

The swinging subculture undressed essay



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Swinging, differently referred to as ‘wife swapping’, co-marital sex or recently, swinging lifestyle in North America, is a subculture or alternative lifestyle that has become increasingly popular among mainstream, middle-aged, married couples in North America and parts of Europe (Bergstran and Williams, 2000; Walshok, 1971; Jenks, 1985a). According to Bergstran and Williams (2000) and Walshok (1971), the popular media such as Psychology Today, New York, Los Angeles Times, Mademoiselle and TV shows (e. g., Phil Donahue) are paying more attention to swinging, as its attempt to combine sexual non-monogamy with the emotional monogamy that characterize marriage is interesting and fundamentally deviant from the generally accepted concept of romantic love. Interestingly, most popular media reporting or at least paying attention to this sexual subculture tend to place a particular emphasis on the potential positive effects that swinging could have on marriages and sexual relationships. In a way, this may be seen as the driving factor behind the increasing popularity of swinging (Bergstran and Williams, 2000). Infact, the North American Swing Club Association (NASCA) claims that there are organized swing clubs in almost all states in the United States, and in major cities of Canada, England, France, Germany and Japan; with swingers’ conventions being held annually in places like Chicago, Los Angeles and other major centers (Walshok, 1971).

Unfortunately, just how popular is the swinging subculture, is a difficult question to answer. Statistics about the swinging population varies widely, depending on where the information is coming from – the swingers’ camp or non-swinger researchers. For instance, statistics reported in a research carried out by North American Swing Club Association (NASCA) by McGinley

(1995) has it that 15% of couples in America have at one point attempted or participated in swinging. However, statistics from researches not related to NASCA vary widely, from 2-4% of couples (Weiss, 1983) to 1.7% (Cole and Spaniard, 1974) or even 1% (Bartell, 1971). However, irrespective of the size of the swinging population, swinging as a subculture or a deviant lifestyle constitutes an interesting topic for research.

This paper therefore intends to critically examine the swinging culture with a view to elucidating its modes of operation and codes of conduct; to understand what motivates people to choose this deviant lifestyle and to assess the impacts or effects of this lifestyle on the individual and the society at large. Overview of Swinging Swinging refers to behavior which symbolizes two distinctive qualities. One is the agreement between husband and wife or boyfriend and girlfriend to have sexual relations with other people, but in contexts in which they both take on such behavior at the same time and typically in the same place. Such extramarital sexual activity may be either in a group situation, such as an orgy or threesome (most often with another woman), or where couples go into separate rooms for coition in private (Walshok, 1971). The second distinction is that the pursuit of these sexual relationships is principally by means of some organized or institutionalized pattern, i. e.

, they are not impulsive occurrences. Advertisements for interested couples in magazines or newspapers, association in a club, institute or bar scene, or attendance at social functions with precise intention of sexual relations with other couples are general (Bergstrand and Williams, 2000). Such a pattern of sex relations outside the conventional context of marriage is however,

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different from other forms of extramarital relations, which are typically characterized by secrecy and impulsiveness and are only considered relationships within the framework of everyday life. Also, it is hard to discover a clearly perceptible subculture in the service of extra-marital relations while the swinging experience has encouraged an elaborate subculture similar in form to the deviant subcultures linked with drugs and homosexuality.

It is significant to note, again, that the swinging subculture hardly affects one's other role spheres to the degree that it does with other forms of deviance. It is these qualities of this deviant subculture that has generated much interest in the lifestyle (Denfield and Gordon, 1970). Swinging has some relationships to open marriages. In the sense that it is a communal agreement between the marital partners for extramarital sexual relationships. Though, swinging is a more couple-oriented activity to the degree that the extramarital sexual relationships take place with both partners present and only within particular times and settings. The actual sexual contact may be open (occurs in the presence of others) or closed (occurs in separate rooms).

In either case, the participants most characteristically arrive as a couple and depart as a couple (Walshok, 1971). Furthermore, the sexual activity is, unlike with open marriages, engaged in, for its own sake. The philosophy here is one of leisure, body-oriented sexuality rather than emotional attachment and personal growth (Denfield and Gordon, 1970; Gilmartin, 1977). Essentially, swinging, unlike both open marriages and other form of extramarital affairs, seek to combine non-monogamous sexual activity with

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emotional monogamy. Maintaining the love and commitment to a marital partner is the primary objective of the lifestyle, thus, sexual activity with people other than one's spouse is treated like any other activity that can be experienced as a couple.

Thus, swingers argue that by removing the secrecy and dishonesty that goes with the natural desire for sexual variety, sexual activity outside the marital relationship is devoid of the guilt or deceit that characterizes other extramarital relationship (Bergstrand and Williams, 2000). From this viewpoint, some argue that swinging can enhance the relationship of the swinging couple, both sexually and emotionally. How it Began Although, throughout history, it is not uncommon to find societies and cultures that encouraged multiple sexual partners; for instance, ancient Rome was notable for its acceptance of orgies and other alternative sexual practices, several African festivals and cultures encouraged and promoted multiple sexual partners; however, the practice of swinging, as it is done today, has a different and unclear beginning. Contemporary swinging is also entirely different from other forms of mate sharing in history because it is found basically, among middle class, and essentially conventional people (Walshok, 1971). Several authors have proffered various accounts of the origins of contemporary swinging subculture, however, there are two interesting accounts that points to the US Military as the origin of swinging, as it is practiced today. Gould (2000) suggests that swinging began among the US Air force pilots and their wives, during the Second World War.

He reports that, within this community of pilots, mortality rate was abnormally high; as a result, a strong relationship was formed between these

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pilots, with the implication that they could all protect and provide for each others wives, both emotionally and sexually, if the husbands were away or dead. On the other hand, McGinley (1995), reports that swinging began among Californian Military couples early in the 1950s. This report has it that the Military couples gathered at ‘clubs’ where husbands tossed their keys into a large pile in the center of a room. The wives were made to draw from this set of keys at random and the owner of any key drawn became the sexual partner for that woman for the night. Obviously, this practice could have been the reason why swinging was initially referred to as ‘wife swapping’ in its early days. From this two accounts, what is discernable is that swinging, as it is practiced today, started late in the forties or early fifties amongst the American Military community.

In the 1960s, the first swinging organization, know as the ‘Sexual League Freedom’ was created and later, an umbrella body, the North American Swing Club Association (NASCA) was created to pursue the interest of swingers and provide accurate information about this subculture. The Swingers’ Demography Several attempts have been made at mapping out what people constitute the swinging population. Bergstran and Williams (2000) suggest that swingers are essentially mainstream or even conservative, in their characteristics and reported several studies to back up this claim. He reports that the majority of swingers fall in the middle to upper classes and tend to be in professional and management positions, over 90% of swingers fall within the white population and middle aged, usually between 39-45years. In the same light, researchers have severally attempted to compare swingers with the non swinging population, in order to

clearly understand the values and morals of swingers. Most studies comparing swingers with non-swingers were based on the Cognitive Dissonance Theory (e.

g. Jenks, 1985a). According to this theory, human beings dislike inconsistency, either in their various attitudes or between their attitudes and behavior, and will always work to reduce tension wherever inconsistency exists. Using this theory, and with the understanding that swingers, being aware of their breaking the sexual norm, would be tolerant of other forms of sexual deviancy and deviants. Swingers are considered to be liberal on matters related to sex and sexual relations, while being conservative or mainstream with matters totally irrelevant to sex (Jenks, 1985a).

Therefore swingers are described as less religious than non-swingers (Gilmartin, 1974; Jenks, 1985c). In his study on group sex, Bartell (1971) reported swingers to be politically conservative and ethnocentric, but Gilmartin (1974) found them to be fairly liberal. Possibly illuminating these findings, Jenks (1985a) found that swingers were more liberal than non-swingers concerning their own sexual behavior (e. g., abortion, pornography, divorce), but more traditionalist on issues less relevant to their sexual lifestyles (e.

g., capital punishment, social welfare). Swingers, in most instances, do not appear to be very different from non-swingers, especially, as noted above, in matters not related to sex or sexual relations (Jenks, 1985b, 1985c). Jealousy seems to be less well-known among swingers than among non-swingers (Jenks, 1985c). Though, some swingers reported covetous feelings as well as

feelings of envy and exclusion (Gilmartin, 1977), guilt and problems in their marriage, (Denfield and Gordon, 1970). Liaisons outside the swinging framework, expressions of love and obligation, and feelings of emotional understanding are considered inapt and unacceptable by swingers.

Interestingly, the most considerable reason for dropping out of swinging was the wives' inability to stand this form of extramarital relations. This appears to be consistent with the belief that, though swinging is a couple-oriented activity, it is perhaps instigated by the male's desire for sexual variety, for the benefit of the male, and the wife serves the functional role of creating the opportunity. Unfortunately, one of the ironic twists in swinging is the husband's upset (jealousy and envy) over the wife "enjoying the swinging too much" (Gilmartin, 1977). Finally, it is significant to emphasize that couples living in open community or other forms of tentative communities are not included in swinging subculture, though mate sharing and group sex may be an element of their life together.

What is distinguishing about the organized nature of the social activities of the group under discussion is that it is mainly and admittedly for the sake of setting up sexual liaisons without disturbing the basic quality of other aspects of one's life. In Symonds' (1967) terms, this discussion focuses wholly on "recreational swingers" rather than the "utopian" ones who actually constitute only a very small minority of the total number of swingers. Why Do People Swing? Attempts have always been made to understand the interplay of culture and crime in the formation of deviant subcultures. The formation of subcultures has been described as a mode of expression, aimed at passing a particular message to the larger culture.

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Thus, understanding what motivates participation in any subculture, such as swinging, in this case, requires an in-depth appreciation of whatever message, expression or style that the group/organization might be attempting to pass across or the perceived problems in the society that is been addressed (Simon, 1999).

Hebdige (1979), opine that “ subcultures are meaning systems, modes of expression or life styles developed by groups in subordinate structural positions in response to dominant meaning systems, and which reflect their attempt to solve structural contradictions rising from the wider societal context” (p442). Somewhere else, Hebdige (1979) argues that subcultures form generally out of the desire to challenge the status quo, though not through direct means, but rather, ‘ obliquely’ through the use of ‘ style’. Therefore, the paraphernalia or styles of any subculture is an essential component of that subculture. From this understanding, the author argued that subcultures evolve out of the replacement of one or more previous subcultures whose styles have disappeared through ‘ commodification’ by the authority and media and an eventual assimilation into the larger mainstream culture. Explaining this process, Hebdige (1979) posit that this process of commodification of subcultures is achieved through a combination of what he called “ the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.

e. the commodity form)”, and “ the ‘ labeling’ and re-definition of deviant behavior by dominant groups – the police, the media, the judiciary (i. e. the ideological form)” (Hebdige, 1979 p94).

Further emphasizing the importance of style in subcultures, Hebdige writes that style in subcultures is pregnant with significance. ' Its transformations go against nature, interrupting the process of normalization'. Thus, they are gestures or movements towards a speech which offends the silent majority and challenges the principle of unity or cohesion in the society (p18).

Therefore, to understand the motives for swinging, one must seek to understand whatever messages that this subculture appears to be passing across to the mainstream culture, or the perceived problems/contradiction in the mainstream culture that this subculture seek to counter.

Unfortunately, not much was researched or reported in early studies, about the motives for swinging, nor about the styles inherent in this subculture. However, recently, there has been increasing interest in this field. Jenks (1985a), for instance, proposes a social psychological model that hypothesis that interest in sex, exposure to swinging lifestyle and organized social interactions with swingers could explain participation in swinging. Also, King (1995) used developmental models of marriage to explain swinging as an attempt to resolve or counter crises in relationship that normally occur in all marriages. King (1995) used the sexual habituation theory to explain swinging. This theory suggests that at approximately three to seven years of 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.

It is believed that at this point in marriage, infidelity increases and divorce is very likely. To make it through this stage, couples have to be receptive to new and different sexual experiences and must find ways to reconnect, both

physically and emotionally. It appears that swinging might be a creative response to this problem, since it provides sexual variety, adventure and the opportunity to fully live out one's fantasies as a couple without the usual accompanying secrecy and guilt. This model is obviously in line with the argument that subcultures evolve out of the need to solve a perceived social contradiction. Walshok (1971) provided another interesting explanation for the motives behind swinging using the middle class model. The author explained that the surge in urban and suburban communities and the influx of hitherto rural dwellers to these new communities have created what is termed 'status ambiguity'.

Also, according to the author, these new entrants to suburban communities live an entirely corporate life. Most of them are highly educated, work for large corporate companies, live in subdivisions, shop in shopping centers and change job and neighborhood relatively constantly. The effect of this corporate lifestyle, among others, is that organization of personal lives follow, to some degree, the predominating corporate structure of the society. As a result, individuals become habituated to 'affectively neutral, segmented, routinized and bureaucratized form of interrelating', even when the situation does not necessitate such forms of interrelation. Since one has not developed the behavioral and interpersonal skills required to establish relationships on a personal level, it becomes easier to pursue relationships through the organized and predictable structures that one is accustomed to. The understanding here is that the average contemporary middle class man is accustomed to bureaucratized and standardized patterns of interrelations

that weakens personal autonomy, not only in work, but also in social interactions.

As a result, sexual subcultures such as swinging, not only provides an imagery of personal autonomy, but also creates a structure for social interaction and adventure that the average bureaucratized middle class man is incapable of achieving on a personal level. Etiquettes and Organization of Swinging Activities Swinging is a well organized and an increasingly popular subculture. It is believed that there are over three thousand swinging clubs worldwide, cutting across North America (USA and Canada) and major cities of Western Europe. The term ‘ club’ in swinging usually has two meanings. It could refer to a physical location, such as a building.

In this context, clubs are divided into ‘ on-premise clubs’, where actual sexual activity, known as ‘ play’ in the swinger’s parlance, may occur there at the club and ‘ off-premise’ clubs where sexual activity is not condoned within the club premises, but may be arranged at a nearby location. In this case, the club only serves as the point of contact. On the other hand, clubs may refer to the organization or group that is charged with arranging swinging activities in a particular area (Jones et al, 1995). Swinging activities in North America usually involve both on-premise clubs, and off-premise clubs.

The off-premise clubs follow a bar or night club format, sometimes renting an entire existing bar for scheduled events. This is termed ‘ takeover’ in swinging. Such ‘ takeovers’ often relegates the swinging activities to suburbia on the weekends, where bars in large industrial parks which attract

a mainstream clientele during weekdays would otherwise sit empty or closed on weekends when offices shut down. The most essential difference between on-premise clubs and off-premise clubs, as it is operated in US and Canada, is that most on-premise clubs do not serve alcohol, they ask participants to, instead, bring their own alcohol beverage, this is obviously due to several restrictive laws guiding the subculture involving sexual activity and the presence of alcohol beverages. Another common form of swinging activity is what is called the ' swinger party'.

A home that is usually suitable for this purpose may have a hot tub, a pool, several bedrooms, and an assortment of sex furniture such as a sex swing, a stripper pole, a dance floor, or a BDSM dungeon. Within the party atmosphere condoms, lube and breath mints may be readily available throughout the house. Sometimes the host may hold events such as a striptease or dance contest, a flogging or other BDSM demonstration (Reinisch, 1990; Mahrer, 1998). However, unlike in the US and Canada, off-premise clubs are very uncommon in Europe. The vast majority of swinging venues/clubs in Europe allow sexual contact in the club premises and even serve alcohol. The activities of swingers in Europe are reportedly carried out in three main formats: the bar/nightclub format, usually smaller, take place in city centers and focused around a dance floor; the spa format which has pools, Jacuzzis, saunas and steam rooms and where people strip on entry; and the country club format, which is out-of-town, usually serves a free buffet and may include elements of the first two as well as offering large play spaces (Reinisch, 1990; Gould, 2000).

Even though swinging is considered a ‘ deviant’ subculture, they also have regulations and etiquettes that are to be followed. Although, country or region variation can be observed within the ranks of swingers, as could be discerned from the explanations above, there are still certain fundamental etiquettes that swingers are supposed to obey in order to remain in the organization. The most important rule/code of the swinging subculture is that ‘ no’ means ‘ no’. In a ‘ play’ environment, the rejection of sexual advances does not have to come with any justification or explanation, and must always be respected.

The hallmark of the swinging activity is the respect for one’s play mate, the violation of this regulation is considered ‘ deviancy’ and could result in immediate expulsion. As would be expected, there are regional variations of this regulation too. For instance, in the US and Canada, it is considered wrong and impolite to touch a play mate without asking, while in UK and other parts of Europe, touching gently, and firmly removing a touching hand are generally regarded as polite form of non-verbal communication in a play settings (Gould, 2000; Mahrer, 1998). Also, sexual activity, especially penetrative sex involves several regulations, though variations also exist in these regulations. While some swinging clubs insist on protected sex, such as use of condom and changing condom between partners, some swinging organizations allow play mates to engage in unprotected sex, in a practice commonly known as ‘ barebacking’. However, when unsure about the rules operational in any swinging activity, it is considered polite and necessary for partners to set the ground rules before becoming sexually involved (Reinisch, 1990; Mahrer, 1998).

Apparently, unlike several other subcultures, swinging appears to be a set of well regulated 'deviants', this perhaps, could be due to the maturity of people involved in this lifestyle. Conclusion Swinging, as a lifestyle or subculture, is a combination of sexual non-monogamy and emotional monogamy within the context of a marital or romantic relationship that seriously challenges the limits and possibilities of marital relationships. It threatens the very foundation of marital relationship, which hitherto, is the sacred and inseparable nature of sexual and emotional monogamy. A thorough understanding of this 'deviancy', is therefore of practical and scholarly necessity. This paper, so far, has shed light on the practices and activities of the swinging subculture. An attempt has been made within the confines of these pages, not only to provide explanations for the motivations for swinging, from a cultural criminology perspective, but also to explain the activities, organization and etiquettes or codes that are operational within the subculture.

Unfortunately, the information in this paper cannot be said to be exhaustive nor conclusive, further researches are needed to adequately bring to light all that is to be known about the swinging subculture.