

Today's Alternative Marriage Styles: The Case of Swingers

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Abstract

The results of a national on-line survey of 1092 swingers are discussed. Questions from the General Social Survey are used to compare political, social, and sexual attitudes of swingers with the general population in the U.S. Measures of marital and general life satisfaction from the G.S.S. are also used to compare the groups. A preliminary attempt is also made to determine the level of childhood abuse and family dysfunction in the backgrounds of swingers. It is concluded that swingers surveyed are the white, middle-class, middle-aged, church-going segment of the population reported in earlier studies, but when it comes to attitudes about sex and marriage they are less racist, less sexist, and less heterosexist than the general population. Swinging appears to make the vast majority of swingers' marriages happier, and swingers rate the happiness of their marriages and life satisfaction generally as higher than the non-swinging population. Implications of the study and its limitations are also included.

Introduction

In the fifties the media referred to it as "wife-swapping." Today it's called "swinging," but regardless of its name this alternative lifestyle seems to be increasing in popularity among mainstream, middle-aged married couples in America. The popular media, *GQ*, (Newman, 1992); *New York*, (Gross, 1992); *Los Angeles Times*, (Mahrer, 1998); *Mademoiselle*, (Chen, 1998); are paying increasing attention to the phenomenon, often putting a positive spin on the effects which swinging has upon marriages. The North American Swing Club Association (NASCA) claims there are organized swing clubs in almost all states as well as Canada, England, France, Germany, and Japan. These clubs are lucrative businesses which provide all levels of social activities for swingers including vacation plans, special vacation sites for swingers, and yearly conferences and seminars. Lifestyles, Inc., a swingers travel agency, booked 700 couples at a resort in Jamaica in January of 1998 (*Los Angeles Times*, 1998; Jenks, 1998).

What exactly is swinging? Unlike "open marriages" of the 1970's which promoted non-possessive

love and tolerance of infidelity in their spouses (O'Neill and O'Neill, 1972), or "polyamory" (Wesp, 1992) - the love of many people at once – swinging is non-monogamous sexual activity, treated much like any other social activity, that can be experienced as a couple. Emotional monogamy, or commitment to the love relationship with one's marital partner, remains the primary focus. Swinging is usually done in the presence of one's spouse and requires the consent of both to the experience. Although swingers often become close friends with other swinging couples, there are rules restricting emotional involvement with non-spousal partners. While swinging involves having sex with people other than one's spouse, its adherents claim that it enhances the relationship of the swinging couple both sexually and emotionally. By removing the secrecy and dishonesty inherent in one's natural desires for sexual variety, the couple can explore their fantasies together without deceit or guilt. By removing the necessity for deceit from the relationship, a new level of trust and openness about all of one's feelings is supposedly achieved without the destructive baggage of jealousy. (McGinley, 1995)

Swinging as an alternative lifestyle is of both practical and scholarly interest because the attempt to combine sexual non-monogamy with emotional monogamy is fundamentally "deviant" from the western model of romantic love which assumes that sexual and emotional monogamy are mutually reinforcing and inseparable (Boekhout, Hendrick and Hendrick, 1999). It has yet to be demonstrated empirically whether this alternative lifestyle actually strengthens or weakens marital relationships, but in an era where 37% of husbands and 29% of wives admit to having had at least one extra-marital affair (Reinisch, 1990), where divorce rates for first marriages are approaching 60% (Jones, 1995), and where family instability and parental neglect of children has become a major national concern (Wagner, 1998; Lowe, 1996; Jones, et al, 1995), any attempt to redefine "love" and strengthen the marital bond is worthy of our attention. If swingers have found a way to stabilize relationships, prolong family ties, and enrich the lives of couples we would be remiss if we did not take their lifestyle and their redefinition of monogamous love seriously.

This paper reports on the results of a national survey of 1092 swingers and their views on politics, sex, marriage, family, and how swinging has affected their relationships with their partners in a preliminary attempt to answer some important questions about this unusual lifestyle.

Previous Research on Swinging

The origins of formalized swinging in the U.S. are not specifically known. In the 1950's the media reported a new phenomenon which it dubbed "wife swapping". California military couples reportedly gathered at "key clubs" where husbands tossed their keys into a large pile in the center of a room. The wives then drew a set of keys at random and the owner of the keys became the sexual partner of that woman for the night (McGinley, 1995). Beyond such lore, however, we have very little scientific information about swingers. What little research is available on swinging, which began to appear in the early 1970's and continued through the 1980's, is out-dated and confined to very small, localized samples (Jenks, 1998).

Estimates of the size of the swinging population vary widely. Research provided by North American Swing Club Association (NASCA) (McGinley, 1995) found that 15% of couples in the U.S. have at some point incorporated swinging into their marriage. More conservative estimates are offered by studies which are unrelated to NASCA. Hunt (1975) and Weiss (1983) estimate that two to four percent of married couples have engaged in swinging at least on an occasional basis. Bartell (1971) found the figure to be one percent and Cole and Spaniard (1974) found, based on a small college community sample, that 1.7 percent had experienced swinging at least once.

Demographically, swingers appear to be surprisingly mainstream, even conservative, in their characteristics. They have been found to be predominantly conservative to moderate in political orientation and to identify with the Republican party (Bartell, 1970; Jenks, 1986 cited in Jenks, 1998; Friendship Express, 1994). The majority fall into the middle to upper-middle classes and tend to be in

professional and management positions (Friendship Express, 1994; Jenks 1985; Levitt, 1988, Murstein, 1978; Weiss, 1983). Over 90 percent of Swingers are white (Bartell, 1970; Jenks, 1985) and middle-aged. Jenks (1985) found the mean age of swingers to be 39 years and Levitt (1988) found it to be 40.7. Data gathered by private swing clubs indicate that 90 percent of swingers identify a religious preference and 47 percent regularly attend religious services (Friendship Express, 1994; Miller, 1994). Others (Jenks, 1985; Murstein, 1978), however, have found low rates of religious affiliation and participation by swingers.

We know very little about why couples decide to adopt the swinging lifestyle and its subsequent effects upon the marital relationship. Research in the 1970's seemed to be geared towards viewing swingers as marginalized people (Walshok, 1971; Gilmartin, 1974; Palson and Palson, 1972). More recent studies have attempted to explain swinging using causative models that do not pathologize the swinger. King (1996), for example, suggests that number of premarital sexual experiences may be linked to later participation in swinging. Jenks (1985) proposes a social psychological model involving interest in sex, exposure to the swinging lifestyle, and organized social interactions with swingers to explain participation in swinging.

Developmental models of marriage have also been useful in explaining swinging as a solution to crises in relationships that occur in all marriages. According to King (1996) one of the things that normally occurs in a relationship leading to changes in how we interact with our partners is sexual habituation. At approximately three to seven years into a marriage, it begins to take increased levels of stimulation to produce the same level of sexual excitation previously obtained by a glance or a simple touch. A couple that is receptive to new and different sexual experiences will begin to explore different avenues of shared sexual fulfillment in order to continue to grow together. At this stressful point in marriages infidelity increases and the divorce rate peaks. Couples who find a way to reconnect physically and emotionally are more likely to make it through this period. Swinging may be one creative solution to the problem of habituation – it provides sexual variety, adventure, and the opportunity to live out one's fantasies as a couple without secrecy and deceit.

Butler (1996) adds to the habituation hypothesis by examining other developmental changes typically faced by middle-aged couples. He suggests that swinging is used to develop social ties and to satisfy sexual needs that are denied due to their restrictive middle-class backgrounds. Most couples begin to look at the swinging lifestyle in their late thirties after the pressure of childbearing, establishing a career, and finding their niche in life passes. It is the first time in their lives when they have the opportunity to diversify their interests. They have matured together and begin to want to focus on sexuality. Women reach a time when sexuality no longer needs to be centered on reproduction, and with children entering adolescence the pressures of dealing with young children dissipates. Traditional gender roles become more flexible and tend to converge in mid-adulthood with cross-gender roles emerging among both men and women. While our culture traditionally views the male role as more assertive sexually, women are now able to become more "masculine" in their sexual lives. Swinging permits a non-threatening exploration of sexuality which extends beyond the monogamous marital bed.

The purpose of the present research was to focus upon two critical questions about swinging:

1. Are swingers in any way "marginal" people compared to the general population in the U.S. as measured by demographic characteristics, political and social attitudes, and presence in their backgrounds of dysfunction families or childhood abuse?
2. Does swinging improve the quality of couples' relationships as measured by marital and general life satisfaction measures?

Establishing whether or not swingers are "marginal" individuals is an extremely important part of any

assessment of the swinging lifestyle, since the importance of behaviors that deviate socially or morally from the norm can too easily be dismissed when the people engaging in these behaviors are pathologized (i.e. seen as social deviants, sex addicts, or otherwise "pathological" individuals.) (Jenks, 1998).

Methodology

The questionnaire used in this research consisted of forty-one questions pertaining to demographic characteristics of the swinger, swinging behavior and attitudes, and several questions which were duplicates of those contained in the General Social Survey out of the University of Michigan. A website was developed wherein the questionnaire could be filled out using one's home computer and submitted electronically to the researchers. NASCA, an official national swingers organization, endorsed the research and gave final approval to the questions used on the survey. This research was not supported financially by NASCA or any other swingers organization. Nor are the authors swingers or members of any swinger associations or groups. Local swing clubs provided links from their websites to the survey and all swinger email listserves on OneList.com were given links to the questionnaire. To avoid "prank" responses from non-swingers the questionnaire was not accessible to any Internet search engines. The only way to access the questionnaire was through links placed on websites catering to swinger groups. The questionnaire was completely anonymous and respondents were informed of this before taking the survey. The unit of analysis for the research was individual swingers rather than couples, so in analyzing the data by gender there is no way to know which returns represent two members of the same marital union.

In order to compare swingers to a national "norm" on various attitudes and behaviors, several questions from the University of Michigan General Social Survey (GSS 1983-91) were included. The GSS uses a scientifically selected sample designed to represent the U.S. population as a whole and is commonly used by government and academic researchers to assess attitudes of the American public. One question which was used from the GSS survey in the present study requires some explanation. One of the measures of the "marginalization" of swingers was to try to determine whether they tended to come from abusive or dysfunctional family backgrounds, since this seems to be an explicit or implicit assumption made in attempts to "pathologize" the swinger (Neubeck and Neubeck, 1997). Asking direct questions about early abuse on the questionnaire did not seem wise. Although swingers were already being asked sensitive questions about their sex lives, probing into past histories of abuse might be interpreted as an attempt to pathologize the respondent and negatively affect return rates.

The following question from the General Social Survey was used as an indicator of past abuse or family dysfunction which enabled the researchers to compare swingers with a scientifically selected national sample of respondents:

On the scale below, circle the number that represents your beliefs about human nature.

1=Good

2

3

4

5=Evil/Perverse

There is ample evidence from the literature on child abuse and family dysfunction that some of the effects of abuse upon the victim are a distrust of others, cynicism about others' motives, and a general perception of the world as hostile and threatening (Matsakis, 1998, Miller 1990, Bradshaw, 1996). The researchers reasoned for the purposes of the present study that respondents who came from abusive backgrounds would be more likely to see human nature as perverse and evil. A review of the literature on family dysfunction and its long-term effects failed to turn up any studies making similar assumptions in identifying abuse in respondents' backgrounds. The present study, therefore, relies upon the face validity of the measure.

Findings

Characteristics of the Sample

A total of 1187 questionnaires were returned. Of these, 95 were discarded because they were duplicates (probably reflecting "double-hits" on the return button) or for other reasons were determined to be invalid, leaving 1092 valid returns. Three hundred and twenty six or 29.9 percent of the respondents were female and 766 or 70.1 percent were male. [Table 1](#) shows the marital status of the respondents. Males and females were fairly evenly distributed across the categories, with approximately 85% of both sexes being married or in a committed relationship. The remainder of the respondents classified themselves as single, divorced, or separated.

[Table 2](#) gives additional information about the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The typical swinger in this study was 39 years old, had two years of college education, had been married 1.5 times, was in a current marriage lasting 10.5 years, and had been involved in swinging for 5 years. The subjects were predominately white at 90.4 percent of the sample. African-American's were 4.1 percent of those sampled, Hispanic's were 3.0 percent, and 1.5 percent indicated "other". Gender differences were minimal on all of these characteristics. Included in the sample were ten physicians, fifteen attorneys, sixty-five upper level managers or owners of businesses, twenty-seven engineers, twenty-two teachers, forty health professionals including nurses, and people representing a variety of other occupations including skill blue collar workers, office personnel, computer technicians and artists..

Political and Religious Beliefs

Swingers in this study, rather than being conservative and Republican as suggested by previous studies, seemed to cut across the center of the political spectrum. They were fairly equally represented in all the major political parties (Democrat 31.7%; Republican 27.7%; Independent 27.0%; Other 13.6%) and, as shown in [Table 3](#), were decidedly middle-of-the-road on a liberal/conservative continuum compared to the national GSS sample. In [Table 3](#) and all cross-tabular comparisons of swingers and the G.S.S. sample which follow, the chi-square statistic is used to determine whether there are significant differences between the groups. Answer categories may occasionally be collapsed to clarify contrasts between the groups or to permit statistical comparisons when the numbers within individual cells were very small.

As shown in [Table 4](#) swingers are slightly more likely than the general population to say that they are members of a religious organization. [Table 5](#) shows, however, that swingers are also more likely to say "Other" when asked about their specific religious affiliation. Approximately 2 percent of both the swinger's sample and G.S.S. respondents were Jewish. The religious affiliation of the remaining swinger's in the "Other" category is unknown.

Although swingers identified themselves as middle-of-the-road politically, they tended to take more liberal stands than the GSS population on controversial issues involving marriage and sexuality. As shown in [Table 6](#), swingers were more likely than the general population to support marriages between Blacks and Whites. [Table 7](#) indicates that swingers are also more likely to be in favor of homosexuals' right to marry. When asked whether it was wrong for teens aged 14-16 to have sex, [Table 8](#), swingers were less likely to say that it is wrong under all circumstances. Swingers also tend to reject traditional sex roles in their relationships to a greater extent than the general population. As shown in [Table 8a.](#), swingers are less likely to agree that the man should be the "achiever" and the wife should be at home.

The results, then, suggest that swingers in the sample are the white, middle-class, middle-aged, church-going segment of the population reported in earlier studies. They are, however, more "middle-

of-the-road" politically than other studies have found and, at least when it comes to attitudes about sex and marriage, may be less racist, less sexist, and less heterosexist than the general population.

Marriage and Family Attitudes

Swingers were also very typical of the general population in the U.S. in the high importance they give to marriage ([Table 9](#)) and the satisfaction they get from their families ([Table 10](#)) When forced to choose between the relative importance of personal freedom or companionship in a marriage, swingers appear to be no different from the general population ([Table 11](#)). If companionship can be loosely interpreted as a commitment to "emotional monogamy" in marriage, swingers clearly see this as a valued part of their marital bond.

The results in [Table 12](#) indicate that while companionship may be more important than personal freedom for swingers, most do not believe that the way to strengthen a marriage is to make divorces harder to get. Swingers and the G.S.S. sample differed significantly on this question. It appears that swingers, while valuing marriage and emotional monogamy as much as non-swinging couples, do not believe that external constraints such as restrictive divorce laws as the way to solve problems in a marriage.

A final measure of the normalcy (as opposed to marginality) of the swinging population used in this research was the presence of abuse or dysfunctional family backgrounds in their histories. Since abuse and family dysfunction are theoretically more likely to produce sex addictions and other disturbed relationship patterns, its elimination as an explanation of the motivation for swinging is important if we are not going to pathologize the swinger. It was assumed in this study that if swingers were more likely than the general population to come from abusive or dysfunctional backgrounds they then would tend to view human nature as more evil or perverse. [Table 13](#) shows the results of this question comparing the two samples. Contrary to the assumptions underlying the pathological view of swingers, no statistically significant differences between the groups were found. If anything, the data suggest that swingers may view human nature as "good" slightly more than the GSS population.

Measures of Marital and General Life Satisfaction

How happy are the marriages of swingers? [Table 14](#) compares how swingers and the G.S.S. sample of married persons rated the happiness of their marriages. Significant differences were found between the two groups, with swingers showing higher levels of happiness than married couples in the general population.

Among swingers, is there a relationship between swinging and marital happiness? Two questions on the survey – one which asked about their relationships before swinging and the other about them after swinging – are cross-tabulated in [Table 15](#). As the data shows, 62.6% of swingers found that swinging improved their marriages/relationships, 35.6% said their relationships stayed about the same, and only 1.7% said they became less happy. Even among those who said their marriages were "Very Happy" prior to swinging nearly half (49.7%) said they became happier. Among those with the most unhappy marriages 90.4% said their relationship became happier after swinging. It appears that, at least among the sample of swingers used in this research, swinging tends to improve the perceived quality of the couples' marriages regardless of how satisfying it was before swinging.

Since only 30% of the respondents in this study were female, the question arises whether the data on marital happiness after swinging is reflecting predominantly male rather than female attitudes. [Table 16](#) shows this same question broken down by gender. As indicated, females showed just as great a tendency to rate their relationships as happier after swinging as did males.

If swinging were to threaten a couples' relationship, one would think that controlling jealousy would be

a major issue. [Table 17](#) shows that jealousy does not seem to be as big a problem for swingers as one might think. The majority of swingers (68.1%) said that jealousy was not a problem at all. Only 6.1 percent said it was "Very Much" a problem and about one-fourth (26.1%) said it was "Somewhat" of a problem. Males and females differed very little on their answers.

Swingers were asked how important "variety in my sex life" and "meeting new friends and expanding my social life" were in their decision to adopt the swinging lifestyle. [Table 18](#) and [Table 19](#) show that while sexual variety was "Very Important" to approximately one-half of the sample, over one-third said making friends was "Very Important." These findings suggest that for many swingers swinging may be more than just anonymous sex with strangers – mixing socially with like-minded people may constitute an important part of their social and emotional lives.

General life satisfaction was measured using two questions on the General Social Survey. [Table 20](#) and [Table 21](#) show the results of these two measures. [Table 20](#) indicates that swingers rate themselves as significantly happier than the general population. [Table 21](#) shows that swingers are significantly more likely to experience life as exciting rather than dull or routine. Although it could not be established in this research that swinging caused general happiness to increase, swingers do appear to lead happier and more exciting lives than non-swingers.

Discussion

Although swinging as an alternative marriage style has been around for at least several decades in our society, surprisingly little research has been done on this group. Recent qualitative studies (Gould, 2000) are giving us insight into the rites and rituals inside the world of swinging, but we still have little published information about the demographic make-up of swingers and how they compare to the general population. The purpose of the present research was to compare selected demographic characteristics, values, attitudes, and behaviors of a national sample of swingers with respondents on the General Social Survey conducted by the University of Michigan.

While the General Social Survey selects subjects using a scientifically based, randomized, and therefore representative sample of Americans, the swingers surveyed in this research are not necessarily representative of all swingers in the U.S. They constitute a self-selected sample of members of swing clubs who chose to fill out an anonymous online survey about the swinging lifestyle. The sample is likely to be biased in favor of swingers who have experienced success with the lifestyle and to under-represent those who have dropped out of swinging or who have had negative experiences with it. Because the survey was web-based and conducted online, it may also over-represent swingers who are more educated, technologically savvy, affluent, and male (Dillman, 1999). The strength of the sample is that it is larger and more geographically diverse than that examined in previously published research, but until we know more about the characteristics of swingers generally in our society there is no way to know how representative this sample is.

The sample of swingers used in this research presents a demographic profile of a person who is typically white, middle-aged, with two years of college education, previously divorced, in a current marriage that has lasted 10.5 years, and has been in the swinging scene about five years. While seven out of ten respondents were male, the significance of this gender imbalance for the findings is unclear. Although the unit of analysis in this research was individual swingers, it may be that some respondents filled out the survey as couples and allowed the male to "speak for" the attitudes of both partners. It may also be that males were simply more comfortable with web-based surveys than females (Dillman, 1999). Comparisons between male and female swingers' responses on all of the questions in this research were performed by the researchers and none showed differences meaningful enough to report. Of those comparisons that were shown, i.e. perceived happiness of their marriage after swinging ([Table 16](#)) and difficulty controlling jealousy ([Table 17](#)) males and females had very similar responses. The disproportionate number of males responding to the survey

remains a problem, however, and future research needs to examine the possibility of a "male bias" in the results more carefully.

Previous research on swingers found them to be moderate to conservative in political ideology and predominately Republican, while the swingers in this research were evenly divided among the major parties and decidedly "moderate" in political ideology. On controversial issues relating to sexism, racism, and heterosexism the swingers in this sample showed a statistically significant tendency to be more "liberal" than the G.S.S. sample. Past studies have reported conflicting results on the religious commitments of swingers – some finding them to be highly religious while others conclude that they are indifferent to membership in churches. The present research found that swingers claim church membership in about the same proportions as the G.S.S. sample, but are more likely to say "Other" (not Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish) when asked their religious affiliation. Since subjects were not asked to specify their memberships in the "Other" category, the nature of this religious involvement is unknown.

The swinging lifestyle as an experiment in consensual sexual non-monogamy within the confines of emotionally monogamous relationships poses fascinating questions about the limits and possibilities of marital relationships. The central purposes of this research were to explore 1.) whether this experiment "works" in terms of making the couples more satisfied in their marital relationships; and 2) if it does work, does it do so only because swingers have deviant or pathological needs or interests that distinguish them and their relationships from those of the general population?

For the swingers who responded to the present survey swinging appears to strengthen their marital relationships. Regardless of the level of happiness of their marriages before swinging, the vast majority of respondents reported that their marriages became happier after swinging. For both males and females, jealousy did not seem to be a major problem in the swinging lifestyle. Compared to the General Social Survey respondents, swingers rated their marriages as happier, their overall life satisfaction as greater, and their lives as more exciting.

The results of this research also suggest that the swingers in this sample are no more likely to come from abusive or dysfunctional backgrounds than the general population nor do they have perceptions or expectations of relationships that deviate in any major way from the general population. The measure of dysfunctional background used – how the subject views human nature – showed no significant differences between the two groups. Since this measure has not been used before, however, its validity has yet to be established. The swingers in the sample also seemed to be as committed to marriage, to family life, and to emotional monogamy in relationships as were those in the G.S.S. sample.

Much more research needs to be done on swingers before any conclusions can be made about the efficacy of this lifestyle for strengthening relationships. Quantitative research such as this must be supplemented by more qualitative studies such as Gould's (2000) to give us an in-depth understanding of the meaning of this lifestyle to its members. Online surveys such as that used in this research offer a unique opportunity to sample large numbers of people at a relatively low cost while providing the advantage of anonymity, but they do not come without drawbacks. The possible sample biases in this research (favoring males, the more educated, and the more affluent) are typical of problems encountered in all web-based research (Dillman, 1999).

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