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Swinging high or low? Measuring self-esteem in swingers

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to examine the self-esteem of individuals involved in a consensually non-monogamous relationship, the swinging lifestyle. Utilizing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the self-esteem of swingers was quantified and compared to a general sample. The results reveal that swingers have higher self-esteem. However, gender differences emerged in post hoc analyses whereby men who engage in swinging have higher self-esteem, but women who engage in swinging have self-esteem comparable to others. Results are discussed in terms of evolutionary and clinical importance. Limitations and future directions are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Frequently in our social world when people hear of individuals or couples who engage in consensual non-monogamous relationships (CNM) they think these people to be “deviant,” or they think of such relationships as inherently flawed and less valuable than monogamous relationships (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2013; Jenks, 1998). However, empirical evidence rebuts these beliefs (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Conley, Matsick, Moors, & Ziegler, 2017). CNM relationships have characteristics that are typically considered healthy traits in monogamous relationships, such as individual self-confidence, open communication, trust, and low jealousy (Kimberly & Hans, 2017; Wilt, Harrison, & Michael, 2018). Individuals who engage in CNM have similar qualities to monogamous individuals and view their relationships as normal loving relationships (Barker, 2005; Conley et al., 2017; Jenks, 1998, 2014).

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that those in CNMs may have increased positive traits. Kimberly and Hans (2017) interviewed 16 married heterosexual couples who engaged in swinging. They found that one or both partners in most dyads reported that high self-esteem – in particular, confidence in one’s appearance – was a factor in the decision to swing. Bergstrand and Sinski (2010) documented that swingers believed engaging in swinging increased their partner’s and their own self-esteem. Swingers commented that people who have low self-esteem “do not make good swingers.” One 42-year-old female participant told the researchers, “You have to have high self-esteem to be involved in this or it will not work” (p. 59). With qualitative research evincing high self-esteem in swingers, in the present study we were interested in quantitatively measuring self-esteem in swingers.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Characteristics of swingers

There are various forms of consensual non-monogamies including polyamory, polygamy, open relationships, and swinging. The present study focuses on individuals who

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engage in swinging. *Swinging*, or *the lifestyle*, refers to individuals and couples engaging in sexual activities with others, within the framework of their relationships, much like the individuals or couples would engage in any other social activity (Bartell, 1970; D'Orlando, 2009). Swinging has had many names over the course of time. In fact, it was once labeled "wife-swapping," but eventually the term was considered demeaning to women because of the inference of women being the property of men rather than having their own sexual identity and voice (Denfeld & Gordon, 1970).

Figures on the number of individuals engaged in swinging have varied across time and research. All CNM relationships are suggested to comprise between 4% and 5% of the United States (U.S.) population (Moors, Conley, Edelstein, & Chopik, 2015). Estimates place the number of swingers between 4 and 15 million in the U.S. (Kimberly & Hans, 2017). Still other numbers suggest that as many as 15% of couples in the United States have engaged in some sort of swinging activity (Vaillancourt, 2006). More recently, Chang and Lieberman (2012) reported that one paid-subscription website that helps swinging couples connect with other couples in the U.S. has more than 10 million subscribers.

Research suggests that individuals who engage in swinging are average people; Bergstrand and Sinski (2010) noted that swingers may be the "normal person next door." Evidence shows that swinging individuals work in jobs requiring some training or education and typically earn an average to above-average wage. For example, surveying 342 swingers, Jenks (1985) found that they have an above average income and education and largely identified as middle-class. Jenks (2014) replicated these findings nearly three decades later. Moreover, swingers were typically affiliated with a religious organization (Jenks, 1985, 2014).

Rubin (2001) described swingers as stable, privileged, and ordinary vis-à-vis the finding that swingers are overwhelmingly middle-class, have typical religious and political identifications, and are employed. Rubin maintained that to withstand the stress involved in maintaining a secret sexual lifestyle, these individuals must be stable and ordinary. O'Byrne and Watts (2011) affirmed this in their study, with participants who swing self-reporting as middle-aged, middle-class, and educated. More than 33% of participants had a bachelor's degree, while just shy of 10% had a master's or doctoral degree. Additionally, more than two-thirds of the participants had annual incomes greater than \$40,000 with over a quarter of participants earning more than \$80,000 annually. Jenks's (2014) later research largely corroborated these findings, elaborating that many swingers identified as being politically "moderate" (37.1%) with "liberal" chosen as second most popular political identity (26.9%).

Findings from several studies suggest that swingers are not only similar to non-swingers, but in some respects, they may be better psychologically and socially adjusted than those not in the lifestyle. Fernandes (2009) showed that swingers report notably high marital and sexual satisfaction. Although male swingers report lower levels of marital satisfaction compared to female swingers, the effect size

was small (Fernandes, 2009). Shared social activities and travel create a shared experience that allows couples the opportunity to bond, thereby increasing marital satisfaction (Kimberly & Hans, 2017). Swingers have identified many positive aspects of swinging, including an improved connection with their partner and an improved physical relationship (Vaillancourt, 2006). Bergstrand and Williams (2000) documented that swingers not only have higher marital satisfaction than the general population, they also experience an increase in marital satisfaction after joining the swinging lifestyle. Nearly two-thirds of participants stated that their marriage became happier after joining the lifestyle. Furthermore, in a study of 34 heterosexual swinging couples, Wilt et al. (2018) found high satisfaction with life, low jealousy, and good partner agreement about swinging motivation and activities. Based on this evidence of enhanced psychological and social well-being, it makes sense that swingers would possess increased self-esteem compared to non-swingers.

2.2. Self-esteem

Self-esteem has been studied extensively throughout the history of social science. William James defined self-esteem in terms of competency and success in areas of life that are important to the individual (James, 1890; Mruk, 2013). Rosenberg (1965) defined self-esteem as an individual's overall sense of self-worth. Evidence continuously supports the value of self-esteem. Self-esteem is widely linked with positive affect (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Ryan (1983) noted that high self-esteem is related to traits that are associated with humility, such as empathy, grace, contentment, honesty, and courage. Mann, Hosman, Schaalma, and deVries (2004) stressed that increased self-esteem can facilitate improved health and social behavior and can be a mitigating factor in a wide range of mental disorders and social problems (e.g., depression, anxiety).

Mruk (2013) stressed that self-esteem functions to guide self-protection and self-expansion. Individuals with high self-esteem will seek out opportunities to grow or expand themselves and face problems directly. With respect to the present research, swingers seek novel sexual involvement and expansion of sexual opportunities. Unsurprisingly, Bentzen and Træen (2013) interviewed 12 swingers and noted that self-esteem was enhanced by participation in the lifestyle. Even more recently, Kimberly and Hans (2017) interviewed 16 married couples who had been involved in the lifestyle for at least one year. Participants reported having self-confidence prior to entering the lifestyle as well as an increase in self-esteem once in the lifestyle. Moreover, characteristics of typical swingers include having well-paying jobs and higher levels of education (Jenks, 1985; O'Byrne & Watts, 2011) are associated with higher self-esteem (de Araujo & Lagos, 2013). It makes sense, then, that swingers experience higher self-esteem.

Self-esteem is positively correlated with marital satisfaction (Sacco & Phares, 2001). Individuals in CNM relationships may have increased self-esteem because they are enjoying satisfying relationships on both sexual and emotional levels. Bergstrand and Williams (2000) showed

that couples who engage in swinging report increases in marital satisfaction after their involvement in the lifestyle. Similarly, Mogilski, Memering, Welling, and Shackelford (2017) found that individuals in CNM relationships, compared to those in monogamous relationships, reported higher satisfaction with openness and communication within their primary relationship.

The open and honest communication that is a cornerstone of CNM relationships, including swinging, encourages healthy interdependence rather than unhealthy co-dependence or dependence, emphasizes support systems, and encourages emotional expression (Barker, 2005). Sexual self-disclosure (SSD) takes place when making the decision to swing (Kimberly & Hans, 2017) and is positively related to sexual and relationship satisfaction (Byers, 2005). Swingers often have open dialogue about sexual desires and fantasies which can lead to open dialogue in other areas of the relationship, increasing effective and empathic communication (Kimberly & Hans, 2017). Oattes and Offman (2007) found that both global self-esteem and sexual self-esteem were significantly correlated with sexual communication and that sexual self-esteem was uniquely linked with sexual communication. Since such communication is predominant in swingers (Barker, 2005), it follows that their self-esteem can be heightened.

Jealousy is consistently negatively correlated with self-esteem (Stewart & Beatty, 1985; Stieger, Preyss, & Voracek, 2012). Bergstrand and Williams (2000) and Wilt et al. (2018) reported that most swingers felt that jealousy was not an issue in their lifestyle participation. Swingers manage jealousy through open dialogue, often enhancing the sexual relationship and increasing sexual interest in one's partner (de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Bartell, 1970). If jealousy does present as an issue, this may be an impetus to discontinue involvement. Rubel and Bogaert (2014) showed that nearly a quarter of those who ceased swinging cited jealousy as the reason.

3. Hypothesis

Previous studies typically utilized qualitative research to assess self-esteem in swingers (Bentzen & Træen, 2013; Kimberly & Hans, 2017). We aimed to quantify self-esteem in swingers. We predicted that individuals who engage in swinging will score higher on a self-esteem scale than the general sample of individuals in the U.S. The purpose of this study is to measure the self-esteem of participants in the lifestyle using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and compare it with general data from a sample of U.S. adults obtained by Sinclair et al. (2010) also using the RSES. The RSES is a widely recognized, scaled measure of global self-esteem (RSES; Sinclair et al., 2010; Rosenberg, 1965) shown to have good internal consistency, content validity, and test-retest reliability (Gray-Little, Williams, & Hancock, 1997; Sinclair et al., 2010).

Researchers have determined that the RSES measures both self-competence and self-liking. Tafarodi and Swann (2001) described self-competence as the perception of one's capabilities developed from successes in goal-achieving. Further, they described self-liking as a subjective evaluation of one's worth based on internalization of social

constructions of worth, such as physical attractiveness. That is, self-liking is not based on ability, but rather on one's assessment of the self as a social object (Mar, DeYoung, Higgins, & Peterson, 2006; Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). The RSES can be used to generate self-competence (SC) and self-liking (SL) subscores (Sinclair et al., 2010; Tafarodi & Milne, 2002), and in the present study we consider overall scores as well as SC and SL scores.

It is important to consider the self-esteem of individuals who engage in swinging, as typically their relationships are devalued by non-swinging society and the individuals themselves are often considered inferior. Even in the face of increasingly liberal sexual attitudes (Twenge, Sherman, & Wells, 2015), nonswingers tend to view swingers' relationships as aberrant even though they are very likely to live normal, perhaps even affluent, stable lives. (Conley et al., 2013; Davidson, 2002; Jenks, 1998).

4. Method

4.1. Participants

All methods were approved by the local institutional review board. Researchers gained permission from the owner of a private, local, swinger's club to recruit participants from attendees of the club's events on four different occasions from November 2016 through January 2017. The researchers set up a table and allowed club members (i.e., event attendees) to voluntarily approach the researchers. At that time, following a script, the researchers briefly explained the nature of the research and inquired as to whether the member would like to voluntarily participate in the short survey. If the individuals indicated that they would like to volunteer, they were asked two inclusion questions ascertaining that they were at least 18 years old and that they identified as swingers. All persons who approached the table volunteered, yielding a sample size of 41 (19 men and 22 women) with a mean age of 44.9 ($SD = 10$).

With respect to demographics, our sample had a mean age of 44.9 ($SD = 10$), similar to that of the general sample obtained by Sinclair et al. (2010) ($M = 44.7$, $SD = 16.3$), $t(39) = .14$, $p = .888$. Participants primarily identified as White/Caucasian (90.2%). Marital status varied somewhat, with most participants married (61%), followed by in committed relationships (17.1%), divorced (14.6%), separated (4.9%), and single (2.4%). Most the participants obtained higher education levels (19.5% some college, 12.2% Associates Degree, 24.4% Baccalaureate Degree, 14.6% Graduate Degree, and 7.3% Doctoral Degree). Fewer than a quarter of the participants did not receive some level of higher education, with 2.5% reporting some high school and 19.5% reporting high school diploma/GED as their highest educational attainment. Household income tended to be in the higher ranges provided on the questionnaire: \$120,000+ (29.3%), \$96,001–\$120,000 (17.1%), \$72,001–\$96,000 (12.2%), \$48,001–\$72,000 (19.5%), \$24,001–\$48,000 (19.5%), and \$0–\$24,000 (2.4%). Many the participants identified as Protestant Christian (34.1%). However, there was a fair representation of those who identify as atheist/agnostic (26.8%). Additionally, partici-

pants identified as Catholic (14.6%), other (7.3%), Wiccan (4.9%), None (not affiliated) (4.9%), and Jewish (2.4%).

The majority of the sample identified as “exclusively heterosexual with no homosexual” (51.2%), with some participants identifying as “predominately heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual” (17.1%), “predominately heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual” (17.1%), and “equally heterosexual and homosexual” (14.6%). Men comprised the majority of the “exclusively heterosexual with no homosexual” category (89.5%). No participants identified themselves as being more on the homosexual side of the Kinsey scale than the heterosexual side.

4.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed a written survey comprised of a question as to whether they identified as swingers; the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES); the Kinsey Scale; the Social Desirability Scale-17 (SDS-17); and demographic information, including age, sex, religious affiliation, marital status, education, and income.

4.2.1. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) is considered the “gold standard” for measuring self-esteem (Hatcher & Hall, 2009; Rosenberg, 1965). The RSES is one of the most widely used scales for assessing self-esteem in adults and adolescents (Sinclair et al., 2010). The scale is composed of 10 items that are statements relating to the individual’s overall feelings of self-worth and/or self-acceptance. An example statement is: “I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.” Participants indicate their agreement on a four-point Likert scale with the options “strongly agree” (0), “agree” (1), “disagree” (2), or “strongly disagree” (3), with some items reverse coded. Self-competence (SC) (perceptions of self-ability based on life experiences) scores are comprised of the sum of responses to statements 1 through 5 on the RSES while self-liking (SL) (internalized self-worth) scores are comprised of the sum of responses to statements 6 through 10 (Sinclair et al., 2010; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001). Cronbach’s alpha showed responses had very good reliability ($\alpha = .89$). The RSES has been shown to have validity and reliability across many different age groups and cultures (Galanou, Glanakis, Alexopoulos, & Darviri, 2014; Hatcher & Hall, 2009; Vasconcelos-Raposo, Fernandes, Teixeira, & Bertelli, 2012; Sinclair et al., 2010).

We followed scoring instructions with respect to reverse and direct scoring for the RSES. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem, and there is no cutoff score for low or high self-esteem. Sinclair et al. (2010) derived general data on RSES total and subscores from a large sample ($N = 503$) of U.S. adults, recruited from across the U.S. and matched as closely as possible to the characteristics of the U.S. general population. We used their reported results for our comparison.

4.2.2. Kinsey Scale

The Kinsey Scale was created by Kinsey, Martin, and Pomeroy (1948) and is widely used today (Weinrich, 2014). The Kinsey Scale assesses respondents’ sexual orientation

on a continuum. As some individuals in CNM relationships have sexual or romantic engagements with the same gender (Bentzen & Træen, 2013), it is important to operationalize sexual orientation with more fluidity than restriction.

4.2.3. Social Desirability Scale-17

Because of the unwarranted, yet consistent, strong stigma associated with swinging and other CNM relationships (Conley et al., 2013; Jenks, 1985), we wanted to address the likelihood that our participants were responding candidly and honestly and not simply recording responses that may be perceived as socially acceptable. The SDS-17 is used to control for participants’ answers biased towards a socially desirable or favorable response (Stober, 2001). The SDS-17 is a brief tool comprised of 17 statements to which participants answer with true or false responses (Stober, 1999). The SDS-17 has been found to be both reliable and valid in populations ranging in age from 18 to 80 (Stober, 2001). However, Item 4, which questions about the respondent’s engagement in drug usage, has not had consistent reliability (Tran, Stieger, & Voracek, 2012). Tran et al. (2012) obtained comparison data for the SDS-17 through a large community sample ($N = 1,612$). After removing Item 4, the average score on the SDS-17 was 9.6978 (Tran et al., 2012). Results from the current study were compared with these results also after removing our participants’ Item 4 responses.

4.3. Procedure

Participants completed the survey at the researchers’ table. If participants did not know the definition of a word on the survey the researchers briefly defined the term. If the participant asked for clarification of any of the questions or responses to the questions, the participant was directed to choose the answer that is most applicable.

5. Results

Table 1 presents analyses of responses from 41 swingers. We hypothesized that individuals who engage in the swinging lifestyle would score higher on a self-esteem measure than did a general sample obtained by Sinclair et al. (2010). As presented in Table 1, a one-sample *t*-test showed that the swinging sample’s mean RSES score was significantly higher than that of the general sample.

Although not an *a priori* prediction, because researchers have consistently found that self-esteem is higher in men (Bleidorn et al., 2016), we conducted post-hoc analyses. Results revealed that male swingers in this sample ($M = 26.58$, $SD = 3.59$) had higher self-esteem than female swingers in this sample ($M = 23.41$, $SD = 5.69$), $t(39) = 2.09$, $p = .03$. When broken down by subscore, male swingers had higher self-competence (SC) scores ($M = 13.95$, $SD = 1.75$) than the female swingers ($M = 12.14$, $SD = 2.83$), $t(39) = 2.42$, $p = .021$, but there was no sex difference in self-liking (SL) scores between male ($M = 12.63$, $SD = 2.56$) and female swingers ($M = 11.27$, $SD = 3.15$), $t(39) = 1.50$, $p = .142$.

Furthermore, when broken down by sex, men’s mean RSES overall score remained significantly higher than that

Table 1

A comparison of Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) scores from swingers and a general sample.

		Swinging sample <i>M (SD)</i>	General sample (Sinclair et al., 2010) <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Overall	RSES total	24.88 (5.04)	22.62 (5.80)	2.87	.007**
	Self-competence (SC)	12.98 (2.53)	12.01 (2.82)	2.44	.019*
	Self-liking (SL)	11.90 (2.94)	10.62 (3.35)	2.79	.008**
Men	RSES total	26.58 (3.59)	22.43 (6.21)	5.03	<.001**
	SC	13.95 (1.75)	11.81 (3.02)	5.33	<.001**
	SL	12.63 (2.56)	10.62 (3.44)	3.42	.003**
Women	RSES total	23.41 (5.69)	22.79 (5.41)	.511	.615
	SC	12.14 (2.83)	12.18 (2.61)	.072	.943
	SL	11.27 (3.15)	10.61 (3.26)	.987	.335

Notes: Swinging sample ($N=41$) from the present study, general sample ($N=503$) from Sinclair et al. (2010).* Significant at $p < .05$.
** Significant at $p < .01$.

of the male general sample. However, although numerically higher, women's mean RSES overall score from the swinging sample did not statistically differ from that of women in the general sample.

Results indicate those who participate in swinging had a significantly higher SC scores than the general sample. Likewise, those who participate in swinging had significantly high SL scores than the general sample. Nonetheless, because of the sex differences we observed, it was necessary to compare male and female swingers' scores to male and female general scores separately. There was an effect of sex. Male swinger's SC scores and SL scores were higher than male general sample SC and SL scores. However, women who participate in swinging did not have a higher SC score than women in the general sample. Similarly, although yielding a numerically higher score, women who participate in swinging did not have a statistically higher SL score than women in the general sample.

Finally, participants' scores on the Social Desirability Scale-17 (SDS-17) were compared with a large community sample (Tran et al., 2012). For consistency with previous research and validation of the SDS-17, as stated earlier, item 4 was removed from the current analysis. There was no significant difference when comparing current scores on the SDS-17 ($M=9.73$, $SD=2.98$) with those of the community sample ($M=9.70$, $SD=3.45$), $t(40)=.073$, $p=.942$. This was also true when comparing only male swingers' responses ($M=9.84$, $SD=2.77$) to the community sample, $t(18)=.23$, $p=.823$, and only female swingers' responses ($M=9.65$, $SD=3.22$) to the community sample, $t(22)=.09$, $p=.929$.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The participants in this study share many characteristics with participants in other studies of swingers. Consistent with previous research (O'Byrne & Watts, 2011; Jenks, 2014), our participants in the current study were predominantly middle-aged and White with considerably higher education and higher-than-average household incomes. Similarly to previous research, most male swingers identified as "exclusively heterosexual with no homosexual," but female swingers were more diverse in their sexual orientation. This is consistent with the lifestyle being more

welcoming of women who identify as bisexual than they are of bisexual males or homosexuals (Kimberly, 2016), and with research by Diamond (2004) and others who have documented more fluidity in female sexuality. Moreover, swingers' responses showed no evidence of increased social desirability bias. It can therefore be argued that our comparable demographics add strength to the generalizability of our self-esteem results to other swingers.

Consistent with qualitative research on the phenomenon, swingers do appear to have high self-esteem. Assessed quantitatively, swingers had higher overall self-esteem than the general sample. Although not a planned comparison, male swingers had higher self-esteem scores than the general male sample overall, and in terms of self-competence and self-liking, whereas female swingers did not statistically differ from the general female sample. It is important to note that research on swinging typically has underscored the psychological and social benefits of swinging and has not differentiated advantages by sex. We therefore tested our research question with no *a priori* predictions of sex differences.

It is possible that some aspects of the lifestyle increase self-esteem in men. Our participants were current swingers, and this may be why we see higher self-competence scores in male swingers compared to female swingers and compared to nonswinging men. Self-competence is based on evidence of perceived successes (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). Both evolutionarily speaking and in terms of cultural norms and patterns of reinforcement, it is perceived as success when a man seeks and has increased sexual and mating opportunities (Buss, 1994; Lefkowitz, Shearer, Gillien, & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2014). In a situation of multiple concurrent opposite-sex sexual partners, a man has the opportunity for conceptions with several women, but a woman can only become pregnant once in the event of intercourse with multiple partners in one event (Hughes, Harrison, & Gallup, 2004). It should be noted, however, that we did not ask participants to report the specific sex acts in which they engage. It would be interesting to examine the self-esteem of both men and women in the lifestyle over time to determine whether it increases with continued participation in the lifestyle.

We also found that male swinger's self-liking scores were higher than the those of the general sample, but this

was not true for female swinger's scores. Self-liking reflects a subjective appraisal based on one's perceptions of valued constructs (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). Since our sample of men consisted of those who currently engage in swinging, it may be the case that this increased sexual activity is increasing self-liking, because men's self-esteem is positively related to number of sexual partners (Quinsey & Lalumiere, 1995).

Increased reproductive opportunity increases sexual self-esteem (Linton & Wiener, 2001). With swinging mathematically introducing more reproductive opportunity for men, as stated above, women can only become pregnant once despite having intercourse with numerous men in one setting, but men have virtually unlimited sperm and can impregnate an appreciable number of receptive, fertile females in one setting (Hughes et al., 2004). It makes sense that swinging might have a greater impact on self-esteem for men. Further, men desire sex more frequently than women, and they also prefer short-term mating arrangements (i.e., one-night stands, "hook-ups") more than women do (Buss, 1994). As such, women may be overwhelmed with male solicitation and sexual opportunity, whereas men's sexual encounters are limited to consensual females. The swinging environment arguably provides an atypically ample number of reproductive opportunities for a man, thereby ostensibly increasing self-esteem. We stress that our data did not measure self-esteem change. Our descriptive data cannot determine improvement in self-esteem from involvement in the swinging milieu. Further, our data did not account for preferred sexual engagement of swingers such as intercourse decisions. This would be an interesting avenue for future researchers to pursue.

It is also possible that the swinging lifestyle attracts men who have higher self-esteem initially. Indeed, Baumeister et al. (2003) have argued that self-esteem does enhance overall initiative. Kimberly and Hans (2017) noted that when making the decision to participate in swinging, persons involved in swinging assessed their own self-esteem to determine their willingness to try or continue involvement in the lifestyle. However, Kimberly and Hans also pointed out that it varied by participant whether heightened self-esteem preceded or resulted from swinging participation. These researchers also did not report variation in self-esteem by sex.

Although not planned analyses, the gender effects we observed do follow logic. Fewer sexual partners predicts low self-esteem in men, and male virgins tend to have lower self-esteem (Walsh, 1991). Conversely, women who engage in fewer sexual activities, or are virgins, have similar self-esteem to females who are more sexually active (Walsh, 1991). It appears, then, that sexual activity plays a greater role in male self-esteem than it does in women's self-esteem. Since swinging focuses on sexual activity, this may explain why men in our sample had higher self-competence scores than the general sample, but women's scores were similar to the those of the general sample. Nonetheless, we stress that although women in our swinging sample did not have higher self-esteem than the general sample as predicted, it was not lower. This adds to growing evidence that swingers are not dysfunctional as is commonly believed (Conley et al., 2013).

Since sexuality plays a role in self-esteem, at least for men, it would be interesting to analyze swinger self-esteem based on the extent or type of sexual engagement, i.e., preferred play. One female swinger told Chang and Lieberman (2012), "There's a lot of branches on the swinging tree, so you have to figure out which branch do you swing from" (p. 1). It is possible that established and experienced swingers have figured it out and experience increased wellbeing as a result.

It is important to stress that directionality is unclear from these data. That is, data from this study cannot determine whether individuals who enter the lifestyle increase self-esteem through their participation or if they enter the lifestyle due to higher levels of self-esteem. Future studies may wish to assess self-esteem of individuals as the enter and progress in their involvement in the lifestyle.

There are several limitations to our study. One issue is that the general data to which we compared our sample logically would also contain swingers. Future examinations of this phenomenon may wish to obtain a carefully matched comparison group. Along these lines, although our sample size is higher than those in many previous studies, when broken down by gender, the subgroups were small. Women in our study did have numerically higher RSES total self-esteem and self-liking scores than did women in the general sample, but the differences were not statistically significant. To increase sample size and study power, future studies of swingers may wish to concentrate on other clubs or recruitment strategies.

The study took place in a swingers' club during club events. The area in the club where the study took place was poorly lit, loud dance music was playing, and there is alcohol available at the club. These factors could have impacted the participant's ability to concentrate on the questionnaire. (Of note, no one visibly intoxicated approached our research table.) Furthermore, only one lifestyle club in a mid-Atlantic state was sampled. Future research would benefit from more locations from which to derive samples. Moreover, self-esteem can vary by demographics (e.g., age, ethnicity, marital status, culture) (Bleidorn et al., 2016). Our sample was relatively homogenous and consistent with other samples of swingers, but it is advisable for future researchers to be aware of these differences. Of note, individualistic societies have been documented to have greater self-esteem compared to collectivist cultures (Schmitt & Allik, 2005; Sinclair et al., 2010). It would be of interest to consider this in future examinations of self-esteem in CMNs.

Studies of the traits of individuals in the swinging lifestyle help to shed light on a lifestyle that is frequently kept secret and disdained by those not in it (Conley et al., 2013). This present research supports the notion that those who engage in the swinging lifestyle are psychologically healthy and may even experience better adjustment than others.

These results have clinical implications. When working with individuals who are in consensual non-mongamous relationships such as swinging, therapists may be quick to presume that individuals in the lifestyle differ greatly from those in traditional relationships. Davidson (2002) prompted counselors to challenge perceptions that

monogamy is the only acceptable type of relationships. Since stigma associated with CNM relationships is persistent (Conley et al., 2013), therapists must be aware of their own preconceptions that may impact course of treatment. Although data suggest that swingers experience higher self-esteem, wellbeing, and low jealousy (Wilt et al., 2018), a therapist may wish to explore how involvement in a harshly judged, and often secretive, lifestyle (Conley et al., 2013; Jenks, 1985) impacts the client.

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