

ATTITUDES TOWARD EXTRARELATIONAL SEX AS A FUNCTION OF PARTICIPANT'S AND THIRD PARTY'S GENDER¹

ELIZABETH QAQIESH AND PAMELA C. REGAN

California State University, Los Angeles

Summary.—An experiment was conducted to examine whether attitudes toward extrarelatonal sex, i.e., “swinging”, differed as a function of participant’s gender and gender of the third party, i.e., the “swinging” partner. Participants were asked to imagine that their current romantic partner had expressed an interest in “swinging” with another individual (male or female, randomly assigned). Analysis yielded several significant differences by participants’ gender. Specifically, men expressed greater interest than did women in joining a swinger’s club, reported a higher likelihood than did women of actually joining such a club, and believed more than women that their sex life with their partner would improve after joining a swinger’s club. Participants also preferred a female more than a male swinging partner, although this comparison was not statistically significant.

One of the most fundamental beliefs that people hold about marital and other long-term, committed romantic relationships is that the partners should be *sexually exclusive*. Once an individual is romantically committed to another, the general presumption is that the person will confine all sexual activities to that relationship (see 10, 15). Nonetheless, individuals do sometimes engage in sexual activities outside of the primary romantic relationship (6). Extrarelatonal sex occurs in a variety of forms, including a type known variously as mate swapping, mate sharing, or swinging. Murstein, Case, and Gunn (8) defined *swinging* as a form of extrarelatonal sexual behavior “involving legally married or pair-bonded couples sharing coitus or other sexual pleasures with one or more persons in a social context defined by all participants as a form of recreational-convivial play” (p. 21).

A considerable amount of research was conducted on swinging in the 1970s and early 1980s. Much of this early work focused on identifying demographic correlates of self-identified swingers and attitudes of the general public toward swingers (4, 5, 14). The present investigation explored whether attitudes toward swinging would differ as a function of the gender of the perceiver and the swinging partner, i.e., the “third party”. Based on earlier research indicating that men generally possess more positive attitudes than women toward casual or uncommitted sexual activity (9), we predicted that men would express greater interest in and greater willingness to experience swinging than would women.

¹Address correspondence to Dr. Pamela Regan, Department of Psychology, California State University, 5151 State University Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90032-8227 or e-mail (pregan@calstatela.edu).

METHOD

A sample of 100 heterosexual, ethnically diverse college students (50 men, 50 women, average age = 23.3 yr.) participated. All participants were sexually experienced and presently involved in a committed, romantic relationship. Upon arrival at the research site, participants were escorted to a private cubicle where they read a scenario asking them to imagine that their romantic partner had (a) expressed an interest in joining a swingers' club; (b) explained that swinging was an agreement between couples to engage in sexual activities with another individual; (c) further explained that both members of the couple could participate to whatever extent they desired in sexual activities (including intercourse) with that individual; and (d) indicated feeling that swinging with a third party would be very exciting. For half of the participants, the other individual (or "third party") was identified as a man; for the other half, the third party was identified as a woman (randomly assigned). After reading the scenario, participants rated on 9-point, Likert-type scales how interested they would be in joining the swingers' club (anchored by 1 = not at all interested and 9 = extremely interested), their likelihood of actually joining the swingers' club if the scenario were true (1 = not at all likely and 9 = extremely likely), and the extent to which they felt their sex life with their current partners would improve if they were to join the swingers' club (1 = no improvement at all and 9 = extreme improvement). Finally, participants were debriefed, thanked, and excused.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A 2 (Participants' Gender) \times 2 (Third Party's Gender) multivariate analysis of variance was conducted on the three inferences made by participants. This analysis yielded a significant multivariate main effect for Participants' Gender (Pillai $V = .154$, $F_{3,94} = 5.69$, $p < .05$), which was explored with three followup analyses of variance utilizing a familywise error rate of .05. Effect size analyses used effect size correlation r (1); the square of this index indicates the proportion of variance accounted for by each effect after partialing out other effects. These analyses yielded three main effects for Participants' Gender. Men expressed greater interest than did women in joining the swingers' club (3.7 vs 1.8; $F_{1,96} = 14.32$, $p < .001$, $r = .36$). Men also indicated that they would be more likely to actually join the swingers' club than did women (3.6 vs 1.7; $F_{1,96} = 16.80$, $p < .001$, $r = .39$), and that their sex life with their current partner would improve after joining the swingers' club (3.7 vs 2.1; $F_{1,96} = 9.42$, $p < .005$, $r = .30$). Although no significant main effects for Third Party's Gender were found, two mean differences were of interest. Participants indicated greater interest in joining the swingers' club when the third party was female rather than male (3.2 vs 2.3; $F_{1,96} = 3.50$, $p = .06$) and reported they would be more likely to join the swingers' club when the third

TABLE 1
MEAN RATINGS FOR ATTITUDES TOWARD EXTRARELATIONAL SEX AS A
FUNCTION OF PARTICIPANT AND THIRD PARTY GENDER

	Male Participant				Female Participant			
	Third Party Gender							
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Interest in joining "swingers' club"	3.2	3.3	4.2	2.8	1.4	1.3	2.2	2.2
Likelihood of joining "swingers' club"	3.2	3.0	4.0	2.8	1.2	1.0	2.1	2.2
Likelihood that sex life will improve	3.5	3.2	3.8	2.7	1.8	1.8	2.4	2.1

party was female rather than male (3.0 vs 2.2; $F_{1,96} = 2.80$, $p = .10$). Table 1 presents mean scores for each condition.

As hypothesized, men generally expressed more positive attitudes toward swinging than did women. This finding may reflect the different socialization processes that act to influence men's and women's sexual attitudes and behavior. For example, sociocultural script theorists (2, 11, 12) and social learning theorists (3, 7) posited that the different patterns of reinforcement and punishment men and women receive for their sexual behavior, coupled with normative beliefs about male and female sexuality (e.g., men should seek, whereas women should restrict, sexual activity), encourage men to hold more positive attitudes than women toward extrarelatonal sexual activity.

No significant results were found for the variable, Third Party's Gender; however, a small mean difference was interesting. Specifically, participants expressed greater interest in joining the swingers' club and indicated a greater likelihood of actually joining the swingers' club when the third party was female rather than male. Men's greater dislike of same-sex touch, relative to women, may explain why these male participants held more positive attitudes toward a female rather than a male third party—selection of a female extrarelatonal partner removes any risk of male-male contact (sexual or otherwise) (13, 16). Women, on the other hand, may have held more positive attitudes toward a female third party partly because this choice would allow them to confine sexual activities to one male partner, in accord with normative expectations of female sexuality (10).

Despite these small differences, participants overall did not hold highly positive attitudes toward swinging. All ratings made by participants fell *below* the midpoint of each scale, indicating fairly negative beliefs about this particular sexual behavior. Thus, although extrarelatonal sexual activity does occur and is favored more by men than women, neither group truly approved this behavior. Sexual exclusivity continues to be an expected and valued component of committed romantic relationships.

REFERENCES

1. COHEN, J. (1988) *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
2. GAGNON, J. H., & SIMON, W. (1973) *Sexual conduct: the social sources of human sexuality*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
3. HOGBEN, M., & BYRNE, D. (1998) Using social learning theory to explain individual differences in human sexuality. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 35, 58-71.
4. JENKS, R. J. (1985a) A comparative study of swingers and nonswingers: attitudes and beliefs. *Lifestyles: A Journal of Changing Patterns*, 7, 5-20.
5. JENKS, R. J. (1985b) Swinging: a replication and test of a theory. *Journal of Sex Research*, 21, 199-205.
6. MICHAEL, R. T., GAGNON, J. H., LAUMANN, E. O., & KOLATA, G. (1994) *Sex in America: a definitive survey*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
7. MISCHEL, W. (1966) A social-learning view of sex differences in behavior. In E. E. Maccoby (Ed.), *The development of sex differences*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univer. Press. Pp. 56-81.
8. MURSTEIN, B. I., CASE, D., & GUNN, S. P. (1985) Personality correlates of ex-swingers. *Lifestyles: A Journal of Changing Patterns*, 8, 21-34.
9. OLIVER, M. B., & HYDE, J. S. (1993) Gender differences in sexuality: a meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 114, 29-51.
10. REGAN, P. (2003) *The mating game: a primer on love, sex, and marriage*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
11. REISS, I. L. (1967) *The social context of premarital sexual permissiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
12. REISS, I. L. (1981) Some observations on ideology and sexuality in America. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 43, 271-283.
13. ROESE, N. J., OLSON, J. M., BORENSTEIN, M. N., MARTIN, A., & SHORES, A. L. (1992) Same-sex touching behavior: the moderating role of homophobic attitudes. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 16, 249-259.
14. SMITH, J. R., & SMITH, L. G. (Eds.) (1974) *Beyond monogamy: recent studies of sexual alternatives in marriage*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.
15. WIEDERMAN, M. W., & ALLGEIER, E. R. (1996) Expectations and attributions regarding extramarital sex among young married individuals. *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, 8, 21-35.
16. WILLIS, F. N., & RAWDON, V. A. (1994) Gender and national differences in attitudes toward same-gender touch. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 78, 1027-1034.

Accepted October 11, 2004.