

# **From the Ethnographers' Side: Escaping Rocks and Pitfalls in Swinger Research**

**(Final Submission Version)**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a model for organizational ethnographers who wish to find new methodological approaches for the study of swingers and other marginalized groups who deal with potential social stigma and form communities around their lifestyles. Very few ethnographers reported on being in the field as participants, even as novice swingers, and how their positionality and their embodied ethnography can contribute to understanding swinger settings. Even fewer ethnographers addressed the contradictory sides of permission from their ethics board to study swinger settings, and the implications of this for data collection. In this article, we focus on these methodological struggles while describing how the first author became an active member in swinger clubs in Spain and France. We claim that it is through wise participation, using ethnographer's positionality, communicating with the ethics review board throughout the project, and skillful writing about this group, that we can create a foundation for future ethnographies inside this subculture.

**Keywords:** alternative sexualities, non-monogamy, swinging, participant observation, stigma

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## **Introduction**

Swinging may be regarded as a transgressive sexual practice during which couples as well as singles have multiple, simultaneous and/or consecutive partner sex (Frank, 2019). Swinger settings are geographical spaces (De Craene, 2017), organized to facilitate socialization among their attendees, negotiation of rules and norms and prevention of conflicts that could arise. These enclaves may be considered sexualized settings that are conducive to their members' own socialization processes. We add to this our observation that not all attendees participate in multiple partner sex and that there is an unknown number of attendees who spend their time in clubs with the intention to watch, dance, socialize and maybe experiment sexually (Vaynman and Harviainen, 2022).

Ethnographers who choose to be active players in swinger settings gain important perspectives that are often inaccessible to others. Real accounts from the field are rarely published, and if they are, these do not include the reality of these experiences - or the smells, tastes, sounds, or the unpleasant — because including these may embarrass and upset reviewers, readers, sensors and publishers unfamiliar with these elements of the subculture. One published autoethnography on a researcher's participation during a swinger lifestyle convention did describe the ethnographer's feelings, her somewhat uncomfortable experiences and her transformation, or 'becoming a sexual being' (Wagner, 2009). Another ethnographer, Claire Kimberly (2016, p. 66) concluded after her fieldwork at a four-day lifestyle convention that the main limitation of her research was 'the lack of complete participation of the author in the swinging lifestyle'. Although these studies brought valuable insight into the ethnographer's experience (Wagner, 2009) and describe swinger settings (Kimberly, 2016), they did not problematize the ethnographer's presence in swinger settings,

how observation and participation was negotiated and the particulars of ethics board approval in these studies.

In 1972, a unique study was conducted by an ethnographer couple, Charles and Rebecca Palson, who claimed that they could ‘never completely divorce ourselves from the personal aspects of our subject’ (p. 29). This was the only study that elaborated on the benefits of participation in studying swingers, where the authors stated that they obtained important insights into the subculture by participating: ‘Had we not participated, we would not have known how to question them about many central aspects of their experience’ (p. 29). Conducting an 18-month study on 136 swingers, this was the only study that reported no problems with recruiting participants. What these ethnographers suggested was that swinger research was dependent on the context, or the situational and organizational setting. While we believe that a variety of methods should be used while recruiting, it is the researcher’s knowledge, acceptance, understanding and the ability to play a part in these settings that facilitates a diverse sample as well as rich data.

We propose ethnographic participation as a research strategy that may potentially solve the problems of nonrepresentative samples, recruiting and errors due to the difficulty of obtaining access. We suggest that future research must consider that swingers themselves establish these settings and their organization, and therefore researchers must consider learning about the settings initially and that each setting has its own cultural composition.

Our article focuses on the first author’s account of escaping proverbial rocks and pitfalls in participant ethnography while obtaining permission to study swingers. We address the following challenges and solutions: 1) ethnographer’s positioning 2) setting limits to participation 3) permission from the ethics board and 4) writing about swingers.

## **Methods**

### ***Multicultural and Sexually Diverse Sample***

All data for this article was collected by [first author]. [The second author] participated in post analysis and reporting. As a result of this, participant observations in this article are reported using the first person. Participating almost fully in the studied community by learning and engaging in its practices, while quite not ‘going fully native’, may be needed to not only gain access to communities with stigmatized practices, but to also fully comprehend and report said activities. This approach, called ‘radical empiricism’ by Jackson (1989) and close to what Fine (2003, p. 53) considers the ‘expected participant in social life’ status on longitudinal fieldwork, has been previously successfully utilized to study sex-related communities (Harviainen, 2015; Harviainen and Frank, 2018). The bodily nature of certain practices requires a bodily understanding and communities oriented on doing rather than talking need to be approached from a likewise perspective of doing (Jackson, 1989). Yet the very engagement in the activities of the communities in question naturally raises questions about both sufficient distance and objectivity and suitable ways of reporting.

An ethnographic, qualitative study was conducted by [first author] using the methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews. Through participation, I was able to understand participants and their actions in the context of swinger settings. In line with Bolton’s research (1995, p. 149), I felt that my depth of understanding of participants came directly from spending time with swingers in swinger clubs or being part of their world. I was able to observe closely and listen to the conversations that occurred during sex. I was invited to private rooms behind closed doors, to observe couples and singles that never had sex in public. I was referred to as someone who had an understanding, an acceptance and as

one who was open-minded to their practices. I used my own non-monogamic, bisexual and kink (see Fennell, 2022) experiences to relate, empathize and identify with swingers. Being referred to as someone who had this understanding was a major motivating factor for participants to talk to me, and this method of recruiting also allowed for other types of swingers to volunteer for the study – such as swingers who were critical to swinger settings and swingers who had problems in their marriage. Although most of the swingers I interviewed were educated and middle-class, recruiting other swinger minorities who are not middle-class and even lack documentation is possible only if the ethnographer exhibits an understanding of these groups and if the minority members are not required to sign consent forms.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish, Russian, English and French with 40 members of the studied scenes, in person in Spain, France and by phone. Interviews were conducted outside of swinger settings due to an observation made early on that each setting played music and this would affect not only the interview situation but also the quality of the recordings and transcriptions. Interviews were conducted with 15 couples, 6 single men and 4 single women in the ethnographer's home, in swingers' homes and by phone. There were 27 men and women who identified as bisexuals, but all looked for heterosexual long-term partners or were in a relationship with a partner of opposite sex. Bisexuality becoming more and more commonly acknowledged, ethnographers who conduct these interviews must be prepared to include questions on bi- and pansexuality, perhaps even bring experiences demonstrating their acceptance and openness, so that swingers do not feel judged. While it is important to probe, question and be as objective as possible as a researcher, my main method of

interviewing was allowing them to be themselves and talk freely about their attitudes, perspectives and experiences.

More than half of the participants were Spanish or Hispanic, while the rest were from other (Northern, Southern and Eastern European) countries. Contrary to the idea that swingers are white, it would be precise to say that depending on the method and location of recruiting, one may obtain a sample that is as international as this one, where 7 different nationalities were included. In Cap d'Agde especially, but also in a place such as Costa del Sol, Spain, places that attract tourists from all over the world, an international sample is much more viable. This is especially true if the ethnographer resides in this area and can network and specify 'what kind of swingers' she/he is looking to interview. Once her/his reputation as an accepting and active member of the community is established, it is possible to streamline these wishes while forming a scientifically viable sample size and variance.

### ***Conducting Interviews and Analytical Approach***

This holistic ethnographic approach to researching swingers allowed for a flexible design to rewrite interview protocols while considering observations, informal conversations and participation in swinger settings. Themes that were discovered during fieldwork were later implemented into interviews and included some of the following: swinger concepts, 'becoming a swinger', challenges in relationships and swinger settings, sexual risk, and protection, bisexuality in men and in women. Also, I asked the participants to talk about their experiences or stories from swinging. These short stories were later used to juxtapose storytelling in my field notes, showing how storytelling forms an important part of the

lifestyle, not just how events unfold and how swingers construct their own identity, but also the way that people gossip about each other within and outside the swinger world.

While interviewing swingers, I was mainly open to their experiences, but analyzing interviews was focused on ‘what the researcher is interested in knowing about’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 18). I did not use qualitative software, analyzing all data material manually (Sandberg and Copes, 2013). As I transcribed each interview verbatim, I would spend time listening to the audios and would get close to data by rereading and looking for common themes. In reflexive thematic analysis, coding is not fixed – it is an open process that uses meaning-based patterns (Braun *et al.*, 2018, p. 845). Analyzing was a continuous process throughout the project, from the very beginning of choosing to study swingers until the end. According to Fangen (2010), analysis occurs at an early stage of the research process, even during the interviews when the researcher is thinking about the data. Coding allows for the researcher to organize data into categories, whether by using the participants' own words or quotes, or by creating new ones. This is not separate, however, from analysis; it goes hand in hand: the researcher must ‘know the data well enough to be able to step back and see how various parts and themes fit together’ (Copes *et al.*, 2016, p. 12). To create these themes, or codes, the researcher must have thought about the data by not only reading and reflecting on it, but also by making comparisons, connecting points of reference and reading relevant literature. “Negative case analysis” also helped me create comparisons and recognize alternative viewpoints, providing a richer understanding of the findings (Morse, 2015, p. 1218). Analyzing negative cases was used to recognize alternative viewpoints. I used a ‘back and forth’ method as explained by Fangen (2010), going back to rereading the data, then reading the relevant literature, then writing. Whyte (1993) also wrote

about this transformation or ‘evolution of research ideas’, pointing to analysis as creative process: ‘We can go on living with the data – and with the people – until perhaps some chance occurrence casts a totally different light upon the data, and we begin to see a pattern that we have not seen before’ (pp. 279-280). We take this further by claiming that in swinger research, the spontaneous creative process of analysis may begin in the very moment that the ethnographer enters a swinger setting for the first time and at the very beginning of the study, and from that first impression begins to consider all the implications and challenges of research in such a setting. From this moment on and through the writing process, analysis happens continuously, especially when the possibility of writing together with other ethnographers who have an understanding of participant observation in these settings.

## **Findings**

The way we study and write about swingers must be reexamined considering swinger settings, by placing more focus on the ethnographer’s positionality, setting limits to participation, obtaining and interpreting approval from the ethics board and writing about swingers in a way that makes sense for the outsiders. In the following, we problematize these issues.

## **Ethnographer’s Positionality**

I positioned myself as an outsider as I was never a swinger, nor could I imagine, erotically or emotionally, sharing my partner. I had never been to a swinger club before beginning to study swingers. The fact that I did not identify myself as a swinger, before, during or after



conducting the study, placed me in an outsider position, allowing distance from my subject of study. However, when I met other attendees of swinger settings who were couples, single men and women who did not consider themselves swingers, I was able to relate to their outsider position. This raised questions about who was and was not a swinger and I found that there was a considerable number of people who practiced sex with multiple partners without sharing their partner or without having a partner, as well as people who practiced BDSM; people with polyamorous tendencies without being polyamorous and people in open relationships. The ambiguity of self-identification and this distance in positioning may work as an advantage in swinger research, due to our observation that swinger clubs, like sex clubs (Haywood, 2022a), may facilitate a variety of sexualities and relationship forms.

Swinger settings in Spain and France mirrored lifestyle events in other countries also placing importance on attendees' age, gender, physical attractiveness, single or couple status – these were all important characteristics that were decisive for attracting swingers. Even though we strongly suggest that swingers should be studied from within swinger settings by ethnographers who spend time observing and understanding these settings, - certain attributes would make it very difficult if not impossible for ethnographers to study swinger communities from within. One's gender, age, educational background, linguistic competence, economic status, previous sexual experience and a sympathetic attitude to swingers would affect access to the field, recruiting participants, interpreting and analyzing data. Harviainen and Frank (2018, p. 10) pointed out that lifestyle events 'preselect participants based on considerations such as age, physical attractiveness, partner permission and availability and personality and sexual ability'.

One of the main restrictions in swinger settings was the separation of the couples as well as single women from the single men. Therefore, being a single female ethnographer gave me physical access to most rooms in most swinger clubs in Spain and France. Had I been a single male, my physical presence would have been restricted to the single male area, a very limited setting in most clubs. I often felt that even my single female status was restricting in studying couples, and I would have had more understanding, participation and access had I been part of a swinger couple. This was because, on an organizational level, most of the attendees were couples, and this was really a community supported by the couples. My single status may have been a threat to some couples, and this also restricted my access and trust by the participants. With time, I did gain the trust of the female participants in couples. It was perhaps a combination of me being there to study them and that I was not looking for a stable partner. They treated me like a potential sexual partner, although entertainer, expert and student were other roles assigned to me, which I chose. These were additional roles that established me as a member. I used my other attributes and played a lot of different roles in these settings. Having language skills, cultural and intellectual interests were also useful in connecting with swingers.

I was one of the very few women with an Oriental look in all the clubs and parties I attended in Andalusia, Spain. As there were very few Oriental, Eastern or Middle Eastern women in Andalusia, Spain, they were considered exotic, as were dark or Latino men, for example. Features from other cultures that were not found in this part of Spain or France were considered interesting and new.

Part of being attractive was maintaining one's appearance, or working out, dressing up, buying lingerie and sexy clothing and shoes. I wanted to look attractive and I took care of

my body, put on lotion and perfume and went to laser treatment for hair removal and got Botox. Since I already did all of the above, I adapted easily to this environment that valued attractiveness. However, I did ask myself the question of whether attractiveness was such an important asset, and whether I could continue to attend swinger settings if I no longer felt attractive. I also considered whether, had I not felt myself an attractive woman, or if I did not place importance on being attractive, whether I would have been able to study swingers.

Nothing exemplifies the importance of attractiveness better than Cap d'Agde, France, where I was told that the summer season was divided into July and August, and if I wanted to meet younger and more attractive people ('models'), I would have to come in July, while an older crowd (40's and up) came in August. Since I was there in August, I did observe and interact with an older crowd. Had I visited Cap in July, I would have had another experience observing and interacting with people who were perhaps younger than I was. I was also told that I was not dressed for Cap d'Agde. I had to go shopping immediately and buy appropriate Cap clothing, which was much more revealing than what I had in my suitcase.

In addition to the issues related to gender and attractiveness, we also address having financial access to this setting. Cap d'Agde was initially constructed as a confined nudist and naturist city in France and is currently also hosting an overlapping swinger community. As a single ethnographer traveling alone to Cap d'Agde and staying on the outskirts of this nudist/swinger city, I had to be able to afford the hotel, entrance fees to clubs and pool parties, food, the day pass, transport to and from Cap d'Agde and the clothes that were suitable for Cap d'Agde. One week of field work cost me 1,300 euros, and many of the participants told me that they could not afford to travel to Cap d'Agde, nor have they ever been there because it was too expensive. Combined with sex-related prejudice from many

funding agencies, these costs may also prevent researcher access to such environments or lead to them only being researched by scholars who are privileged also financially.

Does this mean that an ethnographer must be generally attractive, relatively young, a bisexual female or an attractive swinger couple with money to spend in order to study swingers in both Spain and France? While attractiveness may be a selection factor to meet and spend time with other equally attractive attendees, it is our general understanding that swingers who do want to share information with ethnographers will do so without reservations about looks, especially considering that those swingers who feel the need to share about unusual topics, such as critique of swinger settings, BDSM, transition into polyamory, or being ‘light swingers’. In addition, ‘a flexible personal disposition’ and ‘a genuine interest’ in the participants, or ‘being interested in them as they were interested in me’ (Manning, 2016, p. 20) will contribute to ensuring access, recruiting participants and conducting interviews. Yet like kinksters (see Harviainen, 2015; Fennell, 2022), they are likely to have limits in sharing information with non-practitioners, and we therefore recommend that ethnographers visit swinger settings and learn to set limits to their participation or participate wisely.

### **Setting Limits to Participation**

It must be clear that one can always decide the limits of one’s own participation – this was the rule in all swinger settings in Spain and France. No one harassed or coerced me, even as I was undressed and/or aroused in a swinger club and people were undressed or having sex around me.

Settings limits may not be easy for ethnographers in a place like Cap d'Agde because it was a large resort that included both swinger and nudist beaches, swinger clubs, sex shops, BDSM club and shops, saunas and open pools. I entered Cap d'Agde somewhat unprepared, because I was not aware that nudists had their own norms and culture while swingers' norms were distinct, and while these two subcultures co-existed during summer season in Cap d'Agde, I noticed an existing tension between the sexually inclined swingers and the naturalistic nudists. For example, while I was walking along the shore of the Bay of Pigs, a beach in Cap d'Agde allocated to people who wanted to have public sex with others, - people were splashing water at me. At first, I did not understand why, but then someone told me what it meant, - 'you have to take your clothes off'. I was fully dressed. I do not remember if I had crossed the border from the swinger beach into the nudist beach, as these two were not physically but socially divided and bordered each other. The norms on this particular nudist beach were to remove one's clothing to respect other nudists, who were not swingers. I did not know this. Surprises like this one happened often during my exploration of these settings. In this case, I simply left the beach fully clothed.

Although I was told by experienced swingers in Cap d'Agde not to go walking alone, I did not sense any danger of walking alone, being nude, or participating in sexual practices in Cap d'Agde, because I sensed that people who came here were aware of the norms of swinger and naturist settings. Also, one could observe police and security guards walking around in uniforms and reinforcing safety and norms of the city. The recommendation not to walk alone stemmed from the idea that I could feel overwhelmed because a crowd of men could suddenly appear and follow me. When I walked alone, in high heels and a see-through corset and a very short skirt, men followed me, keeping their distance and some approached

me, keeping their distance, for propositions. I did not feel unsafe but rather somewhat overwhelmed by the constant male presence around me. However, I did not at any time feel that I was in danger, not even as I walked at night on my own. This was not because I was a fearless person, or because there were police on site, but rather, because I knew Cap d'Agde was a safe place, and people who came here, single men or men in couples, were respectful and educated in the norms of this setting. Also, I have never heard anyone say anything about violence, nor have I seen any violence in clubs. As soon as I raised my hand in a gesture of 'no', most men disappeared. Knowing French helped me to navigate this setting, although I was not able to always learn quickly enough about its rules.

Participation in sexual practices happened gradually as I spent more time in swinger clubs, observing and talking to people. Initially, my participation was very 'light', as I considered pole dancing, kissing someone, or watching others have sex within the limits of wise participation because it positioned me as a voyeur, as an entertainer, as someone who was open-minded and not judgmental of swingers. On this level of participation, it was a kind of a performance, where I used my looks and eroticism in order to seduce, attract and socialize in these sexualized settings, while not fully participating in sexual acts on this level.

I also established certain sexual limits because of my own personal and sexual choices. For example, sometimes I was approached by couples where the woman only played with women. This meant that I would only be having sex with the woman, and not with the man, in a private room. I always declined. I was not interested in solely bisexual play with women. This also reminded me of other swinger women that I observed and interviewed, who also refrained from this type of intimacy.

Initially, I did not participate in group sex, as it was somewhat off-putting for me. It was only gradually that I became accustomed to watching others and observe my own sensations of becoming erotically laden. During group sex sessions, I found myself astonished at the sexual limits of attendees as I observed them go beyond what was expected, in an unpredictable fashion. I observed women having sex with 2 partners simultaneously. Some women had sex with 6 partners in one night, consecutively. Women were able to have sex with more partners and go on without stopping. I observed that the men took time to recover and often men had enough sex after 20 minutes or an hour-long session, while women could continue through the night (4 – 6 hours). When I went into the zone where people have sex, I could not avoid its smell, the different sounds that people made and the rather uncomfortable (at first) visual impressions of seeing multiple partner sex or group sex.

### **Permissions from the Ethics Board**

To my great surprise, the ethics board at the University of Granada in Spain approved my participation in swinger settings both in Spain and in France. I believe that they viewed my participation as my own choice, as the right to my own sexuality, and this permission surprised me so much that I wrote to the ethics board once more after approval. The ethics board took the time to address my doubts, pointing out that I should also ‘specify the characteristics of participant observation’ and include ‘an evaluation of risks for the researcher as well as for the quality of information collected, potentially biased by participation’. While I reflected constantly and together with other ethnographers upon the potential bias in my research and considered the risks an ethnographer may have through participation in swinger settings, I questioned whether it was important to point to swinger

settings as risky places for ethnographers, and I wanted to be careful about supporting the idea that data collection is biased because of participation. The solution for this problem was to articulate how my positionality worked to create the objectivity needed and how setting limits to participation was a preventive measure for risk-related issues.

I was specifically instructed not to ‘use or publish’ any data on people who did not sign a written consent. I was therefore not allowed to include any of my field notes where I reported observing the public in swinger clubs, or people who did not sign consent forms. This meant that over 300 pages of my field notes had to be discarded. Discarding my field notes would mean that it would be difficult to prove that I conducted field work, and this stringent requirement points to the implication that future researchers should be careful about writing field notes about swinger settings because they may not be allowed to write about non-identifiable persons in public settings. Although I was anonymizing data even while writing my field notes and not using any data that could identify random people who I did not even know but only briefly described or used some of the sketches of informal dialogues, - none of this was permitted.

The ethics board insisted that participants who did not sign written consent forms, with their full names and signatures ‘do not comply with the criteria for inclusion’. While 40 participants did sign written consent forms, I was never asked to present or send these consent forms to the ethics board as proof, nor was I asked to present the recorded interviews. Had I been asked to present this documentation and recordings as proof, and verify their names and IDs, I wondered whether it would have been ethical. While I was not told to include their Spanish IDs in the consent forms, some participants did include them while signing. I thought of this as a sign of their dedication to the study. Participants’ sincerity,



motivation and trust to let me interview, record and consult them, showed me their support and their solidarity throughout the entire project. They shared with me their negative experiences and challenges in swinger settings, something that I also was able to relate to and understand.

The stringent requirement of written consent went against the explicit norms of discretion paramount among swingers. I understood the scope of the consequences of providing participants with a printed document or an email with information about the study, how this could potentially jeopardize their reputation, their jobs, or even permanently affect attitudes towards them by their acquaintances, children, other family members and co-workers. This was especially true when the region of fieldwork was known, had a relatively low population and everyone knew each other. On the other hand, participants were impressed after I told them that I received approval and that I will be writing about my participation as well. This also meant that I became a kind of advocate for them, an advocate with permission to participate and write about my experiences.

Out of 55 participants, only 40 were able to sign consent forms. The remaining 15 interviews were discarded because of the missing consent forms. Some participants who did not sign told me that they were afraid that someone (at work) could find out. Some occupied important positions in society and did not want to sign any documents and give me their full names, national identification numbers and signatures. Although I could not and did not ask to see their IDs, and there was no way that I could check if these were real names, - this was a community where people knew each other and if one worked in the same sector, such as healthcare, hospitality, education, or the financial sector – it would not be an impossible task to find them if one wanted to.

The restrictions set by the ethics board limited all my writing in a setting where interaction with people was the most important element and focus of study. If I did write about my interaction only with people who did sign, it would be ‘too subjective’ and limited, and it would be strange if I only chose excerpts where I was the only one interacting with participants who signed consent forms. In a setting where participants were there to interact with others, I would have had to wait and see when they were alone, or only interact with other people who signed consent forms. This would have been a staged and difficult task, and one wonders about the integrity of research when an ethnographer must stage fieldwork around ethics board approval and not the other way around.

I was not the only ethnographer facing these challenges, and my solution was to try to interpret the ethics board’s emails to the best of my ability and to adapt to these requirements without jeopardizing the entire study. It is true that the opportunity to have a dialogue with the ethics review board openly makes for ‘more methodologically rigorous and ethically sound ethnographies’ (Sandberg and Copes, 2013, p. 194). But a dialogue is difficult when the project is still at an explorative stage or not exactly formed. For instance, it took me approximately one year to find what I wanted to study, and when I was spontaneously invited to a swinger party one night, I went and immediately knew that I wanted to study this group of people. The tedious and lengthy process of writing a project plan may take an ethnographer a long time, sometimes months or even a whole year. My reluctance to apply for approval before starting fieldwork was tied directly into the lack of knowledge on the subject where research has been scarce. Since the interviews were conducted after I had already visited some clubs and after I became a participant, I felt that

I was better equipped, through my knowledge of clubs and my participation in multiple partner sexuality.

When I was invited to Cap d'Agde by one male participant, who was there that summer and the opportunity to have him as my guide presented itself - I took it. Even if I did receive approval before I went to Cap d'Agde, I would not be able to write about the people who did not sign consent forms. Although I was not able to use my fieldnotes from this fieldwork, I was able to understand the importance of Cap d'Agde for my participants in Spain and I was also able to use this place as a reference point during interviews and subsequently in the analysis of interviews.

As there had been no previous participant ethnographies on swingers and swinger settings approved by ethics boards in Spain, and I had to base my knowledge on previous studies in other countries and mostly USA, places where requirements for ethical approval may be very different, it was mainly my fieldwork during this first year that allowed me to collect enough data to write a viable project plan. This was my preparation for the project. It was during this time that I redrafted the Spanish interview guide many times, translated it into English and French, as I conducted the interviews and edited them, realizing that it was a constant work in progress. These meticulous revisions and the need for a pilot study were communicated to the ethics board, prior to approval, so that no misunderstandings would come up later. The ethics board keenly elaborated that 'if the results of the pilot study generated a hypothesis that will be proved in a posterior study, then data from such a study should not be used'. They also clarified that this was a question of methodology, not ethics, although I was not granted a meeting in person to pose further questions about these issues.

The project was approved with the full knowledge of the ethics board after I was already in the field, and the only solution to this problem was to remove all data prior to approval. This made me examine whether this affected my results, generated bias and increased challenges for future ethnographers.

### **Writing about Swingers**

Ethnographers are in a special position as writers because after having been in the field and learned the dynamics and jargon of a setting and a subculture, it is also possible to bring this into writing and communicate to each readership some of its elements (Van Maanen, 2010; 2011). According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000, p. 242), only researchers can transfer this knowledge effectively, because ‘without linguistic, cultural and theoretical ballast it is not possible for researchers to get their bearings, to make interpretations or write anything that makes sense’. One difficulty we have encounter is explaining swinging to non-swingers or how to explain the sexualized and often objectifying language and practice that is part of the culture, the setting, the people. Therefore, writing about swingers in their own words may potentially stigmatize and marginalize them even more. Swinger jargon, even though at times erotic and intimate, has many objectifying undertones. This sexual framework falls outside of theoretical and academic writing as well as normative sexual jargon. It would be difficult to have a conversation with a swinger in a swinger club without talking about sex on their terms. ‘Swinger talk’ within the swinger world falls into a rather strict linguistic framework of ‘sex talk only’ and excludes profound conversations, or intimate and emotional conversations, even political arguments, and couples’ arguments. People may rebel against this idea of superficiality. As ethnographers and researchers, we may ask

whether such swinger talk is transferrable, explainable, or important. While distinctly different from polyamory, swinging is a sexual practice and not a sexual identity or relationship form. Although swingers are often researched together with other identities, such as polyamorists, we are not certain that we can write about them together. For example, Ritchie and Barker (2006, p. 17) proposed ‘adapting a new language of non-monogamies’, although specifically focused on polyamorists, as ‘the act of rewriting the language of identity, relationships and emotion can enable alternative ways of being’. Although the emotional language of polyamorists has great potential to solidify poly-identity and polyamory as a relationship form, swinging would still remain on the margins if we make a similar claim, particularly because of the sexualized language that is still, in its raw form, often deemed unacceptable. Nevertheless, because of the prevalence and the legality of this practice in many countries, it is important to consider ways of writing about swingers that connects with readers. One such example would be on the organization of swinger settings and the ways in which ethnographers conduct their ethnographies, in other countries and in other languages, as participants. Ethnographers may choose to write in several directions, academically, ethnographically and for swingers. This would create a variety of writing directions and allow for a deeper understanding of this subculture.

## **Discussion**

This paper presents a model for organizational ethnographers who wish to find new methodological approaches for the study of swingers and other marginalized groups who deal with potential social stigma and form communities around their lifestyles. We analyzed ways in which the difficulties found in such an approach may contribute to improving

methodology and theory. We provided unique insights into the organizational elements of conducting ethnography on swinger communities in Spain and France, a world often inaccessible to other ethnographers. We suggest that it is by acknowledging the challenges present in such research that we help widen the scope of ethnographic research into potentially vulnerable groups.

Thus, this article was a methodological contribution to conducting research in and understanding swinger communities. We present lessons learned from the field and provide suggestions for future research. The lessons learned, particularly for early ethnographers, involve innovative ethnographic methods. For example, we problematized the controversial position of attractiveness in the field. Our stance is that swinger research demands the ethnographer's presence in swinger settings and an understanding of these settings is the most important element in the ethnographer's positioning. Whether one chooses to be a student, an expert of swinging or of BDSM, a single and 'light' onlooker or voyeur, an exhibitionist, or a pole-dancer – all these are still active roles the ethnographer has the right to play, personally and to establish herself/himself in swinger settings.

The complex issue of positioning of the ethnographer's body has implications for the ways in which research is conducted and the theory it helps create. Another challenge in swinger research is setting limits to participation. From the point of view of a female ethnographer, there were many instances where emotions of discomfort, feeling overwhelmed, of sexual excitement, of doubt or boredom, became part of the ethnography. It is important to say that part of setting limits is being able to say no to the situations and people that create uncomfortable situations, although certain practices, such as group sex, bisexuality and

BDSM, hold the potential to be acquired or learned adaptations, or practices one learns to enjoy after the initial feelings of doubt and discomfort.

Writing about swingers was another challenge we faced, not only because swingers' sexual, perhaps objectifying language and sexual practices may be shocking as well as uninteresting for the readers, but also because excluding these descriptions completely would disappoint the members of this community. The struggle to write about the swinger world appropriately would mean that ethnographers must consider topics relevant to swingers, while also toning down the explicit language and descriptions for the readers who may feel uncomfortable (see also Haywood, 2022b).

Ours is a tale of advocacy (Van Maanen, 2010, p. 170) for other ethnographers in swinger research. We suggest expanding swinger research into new areas and always while conducting fieldwork legally and ethically. Continuous checks and balances should be rewarded with the support from the university's ethics board. In this way, advocacy is performed together, and the ethnographer does not feel alone and unsupported in such emotionally laden research.

We name some of the major difficulties that the first author encountered and suggest that future ethnographies consider the importance of dialogue with the ethics board in order to obtain direction, elaboration on the requirements, in order to know very clearly what is and what is not allowed. On the other hand, we also advocate for new and improved ways that ethics boards can ensure quality in swinger research. One such example may be an in-person meeting where the ethnographer may have the chance to present sketches or ideas about the (future) ethnography, thereby ensuring approval prior to field work, while still in the beginner phase of writing up the project plan, brainstorming together as an important part of

seeing eye to eye with the board. In essence, an ethical committee is useful when the ethnographer is willing to share the details of his or her idea for an ethnography. The ethics board then becomes an organ of feedback, considerate of the fact that the circumstances during interviewing, writing, analysis and even fieldwork are not fixed and therefore require dynamic evaluation. Ethical boards should benefit ethnographers who will then be equipped to ensure ethical standards in the field. In an ideal situation, the ethnographer, as in the case of the first author, would be able to nurture a relationship with the board and feel free to ask questions throughout the project to ensure or intuitively deduce that ethical standards and legal requirements are in sync with the reality of fieldwork.

Finally, our findings may have larger implications for how we understand the organizational features in ethnographic research and contribute to the importance and value beyond our specific context. We propose that the research strategies mentioned in this paper may be applied by ethnographers who choose to study other communities. Although each context is unique and requires its unique set of negotiations, we believe that using these four strategies can be extended to further studies outside of swinger settings, particularly valuable when accessing research sites, managing boundaries in participation, ensuring ethical standards and good practice and writing with the readers in mind, while still communicating the world of the participants as authentically as possible. Most importantly, we hope that our practical tips from the field will help increase the likelihood of successful ethnographies and support fieldwork in physical contexts.



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