 2002; Ullman & Filipas, 2001).

Even though progress has been made in the DSM-5 among clinicians by distinguishing between a 'paraphilia' and a 'paraphilic disorder,' this professional distinction has not been appropriated in popular culture, which often treats kink as deeply dangerous and as evidence of a de facto pathology. For example, a Google news search for 'BDSM' yielded two initial responses as stories about physical injury associated with BDSM (Holdsworth, 2018) and an article claiming submissive women into BDSM have minimal empathy, accompanied by online comments calling BDSM practitioners 'nasty women,' 'nuts,' 'disgusting,' and engaging in 'a dangerous pastime' (Thompson, 2018).

The pathologization of kink has remained in part because of a cultural narrative of the meaning and purpose of sex for either reproduction or pair-bonding (e.g. Spitzer, 1981) and a delegitimization of the intimate bonding that can occur through kinky sex. This delegitimization is linked to a master narrative of sex that privileges particular forms over others (e.g. heterosexuality, monogamy; see Hammack et al., 2018; Rubin, 1984; Warner, 1999) and to which individuals are exposed through cultural discourse and artifacts throughout the course of development.

Exposure to a pathology narrative of kinky sexual desire is part of a larger cultural ideology of *kinkphobia* (Downing, 2013; Khan, 2016) that may thwart possibilities for positive sexual identity development and mental health outcomes. In some social situations, disclosure of a kink identity might result in what Goffman (1963) calls a 'spoiled' identity – an identity tainted by stigma. Following narrative engagement theory (e.g. Hammack & Cohler, 2009), the meaning of social categories takes the form of narratives individuals appropriate or repudiate in the course of development. Following minority stress theory (e.g. Meyer, 2003), the consequences of internalizing stigma may be thwarted if one is able to form a positive sexual minority identity and participate in a sexual minority community.

### *The liberatory narrative*

A counter-narrative to the pathology narrative is the perspective that a kink identity represents a liberating journey of creativity and discovery from the confines of cultural taboos and inhibitions. In this narrative, kink is framed as a healthy, even therapeutic form of sexual desire and practice that is recreational, playful, and socially and psychologically meaningful (e.g. Hammers, 2014; Newmahr, 2010, 2011; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). Kink represents a new sexual story that possesses meaning and psychological value for practitioners (e.g. Langdridge & Butt, 2004). The rejection of kink as pathology or kink as rooted in patriarchal systems of oppression characterizes a counter-narrative to mainstream pathologizing discourses (Kao, 2013) – a counter-narrative which many, though not necessarily all, kinky people may now encounter in online and in-person community settings. However, in constructing a collective counter-narrative that foregrounds kink as a sexual minority identity, kinky people face challenges akin to LGBTQ movements, including issues of intersectionality and the tension between portraying kink as assimilationism/normativity or diversity/difference (Kao, 2013).

Research suggests three central themes of the liberatory, non-pathologizing narrative of kink. First, kink centers consent and collaborative scripting of roles and scenes, offering a safe and empowering context for sexual experience (e.g., Langdridge & Barker, 2007; Weinberg, 1987, 1994, 2006). Community websites (Langdridge & Butt, 2004) and interview data (e.g. Faccio, Casini, & Cipolletta, 2014) reveal the centrality of discourse related to consent among kink-identified individuals. Role-based fetish relationships such as 'Daddy Dom/little girl' or 'Master/slave' represent collaboratively scripted stories in which individuals in submissive roles report control and agency in the dynamic (e.g. Dancer, Kleinplatz, & Moser, 2006). Kink subcultures and identities appear to privilege practices that emphasize direct communication and consent, which may result in the internalization of consent-oriented sexual values (Klement, Sagarin, & Lee, 2017).

The second theme of a liberatory kink narrative is that it offers the opportunity for recreational power exchange and role exploration, thereby providing a safe context in which individuals can explore power and social categories. Kinky individuals often describe the meaning of their sexual experiences as consensual 'games' with specific rules, often in relation to social categories such as gender, race, or age (e.g. Bauer, 2008, 2018; Faccio et al., 2014; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). Kinky sex involves 'serious leisure' that is largely described by practitioners as empowering (e.g. Newmahr, 2010). Such sex may even serve a therapeutic value for individuals to process trauma or achieve a sense of power (or loss of power) in sex that is psychologically beneficial (e.g. Hammers, 2014; Lindemann, 2011; Newmahr, 2010). A recently documented example is the emergence of 'pup play' among young gay men (Wignall & McCormack, 2015). This kink activity involves play in which the traits and behaviors of dogs are mimicked in both sexual and non-sexual roleplay. Beyond a kink activity, pup play has been accompanied by the formation of a new sexual subculture and community, facilitated by social media (Wignall, 2017), revealing the way in which counter-narratives in the kink community have resulted in the formation of new identities.

Finally, a liberatory narrative of kink emphasizes the meaning and value of subculture and community to the construction of a positive self-concept. Studies of the 'leatherman' subculture suggest that gay men who are kinky find meaning and value in the construction of a leatherman identity as a contrast to a gay male identity perceived as limiting (e.g. Kamel, 1980). Gay men in the leather community report the achievement of self-confidence and better coping with homophobia-induced minority stress through the community's emphasis on family and fraternity (Mosher, Levitt, & Manley, 2006; Tatum, 2016). Studies also suggest the centrality of community for diverse subcultures of individuals who identify as kinky (e.g. Weiss, 2006).

### *The current study*

The current study examined narratives of kink identity sentiment in an international sample of self-identified kinky people. Informed by social psychological theories that emphasize narrative engagement, meaning making, and stigma management in the process of sexual identity development (Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Meyer, 2003), we sought to document the stories kinky individuals constructed about their identities. Based on the preponderance of dominant competing narratives in scientific and cultural discourse outlined above, we assumed that kinky individuals are exposed to at least two competing master narratives of the meaning and value of kink – one narrative that frames kinky sex as unhealthy and pathological, and one narrative that frames kinky sex as healthy, psychologically beneficial, and empowering. We do not suggest that these master narratives constitute the only or even the primary discourses about kink to which individuals may be exposed. In fact, our theoretical approach assumes a cultural context saturated with sexual stories (e.g. Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Plummer, 1995). Kinky people and kink communities are heterogeneous, and we do not assume uniformity in the lived experience of kink-identified individuals. We especially recognize the likelihood of cultural variability in contexts of narrative engagement. An international sample was recruited in order to try to include the voices of kinky people from diverse contexts, and, as part of the broader study, to explore cultural variation in kink

interests. For example, 'chav' and 'scally' fetishism (a sexual attraction to White, young, lower-income street-affiliated men) are likely to be more common in the UK, where these archetypes are more available as cultural touchstone. We were, nevertheless, interested in exploring the ways in which these master narratives were appropriated or repudiated among a diverse sample of contemporary kink-identified individuals. Our qualitative method allowed us to be open to the emergence of other competing discourses to which our respondents were exposed as they made meaning of their sexual identities and practices.

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

Participants were 265 individuals recruited online via FetLife ([www.fetlife.com](http://www.fetlife.com)), the world's largest social networking website for people with kinky sexual desires. Participants were eligible for the study if they were 18 years or older and self-identified as 'kinky.' While most participants explicitly adopted the word 'kinky' to describe their interests, one participant did later object to the use of that term in their open-ended responses, instead preferring to be identified as 'a dominant female and impact player.' Data were collected anonymously to protect participants' identities. Participants were eligible for a drawing of one of four gift cards to an online retailer, but, in accordance with California state law, eligibility for the drawing was not contingent upon participation or completion of the study. The study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Participants were recruited via three methods. First, most participants (57%) were recruited via advertisements placed on geographically-oriented groups on the website. Users of FetLife have the option to join groups associated with their local geography. With the permission of the website caretakers and the leaders of each group, 49 advertisements inviting people to participate in the study were posted in these geographic groups. Geographic groups for the majority of US states were included, representing all major regions of the country, as well as several countries outside the US. To ensure kinky people using FetLife who are not involved in geographic groups were also given the opportunity to participate, we also recruited participants via paid banner advertisements, randomly shown to users on the site over the course of two months. Thirty-six percent of the sample was recruited via these banner advertisements. The third recruitment method involved snowball sampling, constituting 4% of the sample. One percent of the sample came from Tumblr, as a participant spontaneously posted an advertisement for the study on the website, and 3% of the sample did not provide information about their recruitment method. The survey was only available in English, so non-Anglophones are likely underrepresented.

Participants were asked to answer a series of open-ended questions in an anonymous online questionnaire regarding their experiences and memories of being kinky. The questions were developed out of the combination of the researcher's own interests and were pilot tested with eight kinky people already known to the researcher, representing a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations. Responses to the survey questions were uniformly positive, and no changes to question wordings were made after piloting. Our analysis focused on participant responses to the following question on the questionnaire: 'Do you feel negatively, positively, or mixed about your kink identity? Please explain why.' Following a critical realist epistemology (Dy, Martin, & Marlow, 2014), this question assumes that people's attitudes feelings, and thoughts are real and that participants will be able to express them in words, providing researchers with the opportunity to learn about those attitudes feelings and thoughts, by interpreting and reflecting on participant responses with a diverse research team that considers how their own social identities affect how they interpret participant responses.

After typing an answer to this question, each participant's response was saved and used for analysis, even if the participant did not complete any other portions of the survey. Participants

were also asked to report demographics on the final page of the survey. Age ranges, rather than exact ages, were collected to help reduce the likelihood of participants feeling they will be identified, as age is a required part of a profile on FetLife. Similarly, income ranges, rather than exact incomes were collected to encourage participants to not fear identification (such as through tax returns) as a result of providing an exact yearly income.

Table 1 lists the demographic statistics reported by participants. Though a substantial majority of the participants were White (87.2%), as is a recurrent problem in studies of kinky people (Cruz, 2016; Sheff & Hammers, 2011), the sample was diverse in terms of gender identity (20% of the sample identified as something other than cisgender, with roughly equal numbers of cisgender men and women), age (with a median age range of 36–45, and over 6.8% of the sample over 65 years old), income (the median income range was \$36,000 to \$47,999, with a range from under \$720 to over \$240,000), geography (33.6% identified as living on one of 20 different countries outside of the United States), and sexual orientation (58.1% identified as something other than heterosexual or heteroflexible). Critically, because these data are derived from a social networking website for kinky people, it may underrepresent people without internet access, or who are so fearful of their kink interests being disclosed that even creating an anonymous profile feels too risky.

Table 1. Sample demographics.

Current gender identity	<i>N</i>	%
Cisgender Man	105	39.6
Cisgender Woman	98	37.0
Other	22	8.3
Genderfluid	12	4.5
No Response	9	3.4
Transgender Man	5	1.9
Two-Spirit	5	1.9
Agender	4	1.5
Genderqueer	3	1.1
Transgender Woman	2	0.8
Total	265	
Sexual Orientation	<i>N</i>	%
Heterosexual	68	25.7
Bisexual	58	21.9
Heteroflexible	36	13.6
Pansexual	32	12.1
Gay	17	6.4
Other	14	5.3
Questioning/Unsure	10	3.8
Asexual	8	3.0
No Response	7	2.6
Queer	6	2.3
Lesbian	5	1.9
Homoflexible	3	1.1
Sexually Fluid	2	0.8
Total	265	
Race	<i>N</i>	%
White/Caucasian/European	231	87.2%
Other	14	5.3%
Native American	12	4.5%
No Response	9	3.4%
Latin@/Hispanic/Chican@	6	2.3%
Asian/Asian-American	4	1.5%
African/African-American/Black	1	0.4%
Total	265	

## Coding

We employed an iterative coding process combining open coding and constant comparative analysis from grounded theory, and methods from content analysis, modeled after Hruschka et al. (2004). In the first round of coding, two coders (one cisgender gay White man who identifies as kinky, and one cisgender bisexual Filipina-American woman not identified with the kink community, assisting as an undergraduate research assistant) each independently read all 265 responses and created codes at the level of each unit of meaning. After this first round, both coders had over 100 separate codes. Both coders then merged their codes into categories based on thematic similarity, eliminated idiosyncratic codes that occurred for only one participant, and developed a single codebook based on each of their initial lists of codes. Next, each coder independently coded all responses again into the appropriate codes in the newly-formed codebook. After this second round of coding, both coders discussed any challenges with the coding scheme and made appropriate changes to the codebook to accommodate those challenges, including adding, deleting, merging, modifying and/or renaming codes. Then, in each subsequent round of coding, both coders coded all responses independently into all the appropriate codes in the codebook. Each code was then analyzed independently by computing an unweighted Cohen's Kappa 95% confidence interval. If the lower bound of the interval for a code was above .6 – a value considered 'good' by Altman (1990) – disagreements were discussed and resolved via consensus coding, being careful to attend to the coders' own intersectional positionalities (Dy et al., 2014). Most differences in coding interpretations were not the result of differences in positionality around kink-identification, but instead around differences in positionality related to gender, and the interpretation of trauma and danger. Codes that were not reliable were coded again for all the data by both coders, discussed, and modified in each new round of coding until all codes were established as reliable. This process was completed after five rounds of coding, resulting in 27 reliable codes, each representing specific story elements that appear in participant responses.

## Statistical analyses

Because we were interested in what types of stories participants constructed about their own kinky identities, an exploratory latent class analysis was conducted (McCutcheon, 1987). Latent class analysis is a quantitative method for determining an underlying categorical structure for a set of data. Because each of the 27 codes are each story elements of a narrative of identity, identifying patterns in which story elements tend to accompany one another, and which story elements tend to not appear together can help guide an analysis of the data to see how individual story elements converge together into full, coherent stories. In the case of the present study, latent class analysis is a method for assessing how many kinds of stories were present in the data, determining how common each type of story is, and estimating the likelihood of particular story elements appearing in each story type. We chose this approach because it allowed us to more systematically use multiple analytic approaches (both qualitative and quantitative), in order to ensure the integrity of the interpretation.

The latent class analysis was conducted in three stages. First, all 27 codes were run through an exploratory latent class analysis using the *poLCA* package in R (Linzer & Lewis, 2011). Each code was treated as a dichotomous variable and dummy coded before being analyzed. The AIC and BIC (measures of model fit) were assessed using all the available codes for classes ranging from 2 to 9. The AIC indicated there were four classes, while the BIC indicated there were two classes. Thus, the prevalence of class membership for all 27 codes was examined for two, three, and four classes. Codes were eliminated from the model in order to improve parsimony and interpretability, based on the rule that if a code had no more than a 10% likelihood of appearing in all classes in the model for two, three, and four classes, it was eliminated (unless all other classes indicated zero probability of the variable appearing). This rule established a quantitative criterion for parsimony. Four codes were eliminated in the first round of analysis based on this rule.

Second, the AIC and BIC were assessed again for the 23 remaining codes, from 2–11 classes (see Table 3). The AIC indicated four classes, and the BIC indicated three classes. Thus, another latent class analysis was run for three and four classes, using the same parsimony rule. No additional variables warranted elimination under the parsimony rule, so the 3-class model and 4-class model were assessed by the two coders for which most accurately reflected the nature of the data. After discussion, the coders agreed that the 4-class model was the most accurate and interpretable account of the qualitative data with which they were familiar.

Third, we ran posterior analyses to assign each individual open-ended response to one of the four classes, based on which class had the highest posterior probability of membership.

## Results

Table 2 reports the 27 codes and definitions originally identified when coding the data, as well as the frequency of each code. Table 4 reports the relative probability of each code being present each of the four classes of responses. Descriptions and featured examples of the four types of responses given by participants can be found below. To aid in readability, grammatical, punctuation, and capitalization errors have been corrected in some of the responses, without altering the substance of the response.

### Response class 1: unelaborated affirmation

The first class of responses, which was estimated to constitute 20.0% of the population, features an unelaborated positive answer and little to no likelihood of any other story elements. These non-detailed types of responses largely focused on asserting positive sentiment about kink identities without providing much elaboration and tended to be no more than a handful of words. Examples of this type of story are: 'Positive. It's who I am, and it's a part of me.', 'Positive, best thing ever.', 'I

Table 2. Coding results.

Code	N	%
Positive Emotionality	95	35.8
Liberating Journey of Growth and Exploration	92	34.7
Stigma Resiliency	55	20.8
Societal Stigma	50	18.9
Simple Positive	41	15.5
Positivity from Kink Community	39	14.7
Concealment Stigma	34	12.8
Consent Ethics	29	10.9
Barriers to Community and Connections	28	10.6
Kink-Pathologization	24	9.1
Overcoming Hardships and Obstacles	21	7.9
Kink Ambivalence	20	7.5
Workplace Stigma	19	7.2
Improved Relationships	17	6.4
Relationship to Sexual Orientation	16	6.0
Kink Superiority	15	5.7
Partner Stigma	13	4.9
Family Stigma	13	4.9
Peer Stigma	12	4.5
Neutral Self-Censorship	11	4.2
Danger	11	4.2
Desire to Not be Kinky	10	3.8
Relationship to Religion	7	2.6
Kinky Relationship Problems	7	2.6
Negative Mental Health	6	2.3
Fantasy Only	5	1.9
Uncodeable	4	1.5

**Table 3.** Second round of fit statistics for LCA models of with two to eleven latent classes after eliminating indicators for parsimony.

# of Classes	G <sup>2</sup>	AIC	BIC	X <sup>2</sup>
2	1127.92	3581.13	3749.37	39,177,946.00
3	988.92	3490.13	3744.29	50,091,867.00
4	895.13	3444.34	3784.41	6,420,134.00
5	849.58	3446.79	3872.78	143,588.40
6	801.71	3446.92	3958.82	7,480,696.00
7	767.66	3460.87	4058.68	46,392.33
8	736.62	3477.83	4161.56	44,117,892.00
9	718.92	3508.13	4277.77	104,111.60
10	676.87	3514.08	4369.63	20,686.55
11	634.25	3519.46	4460.93	25,300.38

Note. AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion

**Table 4.** Latent class prevalence and item-response probabilities for four class models of identity self-evaluation.

Indicators	Class 1: Unelaborated Affirmation 20.0%	Class 2: Elaborated Affirmation 63.8%	Class 3: Compartmentalization 11.7%	Class 4: Isolation 4.5%
	Item-Response Probabilities			
Positive Emotionality	0.00	0.45	0.44	0.46
Liberating Journey of Growth and Exploration	0.00	0.43	0.37	0.64
Stigma Resilience	0.00	0.29	0.16	0.08
Societal Stigma	0.19	0.10	0.53	0.50
Simple Positive	0.72	0.00	0.07	0.00
Positivity from Kink Community	0.00	0.16	0.37	0.08
Concealment Stigma	0.10	0.02	0.78	0.00
Consent Ethics	0.02	0.15	0.07	0.00
Barriers to Community and Connections	0.24	0.04	0.04	0.49
Kink-Pathologization	0.10	0.07	0.03	0.46
Overcoming Hardships and Obstacles	0.00	0.09	0.06	0.30
Kink Ambivalence	0.00	0.12	0.00	0.00
Workplace Stigma	0.03	0.00	0.54	0.00
Improved Relationships	0.00	0.07	0.09	0.15
Partner Stigma	0.14	0.01	0.09	0.08
Family Stigma	0.00	0.00	0.37	0.08
Peer Stigma	0.00	0.01	0.31	0.08
Danger	0.06	0.02	0.00	0.34
Desire To Not Be Kinky	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.47
Relationship to Religion	0.00	0.01	0.06	0.23
Kinky Relationship Problems	0.04	0.00	0.03	0.31
Negative Mental Health	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.45
Fantasy Only	0.02	0.00	0.03	0.22

feel very positive...no negativity whatsoever.', and one participant who answered the question only with a '+.' Other examples included straightforward responses like 'Very positive!', 'Positively 100%', 'Positively, without a doubt. It is who I am, and I like me very much.', and 'Positive! I love my sexuality.'

While the internal psychological lives and contexts of these participants may have been nuanced, rich, and complex, especially given that they are maintaining a positive identity in the face of stigma and discrimination, those details did not show up explicitly in their responses. What distinguishes these responses from the next response class is primarily this class' lack of detail. There were no relationships between this type of response and any demographic variables assessed.

### **Response class 2: elaborated affirmation**

A story of elaborated affirmation, by far the most common type of story in the population at 63.8%, was less clearly characterized than the other three classes. Like stories of unelaborated affirmation, these stories were mostly or entirely positive, but the participants telling these stories gave much more elaborate, nuanced, and diverse reasons for their positivity, in contrast to the unelaborated affirmation stories.

The most common story of elaborated affirmation included details about how participants' kink identities generate *positive emotionality*. For example, some participants talked about kink as a form of novelty and fun, such as an 18–25-year-old bisexual cisgender White man from Sweden who said, 'I feel absolutely positively as my kink identity is my way out of a boring, predictable & bland life that most people seem to enjoy.'

Others talked about feeling positive emotions surrounding safety, security, and predictability. For instance, an 18–25-year-old pansexual transgender White man from the USA explained, 'I feel very positive about my kink identity. It is one part of my life that I have full and absolute control over, and that I feel safe in.'

For other participants expressing stories of elaborated affirmation, their positive emotions focused on the quality of their relationships and sexual intimacy. For example, one 18–25-year-old cisgender heteroflexible woman from the USA said,

I feel positively. I've never enjoyed sex as much, and this is the first relationship I've felt truly comfortable in (this is my first kinky relationship). I think being kinky requires an element of trust and communication that vanilla relationships may sometimes lack.

The second most common code found in stories of elaborated affirmation was constructing *kink as a liberating journey of personal growth and exploration*. For these participants, kink was a tool for helping them to get in touch with themselves and explore their identity psychologically and physically. For example, one 18–25-year-old pansexual cisgender White woman from the USA stated,

For the most part I feel quite positive about my kink identity. It's a large part of who I am. I've learned a lot about myself through kink. I've tested my limits in many situations and proven to myself I am a strong person that can take a lot, both mentally and physically.

Some participants with stories of elaborated affirmation described an explicit *stigma resiliency* against the pathology narrative through constructing kink as a journey of personal growth in a community of kinky people. For example, a 36–45-year-old heterosexual White person who did not identify their gender from the USA explained,

I am unapologetic about who I am. I am not ashamed of myself. I am a good person and most of my friends love me like family. I feel sorry for people who never experience this type of relationship.

Likewise, a 36–45-year-old cisgender heteroflexible White man from the USA also demonstrated stigma resiliency by saying,

I love my kinky side. It's nice to have people to share it with too. So many judgmental people that don't have an open mind are usually the same ones that hate their life. No time for that. Too much to explore and discover with yourself and others.

A smaller number of stories situated their feelings of positive affirmation in their *pride in the broader kink community*. For example, an 18–25-year-old queer cisgender White woman from the USA said,

I feel extremely positively about my kink identity. I'm happiest when I'm being honest about myself as a kinkster. I take huge pride in my identity, and I take pride in my role as a kink educator and young leader in my community.

Some stories also expressed an elaborated affirmation of their kink identity by focusing on the *ethical aspects of consent*. For example, one 18–25-year-old bisexual cisgender man from the USA, a voyeur, said he felt ‘positively’ about his kink identity: ‘It’s kind of taboo to watch people, but there are consensual outlets like cam sites where I can get off without anyone getting hurt or in trouble, so it’s not bad.’

Lastly, a handful of stories within the elaborated affirmation story type focused on how kink identities helped participants to *overcome other hardships and anxieties* in their lives. For example, a few participants talked about how having clearly defined social roles helped to alleviate their social anxiety. One example is an 18–25-year-old heterosexual cisgender White woman from the USA:

I love it. To be honest, it’s fun to be part of something that’s so unusual and sort of underground. To be able to wear my collar or follow his rules in public without anyone knowing what’s happening. But more than that, I feel “at home” or comfortable in my own skin. This is a solid identity for me to hold on to (as someone with anxiety, labels = predictability/concrete = comfortable) and one that just \*fits\*. I have never been as happy or fulfilled as first knowing I am a slave and then finding my soulmate and Senpai and beginning to serve him. I grow on a daily basis, both as a person and a slave. It’s paradise.

For others, kink was a way for them to overcome the challenges of growing older. For example, one 46–55-year-old, heterosexual cisgender White man from Norway shared, ‘I feel very positive. It gives my life a spice that I really love, especially now that I have become grown up/old. It is a way to feel young and virile.’

Rather than focusing on only one positive benefit of being kinky, many identified several sources of positive identity sentiment all in the same narrative. For instance, one 36–45-year-old pansexual cisgender White woman from the USA responded,

I feel 100% positive. I have a huge group of friends, I am more confident personally, I can now communicate a million times better with everyone in my life, my relationships are way more satisfying, and I can finally live in a way that doesn’t feel hampered by society or laced by wanting.

### **Response class 3: compartmentalization**

Stories in this category, which represent 11.7% of all stories in the population, were characterized by high rates of stigma, especially stigma participants attributed to a perceived need to conceal their kink identities from family, friends, coworkers, and society at large. Despite the prominence of stigma discourse in these narratives, these stories had very low instances of kink-pathologization or negative mental health issues. These narratives were also characterized by discussion of kink community involvement and kinky spaces as a safe context for the expression of an authentic self. In other words, compartmentalization stories appeared to be strategic for participants to manage possible contamination associated with stigma by framing the kink community as a refuge from mainstream kinkphobic society.

Illustrating a typical compartmentalization story, one 46–55-year-old heterosexual cisgender Hispanic woman from the USA narrated,

I love the freedom I feel while I’m being kinky. I love being kinky and live who I am. However, I still feel like I need to keep this part of my life away from the mainstream. I worry a bit that I could lose my job if lots of people knew. I am getting more comfortable letting my friends outside of my kink community know about this part of me.

Stories in this category were characterized by a perceived need to compartmentalize and conceal participants’ kink life from their everyday life to avoid negative social consequences, especially in the workplace. A compartmentalization story from a 46–55-year-old White heterosexual cisgender man from South Africa illustrates:

There is a friendship circle at work which doesn’t know and if they knew would be outraged. We have kept that at a distance... [ellipsis in original] thus not living close by. I socialise with my work friends around the office and work, and kinky friends at home.

Some participants identified media representations of kinky people as a potential source of anti-kink attitudes and stigma. For example, a 46–55-year-old White gender-fluid person from the USA who was questioning their sexual orientation responded,

[I feel] somewhat mixed [about my kink identity]. I enjoy my kinks very much. On the other hand, I don't talk with my "vanilla" friends about them because they won't understand, or they will think I am weird or a pervert or something. I get that impression from hearing some of their comments about things in movies, or making fun of things that they hear others talk about, etc.

In this and other compartmentalization stories, participants narrated a strategy of stigma management focused on concealment when in the presence of non-kinky friends, co-workers, or family members.

Several participants also identified *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2012) as creating a warped image of kinky people, such as this 36–45-year-old gay cisgender White man from England:

I wish it was more widely accepted beyond a *Fifty Shades of Grey* pastiche. I also worry that people think worse of you, and that you indulge in illegal, or very dangerous or dark activities when it's actually mainly fun and sexy.

Compartmentalization stories thus contained a concern with impression management of kinky people and kinky sex, and participants who narrated such accounts were highly concerned about the view of kink from mainstream society.

While some participants reported compartmentalizing their kink activities in the context of kink communities, many participants compartmentalized their kink activities only in the context of their intimate relationships. For example, an 18–25-year-old asexual cisgender White woman from the USA said, 'I like it. It's a part of me, and I like me. I don't share my kink with others besides my husband, but I don't share my vanilla either.' Similarly, an over 66-year-old White cisgender heterosexual woman from the USA stated, 'My kink is personal, for the pleasure of me and my partner only.'

#### **Response class 4: isolation**

The final story type, representing 4.5% of the population, was characterized by discussion of barriers to community, kink-pathologization, and moderate levels of stigma. Few positive codes occurred in stories of isolation, and these stories often focused on the misery involved in being cut off from other kinky people who might be able to understand their desires. In comparison with compartmentalization stories, which also prominently featured experience with stigma, stories of isolation were characterized by discourse that suggested the most suffering, and these stories contained content related to severely negative thoughts about themselves and depression or suicidal ideation.

Some of these stories focused on the loneliness that comes along with being geographically and politically isolated. For example, one 26–35 heterosexual cisgender White man from the USA lamented, 'Negatively – I can't be "out," and it is impossible to find someone to participate in kinky activities in my conservative rural area. I'm lonely and sexually repressed because I'm not "normal."'

Sometimes, other social identities like sexual orientation, rather than geographic isolation, acted as a force to isolate people. For example, one 36–45 lesbian cisgender White woman from the Netherlands narrated,

I feel very mixed about my kink identity. I find it difficult to actually find women to play with. I still feel a lot of shame and often cannot think of reasons why people would want to play with me. In normal life I am quite dominant, so I find it difficult to be vulnerable and open and so on. I feel shame that I have desires that others judge so profoundly. Sometimes what turns me, or the fact that it turns me on, disgusts me.

Isolation stories were characterized by discourse of concern with being 'normal' and lack of access to a kink community in which one might realize kink desires. Many of these stories of isolation reflect Beck's classic cognitive triad of depression (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1987), featuring negative thoughts about the self, the future (especially the likelihood of finding compatible partners), and the world and society at large. There has been some suggestion in the literature that Beck's model can

be usefully applied to other sexual minorities (Satterfield & Crabb, 2010), so its application to kinky people may also be appropriate.

Some isolation stories revealed conflict with religious beliefs or religious upbringing as being a particularly salient source of distress and isolation for participants. For example, one 36–45-year-old White genderqueer bisexual person from the USA narrated:

I was surrounded by a fundamentalist Christian community as a teenager. I have had mates who either had sexual identities that came with damage or were so repressed and closed off that what self-esteem I had about my own was destroyed. I hardly have any sex other than alone now.

As this narrative suggests, exposure to religious discourse that denigrates sexual diversity may foster the construction of isolation narratives for kinky people and thwart their ability to achieve sexual and relational fulfillment.

Some participants even noted that the psychological distress they experienced over their kink desires was presently or historically life-threatening. One participant, a 46–55-year-old genderfluid person from the USA who was unsure of their sexual orientation described their attempted suicide:

...[Being kinky] certainly made my life difficult. I turned to pornography to gratify my urges, and it's destroyed much of my life and my reputation. I've actually been hospitalized prior to a suicide attempt. And make no mistake, it wasn't a cry for attention. I went to my priest to make my final confession, and he asked me to speak to a suicide prevention line. They traced the call, and the police came. I wanted to die. I had my pistol with me and had picked out the nearby park where I was going to do it.

A few isolation stories prominently featured discourse related to current or past suicidal ideation, tracing this ideation directly to the struggles associated with having kinky sexual desires that are potentially contaminating based on stigma.

Some isolation stories, however, assumed a redemptive form and situated suffering as a problem of the past that the individual has now overcome. For example, a 25–36-year-old transgender Caucasian man from the USA reported,

For the most part, being kinky is very positive. I spent a huge chunk of my sexually active life being unfulfilled, anxious and dealing with warring feelings about my sexual encounters. But since embracing my kinky side, I enjoy sex pretty consistently.

Discourse related to isolation, then, is sometimes narrated in the past tense rather than the present for kinky individuals. Its presence in narratives of current identity sentiment reveals its likely significance in the kinky individual's larger life-story narrative, but the redemptive form of such narratives suggests a more positive framing of struggle in the personal narrative.

In isolation narratives that are past-oriented, participants often framed discovery and immersion into a kink community as redemptive. The narrative of a 56–65-year-old heterosexual cisgender man from the Netherlands illustrates:

Some years ago it felt bad to be different, not normal. But nowadays I feel OK about it. It helps very much to be in the kink community, seeing that you are not the only one, but that there are thousands of us. My experience with the kink community is, in general, positive. Most people are respectful and understanding.

The narrative of a 36–45-year-old White and native bisexual cisgender man from the USA further illustrates:

Having had time to grow into it, I find my identity as a sadist and dominant very positive. It may seem like hyperbole, but I think finding a kinky community that helped me understand who I am probably saved my life. I spent years locked in addictions to hide from who I was and I don't think my sobriety would have lasted without that understanding.

As these narratives suggest, community appears to serve as a source of redemption in isolation stories of kinky individuals. Such stories are characterized by a journey from isolation in the past to a present in which community connection has thwarted the potential for contamination on account of stigma.

## Discussion

With greater recognition of diversity in sexual desire and identity, increased cultural visibility of kink, and greater opportunities for individuals to realize their kinky desires by connecting through social media, there is a need to better understand the development and experiences of kinky people. The purpose of our study was to examine how kink-identified individuals feel about their kink identities, with the larger aim to contribute to theory on the development and experience of this historically stigmatized population.

Our analysis was informed by social psychological theories that emphasize the role of narrative engagement in the construction of self and the process of stigma management as individuals make meaning of their kink desires and practices (e.g. Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Meyer, 2003). This theoretical approach allowed us to consider the ways in which individuals engage with cultural discourse that either pathologizes kink or frames kink as a liberating and healthy form of sexuality. A latent class analysis of narratives of identity sentiment among a diverse international sample of 265 self-identified kinky people revealed four larger thematic patterns: *unelaborated affirmation*, *elaborated affirmation*, *compartmentalization*, and *isolation*. These findings revealed distinct ways in which kink-identified individuals navigated stigma and the potential contamination of the pathology narrative.

Compartmentalization stories revealed the way in which individuals use various strategies of information control and impression management through disclosure or concealment of elements of their personal biography or life story (see Goffman, 1963), as well as how having access to communities facilitated targeted disclosure in a safe and supportive social environment. The dominant classification of participants' stories within the category of *affirmation* (either elaborated or unelaborated), however, reveals the extent to which kinky individuals engage with a counter-narrative of kink as a form of liberated, healthy sexuality, often facilitated by learning from and within kink communities. Many thwart the potential contamination of stigma by constructing affirming stories of kink desire. These stories often reveal explicit resilience in the face of stigma, anchored in the experience of belonging to a kink community. The proliferation of elaborated affirmation narratives in our data, many of which describe a liberating journey toward redefining the meaning of a kink identity from 'bad' to 'good,' reveals the extent to which kinky people seek to achieve a positive self-concept through framing their sexual desire and identity as a fundamental good. Similarly, in many isolation stories we discovered, individuals constructed redemptive narratives in which the potential contaminating effect of a stigmatized, spoiled identity was thwarted through a personal journey of reframing the meaning of kink. Across the entire dataset, more than 86% of participants included at least one positive element about their kink identities in their response (such as kink helping participants to overcome obstacles or enjoying the kink community).

Despite narrative processes that would seem to orient kinky people toward more positive mental health or well-being, some participants did construct stories in which the stigma of a kink identity was internalized and associated with isolation, depression, and even suicidal ideation. This finding reveals the relevance of minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) as an important analytic framework for the study of kinky people. Minority stress theory emerged to explain health and mental health disparities between heterosexual and non-heterosexual (i.e. gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other sexual minority) individuals. The theory, however, offers a broad analysis of the way in which structural disadvantage and cultural stigma can lead to prejudice and discrimination that may activate minority stress processes (e.g. stigma expectations, disclosure stress, internalized stigma) that in turn lead to negative mental health outcomes such as depression (Meyer, 2003). Such processes may be moderated by factors such as a positive sexual minority identity and participation in a sexual minority community, though public identification with those communities can contribute to minority stress by making individuals targets of discrimination, violence, and negative stereotyping (Savage & Harley, 2009).

Our findings lead us to hypothesize that, to the extent that kink identities and practices are stigmatized in societies, a minority stress model may be applicable to kinky people, who are not typically categorized within the language of 'sexual minorities.' Our narrative data revealed an intimate experience with stigma and its internalization through kink self-pathologization (i.e. internalized stigma). Furthermore, our narrative data revealed the significance of community for the well-being and development of kinky people. Affirmation and isolation narratives frequently credited the discovery of a kink community as central to the construction of a more redemptive identity narrative. Research on other sexual minorities has pointed to sexual minority identity communities as a critical site for social support, information, and relationship building, which can help to prevent and cope with stigma and distress (e.g. Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). Future research might further examine the relevance of minority stress theory for kink-identified individuals.

Finally, our findings reveal the extent to which kinky people engage with diverse master narratives of the meaning of kink identity. Participant narratives revealed an engagement with the historic master narrative of kink as indicative of psychopathology, especially among participants who narrated isolation stories. Importantly, though, we found considerable evidence of engagement with the liberatory counter-narrative of kink as a safe and empowering identity. Affirmation stories especially emphasized the value and benefit of a kink identity to one's social and sexual life.

The results of this study also suggest that the affirmation of a liberatory narrative may serve as an effective strategy for future work in clinical contexts with kinky people experiencing psychological distress over their kink-oriented desires. A precedent for this already exists in the form of gay affirmative therapy (Glassgold, 2009), and applying this existing model to kinky clients may warrant further exploration. The development of kink affirmative therapy by applying the gay affirmative therapy model may be particularly useful, as clinicians often lack adequate training and direction regarding how to work with kinky clients (Nichols, 2006, 2014; Pillai-Friedman, Pollitt, & Castaldo, 2015).

A few participants mentioned intersections with their religious identities as being sources of challenge to maintaining a cohesive identity. Comparing how religious and non-religious kinky people construct their identities may be a useful future direction for studying sexual identity development in hostile and supportive contexts. Future research may also benefit from more carefully tracing the diversity of specific kink interests among kinky people and investigating whether different kink interests make kinky people more or less vulnerable to internalizing master narratives of pathology.

The study had several limitations. First, prompting participants with the word 'mixed' as a valid option in the questionnaire (implied, but not explicitly stated to mean both positive and negative feelings about one's own identity) may have encouraged participants to express both positive and negative feelings more frequently, or to frame some of their positive responses in contrast to an imagined other who might feel negatively about their kink identity. People's feelings about their own identities often fluctuate across time, cultural context, and place, and including 'mixed' as an option may have also prompted individuals to report how their identities have changed over time (such as the stories focusing on overcoming hardship and developing from a negative to a positive sense of their identity). Similarly, asking participants to explain *why* they feel their identity sentiments may have put them in a position of feeling the need to justify feelings they may have never consciously analyzed before. As a result, the structure of the question may have prompted responses that relied more heavily on *identifiable* sources of positive and negative feelings (such as stigma, communities, practices, and conscious thoughts), rather than simply reporting feelings for which no source may have been identified. Second, the latent class analysis that was conducted was exploratory, so replication may be needed to confirm the 4-story structure of kink identity sentiment.

Third, all the data are self-reported and represent participant narratives of experience, rather than necessarily factual statements of experience. Our interest, however, was in meaning making of kink identities rather than accuracy of lived experience, as is common in narrative research (Josselson, 2004). Given our qualitative method of narrative data collection, our findings may not generalize to the larger population of individuals who identify as kinky. However, the quantitative approach to qualitative data analysis allowed us to blend multiple lenses for examining the identity sentiments among a sample of self-identified kinky people.

Fourth, the sample, like many samples in this research area (Sheff & Hammers, 2011), was predominantly White. Our findings may not be applicable to the experiences of kinky people of color, who may experience unique stressors from within kink communities, such as being the targets of non-consensual racial fetishization (Jackson, 2017) or negotiating the challenges of participating in a community that appropriates the language and tropes of historical slavery (e.g. Cruz, 2016). These experiences are not captured in the present study, and more research needs to be conducted with kinky people of color to better understand their experiences.

Fifth, this study was only conducted in English, and while many of the same sadomasochistic tropes take place outside of English-speaking contexts, the political and sexual environments in those contexts may have profound implications for the mental health of kinky people (Li, 1998). Similarly, the underrepresentation of non-Anglophones may be relevant, because different languages have different features related to gender (such as the gendering of nouns in Spanish, German and French), formality, power, and hierarchy (such as the Japanese honorific system that equates deference with distance, rather than intimacy), which may, according to a weak version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, influence sentiment and conceptual schemas in everyday contexts (Boroditsky & Schmidt, 2000; Hiraga, 1999). These influences of language may extend to concepts of sex, power, and gender in kink contexts in ways that are unpredictable, because these linguistic features have never been studied, to our knowledge, in kink contexts.

Sixth, the 'unelaborated affirmation' group of responses may be less indicative of participants having only a positive sentiment towards their own identity and more indicative of the participant feeling somewhat disengaged with the survey or simply not being verbose. Future researchers may find interview methodologies, follow-up questions, or a question that explicitly asks to list examples of a specific element of identity sentiment (such as worrying about stigma) to be useful for discerning a more accurate impression of participants' identity sentiments. Finally, our application of a quantitative approach to qualitative data analysis in the form of latent class analysis assumed a random sample of the population of kinky people. While attempts were made to gather a large number of participants using several recruitment methods, these efforts may not have been sufficient to satisfy the assumption. In spite of this limitation, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches has allowed us to identify the meanings participants have constructed about their kink identities in ways that may stimulate new research with additional samples of kinky people.

In spite of its limitations, the current study offers a novel contribution to the psychological literature on kinky sexual desires and identities by examining the way in which kinky people engage with competing narratives of the value and meaning of kink. Our findings call for future studies that examine minority stress and stigma management among members of this population who are vulnerable to mental health challenges due to societal stigma.

## Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the assistance of Mikaela Marcos, an undergraduate research assistant, with coding, feedback from Eileen Zurbruggen on an early draft of this manuscript, and the statistical advice of Doug Bonett.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

The research reported in this article was supported by funding from the Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz. The article was completed while the second author was supported by a fellowship from the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University.

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