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# Narratives of the Origins of Kinky Sexual Desire Held by Users of a Kink-Oriented Social Networking Website

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## ABSTRACT

Empirical research on the origins of kinky erotic desires (e.g., sadomasochism, bondage, domination/submission, roleplaying, sexual fetishism, etc.) has been limited and rarely rooted in the narratives of kinky people themselves. Among a sample of 260 self-identified kinky users of a kink-oriented social networking website living in 21 countries, we examined self-reported narratives of the origins of kink desires. An inductive coding process by four independent coders yielded 20 categories of responses, organized into five broad discourses about the origins of kinky desires: *identity* (e.g., personality, personal taste, and role exploration; 72.7% of responses), *nurture* (e.g., both traumatic and non-traumatic life experiences; 38.1% of responses), *negation* (e.g., disavowing or doubting a particular idea about the origins of their kink interests; 24.6% of responses), *nature* (e.g., biology and genetics; 22.7% of responses), and *uncertainty* (e.g., not being able to identify an origin of kinky desires; 10.4% of responses). Fewer than 19% of participants mentioned any kind of trauma in their responses. We discuss implications for scientific understandings of kinky sexual desire within the umbrella of sexual diversity.

Individuals who identify as kinky report an interest in activities that are often labeled as “paraphilic” or “atypical” sexual interests (Lin, 2017). Though a term with a contested meaning, in this article we will use the term “kink” to describe interests in consensual sexual, intimate or sensual activities that fall outside of typical social norms. Common examples include erotic roleplaying, sexual fetishism, intense sensations, inducing and playing with altered states of consciousness (sometimes called “headspaces”) in intimate contexts, bondage, discipline, domination and submission, and/or degradation and humiliation (e.g., Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). In a pattern similar to historic research on homosexuality in the twentieth century (see Hammack et al., 2013; Herek, 2010), research on the origins of kink-oriented desires has often relied on a pathologizing lens, centering the perspectives of clinicians and forensic psychologists (Moser, 2016; Pillai-Friedman et al., 2015). In contrast, narrative accounts of kinky people have rarely been used as sources of data to understand the origins of kink desire, apart from historic reliance on clinical or criminal populations (Balon, 2013; Martin et al., 2016; Pows & Davies, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to explore patterns of meaning-making in narrative accounts of the origins of kink desire among an international sample of self-identified kinky individuals who use a popular kink-oriented social networking site. Following an inductive analytic approach, we sought to identify the types of stories kinky people tell about the origins of their desire. Our theoretical grounding was thus in perspectives that emphasize the role of scripts, stories, and narratives in the development of sexuality (e.g., Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Plummer, 1995).

## Sexual Scripting and Sexual Stories

Anchored in theories of sexual identity development that emphasize the role of engagement with cultural narratives and collective stories (e.g., Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Plummer, 1995), we sought to understand the origin stories of contemporary kinky people. Our aim was to examine narrative accounts of the origins of kink desire in order to provide voice to how kinky people make meaning of their personal origins of their kink interests. However, these origins stories do not exist in a vacuum. Although kinky desires are increasingly recognized and represented as part of a broader spectrum of sexual diversity (Hammack et al., 2019), kinky individuals have also been socialized in a context in which pathologizing narratives have prominently circulated in dominant discourse about sexuality (Hughes & Hammack, 2019).

Our study is situated in a broader theoretical perspective that emphasizes the role of sexual scripts and stories in sexual identity development. Rooted in symbolic interactionist theory about the co-construction of mind and society through language (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), a perspective that emphasizes scripts and stories recognizes that individuals make meaning of their desire using culturally available scripts and storylines (e.g., Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 1986, 2003). People narrate and make sense of their experiences through the lens of the social scripts for sexuality that they have access to within their cultural and historical context, such as stories of being “normal” or “perverted.”

Contemporary kinky adults have engaged with a unique set of discourses about sexuality in the course of their development. Many experienced the late twentieth century shift in discourse about homosexuality from “sickness” to “identity”

(Hammack et al., 2013) within many countries, with a strong story of biological essentialism (e.g., LeVay, 2017). However, many have also experienced the early twenty-first century shift in stories about other types of sexuality, such as asexuality and kink, away from pathology and toward identity and diversity (e.g., Hammack et al., 2019; Hughes & Hammack, 2019).

Given shifts in available sexual scripts over the course of the past half-century, it is valuable to interrogate the way in which contemporary kinky adults make meaning of the origins of their desire. As they appropriate these scripts and stories into their own sexual life narrative and enact these scripts, they also remake the cultural landscape of sexual stories themselves (Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Plummer, 1995, 2010).

### **Origin Stories of Kinky Desires**

Research on kink has been relatively isolated between two traditions. On the one hand, researchers in fields like anthropology, sociology, and social psychology typically place emphasis on the meaning and symbolic practices of kink (e.g., Newmahr, 2010; Wignall & McCormack, 2017). On the other hand, studies in clinical psychology and sexology have more typically focused on the experience of kinky people as they manage stigma (e.g., Bezreh et al., 2012; Waldura et al., 2016). Unfortunately, questions about the origins of kink interests has typically been historically examined through the prism of pathologizing clinical literature, and behaviorist animal conditioning models. Simultaneously, questions about the origins of kink interests have been avoided by other researchers who view the quest for origins as irrelevant (e.g., Williams, 2016). Researchers who have studied the meaning and practice of kink illuminate sources of motivation, such as gender performance (e.g., Hennen, 2008) or stress relief (e.g., Wignall & McCormack, 2017), but they tend not to obtain explicit narratives of the origins of kink desire.

Among pathologizing discourses, an emphasis on trauma as the source of kink-oriented desires remains a common touchstone, both in popular BDSM-oriented fiction (e.g., James, 2012) and in some academic writing (e.g., Southern, 2002). Despite the prevalence of this narrative of trauma, empirical studies of kinky people have repeatedly found no association between experiences of childhood sexual abuse and kink interests (e.g., Hillier, 2019; Richters et al., 2008), and have found that kinky people who have experienced trauma often find it to be a source of healing (e.g., Hammers, 2014, 2019; Thomas, 2019). Further, one clinician has even advocated for the potential value of a kink-oriented experience as a source of intentional healing in a therapeutic context (Pari, 2020). However, empirical data assessing its efficacy has not yet been collected, so these findings should be interpreted with caution.

Given that kinky desires have been in many ways either pathologized or silenced in popular and scientific discourse, we know little about how kinky people make meaning of the origins of their desire. Paralleling the narratives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and other sexual minority populations, and in contrast to the master narrative of kink as a form of psychopathology, kink communities and kinky individuals have constructed counter-narratives of kink as a legitimate form of sexual diversity and a source of meaning and value

(Hammack et al., 2019; Hughes & Hammack, 2019). Starting in the 1980s, sociological research began to identify the way in which sadomasochism represented a safe and consensual context for the ritualization of power and recreational power exchange (e.g., Rubin, 2013; Weinberg, 1987; Weinberg et al., 1984). Through this early research, kink communities were identified as alternative sites for the healthy development of sexuality (Kamel, 1980; Rubin, 2013). Research has since continued to document the core features of kinky sexual practices and communities, highlighting the meaning and value of identity and community for kink-identified individuals (e.g., Mosher et al., 2006; Newmahr, 2010; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013; Weiss, 2006; for review, see Hammack et al., 2019).

While we know that kinky people are likely engaging with competing sexual stories about the meaning of kink (Hughes & Hammack, 2019), we know less about the way in which these stories frame their understandings of the origins of their own kinky desires. Given the expansion of non-pathologizing research on kinky people, it is noteworthy that, with only one exception to our knowledge (Yost & Hunter, 2012), non-pathologizing research with kinky people has not addressed kinky people's narratives of the origins of their sexual desires with a large sample.

In response to an open-ended question about what first attracted practitioners to BDSM, Yost and Hunter (2012) found that responses tended to fall into one of two categories: *intrinsic motivations* (e.g., essentialist narratives that being kinky is part of a core sense of self) and *external influences* (e.g., friends, romantic partners, the media, abuse history, etc.). Yost and Hunter (2012) highlighted the way in which these narratives mirror essentialist and constructionist views of the origin of sexual orientation (see DeLamater & Hyde, 1998).

It is worthy of note that identities which occupy spaces of relative social privilege are rarely the subject of studies asking participants to directly explain the origins or causes of these identities. White people are rarely asked, "Why are you white?". Straight people are rarely asked, "Why are you straight?", and vanilla (i.e., non-kinky) people are rarely asked, "Why are you only into typical forms of sexual behavior?" (for a discussion of the undertheorizing of heterosexuality in the research literature, see Kitzinger et al., 1992). This is especially the case when research seeks to create "treatments" to control and constrain what is perceived as social deviance. In contrast, we ask questions about the origins of kink interests not in an effort to continue a tradition of scrutinizing and interrogating people who hold sexual minority identities. Instead we ask these questions to amplify the voices and sexual stories of kinky people, who are often marginalized, or whose stories are sometimes constrained by pathologizing clinical case studies. We also ask these questions because many kinky people themselves seek answers to these questions, as evidenced by the thousands of news articles, books, and blog posts that come up when searching for the phrase "Why am I kinky?" on Google. As social scientists critical of outside power structures that seek to define, represent and treat sexual minorities as an object of study, rather than a subject, we have a responsibility to provide answers to these questions grounded in actual kinky people's perspectives and experiences, or we risk the proliferation of mainly pathologizing narratives.

In the present study, we sought to expand the analysis by Yost & Hunter (2012) to describe the origin narratives of a diverse international sample of kinky-identified individuals. Using an inductive approach, we sought to categorize the types of stories kinky individuals used to make meaning of the origins of their desire. Though we were informed by Yost and Hunter's (2012) findings, we did not develop specific hypotheses about story types and remained open to discovery, given the novelty of this area of inquiry.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Participants ( $N = 260$ ) were members of an online kinky-oriented social networking website with a diverse international membership ([www.fetlife.com](http://www.fetlife.com)). Attempts were made to recruit from other websites, such as [recon.com](http://recon.com) (a fetish website predominantly for kinky gay men) and [collarspace.com](http://collarspace.com), but the research team either received no response or was unable to obtain permission to recruit on these sites. Users of FetLife have the option to join groups associated with their local geography, such as "Vermont Kinksters" or "Oregon BDSM." With the permission of both the website administrators and the moderators of each geographic group, 49 advertisements inviting people to participate in the study were posted in these geographic groups. The method for selecting groups was informed by purposive sampling, attempting to get a wide geographic diversity of states in the United States, as well as country-level groups for predominately English-speaking countries in the world. To ensure participants felt comfortable with their anonymity being protected, we only asked participants to identify the country in which they were born and reside, as more detailed geographic information might have made some participants skittish. Forty-three percent of group moderators provided permission to post when contacted. Most of those who were contacted but did not provide permission did not respond at all. However, those that did respond by denying permission typically cited concerns over past pathologizing research on kink, their members' fears of being outed, despite the steps taken to preserve anonymity, and in two cases, recent negative news coverage of their community by their local press. In addition, we placed paid, general advertisements on the website over the course of two months, inviting users to participate in a study on kink, which were shown to individuals even if they were not part of any groups on FetLife.

Participants were eligible for the study only if they were at least 18 years old and self-identified as kinky. Participants were not provided with a definition for the term "kinky" during recruitment, so participants were allowed to define the term for themselves. Data were collected anonymously to protect participants' identities. As an incentive, participants were eligible for a drawing of one of four 25 USD gift cards to an online retailer, but eligibility for the drawing was not contingent upon completion of the study.

Approximately half the sample (51.25%) responded to advertisements placed on geographically oriented groups on the website. One-third (33.1%) of the sample responded to

general advertisements. An additional 11.9% of the sample came from referral-based, "snowball" sampling, and 3.8% of participants did not provide information on how they were recruited for the survey.

Participants completed an online, open-ended survey about their kinky desires, fantasies, experiences, and practices. The survey was designed to produce open-ended data for exploratory analysis and was not designed with the intention of testing any specific *a priori* hypotheses. The current analysis examined responses to the following open-ended question in the survey:

Some kinky people have thought a lot about why they are kinky. Other kinky people haven't given it much thought. Have you thought about why you might be kinky, and if so, why do you think you are into the kinks you are into?

Participants could skip any question they wished in the study, so the 260 participants included here are the participants who answered this particular question, even if they did not complete the entire survey. Eleven participants who answered later open-ended questions in the survey did not answer the question being analyzed in the present study. There were no apparent demographic differences between those who skipped the question and those who did not, though not enough participants skipped the question to assess for small demographic differences in attrition with sufficient statistical power.

Table 1 lists the demographic statistics reported by the 260 participants. Participants were provided with eight options for their current gender identity, as well as an open-ended option for participants who did not feel like one of the available options described them well. A substantial majority (83.4%) of the sample identified as either a cisgender man (44.2%) or cisgender woman (39.2%), while the rest identified with another gender category (see Table 1). The median household income ranged between 48,000 USD–59,999 USD, while the median age ranged between 36–45, representing a wide diversity of age and social class. Ranges were employed in the demographic questions in these two categories to preserve participant comfort and anonymity. The sample was diverse in terms of sexual orientation, with more than 57% identifying as something other than heterosexual or heteroflexible, although monosexual same-sex attracted individuals (i.e., gay men and lesbians) were somewhat underrepresented, as other kinky-oriented social networking sites (e.g., [www.recon.com](http://www.recon.com), queer-oriented pages on Tumblr) are more targeted to their communities. The sample was international, with 35% of participants identifying their country of residence as a nation other than the United States. However, despite the significant international presence in the survey, when asked to identify their ethnic or racial identity via an open-ended question, the sample identified mostly as White (86.2%). In the description of participants whose excerpts are included in the Results section, we use demographic language provided by the participants themselves.

### Coding

Twenty codes were derived from the 260 open-ended responses via an iterative open coding process combining the

**Table 1.** Sample demographics.

Gender Identity	N	%
Cisgender Man	115	44.2
Cisgender Woman	102	39.2
Genderfluid	15	5.8
Genderqueer	10	3.8
Transgender Man	6	2.3
Two-Spirit	5	1.9
Transgender Woman	2	0.8
Did not provide gender identity	8	3.1
Totals	260	
Sexual Orientation	N	%
Heterosexual	73	28.1
Bisexual	60	23.1
Heteroflexible	38	14.6
Pansexual	30	11.5
Gay	17	6.5
Questioning/Unsure	12	4.6
Asexual	8	3.1
Queer	6	2.3
Lesbian	5	1.9
Homoflexible	3	1.2
Bi-curious	3	1.2
Demi-sexual	2	0.8
Heteroromantic	1	0.4
Sexually Fluid	1	0.4
Did not provide sexual orientation	5	1.9
Totals	260	
Country of Residence	N	%
United States	169	65.0
United Kingdom	28	10.8
South Africa	13	5.0
Canada	11	4.2
Australia	9	3.5
Ireland	3	1.2
France	2	0.8
Netherlands	2	0.8
New Zealand	2	0.8
Norway	2	0.8
Austria	1	0.4
Brazil	1	0.4
China	1	0.4
India	1	0.4
Italy	1	0.4
Romania	1	0.4
Serbia	1	0.4
Slovakia	1	0.4
Slovenia	1	0.4
South Korea	1	0.4
Venezuela	1	0.4
No country of origin provided	11	4.2
Totals	260	
Race/Ethnicity	N	%
White, Caucasian, European, European-American	224	86.2
Mixed Race/Ethnicity	14	5.4
Native American/Alaska Native/American Indian	11	4.2
"Colorblind" Race/Ethnicity (e.g., "human")	7	2.7
Asian, Asian-American	4	1.5
Hispanic	4	1.5
Jewish	2	0.8
Black, African, African-American	1	0.4
Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	1	0.4
Latino/a/@	1	0.4
No race/ethnicity provided	16	6.2
Totals	186	
Annual Household Income	N	%
Under \$720	14	5.4
\$720 to \$5,999	16	6.2
\$6,000 to \$11,999	16	6.2
\$12,000 to \$23,999	31	11.9
\$24,000 to \$35,999	29	11.2
\$36,000 to \$47,999	23	8.8
\$48,000 to \$59,999	26	10.0
\$60,000 to \$89,999	40	15.4
\$90,000 to \$119,999	20	7.7
\$120,000 to \$179,999	14	5.4

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued).

\$180,000 to \$239,999	6	2.3
\$240,000 and Over	9	3.5
No income provided	16	6.2
Total	260	
Age Range (Years)	N	%
18–25	56	21.5
26–35	59	22.7
36–45	50	19.2
46–55	42	16.2
56–65	29	11.2
66 and older	17	6.5
No age provided	7	2.7
Total	260	

Participants who did not answer a question may have done so either because they ended the survey before reaching the demographics page, left the entire demographics page blank, or only answered certain demographic questions.

constant comparative method from grounded theory with content coding methods, modeled after Hruschka et al. (2004). In the first round of coding, two coders (one cisgender, gay, kinky, White American man and one cisgender, bisexual, non-kinky Filipina-American woman) each independently read all 260 responses and created codes at the level of each unit of meaning. Ensuring coders came from different social backgrounds with regards to kink, sexual orientation, race, and gender was helpful to increase the validity of coding decisions, by allowing coders to reflect on how their own identities may influence or shape their codes (i.e., the effect of their positionalities), especially when disagreements arose.

After this first round, both coders had over 90 separate codes. Both coders then collaboratively merged their codes into categories based on thematic similarity 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, changing the codes after each round when necessary to improve clarity and reliability.

After the third round, each code was analyzed independently by computing an unweighted 95% confidence interval for Cohen's Kappa. 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). Codes that were not reliable were coded again for all the data by both coders, discussed, and modified in each new round of coding. After the first two rounds, two new coders (one White/Persian, American, pansexual, kinky, cisgender woman and one White, American, queer, non-kinky, cisgender woman) replaced the original coders and continued coding with the codebook, continuing to make changes along the way. All 20 codes were established as reliable after 10 rounds of coding.

## Results

Participants reported a wide variety of sources of the origins of their kinky desires (see Table 2). The 20 codes were sorted by all four coders into five broad categories: *identity*, *nurture*, *negation*, *nature*, and *uncertainty*. The categories were not mutually exclusive. While the last category (*uncertainty*) represented people who answered they were uncertain of or unable to identify a source of the origins of their kink interests, the plurality (40.8%) of all responses fell exclusively into one of the first four categories, while 36.9% relied on two of the first four categories, and 11.9% utilized three of the first four. A handful of participants (1.9%) managed to use a response that included all of the first four categories.

Narrative excerpts from participants have been edited for grammar, spelling, and punctuation, while taking care not to alter the original meaning of the participant's response. Excerpts were selected because they were the most illustrative among those which were most representative of each code. However, representativeness was the primary criterion for inclusion.

### Category 1: Identity (72.7% of Responses)

Responses were considered as being in the *identity* category if they fell into at least one of four codes: *taste*, *subculture*, and *lifestyle* (kink as a positively enjoyed personal taste, subculture, style, or way of life); *personality* (pointing to specific personality traits); *role exploration* (discussing the opportunity to explore identity roles); or *generic identity* (discussing kink as an identity in general).

Some participants discussed kink as part of a larger cultural identity or way of life, such as one White homoflexible genderqueer participant from New Zealand, who wrote, "I have put thought into it. I think it's the perversity of it. I love counter culture, and exploring my own sexuality as I want to . . ." This participant frames their kink identity as part of their larger counter-cultural identity, while for other participants, their kinky desires were explicitly drawn in comparison to other sexual orientation identities. For example, a pansexual, cisgender woman from the United Kingdom wrote, "In my humble opinion, being kinky is an orientation similar to being gay, bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, demisexual, or asexual. I feel I am kinky in the same way that I know that I'm bisexual and I love steak."

For other participants, the origins of their kinky desires were seen as a natural extension of personality traits such as adventurousness and openness to new experiences. For example, a heterosexual, cisgender man from the USA explained,

I know I'm a very adventurist type of person; I like travel to foreign countries, SCUBA dive, camping, hiking, boat riding and fishing as far away from civilization as possible, "going where no man has gone before" type stuff. I have a lust for, a love for adventure, knowledge and experiencing new and unusual things.

This participant framed the origins of his kink interest in his personality trait of adventurousness, which he framed as a core part of his identity. Similarly, a heteroflexible, cisgender woman from the USA framed her interest in kink as connected to a personality oriented toward discovery and curiosity. She

Table 2. Coding results.

Code	N	%
<b>Identity</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>72.7</b>
Taste, Subculture, and Lifestyle	136	52.3
Personality	50	19.2
Role Exploration	48	18.5
Generic Identity	35	13.5
<b>Nurture</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>38.1</b>
Parenting/Upbringing	56	21.5
Trauma	49	18.8
Generic Nurture	19	7.3
Media	19	7.3
Childhood Play	6	2.3
<b>Negation</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>24.6</b>
Unclassifiable	30	11.5
Not Nurture	20	7.7
Critique of the Definition of Kinky	8	3.1
Generic Negation	7	2.7
Universal	7	2.7
Not Nature	2	0.8
Generic Multiple Origins	1	.04
<b>Nature</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>22.7</b>
Generic Nature	28	10.8
Genetics	21	8.1
Neurochemistry	20	7.7
<b>Unsure</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>10.4</b>

speculated, "[I] could be [kinky] because I am an insatiable learner and I'm curious about everything and open to most things, especially in the interest of either helping others or self-discovery."

While many participants framed their kinks as being natural extensions of personality traits or roles in their everyday lives, some understood kink as a way to take a break, escape, or balance the stress of the roles they embody in their everyday lives (e.g., as a way to cope with role strain). For example, a heteroflexible, cisgender woman who was an immigrant from New Zealand to the United States explained,

From what I've determined, primarily my submissive side likes letting go of control. The more pressure, stress and high demands at work, the more I enjoy not making decisions in my personal life. The more I enjoy being objectified and used. The less stress there is, the more my Dominant side seems to rear up as it were.

Other participants expressed similar ideas about finding a way to balance and explore the social roles they occupy. For instance, a heterosexual, cisgender White man from the United States narrated,

I think that I'm a dom because I'm a very quiet and unassertive person in my day to day life, and being . . . able [to] completely control another person would be the polar opposite of that.

Participants such as this man interpreted their kink desires as originating in a desire for role experimentation or exploration, in order to use kink to express elements of themselves not expressed in their daily lives.

Many participants in this response category described the origins of their kink desires as simply being intrinsic to their identities rather than pointing to particular personality traits, suggesting their kink-oriented desires as natural extensions of their core self. These responses in particular were sometimes also coded as "Uncertainty" (see category 5 below). For example, a pansexual, cisgender woman from the USA responded, "Not much thought has gone into why I'm kinky. I just like to accept myself for who I am and be happy with it." Similarly,

a bisexual, cisgender White woman from the United Kingdom responded, “I just am, I’ve discovered and explored a lot of kinks, so I know the ones that I am into I enjoy.”

### **Category 2: Nurture (38.1% of Responses)**

Responses in the *nurture* category fell into at least one of five codes: *parenting/upbringing* (kinky desires originating in a parenting or child-rearing experience they had as a child), *trauma* (identifying an explicitly negative or traumatic experience or set of experiences), *generic nurture* (discussing experiences, extrinsic or environmental factors, or “nurture” in general), *media* (films, television shows, music, books, art, and other cultural products), or *childhood play* (games and interactive play experiences as a child). Responses in this category usually referenced a specific past event or series of events that the participant interpreted as the origin of their interest in kink. In contrast to identity narratives, which often stressed the idea of “this is just who I am,” nurture narratives pointed to an external source of influence.

References to parenting were typically general, rather than pointing to specific parenting experiences. For example, one bisexual, cisgender, Native/Caucasian man stated, “I figured it’s all about how I was raised and things that happened to me while I was young. Never gave it much consideration.” However, some participants noted more specific elements of their upbringing, often focusing on discipline. For instance, some participants pointed to parents being too harsh or too lenient as potential sources of their kink interests, such as one bisexual, cisgender, Irish woman from Ireland who speculated, “I suppose if I had to say something, I like having an authority figure because my parents were always too lenient.” Conversely, one heterosexual female from England narrated, “I think I am a people-pleaser because of my upbringing. I was raised to do as I was told or I would be punished, so I have always tried to be good.”

Some participants (<19%) understood their interest in kink as originating in a traumatic event. Most of these participants did not go into detail regarding the nature of their trauma. Most, though not all, who pointed to a traumatic event explained that kink was an empowering way to cope with that event. In other words, they often saw it as part of pursuing a healing process from their trauma. For example, a bisexual, cisgender woman who was a British immigrant to Canada explained, “Yep, I’ve given it a lot of thought. I am certain that I am trying to relive childhood trauma (specifically sexual and emotional abuse), but with a sense of mastery.”

Responses that discussed trauma also often emphasized empowerment and consent present in kink, allowing them deeper levels of intimate trust with a partner. In another example, a heterosexual, cisgender woman from New Zealand explained,

I know I enjoy being a sub because I have all the power. It might not look like it but at any time we can say our safe word and everything stops. I came from an abusive relationship so it feels good to be taking my power back in this way so to speak. I feel glad to have met so many wonderful people who are into strange and wonderful things!

Other participants talked about trauma that did not involve severe abuse, but instead discussed trauma more broadly, such as one participant who did not provide demographic information who stated, “I was starved for emotional intimacy as a kid with too many responsibilities. I recovered by learning power exchanging intimacy with others. I want to know people inside and out. Where I lacked earlier, I make up for now.”

Some participants referenced “nurture” or “experiences” or “society,” as a broad, nonspecific category without providing much detail. For example, one bicurious, cisgender White woman from the USA stated, “. . . I also think that the way I was raised in society plays a role in why I like what I like.” Similarly, a cisgender heterosexual White man from the USA said, “I think it may have something to do with a number of innocent experiences I had when I was young.”

References to media exposure as the origin of a person’s kink interests focused on both sexually explicit media, such as pornography, as well as non-sexually explicit media. For instance, an unsure/questioning, cisgender, White man from South Africa simply responded “porn sites” as the origin of his kink interests. In contrast, a heterosexual, cisgender, Qualipu Mikmak man from Canada wrote,

I blame a misspent youth on comic books. A lot of comics contain kinky themes; mind control on heroines and kidnap victims, bondage themes (Wonder Woman gets tied up all the time) and of course, the women are always super attractive. I think reading large quantities of comics really introduced me to the ideas I find most appealing.

Similarly, an agender, bisexual participant from the United States said, “I joke around and say it probably has to do with me watching so much sci-fi as a kid . . .”

Rather than relying on outside media, some participants talked about discovering their interests through playing out their own stories in the context of childhood play. For example, a heteroflexible, cisgender, Canadian man said, “At a very young age playing cowboys and Indians, I was always up for being the one tied up outside by the Indians.” A gay, cisgender, White man from the United States similarly said, “I know my kinks stem for my childhood (around 10 years old) when my friends played the escape games.”

### **Category 3: Negation (24.6% of the Responses)**

Responses were considered as being in the *negation* category if they fell into at least one of seven codes: *unclassifiable* (the origins of kinky desires being unknowable, or not valuable to know), *not nurture* (rejecting, questioning, or expressing doubt that their kinky desires were caused by an extrinsic factor), *critique of the definition of kinky* (criticism over how the word “kinky” is meant to be understood or interpreted), *generic negation* (rejecting, questioning, or expressing doubt over ideas in general), *universal* (expressing a belief that all humans are kinky), *not nature* (rejecting, questioning, or expressing doubt that their kinky desires were caused by a biological factor), or *generic multiple origins* (generally pointing to “multiple” sources without identifying what those sources are). All the responses in this category featured an explicit rejection,

questioning, or expression of doubt over an idea, assumption, or narrative about the origins of their kinky desires.

For example, some participants framed the origins of their kinky desires as not coming from genetics or heredity, such as a pansexual cisgender White woman from the United States who rejected a genetic explanation by saying, “I find it interesting that I am kinky. I have no idea where I got it from. I don’t know about my father but I’ve spoken to my mother and sister enough to know that they are both very vanilla, so I’m not sure where it came from.”

Many more explicitly rejected a nurture narrative, such as one heterosexual cisgender White woman from Australia who stated, “To be honest I haven’t really thought about it, I’ve always known I was a little different in all aspects of my life, I’ve had no trauma or abuse to lead me down this path, it’s just who I am.” Likewise, a bisexual cisgender White woman from South Africa wrote, “. . . nothing ever happened in my life to make me like this. I just know that I am and have accepted that this is who I am and these are my needs and wants.”

Other participants whose responses fell into the *negation* category saw kink as something that was mysterious and unclassifiable. These participants typically emphasized not thinking about kink and instead mindfully enjoying kink experiences without evaluating them. For example, a heterosexual, cisgender woman from Canada wrote,

For all the time I’ve put in to trying to figure out the how and the why, I’ve realized that some things have no explanation and are better being experienced and enjoyed for that simplistic experience. Sometimes it’s harder to recognize that there isn’t an explanation than it is to search for one.

Some participants whose responses fell into the *negation* category suggested kink, rather than being a minority group, may serve as a universal aspect of all human experience. For example, a heteroflexible, cisgender woman from the USA suggested, “Perhaps kink is actually what is truly normal, and those who close their minds to it are only limiting themselves or denying the full potential of their sexuality.” Similarly, a heteroflexible, cisgender man from the USA proposed, “I think EVERYONE is kinky. Normal is just a word we use to describe people we don’t know very well.” Others speculated that while kink is universal, social pressures may prevent people from expressing their kinky desires, sometimes even treating vanilla sexuality as evidence of pathology, such as one participant, a pansexual cisgender man, who was a Cuban immigrant to the United States who wrote,

Kink is defined as ‘non-traditional sexuality.’ Traditional sexuality is the result of societal and religious pressure to control human sexual expression. Dr. Kinsey said that ‘the only unnatural sex act is that which is impossible to do.’ Without the societal and religious pressures most people would engage in ‘non-traditional sexuality.’ I’m healthy and people that only engage in ‘traditional sexuality’ suffer from repression.

Lastly, a small number of responses in this category objected to the use of the word “kink” in the question, such as one participant, a heterosexual from the United States who did not provide other demographic information, who, rather than describing the origins of their kink interests, explained their perspective that “BD/SM isn’t a Kink, they are practices, and

are separate from sexual kink activities.” This response may have indicated some degree of frustration with the researchers not explicitly defining “kink” for participants, as this participant noted criticisms of the definition of kinky in several questions throughout the survey.

#### Category 4: Nature (22.7% of Responses)

Responses were coded into the *nature* category if they fell into at least one of three codes: *generic nature* (referring generally to “nature,” “biology,” or being “born this way”), *genetics* (pointing to specific genes or genes in general), or *neurochemistry* (pointing to specific neurotransmitters or hormones, or neurochemistry in general). Responses that fell into this category relied on the language of biology to understand and articulate the origin of kink desire. Just as the nature vs. nurture debate regarding the origins of same-sex attraction relied on “born this way” narratives as an explanation rooted in biology (Morandini et al., 2017), so too do we see similar narratives among kinky people. Importantly, as with other response categories, these stories were not mutually exclusive with categories like *identity*.

Many participants identified genetics as the origin of their kink interests as a result of the relationship they saw between their biological parents. For example, a queer, pansexual, Chinese immigrant to Canada narrated, “I think a part of it may be genetic as I’m fairly sure my parents are unknowingly in a D/s [dominant/submissive] relationship with my mom as the Dom . . .” An agender bisexual participant from the United States similarly stated, “I think it’s at least somewhat genetic. I have other relatives who are also kinky.” Other participants pointed to genetics without referencing their parents, such as a heterosexual, cisgender, White man from the United States, who wrote, “If there is such a thing as the ‘kink gene,’ then I have it. It would be hard to explain any other way.”

Some participants discussed the role of neurochemistry and the biological impact of some forms of kink as central to their desires. In these instances, the origins of kink desire are linked to the nature of particular kink activities and their impact on neurochemistry. Participants frequently pointed to neurotransmitters like adrenaline and endorphins to explain why they enjoyed the kink behaviors they engaged in. For example, a heterosexual, cisgender, White man from the United States said, “The endorphin rush from pain is invigorating. It’s cathartic and a temporary escape from the world.” Similarly, a heterosexual, cisgender woman from South Africa explained,

Since most of my kinks are sensation related, even fear is for the adrenaline rush, which I classify as a sensation. I am sensation-seeking and I just have a higher tolerance for sensations. When doing electrical play, it has to be turned up to where some people experience it as painful before I even feel it. The same with impact, I’ll feel something as pressure that someone else experiences as pain.

Some participants understood their interest in kink as a biological way to cope with physical ailments. For example, a heterosexual, cisgender American woman explained how she used kink to cope with her pain disorder:

The endorphins that are released when I'm playing help both my chronic pain and my stress levels. I love playing with the violet wand because the static charge seems to calm my pain levels for several hours after we stop. I also love fire play for the same reason.

Some of the responses in this category simply used the word "nature" itself to describe the origins of their interests. For instance, a heterosexual, cisgender American man stated, "I'm in the nature camp. I think I was born kinky, and it just took a combination of circumstances for me to be able to fully embrace my kinky nature."

### Category 5: Uncertainty (10.4% of Responses)

Responses were coded as *uncertainty* if they indicated they were uncertain about where their kink interests came from, without pointing to or speculating about a specific cause (such as responses coded in *identity*, *nurture*, or *nature*). However, many of these responses were also coded into *negation* when their expression of not knowing a cause was accompanied by questioning the importance of knowing a cause in the first place. These responses tended to be short in comparison to the other responses.

For some participants, their uncertainty was the result of having never considered the origins of their kink interests before. For example, a bisexual, White male from the United States answered, "Not really thought on it," while a bisexual, transgender White woman from the UK similarly wrote, "Never gave it much thought and doubt I ever will." While it is possible that these responses may be indicative of a more general attitude some of these participants take toward questions about explanations and origins of other aspects of their lives, it is impossible to determine based on the data available.

For other participants, their uncertainty was the result of failing to come up with an answer, even after what was perceived as a substantial amount of reflection. For instance, a lesbian, cisgender, White woman from Norway said, "I have thought about it, but I have absolutely no idea," while a questioning/unsure, cisgender, Hispanic woman from the United States said, "I have thought about it a lot but I have no idea."

### Exploratory Demographic Analyses

Exploratory statistical analyses were also conducted to determine if there was evidence of a relationship between each demographic variable (age, income, disability status, race, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, country of residence, and whether or not the person answered "yes" to the question, "Do you consider yourself involved in any kinky groups, munches, clubs, or events?") and each coding category. For all categorical demographic variables, Phi coefficients were computed between identification with each demographic category (e.g., disabled, cisgender man, cisgender woman, heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.) and each parent coding category (i.e., *identity*, *nurture*, *negation*, *nature*, and *uncertainty*). A Phi coefficient is a measure of the strength and direction of the relationship between two dichotomous variables and carries a similar interpretation to a bivariate correlation. For income (an interval variable), point-biserial

correlations was computed to assess the strength and direction of any relationship with each parent coding category. Statistically significant exploratory results are presented in Table 3.

In order to assess if these origins stories were associated with specific BDSM power roles (e.g., Dominant, submissive, switch, etc.), exploratory measures of association were also computed. Specifically, Phi coefficients were computed to test for any relationships between these origin story categories, and (based on another question in the survey) having 1) dominant fantasies, 2) submissive fantasies, 3) fantasies involving switching, and 4) non-power related fantasies. No statistically significant results were found, with effect sizes hovering near 0.

These exploratory demographic analyses, while revealing some patterns in the data, demonstrated effect sizes typically considered to be "small" or, in the case of the strongest association discovered (that gay men are more likely to respond with an *unknown* answer), roughly halfway between "small" and "medium" (Kim, 2017). As a result, we did not interpret there to be especially meaningful differences in the use of particular discourses about origins of kink based on demographics. Because many tests were conducted, and there were no *a priori* hypotheses, these exploratory demographic analyses should be interpreted with caution. Because multiple comparisons were made, some of these relationships may represent false positives, so replication is needed before interpreting these results with confidence.

### Discussion

Since the dawn of the scientific study of sexuality, kinky sexual desires have often been framed as forms of psychopathology (e.g., Krafft-Ebing, 1886 [1959]). As other forms of sexual diversity such as homosexuality eventually became declassified as forms of psychopathology, kink and sexual fetishism have also gradually become considered legitimate forms of diverse sexual expression (e.g., Lin, 2017; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013), and cultural visibility of kink has increased dramatically in the twenty-first century (e.g., James, 2012). While research has documented the nature and meaning of kink and sexual fetishism for its practitioners, virtually no research has examined the way that kinky individuals understand the origins of their desires.

**Table 3.** Significant associations between demographic variables and parent codes.

Parent Code	Demographic Variable	$\phi$
Identity	Cisgender Women	.139**
	Cisgender Men	-.147**
	Gay Men	-.187**
Nurture	Mentally and/or Physically Disabled	.198***
	Pansexual	-.134*
	Involved in Kink Community	-.135*
Negation	Cisgender Women	.126*
	Heteroflexible	.143*
	Genderfluid	-.141*
	Questioning/Unsure of Sexual Orientation	-.126*
Nature	Cisgender Women	.167**
	Mentally Disabled	.147**
Uncertainty	Gay Men	.216***

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The purpose of our study was to identify patterns of meaning-making about origins in the narratives of users of a popular kink-oriented social networking site. Our analysis revealed that individuals call upon five types of responses when asked to explain their kink desires. The most common responses (72.7%) appealed to the centrality of identity and the origins of kink as intrinsic to one's personality, cultural identity, personal tastes, and a form of role exploration or experimentation. The dominance of this mode of discourse reveals the extent to which individuals with kinky sexual desires typically see themselves as inhabiting a distinct social and personal identity, and their kink desires are framed as intrinsic to one's sense of identity.

Modes of discourse that emphasized biology and "nature" (22.7%) also revealed kinky individuals' interpretations of their desires as intrinsic or essential to their being, and these modes mirrored rhetoric common in sexual minority communities that emphasize a "born this way" narrative of sexual desire (Morandini et al., 2017). These modes of discourse correspond to what Yost and Hunter (2012) labeled *essentialist* narratives about the origins of kink desire. Individuals who construct these narratives call upon master narratives of sexuality that de-emphasize individual agency or experience as drivers of sexual desire or identity. By contrast, modes of discourse that emphasize extrinsic factors such as experience (38.1%) and those that challenged the meaning or "abnormality" of kink fall within a more constructionist framework in which agency is central.

It is critical to note that these discourses do not emerge fully formed from participants' minds, nor are they constructed in a vacuum. Sexual stories (see Plummer, 2010), like all narratives, emerge, in part, from the sociocultural contexts in which people live, as well as people's relationships to those stories. As many participants in our studies have lived through wide-ranging cultural debates about the origins of lesbian, gay, and bisexual desires, it is not surprising that some of their discourses mirror some of these debates, such as participants who rely on "born this way" discourses to account for the origins of their kink interests.

The proliferation of all these modes of discourse reveals the extent to which kinky individuals engage with multiple, sometimes competing narratives about the origins of their desires. However, unlike Yost and Hunter (2012), we did not find evidence of *socialized essentialism*, in which participants explain the origins of their kink interests as originally coming from external sources but ultimately becoming internalized into an essential sense of self. This may be because Yost and Hunter (2012) asked a slightly different question than in the present study. Yost and Hunter (2012) asked about "what first attracted [the participant] to BDSM," which may have prompted stories of *when* kink interests were first identified (which may have involved external influences).

Because our participants invoke a similar discourse to other sexual minorities, their narratives may support the notion that kink may constitute a parameter of sexual orientation, as has been suggested in previous research (see Better & Simula, 2015; Simula, 2014; Van Anders, 2015). We did not, however, ask participants directly whether they considered their kink desire an indicator of underlying sexual orientation. Future studies

should consider explicitly asking this question to gain a better understanding of the relationship between how kinky people see their interests and the concept of sexual orientation.

It is important to note that the responses provided by participants illuminate how people construct the stories of the origins of their kink interests, which inherently represents "narrative truth" rather than "historical truth" (Spence, 1984). Narrative accounts of origins represent stories individuals construct to make meaning of experience, and they call upon available sexual stories to construct coherence (Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Plummer, 1995). Analysis of narrative data reveals this meaning-making process, rather than some decidedly "accurate" account of events or causes. Narratives are always positioned for an audience (e.g., Bamberg, 2004), and so it is important to consider the ways in which the stories provided were constructed by participants to communicate to the scientific community.

The moderate frequency of *negation* responses (24.6%) indicates that for some kinky people, the academic quest to understand the origins of kink interests has been misguided and/or unimportant. The implication of this finding for future studies will depend upon the purposes of those future studies. If the goal of future studies is to actually determine the origins of participants' interest in kink, this finding suggests that researchers should explicitly tell participants why they are interested in the origins of kink interests to help contextualize the purpose of the study. This was not a practice we engaged in but might have reduced the number of *negation* responses. However, if the purpose of future studies is to understand how people react when they are asked about the origins of their kink interests, the proliferation of negation responses also signals the way in which some kinky people counter normativity by challenging the quest for origins. That is, many appear to frame kinky desires as a healthy and normal part of sexuality, and they challenge the very idea that it is important to identify the origins of such desire. In future studies seeking to document and evaluate these processes, explicitly telling participants the purpose of the study may not be a benefit. We view this meaning-making process as a form of challenge to normativity itself for kinky individuals. That is, a negation response suggests that individuals have possibly internalized a counter-narrative of kink as normal and healthy, in contrast to the historic master narrative of pathology (Hammack et al., 2019; Hughes & Hammack, 2019).

### **Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research**

Our study had several limitations. While we gathered narrative data from a large number of participants from a variety of demographic backgrounds, as a qualitative study concerned with understanding, description, and meaning-making, our study has limited generalizability beyond our sample. This study was additionally limited by the fact that, although there was a significant international presence in the data, there were often not enough participants from each country individually to examine differences on the basis of nationality. Our participants represented a nonprobability sample of kinky people who participate in a single major social networking site that predominantly caters to monosexual heterosexual and

plurisexual (i.e., bisexual, pansexual) people over monosexual gay and lesbian people. Thus, our findings may not generalize to the broader population of kinky people. Similarly, while our sample did have a diverse representation of income, no participant explicitly talked about social class, so any conclusions we might draw about social class would be purely speculative, and no significant effect sizes were found relating social class to origins story type.

Because the study relied on written responses to an open-ended question, it likely oversampled people who were eloquent, verbose, or patient, who had the motivation and willingness to sit at a computer and provide narrative data. Because the study was only conducted in English, there are many other experiences that are likely missed from non-Anglophones. Similarly, the overwhelmingly White nature of the sample, while not uncommon in research on kink (Sheff & Hammers, 2011) precludes the ability to specifically consider issues of racial and ethnic intersectionality among people who identify as kinky, as White people rarely discuss Whiteness unprompted. Future studies may wish to pursue a strategy of deliberately oversampling people of color, such as recruiting via ONYX, a BDSM organization for men of color (ONYX, 2019). It would also be beneficial to sample for intersectionality beyond race, to include respondents from a diversity of class, ability, and other intersections of identities.

This study was also limited in that its participants were largely drawn from a single website. The experiences of kinky people on other websites or those who do not participate in online communities may differ from those in our study, and future research may need to consider these more difficult-to-reach populations. Additionally, by leaving the definition of “kinky” open to participants, it is difficult to determine with a fine degree of precision what specific kink interests people held, their intensity, or how these different interests could be associated with specific types of origin narratives.

It is also noteworthy that many of our respondents challenged the premise of the study to identify origins of kink desire, at times challenging the notion that a quest for origins is appropriate, given that it may implicitly suggest a “problem” to be explained. Here again we see a parallel to historic research on homosexuality, which has gradually emerged in this century away from a concern with origins that consumed the field in the prior century toward the documentation of experience (e.g., Herek, 2010). Thinking about sexual science paradigmatically, the concern with origins implicitly links to a pathology paradigm which has traditionally denigrated all non-normative forms of sexuality, including homosexuality, polyamory, asexuality, and kink.

Although we accept this premise and recognize its legitimacy, we contend that a study of meaning-making about origins is valuable, both on scientific and social grounds. On scientific grounds, we view the study of origin narratives as part of the broader scientific study of sexual identity development. Our narrative theoretical approach posits that individuals are socialized in a context of storytelling about sexuality (e.g., Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Plummer, 1995) and that to understand their development, we must interrogate their appropriation and

repudiation of particular story content – especially story content that may be associated with internalized stigma and other negative psychological outcomes. All stories have beginnings, so understanding how people see the beginnings of their stories can help us to better understanding how these stories are constructed. On social grounds, we view the study of origin narratives as important to give voice to kinky people and to illustrate the way in which they challenge potentially pathologizing discourses in the course of their development. Thus, we believe one can be critical of the premises of studies of origins, recognizing the historic basis of such questions in a pathologizing paradigm, while reclaiming such an endeavor as scientifically necessary and socially valuable for kinky people and other sexual minorities.

Despite its limitations, our study offers a novel contribution to the literature by extending Yost and Hunter’s (2012) analysis of kinky people’s understanding of the origins of their desires. Despite the presence of cultural narratives that kink is rooted in trauma, our study found that less than 20% of participants identified with that narrative, even though trauma was fairly broadly construed in our coding scheme (i.e., not limited only to childhood sexual trauma or abuse). This aligns with previous literature finding similar rates of trauma among kink-oriented and general populations (see De Neef et al., 2019). Participant origin stories typically reflected the idea of kink as an identity and often pointed to nature and nurture narratives, such as being “born this way” to make sense of the origins of kinky desires. These modes of discourse echo accounts provided by other sexual minorities such as gay and lesbian people (e.g., Morandini et al., 2017). Some narratives also pointed to the idea of kink as a taste or a lifestyle identity. The existence of both discourses could potentially be interpreted as evidence suggesting that kinky sexual desire might be appropriately described as both a dimension of sexual orientation within the umbrella of sexual diversity, and as a form of recreation or “serious leisure” as suggested by previous research (e.g., Newmahr, 2010; Sprott & Williams, 2019). However, additional modeling with very large samples will be needed to better account for and explore this question, and our dataset only speaks to providing evidence that individuals who are kinky make meaning of their kink interests informed by both sexual orientation and serious leisure interpretations.

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