Claiming Identity, Delineating Category: Understanding Narratives of Religioning and Kink

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ABSTRACT

Identity is an important focus for discourse in the contemporary world, used as an indicator of elements that are felt by an individual to be an important part of how they see and understand themselves. Self-identification commonly employs terms that can also be used to signify an analytic category, and the understanding that underlies these different uses is often neither wholly shared nor entirely distinct. Recognition of different use is thus potentially significant in research related to the groups, behaviours or concepts signified by such terms. This paper utilises concepts of religion(ing) and kink - both terms which can be, and are, used as claimed identities and as analytic categories - to reflect upon the porosity of such concepts when they are deployed in individual and academic narratives. Qualitative research into kink (understood as a marker of identity) is used to explore how personalised practices contribute to religioning processes (understood as a category label). This offers opportunities to consider how personalised practices contribute to the religioning processes of world- and/or meaning- and/or story-making, and also demonstrates the porosity of concepts like kink and non-kink, religious and non-religious, as they are constructed, maintained and/or disrupted within individual and academic narratives.

KEYWORDS

Kink, identity, authenticity, religioning, non-religion

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Introduction

> I'm a Pagan priest, a Pagan Shaman, a Pagan pervert, and the owner
> of a Pagan slave.
> I am firmly ensconced in a religion that claims sex is sacred and abuse
> is wrong, and I beat two out of three of my partners on a semi-regular
> basis.
> I am firmly spiritually ensconced in a religion that has tried hard,
> perhaps harder than any other..., to teach about human equality and
> walk that talk. I am also a person whose partner says that he is my
> slave, and I am his Owner.
> How does this work, without complete denial of everything that I believe
> in?
>
> (Kaldera, 2015, 117)

In the passage above Raven Kaldera, who has written extensively about the intersections of his Paganism and his kink, poses a (to him) rhetorical question about how his religious values can harmoniously coexist with other elements of his identity. The need to both ask and offer answers to such questions is connected with a desire to remove "personal and social distortions" (2015, 142) from views of kink practice. Such an objective viewpoint as that may not really be possible, but elements of it can be achieved: by recognising at least some of the personal and social elements that feed different understandings of apparently simple terms a richer understanding of complex human phenomena can be achieved. This article will contribute to such a process by identifying two particular ways in which the concept of religion is used and considering those distinct uses in the context of kink.

Like religion, kink is a multivalent term potentially denoting a diverse range of concepts, phenomena, artefacts, communities and behaviours. I therefore offer, as a useful starting point, this brief explanation of kink practice as:

> …a collection of activities that involve the conscious and consensual use
> of pain, perceptions about pain, sensation, emotion, restraint, power,
> perceptions about power or any combination of these, for psychological,
> emotional and sensory pleasure.

The two uses of the term religion I will examine are: 1) the deployment of the term as a label for or contributor to aspects of personal identity; and 2) the term's use as an indicator of a category or set into which people, objects and behaviours might be placed for analytic purposes. I will identify the impact that conflating distinct uses of the same term might have on research and, in doing so, demonstrate how the conscious use of religion (and associated terms) as a category label, can broaden understanding of the religious beyond the sharply bounded categories of an essentialist approach to enable greater understanding of the ambiguous and idiosyncratic practices of religioning.

'Religioning' as a category label

It is, or perhaps I mean it ought to be, a foundational principle of the study of religion that the area to be studied is not (and cannot be) identified, delineated or defined by spotting the presence of a single essential ingredient. Although the idea of an essence, universally present in all forms of religious activity and therefore rendering any activity, concept or process that possesses it as religion while simultaneously excluding all those that do not is tempting. It is also unhelpful in engaging with the complex realities of the religious. Defining our area of study cannot work like this because religion is not really anything but the 'creation of the scholar's study' (Smith, 1982, xi). This creation is achieved by conscious selection from the diverse possible phenomena that might be categorised as religious. The task is then one of 'redescription' within these carefully constructed academic categories (Hughes, 2015, xii), which allows the selected phenomena to be contextualised and analysed without accepting the perceived ideas of the actors as representative of anything other than their own understanding of what it is they do. In the process of expanding on his own processes of this kind, Jonathan Z. Smith cautions the scholar of religion to be always conscious of the selections being made. He critiques attempts to seek 'the 'that without which' religion would not be religion' (1982, 5) and so striving to define religion in a monothetic manner. In championing instead a polythetic taxonomy of religion, he speaks of different possible configurations of characteristics, any one of which is sufficient for inclusion as religious taxa, but with no single one constituting a unique and sufficient cause. My research suggests that one such characteristic is contribution to processes of world-, meaning- and/or story-making.

However, for most people who are not Religious Studies scholars, religion is presumed to have an essential component which transcends context, culture, change and challenge. Many people would likely agree that a satisfactory and universal definition of religion is not only possible, but that it is not even especially challenging to arrive at because we already intuitively know what it is (Nongbri, 2013). In the contemporary Western world such an intuitive 'recognition' of religion is based on understandings of the concept that owe a great deal to Protestant forms of Christianity. These are popularly presented as universal, ignoring the fact that the construction of 'religion' as synonymous with belief or faith happened in a time and place which is not *this* time and place (Asad, 1993). Presentations of religion in popular discourse create the impression that to own, accept or belong to a religion is to uncritically accept doctrines about both internal matters (like belief in deity) and external behaviours which reflect agreed moral values. In sum, 'religion is anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity' (Nongbri, 2013, 18).

I do not intend to rehash discussions of the many ways in which this is unhelpful; what is most relevant here is that, regardless of the reductive nature of this view of religion, it remains a highly accurate way of recognising popular use and understanding. The imprecisions of the term religion, as used in popular discourse, in no way prevent its use in, or utility for academic study, as long as conscious precision of the kind advocated by Smith is thoughtfully applied. To be so precise, and to carry out the kind of conscious construction

Smith describes, requires recognition of the multiple ways in which the term is used even when the users of it are not so reflexive. There are always multiple contributors to conceptual and linguistic constructions, among them participants in the research process. It is important to recognise where their constructions differ substantially from those of the researchers so that the reasons for such difference and their impact on the object of study can be examined.

In sculpting the concept of the religious for my own research I wished to understand it very broadly. I sought to avoid presenting religion as something either wholly interior or wholly transcendent, instead considering people as animate and relational beings, caught up in the dynamics of their immediate surroundings. As people move through their constantly changing worlds they draw from, and are conditioned by ecology, biology, psychology, culture, past happenings, possible futures and many forms and qualities of relationship. Making personal sense of all this is an active and continual process. Formalised religions and their associated packages of doctrine and practice are contributors to these processes for some. But, while it seems likely that everyone engages in some form of personal sense-making, not everyone utilises traditional or organised forms of religion to help them do so.

Consideration of the complex web of contributors reveals 'phenomena that are salient in everyday life… that exercise palpable power on and through the lives of practitioners' (Vásquez, 2011, 322). In other words, behaviours, objects, experiences and relationships that are encountered in everyday life have the same powerful potential to contribute to world-, meaning- and/or story-making as belief in deity or participation in formal ritual. Understanding religion as an element of human existence shaped to and by individual lives entails recognising it as a constant and fluid process of exploration and creation. This is better reflected by the active term "religioning" (Nye, 2000), which I use as the label for the analytic frame within which I examine kink phenomena: the switch from noun to verb signals a concern with the doing of religion, rather than with naming of religion as a thing with an essence to be talked about.

Religioning and Personal Identity

I use the term religioning to categorise the practices of my research participants whilst knowing that only seven out of the 44 considered the concept of religion to have anything to do with them. The remainder rejected the idea of religion in relation to their own lives with responses that ranged from indifference, to distaste, to outright hostility. In a world where an ordained and practising member of the Christian clergy can declare with apparent sincerity on national television that she is not religious,[1] I do not regard such reactions to a contentious term as a signal that a wholly different category is required. Instead it demonstrates that the concept of religion constructed and held by my research participants is substantially different to that which shapes

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[1] Pilgrimage: The Road to Santiago, 2018. Television. Directed by O'BRIEN, M.: BBC. Episode 1, aired 16 March

my analytic category. My use of religioning to label this is, in part, a signal of this difference, but the issue is not simply one of applying differing definitions to the same term. It includes a conflation built into common understanding of two distinct uses of the same term — one being use as a marker of identity and the other being use as a descriptor for a category into which phenomena might be placed for analysis.

Identity is as challenging a term as religion, but my use here is based on the discourse of my research participants. They used it to refer to things they considered to be deep, authentic elements of their individual selves and contributed to the expression of that self in the world. In selecting and claiming identity labels they chose terms they felt said something of great importance, not only about who they 'really' were but about how they understood that real self, locating it within the worlds they constructed and encountered and relating it to others. Different elements of identity were strands woven into an individual narrative that could directly impact such practical matters as clothing choices and personal relationships as well as more abstract ideas of selfhood (Haenfler, 2014, Wilkins, 2008, Winge, 2012). Identity construction could incorporate anything that was felt to contribute to the sense and expression of that authentic self, and this was constantly in flux as individuals encountered and responded to the world and others and had been encountered and responded to in their turn. The issue is further complicated by the ambivalent nature of many 'publicly available categories of identity' (Lawler, 2014, 7), as personal identity construction crosses over and combines such categories and applies idiosyncratic meanings to them. This prevents clear and unambiguous mapping of a given identity label onto particular ways of living, experiencing and/or self-understanding. However, the challenges involved in speaking meaningfully about identity from a scholarly perspective do not undermine the strength with which claims of identity may be made and the significance that is attributed to them by the claimer.

The contemporary cultural context for my participants is one of radical individualism which views individuals as autonomous, unitary selves, wholly and solely responsible for themselves and their happiness. Self-fulfilment and/or 'authentic' self-expression seem among the highest virtues. Given this, it is hardly surprising that terms which can be understood as entailing some form of identity marker, like religion, are subject to hostility when they appear to be imposed from the outside. The value placed on personal choice contributes to rejections of institutional religion, with doctrine seen as interfering with personal autonomy. Ideas of personal development and fulfilment retain great importance, and practices, attitudes and values that contribute to this process share that importance. In unpacking specific contributions to processes of identity construction, such as kink, it is possible to examine how a single term functions as a denominator of both identity and category, while discussion around authenticity in relation to identity claims offers potential insights into the conflation of these two uses.

Researching Kink

Previous research into kink has recognised the 'seriousness and significance' its practitioners may ascribe it in their lives (Lindemann, 2012, 135) and explored narratives of kink as therapeutic or healing (Henkin, 2013, Lindemann, 2011), as an escape from the burden of selfhood (Baumeister, 1988) and as creative experiments to address existential anxieties (Langdridge, 2005). These concerns potentially blur into narratives of personal religioning, but there is also limited recognition that individuals might explicitly place their practice 'within a spiritual or mystical framework' (Taylor and Ussher, 2001, 305), although such terms are generally used uncritically and/or rely on Christianised understandings. Whatever academic terminology is chosen the potential of kink to create profound and transformative experiences and to contribute to discovering ways to live and be in the world is well recognised within the community (Kaldera, 2006, Easton & Hardy, 2004, Harrington, 2010), although these experiences are used and understood in idiosyncratic ways. My research focussed on whether religioning, used as an analytic category, can offer helpful insight into the meaning and value of kink practice for practitioners.

To examine this, I carried out 46 qualitative semi-structured interviews with 44 self-identified practitioners of kink. For clarity, I reiterate here the previously offered summary of kink in the context of my research as a collection of activities that involve the consensual and conscious use of pain, perceptions about pain, sensation, emotion, restraint, power, perceptions about power or any combination thereof, for psychological, emotional and sensory pleasure. An exhaustive list of activities that fall into this is not really possible; however, specific examples from my research include commonly practiced staples like rope bondage, spanking and flogging as well as more 'edgy' things like electro-play, cutting and enemas.

To help ensure anonymity I did not collect demographic data but I can make some general observations about my pool of participants: The age range was broad, spanning early twenties to mid-seventies. The number of years of active practice also varied greatly, from less than two to more than fifty years. Beyond the obvious fact that younger participants could not yet have achieved a fifty-year play history, there was no clear connection between age and length of involvement in kink. Most participants did not refer to their gender identity, but there were four exceptions to this - two queer, one genderfluid and one intersex individual. Three participants described themselves explicitly as polyamorous, and eighteen referred to play relationships with multiple partners without using that term. Committed and primary relationships appeared to be heterosexual for all participants, but the complexities of different forms of kink and kink relationship means that conclusions about sexual identity or orientation should not be drawn from this. Most participants lived in the UK, although not in the same geographical area. I also spoke with people living in the US, Europe, and Asia. Not all of my research participants were British nationals, nor were all resident in their countries of origin.

My requirements for participation in the research were only that they had some real-world experience of doing kink, in whatever form that took for them, and that their kink was important to them. The concepts entailed in this requirement were unpacked and explored through reciprocal and dialogic research conversations covering a range of areas associated with kink and religion. The same themes were explored in each conversation, with core questions worded in the same way but the order of these (except for the first and last questions) and the ways they were introduced was shaped by the flow of the conversation.

Kink Identity and Performance

The Kink Scene (is comprised of diverse and overlapping sub-groups of people who self-identify as interested in behaviours outside the norms of bodily behaviour and inter-personal interactions espoused by the mainstream of society (Sheff and Hammers, 2011). It comes into being through the flow of debate and discussion, and the community recognises itself 'through a shared, yet contested, language' (Weiss, 2011, vii) in which different terms may be used interchangeably or with overlapping meanings in the context of varied relationships, practices and roles. There is thus no essence of kink agreed upon by my participants; the term rather denotes a complex, diverse and polythetic taxonomy of behaviours, known individually as kinks, from which each kinky individual identifies a portfolio of interests. These selections give finer detail to the individual's identity and enable them to find others who share their specific interests. Kink is thus able to function both as an identity label — most commonly as an umbrella identity signalling a need for more specific discussion before any kink activity occurs — and as a descriptive title for a broad category of phenomena. It may seem that the distinction between these uses is commonly elided in popular discourse within the Scene, but it is perhaps more accurate to say that there is an assumption both aspects are always present and/or that the presence of one aspect necessitates the other. This is evident in the uses to which the term is put, and the personal narratives built upon it. However, the possibility of a claimed kink identity being judged to be inauthentic by other kinksters strongly suggests a recognition (albeit an unarticulated one) that the two usages of the term can exist independently.

For my research participants, claiming a kink identity was strongly connected with actual engagement in kink activity. The performing of their personal kinks (play) gives rise to an initial identity label and continued practice is the means through which the related self-understanding is shaped, refined and re-shaped. This process enables the selection of a preferred (although changeable) over-arching label for a specific kink identity; it also provides an opportunity to demonstrate the potential impact a failure to recognise the category/identity distinction might have on research by comparing the most commonly chosen academic labels with those chosen by practitioners. Studies of kink commonly use three broad categories drawn from preferred roles taken during play: tops, bottoms and switches. Put simply, a top is the person using the flogger while the bottom is the person being flogged; people who always take the same role would be within these categories, and people

who change roles would be classed as switches. Using these to group my participants I could be said to have interviewed eighteen tops, eleven bottoms and fifteen switches. However, these terms are uncommon as personal choices and using their preferred terms reveals instead that I interviewed four tops, eight switches, one switch with no interest in power exchange, one collared switch, twelve Doms/Dommes, eight submissives, two slaves, one sadist, one sadomasochist, one fetish practitioner, one primal, one Daddy, one TV sub, and two people who were undecided or unsure. Everyone, including those who self-identified as undecided, did have a label to deploy on occasions when it might be required but almost all qualified that choice in some way and some shared it together with an explicit dislike of accepting any label as adequate to describe their identity. I shall return to this issue later, but it should be noted here that kink identity is performed and that the self-understanding constructed through such performance may be inadequately captured, or even distorted, by a lack of reflection on the label chosen to categorise behaviour.

Kink and Religion, Kink Religioning

At the end of each research conversation I asked participants explicitly what the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' meant to them, and whether they identified with either or both. Eleven people identified with both terms; fourteen identified in some degree with spirituality, although differing understandings of the term, and different degrees of certainty as to its application were present. Four people rejected the term religion while also identifying with named traditions commonly placed within that category. Nineteen people did not connect either term with themselves. No one identified as religious without also considering themselves spiritual, while four among those who identified with both terms explicitly rejected the idea of any significant difference between the two. Those who connected in some way with one or both concepts related that aspect of themselves to their kink in different ways: my research thus included people who practise their kink as an aspect of a named tradition commonly considered a religion (typically Paganism) - all these people also rejected the term religion/religious as applied to them; people who practise a religion and who practise kink but regard the two as distinct strands of their identity; people who find kink meaningful or transformative but do not connect it with religiosity; and people who practise something explicitly labelled 'spiritual kink'.

What I found striking was not the distinctions being made but how much the people holding these disparate views appeared to have in common when they spoke of the value, meaning, non-physical elements and overall gestalt importance of their kink. While I could have separated my pool of participants into different categories based on their chosen way to define and combine (or separate) kink and religion, I chose not to do so. I focussed instead on religioning as a category of behaviour offering a means of understanding how any phenomena that is described as greater, or other, than the sum of its parts (a gestalt) can contribute to an individual's personal processes of world-, meaning- and/or story-making. Regardless of personal understanding and identification with the term religion all my participants spoke of their kink

experiences in comparable terms, communicating this sense of it as gestalt - carrying an emergent sense of specialness created through powerful experience and subsequent reflection without requiring a transcendent Other, a particular worldview or an established cultural tradition to provide that lustre. This shared valuing allows me to say that kink can function within individual lives as other forms of religioning do and to examine kink practice within that category without also making the identity claim that 'kink is a religion' or imposing a religious identity onto my research participants.

My research conversations included accounts of experiences resulting from kink practice and ways these experiences were used by the experiencer, and these inform my framing of kink practice as religioning. The point at which kink practice becomes gestalt is also the point at which it becomes more likely to be a significant contributor to personal identity, and thus the point at which the distinction between identity marker and category label begins to really matter. A conflation of the two not only shapes responses to research questions and analysis of those responses, it also potentially shapes the research questions themselves. It determines who can and cannot participate in the research and even who might wish to do so. In saying that kink can be understood as a religioning process I do not simultaneously say that my research participants have a religious identity. Most do not, but it does not thereby follow that none have had experiences, engaged in activities or ascribed meaning to their practice in ways which can be best understood within the broad category of the religious. While I could have restricted my research to kinky people who also claimed a religious identity this would have created boundaries between experiences which were used and valued in the same ways; I judged a category of kink religioning to be better analytic reflection of the lived realities being described.

Existing Constructions

Using my participants understandings of and reactions to the term religion I suggest that much of the antagonism expressed towards it arises from understandings of 'religion-as-a-thing' (Nye, 2000, 466) with the concomitant expectation that to be religious is to resonate, on some level, with the essential nature of such a thing — the conflation of category with identity. I intended the question 'what does the term religion mean to you?' to ask about how they understand the category, but common responses assumed that I was asking about identity and revealed the assumption that religious identity must rest on a belief in God. The most frequent initial response was the delivery of the statement that 'actually, I'm an atheist'. Such an equation appears to mean that atheist individuals felt they had to self-define as non-religious: they could not accept what they considered the essential component of religion and therefore it was necessary to reject the whole idea as having any relevance for them. Another common association that functioned to make the category unappealing was a connection of religion with an external authority which presents a 'right way' to live and/or engage with the spiritual. I also asked the same questions about spirituality and found that it was usually perceived both more positively than religion and more vaguely. For most people spirituality incorporates any and all of the hard-to-quantify things that

contribute to a sense of meaning in life, to personal narrative, and to embracing, encountering or experiencing the non-physical. In other words, the spiritual deals with religious type stuff, but without the specific elements that were leading people to reject the term religious.

My research participants' comments on the meaning of spirituality suggest that it may be offered as an identity marker on the basis of a recognition that there are elements of identity, practice, understanding and belief that would be considered part of religion had that category not been rejected. While it is important to recognise that people drew this distinction their choice cannot simply be accepted as marking an objective binary. Not only does spirituality have no clearer or more universally agreed essential nature than religion, but both terms are also commonly employed with moral weighting, which it is not the role of the researcher to reify (Ammerman, 2013). Equally, regarding the two as entirely discrete categories of phenomenon raises once again the idea that such concepts form around a single essence when in fact 'the religion being rejected turns out to be quite unlike the religion being practiced and described by those affiliated with religious institutions…[and] the spirituality being endorsed as an alternative is at least as widely practiced by those same religious people as it is by people drawing a moral boundary against them' (2013, 275).

Using the existing constructions my participants held regarding these two terms I judged that hostile rejection of religion was rooted in a conflation of 'religious' as a category label (the essence of religion is belief in God) with 'religion' as an identity marker (if someone *does* religious things they must *be* a religious person). This leads to the view that in order to claim or accept the identity one must perform the essential element of the category. In other words, the choice or rejection of 'religious' as an identity marker for my research participants tells us less about their practices, the nature of their kink and its role and value in their lives than it does about their previously formed associations with people and institutions that do claim the religious identity marker.

Separating Being and Doing

Reflecting further on how kink identity is formed, understood and relates to kink behaviour may shed additional light on category and identity construction and the risks of accepting perceived or reported binaries as reflective of substantive difference. People who are kinky do kinky things and, as previously noted, much of the building of a kink identity is carried out through such doing. But not everyone who does (apparently) kinky things regards kink as an important part of their identity. There is also a thriving Scene of virtual kinksters who 'do' kinky things in virtual worlds rather than physical ones. My research did not encompass this community but reports from my participants suggest that members of it do often incorporate 'kink' into their identities. It is certainly possible to argue that to engage as a community on the basis of that shared interest strongly implies a connection with identity, even without the associated physical practice. However, most of my participants held the opinion that it is not possible to know if you are 'really' kinky until, as research

participant Madeleine succinctly put it, 'the minute the belt hits the arse.' This common view demonstrates the assumption that there is an authentic kinkiness, that is determined at least in part by internal and personal responses to the stimulus of real-world physical involvement in a kink activity. It also implies that it is possible to believe you possess this until you receive a practical demonstration otherwise. It is this judgement of authenticity that invests the identity label with its significance for the individual, as an expression of what is considered most true/real about them.

I was told several stories around this area of virtual kink by my research participants, all along the lines of their engaging in play with someone who believed that they would enjoy a given activity because they had fantasised about it extensively but who then found the reality wholly unpleasant and, as a result, never again engaged in kink activity. The lack of kinkiness is thus twofold: not just experiencing unpleasantness (which can be restructured into a fulfilling aspect of personal kink) but also the avoidance of real-world repetition as a consequence of that. The assumption is that a 'real' kinkster would want to repeat and build upon the experience, and so most of my participants would not describe people who fulfil both the above criteria as being 'really' kinky. The person themselves might still self-identify in that way, however, on the basis that their fantasy interests remained unchanged. A clear distinction can thus be drawn between the category of kink (as my research constructed it), which requires real-world action, and kink as self-selected identity which may not.

This perceived difference between an authentic identity of being 'really' kinky and simply acting in a way that an observer might describe as kinky forms one of the layers built up in identity narratives. It is may be considered as a distinction between being and doing (Haenfler, 2014, Newmahr, 2011, Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1990, Wilkins, 2008, Winge, 2012), or the difference between engaging in something as a means to an end (doing) and as an end in and of itself (being) (Newmahr, 2010). This being/doing distinction is relatively clear where people try something kinky, dislike it and never try it again — these people neither are kinky, nor do they do kinky things beyond that experimentation — but it becomes blurred with regard to people who do kinky things without regarding kink as a part of their identity and/or people who do not do kinky things but consider kink to be a strand of their identity. It is hard to estimate how large a group of people this last might be, but it is worth noting that for people who both identify as kinky and do kinky things the assumption that there is such a group of people is widespread, as is classifying them as not authentically kinky. The implication here is that to fully understand a term being deployed as an identity marker requires talking with people who claim it about the basis for that claim and what it denotes for them; by contrast, observation of a particular behaviour offers one way to mark out a potential category.

Using the Separation

Narratives of authenticity and distinctions between being and doing create difficulties where the term, in this case kink, is being used as label for a

category of phenomena (rather than as an identity marker) without explicitly identifying that this is the case. That the two overlap is clear, and my participants used kink in both ways. When used as a category, kink necessarily includes both people who occasionally tie their partners' wrists and ankles to the bed before sex and people who spend hours creating elaborate patterns of rope around bodies in order to savour the many-layered experience of such bondage. It must include all those people, regardless of their personal understanding of how the activity relates to their identity, and it must include them regardless of any association of kink with sexual arousal or the lack thereof. This is so because in the activity in both examples is unquestionably, from an observer's perspective, unquestionably bondage (which is included in the summary of kink given earlier as activities involving consensual restraint) and because no experiential qualities of the activity can be more than inferred without conversation with the actors. Regardless of the shared category, my research suggests that it is the people in the second example who are more likely to regard what it is they do as expressive of some deeply felt need or truth, a contributor to their self-understanding and therefore part of their identity narrative. That narrative may well have begun with simple bondage as an act of foreplay because all parties involved found it sexually arousing and exciting, but for my research participants the narrative does not end there. Instead the interest expands, the activity becomes more complex and the experiences resulting from it more intense. It may well leave the arena of sexuality entirely but, regardless of whether sexual gratification is an element of play, the behaviour ultimately becomes an end unto itself, rather than a means to an end. The person is being kinky rather than doing kinky things. The things it then brings to the person's life become harder to articulate in words, although they remain clearly felt: this is when kink activity becomes gestalt kink, as it has become more, or other, for the individual than its original contributing parts. When kink becomes a gestalt in a person's life it is strongly felt to be a significant part of their identity, a meaningful contributor to how they move through and relate to the world as it both draws on other narratives and shapes its own. However, if research does not engage with such narratives, focussing instead on the behaviour itself, then there is little distinction to be drawn between what one of my participants (pussikin[2]) described as 'just bedroom games' and gestalt kink.

The potential impact this has on the understanding of kink that is likely to arise from such research is amply illustrated by the values ascribed to 'sadism' or 'sadist' by my research participants. Only one of my 44 research participants chose the term 'sadist' as the best fit label for his kink identity, but at least 26 of the people with whom I spoke were (from both the perspective of an outside observer and in their own descriptions of their practice) actively and enthusiastically creating pain for their play partners and doing so in many of the same ways as the self-labelled sadist. So, did I interview one sadist or 26? The answer, and the nature of my research, is clearly shaped by whether I am interested in behaviour I can categorise as sadistic or in the thinking that

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[2] It is a common convention within the Kink Scene for individuals who identify as submissive not to capitalise their names; where a participant expressed this preference, I respected it.

underlies the acceptance or rejection of sadist as a personal identity marker. These do begin to overlap if I am interested in the qualitative experience of sadistic behaviour, which might be affected by chosen or imposed identity labels, but they do not become a single thing. If I accept chosen identity as the whole story and regard the 26 as engaged in a fundamentally different thing to the one, then the picture thereby created is, at best, over-simplified and at worst wholly distorted by my conflation of two distinct usages of the term 'sadist'. If instead I choose to focus on category, recognising the identity issue and setting it to one side in terms of how I define the focus of my study then I can explore the experience of doing sadistic things and ask whether there is any experiential difference resulting from the identity choices.

I have noted already that a default assumption about the use of religion is that it always carries an intrinsic claiming of identity. Since identity is understood as an authentic expression of deep truth about the self the imposition of an identity marker is likely to be resented. When that marker is also assumed to describe a concept with an essential component that is offensive on some level the resentment is intensified and the rejection more fierce. For most people not engaged in the academic study of religion the idea that there is an essence to religion is not so much accepted as it is never questioned. For some people that essence is belief in deity (and probably deity in a specific form) or an acceptance of external authority over moral, spiritual, relational choices/thoughts and behaviours. If this element, whatever it is felt to be, is simultaneously regarded as the essence of what religion is, and rejected as an authentic component of identity, then the application of religion and associated terms to oneself must also be rejected. This is comparable to the assumption that commonly emerged among my participants regarding 'sadism', namely that consent and/or the pleasure of one's partner is not a concern for sadists. If this is the essence of sadism and the individual regards those things as extremely important they cannot identify themselves as a sadist, even while recognising that they perform (and enjoy) activities that fit the category of sadism. That all my participants did recognise this speaks to the practical reality of the use-as-identity/use-as-category distinction I am drawing. The same is true regarding religion, where individuals might both reject the identity label and recognise a concern/interest within the same sphere. The rejected term cannot be taken as a strand of identity because, in their understanding, it requires something they are wholly unable accept as being authentically 'true-for-me'. However, if this is recognised it can be used as part of a carefully constructed analytic category.

The kink community employs a range of terms that can be used in substantially different ways, with those different uses being recognised and understood. The broadest, kink itself, provides a broad umbrella identity label. But the Scene also holds as one of its most important shared values the idea that 'your kink is not my kink', so that this identity umbrella is both claimed and then, almost immediately and almost always, qualified with additional, complementary identity markers. For most of the people with whom I spoke it is the very fuzziness of the kink concept that gives it appeal as a label: it is open to wide interpretation and avoids the obvious emotional loading of terms like sadist. But fuzzy labels also come with inherent risks, not least that there

will be associations drawn with which the claimer of the label does not agree. Kink is not unique in this, but it is perhaps unusual in its explicit engagement with it. Both identity labels and the placement of specific behaviours into categories are simultaneously claimed, challenged and qualified as a basic aspect of individuals finding people with whom they might play. There is good reason to engage in such explicit analysis of labels, since as Wiseman observes in his guide for new players, it is not the best time for a serious mismatch of expectations 'when two people are alone together..., one of them is naked and tied up and the other is standing over them holding... torture implements' (Wiseman, 1996, 57). Thus, kinky people construct layers of category interest and identity label not only to express their self-understanding but also to be explicitly explored and sometimes deconstructed by potential play partners before they get into a play situation. The safety imperative of such exploration may not exist in all contexts, but this tension between selecting a label as a marker of identity (which is presumed by the importance of autonomy and self-expression in contemporary Western society to communicate something important about you) and the knowledge that any such label is always partial and imperfect (requiring clarification or qualification) is common and contributes to the blending/conflation of identity markers with category labels.

A useful example of the complexities involved in clearly distinguishing use-as-category from use-as-identity can be found in the claiming of identity labels relating to the taking of a role during play. As previously mentioned in a typical play scenario there is a person (or several) giving or creating sensation, wielding whatever tools are being used and generally directing the scene overall and a person (or people) on the receiving end of this and the common descriptors for these roles are 'top/topping' and 'bottom/bottoming'. These terms are used within the Scene, although not commonly as identity labels. They describe the mechanics of play, while the terms that are probably better known outside the kink Scene — Dom/Domme and sub(missive) — refer to dynamics of relationship and/or to what is considered a more authentic power exchange. These latter terms are much more likely to be selected as markers of identity.

Among my participants Michael and Molly offer an illustration of the experiential difference between being a top and being a Dom[3]: They are a married couple with a Dominant/submissive relationship. Michael identifies as a Dom and Molly as a sub, and they also use these terms to describe their respective roles during their play together. However, Michael observes that if he takes the top role with people other than Molly he is just 'a stunt arm'. He cannot be a Dom because the relational dynamic necessary for him to perform that identity is not present. His overall identity does not change, but his actions in that moment are not experienced as expressions of it. It is thus possible for him to play in a way that fits the 'topping' category of behaviour without that simultaneously being a performance of his identity as Dom. The distinction is not one which is likely to be clear to an observer, unless it is an

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[3] As with personal names the use of capital letters for Dom/Domme and lower case for sub is a common convention within the Scene.

observer who has previously had a conversation with him about his Dom identity and who would recognise whether he is or is not playing with Molly. Neither is it a difference that can easily be pinned down in words, but this close relationship of performance, relationship and identity makes a significant contribution to Michael's subjective experience of any given occasion of play in which he is engaged.

Neither role being taken in play nor its contribution to personal identity can be wholly defined by who is on which end of a cane - it is for example possible to 'top from the bottom', which would be indistinguishable to an observer from any other form of play. Michael's example serves to illustrate this important point: different instances of a behaviour that would be judged by most observers to belong in the same category are not necessarily equal contributors to identity construction, even when they are engaged in by the same person. The distinction is one of qualitative experience, placed within a complex mesh of previous experiences, their associated contexts and relationships and their contributions to self-understanding. There is no objective distinction to be drawn — Michael might flog a partner who is not Molly for the same duration, in the same position, with the same implement, but it would not feel the same to him. For the purposes of research, and for greater insights into the various complexities of kink it is thus useful to separate Dominant as an identity label from dominant as a description for a category of behaviour. It is important to recognise that Michael would view the two experiences in different lights, but it need neither undermine nor challenge the felt authenticity of his narrative for a researcher to recognise that term chosen for identity labelling is also an ideal descriptor for the observed behaviour. In the same vein I suggest that it should not be considered inappropriate to frame the activities of a self-identified non-religious person as fitting into the category of religious behaviour, if such framing will contribute to overall understanding of either or both the group and the category under consideration.

Conclusion

I opened this article with Kaldera's summary of the apparent contradiction between his identity as a pagan and his identity as a kink practitioner. Part of that contradiction arises because Kaldera deploys both kink and religion as concepts incorporating identity and category, without explicitly signalling either use on any given occasion. This same conflation is widely shared, meaning his identity claim meets with negative reactions from those who also claim that label: the perception is that accepting his claim to it necessarily includes them in a category that allows, accepts or even requires practices they find repulsive, morally wrong and/or contrary to the definition of category they associate with that identity label. For example, Kaldera suggests that although most pagans agree sex is sacred the concomitant (if unspoken) assumption is that sex is should be gentle and "poetic", rather than 'reminiscent of a lion ripping apart a gazelle' (2015, 129); if this assumption is held to be true then the latter kind of sex can be neither sacred or morally right. In other contexts, assumptions about how sex and sacredness connect may well be different, just as there are different discourses on the connection between kink and sex.

The issue is not which assumption is 'correct' but on the effect they, and the context which gives rise to them, have on experience, understanding and discourse. Regarding as fixed meanings that are, in the reality of their usage, not only contested but fluid can only limit understanding of complex phenomena.

Engaging in the scholar's task of redescription, whether it be of a broad concept of religion or of a specific sub-concept within it, requires conscious recognition of different uses, values and understandings held and deployed by researcher and research participants alike. One such example is the distinctions between use-as-identity and use-as-category, and the unquestioned conflation of these two, that I have set out in this article. It is possible both to construct a definition of religion (or of paganism) that includes Kaldera's Pagan kink practices and one that excludes them; which is applied should be a conscious choice. It is also possible to construct an overall definition of religion excluding practices not explicitly named as religion by their practitioners. Such a category would include Kaldera, but it would exclude those among my research participants who explicitly use kink as part of pagan practice (as Kaldera does) but who reject the term religion. If I wish to understand experiences, and the uses to which they are put, and this self-chosen classification of religion or non-religion is the only distinction between the qualitative accounts I have to work with then the analytic value of maintaining such a distinction is called into question: Non-religion/non-religious is certainly a distinct identity claim to religion/religious; what is not (necessarily) simultaneously true is that these distinct identity claims inevitably signal phenomena or experience that belongs in a wholly different category.

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