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Title: On the Openness of Desire: Meaning-Construction and Dialogical Processes in the Swing Experience

Objective

The main purpose of the research project here presented consists in analyzing, contrasting and interpreting the self-narrative accounts produced by couples when describing and assessing their unique experience of becoming swingers. This entails a psycho-semiotic approach in order to map the range of differential and common motives as well as the narrative patterns that seem to configure - within a given couple - the adoption of the swing sexual style. Our analysis focuses on the specificity and multiplicity of the male and female's voices so as to disclose the dialogical play through which the representation of desire is continuously co-constructed.

Design and Method

In line with ethnomethodology, conversational analysis and narrative psychology, our study describes the joint discursive and representational processes concerning the changing dynamics of sexual desire and sexual awareness that accompany a couple's opening up to swing experiences. The research method was based in on-line and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 20 Portuguese couples belonging to three different cohorts, in regard with time of beginning and length of their experiences as swingers, that is, beginners (still looking for or just had their first shared imagining or real experience), experienced couples (had multiple partners for at least 2 years), and swing-committed couples (engaged in organizing parties or promoting the swing life-style). The questions were directed at their process of becoming and degree of experiential communion (narrative consonance/dissonance) in terms of psychosexual motives and satisfaction.

Results

A psychosemiotic map is drawn which allows us to understand the wide range of differential and common motives as well as the narrative patterns that seem to configure – within a given couple – the adoption of their swing sexual style. Our analysis focuses

on the specificity and multiplicity of the male and female's voices so as to disclose the dialogical and polyphonic movements of meaning through which the representation of sexual desire and well-being is continuously co-constructed. The ideological background reveals a deep criticism of monogamy, both in its psychosocial and erotic or sexual dimension, accompanied by a plea in favor of “natural polygamy and polyamorism”, and against the supposedly universal hypocrisy and betrayal in marital experience that adopt the cultural canon of monogamy. Thus, becoming swinger is conceived as a significant turning-point that redefines the idea of marital fidelity into a qualitative communion and mutual acknowledgment of Desire as naturally wider and stronger than monogamous commitments. However, if the swing sexual lifestyle is justified by most men as a mode of erotic honesty, a new ethics of love, that saves marriage from erotic frustration and enhances its human quality, it is envisaged by most women as a challenge of freedom that destabilize their ideal of marital happiness but offers enriching peak experiences with ambivalent consequences. Some women regret that their sexual lives have become confined to the swing script and they miss the lost exclusive intimacy of the romantic dyad.

The voice of heterosexual male desire pervades predominantly the visual and verbal interactions. The couple profiles presented on-line provide a wide range of erotic images of the female body, whereas the male body appears to be marginal, as if the swinger realm were mainly dominated by an erotic male decision-maker. Therefore, the voice of female desire is not clearly represented, not only because women are not the protagonists of the decision-making process (typically couples describe their becoming swingers as an original male challenge to the couple sexual life that converts gradually into a genuine joint project), but also because almost all women have a more complex experience than men which requires psychological multivoicedness, that is, they oscillate firstly between anxious resignation and excited emotion-seeking, and secondly they discover their bisexual potential and feel re-empowered with the control they exert on men and the opening up of (in our sample all women declared to have had their first satisfying lesbian experience within a swinger framework and assumed to have become bi-curious or bisexual).

Conclusions

Significant consonances/dissonances were found both within and between couples, showing differences linked to gender (the dissociation between romantic bond and sexual need remains more problematic to women than to men) and time (cognitive consonance between spouses' representations of the swing experience tends to be reinforced over time).