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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Profiles and sexual practices of current and past swingers interviewed on French websites<sup>☆</sup>



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## KEYWORDS

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Sexual orientation;  
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**Summary** Swinging is a group sexual practice engaged in by a minority of people infrequently. Our study includes 95 swingers (62 men and 33 women, average age  $38 \pm 9.6$  years) recruited via Internet French websites, mainly “<http://www.netechangisme.com>”. Approximately half of all swingers included declare to be single (42%). Most are middle managers or skilled workers (45%) and higher level managers or other professionals (42%). As to sexual orientation, 67% of the swingers describe themselves as heterosexual (81% men, 42% women), 31% as bisexual (19% men, 52% women) and 2% as homosexual (0% men, 6% women) ( $P < 10^{-3}$ ). Half of all the swingers (48%) state they go to swinging locations with their usual partner, 13% most of the time, 24% sometimes, and 15% never. The types of sexual activities engaged in are: threesomes (86%); soft-swinging (72%); swinging (60%); voyeurism (56%); candaulism (42%); exhibitionism (39%); gangbang (33%); same room sex (31%); and sadomasochism (19%). There is no significant difference of swinging practices based on sex or sexual orientation. The main characteristic of current swingers, as opposed to people who were swingers in the past (past swingers), is that they frequent swinging locations all or most of the time with their usual partner. Among the men, sexual practices which differentiate current swingers from past swingers include swinging and threesomes. Among the women, sexual practices which differentiate past swingers from current swingers include gangbang and voyeurism. The personality dimension sensation seeking, the frequency of alcohol and cannabis consumption and the lifetime prevalence of cocaine and ecstasy use are higher in the swingers than controls.

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## Introduction

Often times perceived as marginal, swinging is a form of group sex thought to be practiced by a small number of individuals. In his book, *Pratique des amours de groupe*, Dr. George Valensin describes his observations of this phenomenon in France over a 15-year period, beginning with the end of the 1950s (Valensin, 1973). In his book, *La planète échangiste*, Welzer-Lang describes the trends and the current position of this form of sexuality in our society (Welzer-Lang, 2005). In this book, with the secondary title *Les sexualités collectives en France*, Welzer-Lang discusses several details with regard to swinging. These details concern in particular, the swingers themselves (who are they), how they meet in the era of Internet, the variety and variability of the places for their meetings (swinging/libertine clubs, private libertine evenings, sauna, public places, etc.), their sexuality as strongly influenced by the codes of pornography, the increasing economic impact of swinging practices, taking into account the changes in street prostitution and the frequent involvement of prostitutes in swinging practices. One must remember that swinging is for the most part initiated, led and at times imposed by men and that half of the classified ads for swingers are from single men. Based on a nationally representative sample of approximately 12,000 persons, 18 to 69 years of age, the "Study of Sexuality in France" found that 3.6% of men and 1.7% of women declared that they had visited a swinging meeting place; 2.2% of men and 0.6% of women declared that they had at least one sexual relationship in these meetings (Bajos and Bozon, 2008). Another study, conducted for the IFOP for the website "<http://www.netechangisme.com>", included 1020 persons and found that overall 7% of the French population (11% men and 5% women), had at least one swinging relationship (Institut français d'opinion publique, 2010). It is important to note that people who engage in swinging make up a high-risk group for sexually transmitted infections (Dukers-Muijers et al., 2010). The goal of our study is to describe the profile of modern French swingers including their sexual orientation and sexual practices, their alcohol and illegal drug use, the sensation seeking dimension of their personality, and the factors associated with stopping swinging practices.

## Subjects and methods

### Sample

Participants were recruited into the study from October 2011 to January 2012. An advertisement describing our study was posted on the Internet site "<http://www.netechangisme.com>", the principal French website dedicated to sexual meetings and swinging. The question "Have you ever been to a location where swinging is practiced (a swingers club or private swingers party, that is, a party organized by an individual for the express purpose of practicing group sexual activities) at least once in your life?" was used to recruit swingers and controls. This advertisement invited people wanting to participate in our study to contact us using the private messaging function. Questionnaires were then sent to these respondents by electronic mail. A link

allowing site users to respond anonymously to our questionnaire was also posed on other French Internet forums for the general public dealing with sexuality (the forum of the radio show "Lahaie, l'amour et vous") or psychology ("<http://www.doctissimo.fr>") and one professional website for French Psychologists ("la Fédération française des psychologues et de psychologie"). The link was also sent by electronic mail to doctors, psychologists, physical therapists and midwives, who participated in a sexual therapy and cognitive and behavioural therapy training course. Sixty-seven swingers (45 men, 22 women) were recruited via the website "<http://www.netechangisme.com>". Twenty-eight other swingers (17 men, 11 women) and 274 non-swinger controls were recruited via the above-mentioned websites and from among the participants in the sexual therapy and cognitive and behavioural therapy training course. This study was approved by the ethical committee of the Paris public hospital (Saint-Louis, CPP, Île-de-France IV) and declared to the national commission which monitors electronic data gathering (Commission nationale informatique and liberté [CNIL]).

### Measurements

The socio-demographic data, sexual orientation, use of swinging locations currently and in the past, sexual practices, alcohol and illegal drug use are given by the subjects using a self-report form which takes 10 to 15 minutes to complete. They then completed the French version of the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS-V) (Zuckerman et al., 1964; Carton et al., 1990; Loas et al., 2001). The total score is 40. The higher the score, the higher the level of sensation seeking is.

### Statistical analysis

Parametric tests ( $\chi^2$ ,  $t$ -test) were used for the descriptive analysis. When the sub-groups were too small, non-parametric tests were used (Fisher exact test, Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis). The level of significance was set at 0.05. The software used is Stata 11®.

## Results

### Socio-demographic characteristics

The swingers group ( $n=95$ ) is made up of 62 men and 33 women, average age 38 ( $\pm 9.6$ ) years old. There is no significant age difference between men and women swingers. Forty-two percent declared they are single, 30% live together and 28% are either married or in civil partnerships. A large proportion (77%) of the swingers are university-educated. Professionally, 45% of them are middle managers or skilled trades workers, 42% are higher level managers or other professionals, 8% are students, unemployed or retired and 5% are blue collar workers. The group of swingers differ from the controls ( $n=274$ , 90 men and 184 women, average age 35.9 ( $\pm 12.3$ ) years old) in that there are fewer women ( $P < 10^{-3}$ ) and students ( $P = 6 \times 10^{-3}$ ).

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