

Speaking with Swingers in Spain and France: Strategies from the Swinger World

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which swingers negotiate their world in swinger settings in Spain and France. This includes previously ignored subgroups in swinger subculture, such as single swingers, intergenerational and intercultural couples as well as cuckold couples.

Demographics differ slightly from previous studies, including 7 nationalities, suggesting a higher level of multiculturalism among swingers in cosmopolitan and touristic areas, such as the south of Spain and south of France. Drawing on ethnographic data collected in Andalusia, Spain, and Cap d'Agde, France, as well as qualitative interviews with 40 participants, we demonstrate the ways in which swingers negotiate their world. Strategies by swingers were used to avoid misunderstandings, create boundaries, claim agency, transgress, and deal with stigma.

Keywords: alternative sexualities; swinging; participant observation; stigma

Introduction

Swingers are usually couples, although sometimes single men, and women, who have the intention to participate in multiple partner sex. Frank (2019, 17) specifies that this sexual practice can occur by any number of people who are interested in having this type of sexual experience involving other people, in any country within the parameters of organized time and space, pointing to swinger clubs as settings where participation is spatially organized to facilitate these sexual practices. Swinging is sometimes presented as a strategy used by couples “to strengthen primary bonds and to add excitement to their existing relationship” (Serina et al., 2013, 350).

Researchers struggle to find a theoretical framework to explain swingers’ behavior and discourse. Kimberly and Hans (2017, 797) address this issue by presenting “an experienced-informed approach to produce a theory that describes the experiences” of swinging couples and suggest that the strategies utilized by these swinger couples may also be employed by therapists to facilitate communication among all couples. While it is not certain that swingers’ model of honesty and trust, setting boundaries, and penchant for variety are all transferrable to other relationship styles, - swingers can certainly teach us about their communication strategies, sexual experimentation in their world, and dealing with stigma associated with swinging.

In this article, we delineate the strategies¹ used by swingers in “the swinger world”² to further analyze how these facilitate safety, openness, and transgression in the context of non-monogamies. We organize data material as follows: 1) couples’ strategies 2) single swingers’ strategies 3) transgressive sexualities 4) dealing with stigma.

Methods

All data was collected by the first author, while the second author contributed to the analysis, interpretation of data, evaluation of bias, and critical revisions of the article.

A qualitative study was conducted using the method of participant observation and in-depth, individual interviews. The sample consisted of 40 participants, many of whom were white, educated, middle-class, and experienced swingers. Even though these demographics are consistent on some level with other studies, the diversity of this sample suggests both a cultural and socioeconomic shift in swinger settings. It would be erroneous to say that swingers are white and middle-class, when swingers from a variety of nationalities and socioeconomic backgrounds were observed on a continuous basis in swinger settings. Further studies including a larger sample on swingers in Cap d’Agde will demonstrate a similar diversity. The sample in this study consisted of 7 nationalities and was conducted in 4 languages (Spanish, French, Russian and English).

¹ We acknowledge the vast complexity of existing strategy literature, and consider a “strategy”, for the purposes of this article, to consist of a negotiated plan of action that contains adaptive capabilities and is open to further negotiation.

² Translated from Spanish: “El mundo liberal”. This term is currently used in Spain.

Recruiting began when the first author encountered her first key informant at her very first swinger party, to which she was invited by a (male) acquaintance. Throughout the study, there were 3 key informants, all experienced swinger males and familiar with anthropology research. They introduced the first author to their friends, explaining about the research project, and indirectly vouching for her. Through this process of snowball sampling method, many long-term observations were possible, and long-term contacts were established primarily in Andalusia, Spain, where the first author resided during the project. To safeguard the anonymity of the informants, specific age groups, professions, and specific nationalities are not disclosed.

To contrast this subgroup of people observed and interviewed, the first author also recruited participants online, through the help of one of the key informants who allowed access to 2 swinger websites in Europe. The author was able to post an advertisement about the study and attempted to recruit more women and young couples through this channel. However, only 2 couples responded to the advertisement and participated in the study. The final sample consisted of 19 women and 21 men. A third method of recruiting became available to the first author when she was given the contact of an organizer of a swinger chat group online that consisted of approximately 100 members. This experienced swinger wrote and posted an advertisement about the study in this group, resulting in 11 participants, all of which gave telephone interviews. These phone interviews were used to contrast the observations and live interviews.

The first author conducted interviews with 15 couples, 6 single men and 4 single women, using a semi-structured interview guide, and focusing mainly on the topics that were relevant and important to swingers. Out of 40 participants, 27 identified as bisexuals, 18 were introduced into swinging by male friends, boyfriends, or husbands. Most participants were in a relationship for an average of 9 years, 11 years swinging on an average.

This study was approved by the ethics review board on December 14, 2020, requiring all people mentioned in the study to sign written consent forms, including their names and signatures. Only the interviews with signed consent forms were included in this article. Explicit, written permission was obtained from 40 participants to observe them and conduct recorded interviews. Participants were fully aware of the researcher's role as an anthropologist, as someone writing a doctorate on swingers. Participants were informed on a continuous basis, and from the start, about the anonymization process, specifically that all details would be distorted or written abstractly so that no one is identified (Harviainen & Frank, 2018, 6). Being an active member in swinger clubs from the start of the study was used as a strategy to understand participants and their actions, to write the interview guide, to code and analyze swinger settings.

Although analysis of data occurred continuously throughout the interviews, transcriptions, translations, and while identifying major and important themes – the process of analysis and theme coding took place more in-depth while collaborating with the second author. During this extensive process of repeated revisions, the first author returned to the data countless times in order to provide additional coding themes (Vaillancourt & Few-Demo, 2014, 3) through reading and reflecting upon data, and further analysis was developed together with the second author.

Results

Swinger couples used strategies to minimize problems and maximize pleasure and satisfaction. Strategies were also used to avoid conflict, as misunderstandings were the result of simple miscommunication or lack of knowledge. Couples' strategies were different from singles'

strategies but were nevertheless interconnected. Strategies were also used for more transgressive sexual experiences. Finally, swingers used strategies to deal with stigma.

Couples' Strategies

One of the pillars of a swinger relationship was honesty. In this study, couples reported that they had no secrets from each other. For example, they did not hide their phones from each other. Many couples worked together, lived together, and went to swinger clubs together, eventually sharing a swinger network together. They spent a considerable amount of time together, valuing honesty above all else. One example where honesty and trust played an especially important role was when couples decided to see other people separately outside of clubs. Abigail and Scott have been swingers for over 15 years, and it was only in the last few years that they came to a decision to meet people separately. In the following excerpt, Abigail explained in detail the careful plan of action to achieve a goal:

We trust each other. He tells me, for example, that he will meet someone. I will be away for 3 hours, or 4 or 2. That's it. The most important thing is for him to tell me, and the same goes for me. So that he's not worried, if I go alone with someone, or so that I'm not worried. I always write to him, 'I'm here' at the place where someone is waiting for me. We always call each other, write to each other. We don't have this, 'I'm going...and I will be back tomorrow or in three day'. If I am meeting someone, I know for how long. I usually ask the guys how long we will be, so that I know and let Scott know. In the same sense, he knows it if he is picking me up. For example, I could take the train, and then, in the evening, Scott would pick me up and we could go out to dinner with one of my lovers, the three of us. To talk, spend time... and everything is ok, he knows who I'm with.

Abigail, interview

It seemed that there was little room for spontaneity when everything was so well-planned. However, Abigail's sexual fetish was considered a sexual practice that involved some risk, and the importance of careful planning was paramount here. Her husband was aware of the place, the time, the duration, and knew the other man very well. Both members of the couple were equally aware of where the other was and would usually show up at some point. One may wonder whether this openness and trust came from a sense of security within the couple, and why this couple began to develop rather private fetishes on their own. Scott claimed that in the beginning, their relationship was new and exciting, but with the years in the swinger world, they started to develop different kinds of fetishes. Scott explained this in the following:

Our sexuality is free, open, and now, well it is normal, we are starting to age, and each one of us has its own style, interests, and one must respect this – she enjoys some things and I enjoy other things, that we cannot realize together, so each one, sometimes goes alone.

Scott, interview

In the trajectory of this couple's sexuality, their use of honesty, freedom and respect for the other's choices facilitated sexual experimentation. Being honest and open with each other throughout the years may have paved way for sexual fluidity in a swinging relationship. On the other hand, neither of the parties was interested in watching the other enjoy their fetish. Other swingers criticized these couples, claiming that they would not be considered swingers because a swinger couple should have a connection when they have sex with others, such as, for instance, being present, or watching their partner. However, many couples reported this as a simple deviation in their relationship, not as a problem. Scott claimed that he needed time, and space, to

focus on a lover, and therefore he would often prefer to meet someone on his own. Out of 15 couples, 13 reported seeing other people privately (without the presence of their partner) outside of their relationship. It was only when this deviation became continuous, turning into an emotional and long-lasting relationship, that it became problematic for the couple.

Swingers often talked about their own private and personal boundaries. A well-known and important rule in swinger settings is “no is no”. What this verbal as well as non-verbal rule implies is that if a person is not interested in another person, one silent gesture, with the head, or the hand, should be enough for the other person to physically step back. Despite these implicit and explicit rules, swinger club attendees in this study found themselves in constant friction when it came to communication or negotiation of intimacy. For instance, swingers talked about the difficulty of knowing how to communicate their limits during their first exchanges.

Tiffany and Jacob, an intercultural couple residing in Spain, have been dating for a very short time when Tiffany told him that she did not want to feel tied down in a relationship. She had only recently left a relationship where she felt like “a caged bird” and wanted to be free. Jacob told her, “I have just the right place for you”, taking her to a swinger club. Tiffany ran out of the club on their first night, not being able to handle the situation of a swap with another couple:

I did not feel like being with them, but I did not know how to say no, and at one point, I started panicking, I felt disgusted, and we left arguing, arguing, and when we came home, he said to me, ‘don’t worry, it will be better next time’. And that is what happened, next time was better, because I already knew that I could not say yes just because. After that, I already knew what to do so that I would not feel bad.

Tiffany, interview

As her first and most important strategy, instead of saying “no” directly, Tiffany used the following expression in order to set boundaries with the numerous men that approached her: “If there is a feeling, if there is a connection...”, insinuating that until there is one, a “no” will remain a “no”. In addition, Tiffany made it clear to Jacob from the start that she would not be with another person to please him. As a result of their negotiation, Tiffany would have sexual experiences with men on her own, while Jacob would also be on his own in the club, sitting at the bar, talking to people, or dancing. They both played a flirtatious game where they seduced people on their own. Nevertheless, they were aware of each other, and would look for each other at any moment. The boundary here was not to go off into a private room with a lock without telling the other, not disappearing. Once, Jacob did go off to a private room with another man but argued that it was because it would not be accepted to have sex with a man in front of everyone.

It was especially during initiation, or in the beginning of swinging that participants talked about the challenge of setting boundaries. Vaillancourt and Few-Demo (2014, 8) claimed that initiation into swinging may have reinforced gender conventionality or patriarchal values. This statement has several nuances that should be considered. Both male and female participants in Spain and France claimed that female agency and desire were at the center of their husbands’ desires as well, as many men referred to women as “the queens of this world”³. In the following excerpt, Valerie described one of her initial multiple partner experiences in a club during which she explicitly asked her partner Jake to intervene and pause the unwanted advances from men:

³ Translated from Spanish, “las reinas de este mundo” or “the queens of this world”, a term mostly used by the husbands.

Once, we were in the bed zone, people were fucking, so I started to have sex with my partner, and a guy came, it was nice, then there was another guy, and that was fine. Then there were 4-5 men and my partner and me. It was good for some time, as a type of gangbang, and I was feeling like, the goddess of Olympus, but then there was a point where there started to be more and more men, and some of these men grabbed me and it was more like, 'now you will suck me' or 'now you will do this to me'. I was with the one that I liked, and with my partner, but some of them started to be like 'now, you will do this to me'. So, in that moment, I got upset, and I told my partner – well, he told them all to buzz off (she laughs) - everyone understood, and it was all cool. This is an example of how at that moment it was difficult for me to say no, and my partner helped me. I think that also, with time, you mature as a woman, well I learned how to say no, and in general, I have never been forced to do anything, it is just in the beginning, saying no was difficult.

Valerie, interview

Valerie and Jake, an intergenerational couple from Spain, have been swingers for several years. Initially, Jake considered swinging because he wanted to have a relationship that was more sexually open, specifically because of the following logic: “Knowing that you can have other sexual partners, even as a possibility, even if you don't do anything, - is like a relief, it is as if the relationship does not restrict you or hold you back”. On the one hand, swinging reinforced Jake's personal freedom and sexual satisfaction. On the other hand, Jake admitted that swinging was also a long-term strategy for his wife's long-term satisfaction:

What will happen when I am in my 60's and 70's, and my partner is still a young woman? She will be a woman full of strong sexual desire. And me, at 70, my testosterone levels will have lowered a lot more, and I will probably have a lot of desire, but not the same sexual capacity that I have now. So, what will happen? What will happen then? I ask myself whether the swinger world will be a good outlet for maintaining a good relationship when, in my case, in 20 years, my sexuality is no longer the same. She will be in her prime, and for me, surely, it will not be the same as it is now.

So, to keep her, sometimes I think that the sexual freedom that we have now can be something positive in the future. To keep the relationship, I mean. This is something I never told her.

Jake, interview

Intergenerational and intercultural swinger relationships have rarely been explored, but these strategies may point to the advantages of swinging and the sexual satisfaction in these couples.

Boundaries within swinger relationships were never static. One interesting strategy observed in the swinger world was how couples tested their own boundaries. Some couples, such as Nicole and Victor, lived the very epitome of freedom, although in practice, their strategies were not unlike other couples' in the way that freedom was used to test boundaries. Even though Nicole believed in promoting sexual freedom in their relationship, she also wanted to see how far she would take it:

Nicole: Sometimes I push it, like... maybe I'm doing something that I know I will regret. We were once at a party where there was this gorgeous young girl, person, and her body was like perfect, and... I just needed my husband to be with her so that I could see how I would react. And I even said to her, 'go to our room, go and wake him up and do whatever you do there, in our room' (We were in a hotel). I told the girl to do it to know how I would feel afterwards. And afterwards, when my husband started... to mention her... too much, that's when I noticed, hey, there is this jealousy. Maybe I just wanted to feel it, that there was still something left, that yes, I was a little bit jealous.

Interviewer: This was after he had been with her.

Nicole: Yes, I felt it after, when he started talking about her, 'oh, she's so lovely and beautiful and blah blah blah...and she's single'. That's the point. She was single. Had she been in a relationship with somebody, I wouldn't have thought about it, but I think single women... it's

something like they can cause a little problem sometimes... in your mind... And I think why don't men think... single men as a threat? They never do.

Nicole, interview

Acknowledging this risk and addressing it later with her husband was part of the process of negotiation with herself and with him. Even though Nicole strongly expressed her belief in freedom, "I like that everybody can do what they want, and they can freely.... be with anybody", - acknowledging and voicing her discomfort with another woman was part of respect for her own boundaries. As with all other couples in this study, it was Victor who contacted and filtered new people online, claiming that if Nicole did not approve of a woman, usually young and attractive, - then she would tell him so directly. This, however, usually did not apply to meeting people at parties:

There are situations where we meet a young couple at a party, the woman is very beautiful, and they are both nice people, the chemistry is there, we dance, and anything can happen. I have permission to have sex with this woman in that moment.

Victor, interview

This couple told me that they both felt as if they were moving in different directions. While Victor found swinging very stimulating, and believed himself to be a true swinger, although always preferred to have a swinging partner rather than being single, Nicole felt that she was not

a swinger but a “liberal”⁴. She wanted swinging to be something much more spontaneous, such as for example, when they travelled together to other countries:

It’s more exciting when we are somewhere else, and I don’t know the people and you never know what you’re going to find. You get to know people, you travel together with your partner, and you go to a country where you don’t know anybody, and then you meet... through SDC (an international swinger website), you meet people, and they are willing to show their country and their town, and they are inviting you to their houses and clubs and parties and then.... it’s fun to get to know a little bit about the country and its people. And that’s what I like.

Nicole, interview

The swinger world is a community that comprises not only of swinger clubs, swinger conventions, swinger cruises, and other events, but has a strong online network as well, where swingers help facilitate meetings across the globe. Many swingers reported that they traveled regularly to other countries to meet couples and went out together to parties and clubs, while sightseeing in that country as well. For many couples, swinging was secondary, transitory, temporary, a type of entertainment, while for others, it became a source of social networking where long-term relationships formed a much more solid community than initially expected.

Single Swingers’ Strategies

Swinger club attendees also comprised of single swingers or swingles (Bentzen & Traen, 2014).

Although they represented a minority, swingles still formed an important part of swinger

⁴ “liberal” in Spanish refers to someone who is sexually and sometimes even romantically open-minded. It is a more inclusive concept, while swinging is a concept more confined to sexual exchanges.

settings, as had there been no swingles, there would not be any threesomes. Within this minority, an even greater minority is comprised of single females, and this was especially true in Andalusia, Spain. In an interview with a female, bisexual swingle from Spain, the participant, Emma, shared that she felt “saturated” in the swinger world, attributing much of her disappointment to the way that she was treated by the single men:

No woman likes to feel like a toy...Yes, she came here for sex, that is true, but every woman, regardless of age or nationality, likes to be courted a little bit, - ask her if she wants a drink, order a drink for her, just as an example, talk to her, at least for 5 minutes, rather than ‘let’s go to the room’.

Emma, interview

Other single female swingers, such as Emma, similarly expressed that while they enjoyed a variety of sexual experiences in swinger settings, it was more difficult to claim their agency on their own without the help of a supportive network or a male friend. Emma had a lot of friends who resisted heteronormative ideals and invited her to go out as a group, also inviting the single men they knew well. However, Emma admitted to me that after having been in swinger settings for quite some time (several years), she longed for a man of her own, and even though she would love to see him happy and would be open to share him sexually, she was longing for a long-term relationship, swinger or not.

Single male swingers refused to be treated as objects and claimed their right to voice their refusal or resistance. Vlad, a Spanish male in his 40’s, had been a swingle for approximately 10 years, and during this time, there were several swingle women who wanted to have a serious

relationship with him. He felt that the women began to place conditions on their (sexual) relationship, demanding more exclusivity, something he did not want, and he communicated this almost immediately. When it came to having sexual experiences with couples, Vlad explained what he wanted to negotiate his position as a lover, but in his own way:

I prefer to play...contributing good things to their relationship and at the same time, leaving with something good for myself. And many people see the profile of a single man online, well see us as mere objects or toys to play with. I live in (the North of Spain), and many times, I would get messages such as: 'we are a couple, and we are going to (the North of Spain) - find a hotel and fuck my wife while I watch'. Jesus. And they call this cuckold. I tell them, 'Thank you for thinking of me, thank you for the offer, but I am not interested. I am certain that you will find many candidates that will be interested in your offer'. As a rule, although being part of the swinger world, I like to get to know the people beforehand. I don't take anything for granted, well, my greatest sexual feature is the mind. For me, either one stimulates or activates the mind, or they can be the most attractive person, but I am not interested.

Vlad, interview

Miscommunication in swinger settings would often lead to emotional and sexual dissatisfaction. Much to Emma's and Vlad's disappointment, superficiality and focus on sex may have been the root of the problem. Although they were both looking for something completely different, they shared a similar wish - not to feel "used". Vlad was not looking for exclusivity, but he did demand consideration, depth, conversation, maybe even affection. Vlad's account contradicts the stereotype of single males in swinger settings and may be used as a counternarrative to resist objectification of this subgroup. Other single swingers, male and female participants in Spain, wanted to claim their agency as they understood their minority and marginalized position as singles, advocating their rights within the swinger community. As a strategy, they formed their

own chat group that was more open-minded and included liberal couples and singles that felt left out and wanted to be more respected.

On the other hand, couples reported friction with single men in Andalusia, Spain, and noting less of this among single men in Cap d'Agde, France. Theo pointed this out in the following example where he offered to be an interpreter (French-Spanish) for his wife who spoke only Spanish:

The French man appreciates this gesture. In some way, holds you in regard. He respects you because you are her partner. And here (in Spain), this is less, I mean, we go from one extreme to the next. Either someone thinks that because you are the man, you can decide for her, which is completely erroneous. Or there are those who consider that she is there, and it has nothing to do with you. Excuse me? We are a couple, which has nothing to do with me deciding for her, if she likes a man, well, she can be with him, that is it, she does not ever have to ask me for permission. But I am still her partner, and whether she wants to invite me if we are going to have a threesome, well, it is up to her to decide.

Theo, interview

Theo gave this example as a communication strategy used by the single men in Cap d'Agde, France. The lack of consideration among the single men in Spain was perhaps due to the lack of knowledge about swinger dynamics. However, obtaining knowledge about the norms of each couple was a constant individual process and negotiations were formed constantly. For any novice male or female swingle in any country, the main source of knowledge in that moment was usually the couple. There would be no way of knowing for a novice, without obtaining the information beforehand, what this swinger couple wanted. As many swingers said, "each couple is its own world", referring to the complicated interaction in couples, each one unique.

According to Theo, the French man was much more proficient at reading couples' behavior and negotiated his position without offending the husband, simultaneously seducing the wife.

Swingers' Strategies for Transgression

For those who know it well, the swinger world is full of contradictions. On the one hand, perhaps it was due to the many strategies that one could say that it was an open and welcoming community, where people could come to experiment and where new experiences allowed for non-normative, fluid sexualities. One participant, Diana, claimed that she did not like repeating with the same lovers - she enjoyed having new lovers. Desire for variety and not repeating sex with the same lovers was equally appealing to both women and men in the swinger world. When asked about her desire for sexual variety, Diana explained that it was for the following reasons:

Diana: To break with cultures. I know that a man usually likes to be with a lot of women, have variety, and the woman searches for stability and security, always with the same man. I want to break this culture, and I have always wanted to try this, in the very beginning, change partners, different guys, but of course, without having feelings, and I did like it. I thought, if a man can do it, - a woman can do it too. But she must want it, and free her mind. Because it is always like us women when we are with a lot of men, our culture and the education that we received tells us that we are easy if we are together with a lot of boys. No? But it's not like that. The more boys you have, the freer you become as a woman. Because...you fuck one guy and you throw him away and look for another one. This is very good (laughs).

Interviewer: This is very...feminist. Aren't you a feminist?

Diana: No, I'm not a feminist because I adore men. Because I know my rights and I have my freedom, so no man acts macho around me. It's not feminist. It is the way a woman should be. That's it. If I ask for something and I say that I'm a feminist, I realize in that moment that I'm weak.

Diana, interview

Diana and Samuel were an intercultural and cuckold couple. In this study, 6 out of 15 couples identified as cuckold couples, or couples where the man enjoyed watching his wife with another man. There were no couples where the female was cuckold. For Samuel, swinging was a game where he played on the boundaries of jealousy and eroticism, often lurking in the shadows while Diana seduced the men. They have played a similar game with the same boundaries and same rules for over 10 years:

Sometimes there are women that come to me, but I tell them 'Leave me alone' (gestures with his hand) - 'I am in my world'. Diana is playing an erotic play with a man, don't talk to me, and don't touch me. I am in this - watching'. In our house, we have this mirror, it is the spying mirror. Here is the mirror, here is her bed, and I can see everything. So, there are 2 rooms, one is where she is and other where I am, and the man does not know that I am there.

Samuel, interview

The men who came to their house, they did not always know that Samuel was in the other room, watching. Diana said that it bothered some single men, and they preferred to be with her alone, feeling uncomfortable with the idea of being watched.

Another cuckold couple, Audrey and Derek, claimed that they enjoyed sexual variety, often focusing on the wife. Audrey, an attractive woman in her 40's, said that women "also like to change" and "we also get tired of even the most handsome man in the world". Another female participant, Sabina, told me that she felt that "a woman is tantric by nature", pointing to the

insatiability of female desire⁵. Women in swinger settings did not always feel the need to be with a lot of men, but some of them admitted, and this was often confirmed by the husbands, that “it takes her a while to get started, but then there is no stop to it”. In order to “get started”, women wanted to get seduced, it was a negotiation, not unlike the one in the vertical⁶ world.

However, issues of compatibility translated into the different types of sexualities that were present. Each person came with his or her own feelings and desires, and this made it difficult to maintain a set of rules that one established initially. Kathy and Owen have been together in a swinging relationship for over 10 years, and they were an attractive, bisexual couple in their 40’s. Both have had issues with negotiations with couples in swinger settings, something that Kathy referred to as a problem of compatibility – not all lovers were compatible:

When you try hard to all be together (2 couples), there is always one person in the couple that does not fit in, there is no connection, and the other two yes, and it is a lot more fluid than when it is unexpected. A lot of times, one of the two must give in so as not to annoy the other. Women are much more selective. I am more selective.

Kathy, interview

Kathy refused to be placed in a box as “a swinger”, and even as a regular club attendee, she found swinger settings too constricting, too “predictable”, even “forced” - behind it all was the

⁵ [The second author] has observed in his other data sets numerous parties where certain women exhibited seemingly insatiable sexual desires, requiring many "helpers" (a local term for single men attending group sex events) to satisfy them, in addition to regular partners. We therefore believe this area requires further research, on both insatiability exhibited by certain female attendants and the differing roles played by non-partnered males in different group sex communities, as this affects also factors such as whether single men are welcome at swinger events in a particular community.

⁶“Vertical” versus “horizontal” worlds, terminology used in Spain to juxtapose the world outside of swinger settings with the swinger world, or the horizontal world, alluding to the horizontal position of a bed.

underlying idea that you were there to have sex, it was expected that one was there to have sex. Both Kathy and Owen transgressed their individual sexual limits, and Owen himself said several times during his interview, - “my recommendation to whoever listens to this is – the less rules, the better”. Owen talked about starting out completely “light”, or not having sex with others in the beginning, only watching. This lasted 2 weeks, and other rules, such as “no anal sex” were also broken shortly. This couples’ main strategy was to transgress their own rules, and to venture into unexplored territory. As an example of this, Owen, who only played light, began to have more and more experiences with men. When asked whether there was a difference between single and men in couples, Owen observed more bisexual play among the husbands, commenting that “it happened to me as well, with age, the older they are, the more bisexual”. Owen also pointed out that a single man could let you perform fellatio on him without the presence of his friends, meaning that transgression into bisexuality for heterosexual single males happened on individual basis more than it did in a group.

Male bisexuality among heterosexual male swingers should be studied more in depth. In Andalusia, Spain, sexual play between men was more observed in private homes, while in clubs, this was a more hidden sexual practice. Some male attendees who were not bisexual talked about not wanting to be touched by bisexual men during group sex. Other men did not mind this at all, and accepted oral sex from other men, being open to sexual fluidity, especially finding oneself in a spontaneous group sex session where “homoerotic play” happened between those “bi-playful” and “bi-curious” men (as per Harviainen & Frank, 2018). Even when considered uncommon by some people, swinger settings in Spain and France, like swinger settings in other countries, still adapted to the trends and practices of its participants. Contrary to the idea that swingers

supported heteronormative ideals, most participants in this study expressed their acceptance and support for differences in sexual orientation and sexual practices.

Rachel and her husband Theo have been bisexual swingers for many years and they both strongly believed that bisexuality was natural for both sexes. Even though male bisexual practices were mostly observed at private parties, this couple pointed to the fluidity of these practices, across time and space:

When I started in this world, I put 'heterosexual' on my profile online. But as you get introduced in this world, and you start, and you get to know it... I think that fundamentally, deep inside, everyone is bisexual. Then you have people that hide it and do not want to take it out, and people that keep it hidden. So, it is true that 11 or 12 years ago, there were less bisexual women. Now, most of the women, most of us are bisexual, the ones that are in this (swinger) world are bisexual. If I tell you that it is 90 % - definitely. Of all the men, well, 10 or 11 years ago there were very very few, and the lowest percentage possible of bisexuals. Now, there are a little bit more, but they still have not come out of the closet. A lot of men are interested in trying it, their women saying, 'oh, I would love for you to be with a guy'. But I don't think they dare. So a guy that is bisexual, maybe it is like you say, it is a bit looked down upon, seeing two men at it, but it is a huge turn on, watching it is fantastic. Watching it, you as the observed, everyone goes mad, I don't understand why they don't allow themselves to... why they don't cross that line.

Rachel, interview

Many female participants shared with me their sexual desires to watch their man, or another man have sex or to penetrate a man with a strap-on. Some reported on how one sexual experimentation suddenly spilled into another, and a more risky or transgressive sexuality was initiated. Abigail talked about how her initiation into fisting began with being offered a strap-on at a private party:

There was one man, and he decided to try it with me. I tried it, I fucked him, and everyone watched. It was interesting because no one did anything like that during that party. And I liked it, to dominate a man - usually, it is the other way around. And I enjoyed that. So, I started to try it out a little and bought a strap-on. I found one that was comfortable, suited me, and I bought it. And I started doing it, of course with women too if someone asked me. Someone told me, 'You have a small hand', we were at a BDSM party, and someone said that because I had a small hand, I could try fisting, even with a woman. And I tried it, it was interesting. That's when I understood that it was my thing. This is how it started, it was with men, and sometimes with women as well. Maybe so that I would have sex with her with a strap-on. I prefer doing it with men, though, because it is not usually done, and it attracts me more. And of course, fisting... is a very interesting sensation because you enter a hand and the hand ...if it's possible to close it and make it in a fist - and I have seen this in porn movies.... I have seen it, and it made me want to try it as soon as I saw it. When you enter your hand, it is a great sensation - everything is so hot inside and I like it. The person that you do this with - to see his expression, how he or she gets turned on.... it is very pleasurable. You find yourself inside that person, that's what I feel. I never get sick of it, and I've been doing it for years. Sometimes I try new things, and after a while I think, 'no, this is boring'... not this - this is always interesting.

Abigail, interview

Abigail was a married, bisexual swinger. She came from a society where it was unacceptable to talk about multiple partner sex, or extra-dyadic sex, let alone fisting. At most, one could talk about cheating on one's spouse. This was another point of separation between the horizontal and vertical worlds, as cheating was considered unacceptable among swingers. While Abigail may be viewed as an outsider on many levels, as a swinger, and as a BDSM practitioner, she was a strong believer that she was free to practice any type of sexuality she pleased, and that it should be so in any society in the world.

Dealing with Stigma

Even though swingers did not live with the constant fear of marginalization, most swingers in this study have been living double lives, hiding their private lives from family, friends, children, and co-workers. They were very explicit about their desire to keep it this way, and to avoid the risk of exposure. The main reasons they named were serious repercussions at work and judgmental attitudes from family and friends. One participant, Noah, occupied an important position and resided, with his wife Adele and children, in a prominent area in Spain. They both wanted to make sure that this study was anonymous and added that if someone in their community found out that they were swingers, it would be damaging to his reputation. Another participant, Patricia, a business owner, wanted to make sure that her name did not appear anywhere, repeating to me several times, “my name cannot appear anywhere”, because association with swinger settings would bring serious and negative consequences to her business. Many business owners advertised online and avoided being friends with other swingers on social media. For most people, the risk of exposure was real considering the tightly knit community where they lived and the fact that people knew each other. On the other hand, one participant, Derek, said that the secrecy added to the eroticism, and it was much more exciting to have a double life. For couples such as Derek and Audrey, there were definite legal implications and consequences for them if they were ever found out. Pérez Navarro (2017, 11) explored in depth the ways in which non-monogamies have been excluded from partnership- and kinship-related rights in Spain, pointing out how monogamy has been the exclusive relationship form providing economic privileges to couples who are married.

Swingers themselves claimed that they were “the new gays”, but that “coming out of the closet” for them would take time because society was not ready for this. While swingers were supportive

of other marginalized groups such as bisexuals and transgendered individuals – many did not think that “the world was ready” to accept swinger practices. Others separated gays from swingers saying that while homosexuality was a sexual orientation, swinging was just “a vice”. This reflects on the strategies used to legitimize homosexuals as middle-class, “normal” families in many Western countries, but also creates interesting friction when compared to the prevalence of non-monogamy among gay men (see e.g., Frank, 2013). For example, in Cap d’Agde, swingers did not get support from other groups such as nudists, who were seemingly their marginalized cousins. Friction between nudists and swingers existed, as resorts received bad reviews because of scandalous swinger parties or swingers having sex on a beach where nudists came with their children. These socially established views or identities were difficult to resist in an already marginalized framework. However, Kreston’s (2014) results showed that swingers resisted stigma by redefining their identity online. Social platforms, such as swinger websites and chat groups, allowed swingers to defy expectations and educate others about their lifestyle. This author particularly analyzed swingers’ rhetorical efforts to redefine their own views on non-monogamy as well as resist pre-established stereotypes.

In Frank’s (2019, 4) article on sexual risk in collective sex environments, the author pointed out that “having sex intentionally in the presence of observers or with multiple partners is widely stigmatized, pathologized, and at times criminalized; places where collective sex occurs have long been policed in the name of social order or morality, not just public health”. Participants who chose to share their stories and sign their names said that it was because of “solidarity”, - to support and help research. By contributing to research, and with the help of ethnographers, swingers believed that there would be less stigma with the increasing knowledge about the community. In a similar vein, ethnographers must be equipped with strategies to handle

unpredictable situations within the studied setting and subsequently, in one's personal and professional life. In her article using data from her research on strippers, Israel (2002, 258) suggested that "sexuality researchers may benefit from some of the dancers' strategies for managing stigma, naming the following strategies used by the dancers to manage stigma: supporting each other, protecting their identity, and setting their own limits with the customers" (Israel, 2002, 258-259). As she identified with the dancers, the author suggested that sexuality researchers may use similar ways to handle critique, jokes, harassment, and other negative reactions that such research provokes. In a similar vein, Kimberly (2016, 66) urged sexuality researchers to explore how "acceptance of non-traditional behaviors – such as bisexuality or BDSM – in this subculture might directly impact and shift the views of sexual behaviors in general".

Discussion

There is a lot to be learned from the strategies swingers use in order to manage their negotiations with each other, making sense of swinging, and still resisting stigma in their daily lives. Some of these are: setting eloquent but firm boundaries, choosing time and space, breaking with cultures, refusing objectification, transgressing into non-normative sexualities. We believe that it is through the use of these and other strategies that swingers can maintain a community that fosters non-normative sexualities.

Furthermore, we analyze the ways in which expressions of gender and expectations of sexual orientation have become more fluid among the non-monogamous. Earlier literature describes these communities as largely accepting (or expecting) of female bisexuality but heteronormative

for males. However, our fieldwork and that of certain other researchers shows that the communities may nowadays actually contain phenomena such as a preference on BDSM orientation over gender, strong bi-playfulness among males, and a general openness for safe experimentation without prejudice. While doing so, it nevertheless also illustrates how this seeming openness too contains many tacit boundaries, such as hierarchies of acceptable and less acceptable kinks, or the exclusion of certain gender identities or relationship types. It also sheds light on the ways in which these practices and frameworks may starkly differ from one community to the next, as well as how it is increasingly often the potential attendees themselves who limit their participations in such spheres due to internalized expectations of not being accepted, while the community would actually be quite welcoming of them.

Future research should focus on diversity within swinger couples, such as intercultural and intergenerational relationships, cuckold, and younger couples. Since each setting is distinct, observational ethnographies may be used to recruit couples in different settings and countries.

A major limitation in this study is its nonrepresentative sample that included only those who volunteered for the study. These participants may not be representative of the larger swinger population in Spain or France. Both a representative sample as well as a longitudinal evaluation of swinging over time would be possible if another study was to be conducted, using the established network in Spain and France.

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Author contributions

Both authors contributed to the study's conception and design. Material preparation and data collection were performed by the first author. Analysis was performed by both authors. The first draft of the manuscript was written by first author, and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics approval

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of University of Granada, Spain (Date: December 14, 2020/No. 1588/CEIH/2020).

Consent to Participate and to Publish

Written informed consent was obtained from participants to participate and to publish.