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# Group Sex as Play

## Rules and Transgression in Shared Non-Monogamy

FINAL SUBMISSION VERSION WITHOUT LAYOUT AND COPYEDITING

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### Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic and interview data collected from the United States and Finland on lifestyle (“swinging”) events, this article explores the implicit and explicit rules influencing negotiations for group sex as a type of play. Participants maintain a sense of freedom and spontaneity while acting within situational constraints—ethical expectations, pre-explicated rules, implicit rules, and complex negotiations that occur during the play itself, either openly or more subtly. Because it has implications for the participants’ everyday lives, lifestyle group sex is a phenomenon on the border between games and adult play. Through an analysis of the rules and social contracts arising in group sex, we demonstrate how participants learn to read interactions at group sex events in the way that players learn game systems, and how they can and do become “good players” in such situations.

### Introduction: Lifestyle group sex as play

*I’m sitting on a couch, watching a gorgeous man being fisted on a sling. The woman leaning next to me lets out a long, pleased sigh: a lover has just entered her, unannounced, from behind. The researcher in me immediately thinks “she did not have time to indicate consent”, then remembers that this is not the first time I’ve watched them have sex tonight. They have obviously reached an agreement...<sup>1</sup>*

Sex partying occurs across the globe. Recreational group sex events can be segregated by sexual orientation, relationship status (gay, pansexual, bisexual, heterosexual; couples, singles, mixed; etc.), or by the activities expected to occur (Frank 2013). Although such gatherings are occasionally referred to as “orgies,” we refer to such events here as group sex events (GSEs) or sex parties to avoid the historical connotations of the word “orgy.” Despite popular beliefs that sex parties present a free-for-all atmosphere, Frank (2013) argues that group sex is organized spatially and socially to minimize risk, conflict, and stress. The social dynamics of group sex, along with the formal and informal rules and expectations influencing people’s behavior, vary by situation. Semi-spontaneous group sex between friends, at a swingers’ club event, between gay men in a public restroom, or

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldnotes, 2007, Harviainen.

at lesbian bathhouse events will unfold differently, as participants in these environments have somewhat distinct sets of social and erotic aims and concerns. Yet despite variation, some features of public sex venues and parties are relatively pervasive across practices and identities, such as rules designed to prevent hostile or accidental intrusions, promote orderly interactions, and ensure that participants achieve their primary erotic aims (2013, 186-187).

This article focuses on group sex between male-female couples at organized swinging events and sex clubs in the United States and Finland. In swinging, also called the “lifestyle,” participants engage in recreational sex with outside partners while remaining heterosexually coupled or married and usually emotionally monogamous. Across cultural contexts, committed partners who engage in swinging or attend group sex events often claim to do so to strengthen their dyadic bond, as well as to pre-emptively fight the potential boredom and the resulting decrease in libido caused by habituation (Bergstrand & Sinski 2010; Sims & Meana, 2010; Frank, 2007; Frank & DeLamater, 2009). Not everyone who engages in recreational extra-dyadic activity identifies as a “swinger” or as “lifestyle”; we use these terms for simplicity but recognize the diversity in identifications even as some of the practices involved in “sex partying” are similar.

Recreational group sex among lifestylers occurs at sex clubs or at international, regional, and local events and parties; some events are organized and advertised widely while others are semi-private or invitation-only. Group sex is never essential for lifestylers, but most swingers have at least some experience with multi-person eroticism. Sexual encounters may be “full swap,” involving couples in intercourse with another partner (or partners), or “soft swap,” where touching, oral sex, “girl-girl play,” or other activities short of intercourse occur.

Existing research on swinging from various disciplinary and theoretical perspectives has noted the existence of explicit and implicit “rules of engagement” for negotiating sexual activity in these settings (Bentzen & Traeen 2014; Bergstrand & Sinski 2010; Jankowiak & Mixon 2008; Jenks 1985; Vallaincourt & Few-Demo 2014). Despite local variation due to legal considerations or idiosyncratic circumstances, rules and expectations arise to help participants fulfill their social and sexual purposes while maintaining physical and psychological safety. Group sex events thus contain elements that could be considered game-like, even as precise definitions of a “game” remain tautological, contested and elusive (see Stenros, forthcoming). Game philosopher Bernard Suits (1978) argued that any sexual activity that does not focus on orgasms can be potentially considered a game. Sado-masochist play, for example, is arguably game-like in many respects, including role-playing and interaction with rules (Harviainen, 2011). As we will explore, organized group sex contains implicit expectations, explicit rules, and artificial, pleasurable limits, which are traditionally traits common to game-like activities.<sup>2</sup>

We argue, however, that despite such situational constraints, organized group sex falls along the borderline between games and adult play. Simulation and games scholar Jan H.

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<sup>2</sup> This argument requires us to navigate a contested field. For example, for Buytendijk (1931) “love-play” is play in its purest form, but Huizinga (1939) refutes this, saying that foreplay and wooing may be play, but the sexual act is not (a thought already suggested by Groos in 1899). For Frey (1991), sex is usually performed in a paratelic state of mind, making it play, but can also be instrumental or goal-oriented and thus telic.

G. Klabbers (2009, 24) defines play as: “a voluntary activity or occupation, executed according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the awareness that it is different from ordinary life.” Sutton-Smith (1997) uses sex as a key example of play, and Apter (1991; see also Kerr, 1991) states that sex can, and should, be play. Lifestylers often refer to sex, particularly non-heterosexual, non-monogamous and non-married sexual activity, as “play,” similar to BDSM practitioners (Weiss, 2006; Frank, 2013). Games tend to be more goal-oriented and have more binding rules than play; in play, the rules are “absolutely binding” only in the sense that if the social contract to play is not accepted, the activity becomes something else (Klabbers, 2009). For Sutton-Smith (1997), play is simultaneously drawn to both the equilibrium of repetition, regularity and rules, and to the disequilibrium of transgression, disorder and fantasy. Without both facets, the activity becomes either boring (due to lack of spontaneity) or nonsensical (with a lack of sufficient information; see e.g., Edgley, 2015). Even though GSEs are organized spatially and socially to minimize risk, conflict, and stress, we argue that participants continually negotiate the expectations, rules and logics that emerge in these often clandestine settings. Despite Caillois’s (1961) claim that when play is made secretive, it becomes institutionalized, fluid negotiations of many types unfold at lifestyle group sex events.

We also argue that although group sex at lifestyle events unfolds within a “magic circle” of play, the membrane between worlds is porous. Although a magic circle describes a self-defined world of play, some worlds have more “porous membranes” than others—meaning that players cross the membrane “all the time in both directions, carrying behavioural assumptions and attitudes with them” (Castronova, 2005, p. 147). Group sex has implications for players’ everyday lives that cannot be ignored, whether before, during, or after play. After all, nonmonogamous, semi-public or public sex challenges cultural norms--and part of its appeal, for some practitioners, is this transgressiveness. Not all participants, of course, consider their activities to be transgressive or stigmatizing on an individual or social level – lifestylers rarely need or want to “out” themselves as socially “deviant” (see e.g., Becker, 1963). Still, participants are usually aware of the transgressive nature of their sexual activities. At lifestyle events, participants engage in activities that would be sanctioned or disapproved of in other realms; despite local variation, then, the rules, norms, and expectations of events allow participants to experiment with physical and emotional transgressions in situations where safety and danger are balanced. The rules allow participants to soothe anxieties about the effects that extradyadic sex might have on their relationships or temporarily alleviate fears of stigma (Goffman, 1963) or legal repercussions, for example. The ongoing, fluid negotiations between potential partners, on the other hand, preserve excitement and a sense of spontaneity and fantasy.

## **Methodology**

*A sexologist who knows things such as bordellos, dungeons, gay bathhouses, nude beaches, sadomasochist clubs, and similar places, solely from books, has missed his calling. (Haeberle, 1989, 75; translation by Harviainen.)*

In exploring the research question **how group sex events function as a form of play and how lifestyler group sex practitioners learn and negotiate the rules present in**

**such situations**, we answer an implicit call for game studies to engage with sexuality, something still done only rarely (e.g., Harviainen, Brown & Suominen, 2016).

Our primary data comes from radical-ethnographic forays into the world of swinging and group sex, published research on the lifestyle, and interviews with practitioners. We approach the subject primarily from an ethnographic perspective, as we believe this to be an efficient means of acquiring reliable data from a stigmatized community—people may be inaccurate sources of information if that information further stigmatizes them or conflicts with their social self-presentation (Van Maanen, 1979). Humans are furthermore likely to be inaccurate sources when reporting on their own sexual behavior or experiences (e.g., Alexander & Fisher, 2003), for conscious and unconscious reasons.

As this article combines findings from two individual studies involving different methodological decisions and ethical considerations, the next sections describe each approach in brief.

**Harviainen:** The Finnish interview data was gathered on an opportunistic basis between 2002 and 2012, dependent on events and invitations, and using free-form themed discourse as a form of interview (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Explicit permission was obtained from each interviewee. In order to not disturb participants' activities, notes were written as action summaries during play, then expanded post-event and presented in an observer tone (see Van Maanen, 2011). The interviews were supplemented by participant observation. I chose to actively engage myself with the practices of the communities I studied, instead of remaining a passive observer (Spradley, 1980; Jackson, 1989; see Frank, 2015, for an opposing viewpoint regarding sex research; and e.g., Brown (2015), Moser (1998) and Sundén (2012) on ethnography relating to sex in playful environments). A researcher may increasingly engage in local practices in order to understand performers and their actions in the cultural contexts, as long as that engagement is neither disruptive nor disrespectful. In alternative sexual communities, I believe, the imperative to do so is even stronger, both to produce reliable ethnographic data and to protect the community being studied. While non-participatory observation may also yield useful information about the activities, it does not reach the level of practitioner insight. Such findings can - and should - then later be verified with other methods (Agar, 1996).

The physical, personal and interpersonal nature of group sex requires that a researcher develop an understanding of and integration with the community, perhaps even reaching "expected participant in social life" status (Fine 2003: 53), while maintaining an awareness of his ethical duties (Haeberle, 1989; Frank, 2013).

For ethical reasons, none of that data described here contains activities in which the author himself directly engaged. The Finnish guidelines for research ethics state that one should not engage in activities that physically affect the state of an interviewee or provide them with very strong stimuli (National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2009). Several GSE participants were however interviewed during cool-down periods of events, pauses between play, or in spaces where socializing occurs. As Boelstorff et al. (2012, building upon Fine, 1993) note, a researcher's presence does not taint data gathered from a situation if their actions do not influence events too directly or significantly. In the case of transgressive activities like group sex, *not* participating while observing could arguably

also cause interference and ethical problems (Bolton, 1995). Further, the eroticized atmosphere allowed participants to discuss sexual matters relatively freely, as long as they were guaranteed anonymity.

**Frank:** As I never intended to study group or public sex, my research did not unfold in a traditional manner. My initial academic interest in lifestyle group sex events emerged while I was conducting research on sexual exclusivity. That project involved collecting survey data from 200 married individuals participating in a variety of relationship types—monogamous, secretly or non-consensually non-monogamous, open marriage, polyamory, and swinging or “the lifestyle.” The survey was composed of both existing scales and original questions; respondents were also allowed to write explanations of their answers, generating over 100 pages of text. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 50 survey respondents who reported a variety of sexual practices related to exclusivity (Frank & DeLamater, 2010). The interviews were open-ended, lasting one to 1.5 hours and allowing participants to provide extended narratives about their relationships as well as to occasionally ask questions of the interviewer. Although that research did *not* focus on group sex specifically, information gathered from lifestyle participants and from those reporting group sex experiences in that study continues to inform my writing in this area (Frank, 2007; 2008; 2013).

Further, due to personal involvement in the lifestyle community for over ten years, I also had firsthand participant or observer experience in some enclaves where group sex is practiced. (I purposely do not use the term “participant observer” when referring to experiences I had when I was not present in an official research capacity or at a time when I did not anticipate writing about group sex, as I believe the term “participant observation” should be reserved for a specific, purposeful method of data collection; see Frank, 2015). Beginning in the mid-1990s, I regularly attended lifestyle events, erotic parties, and conventions in the USA, Canada and Europe, as a single woman or part of a couple, and as part of the entertainment as an exotic dancer or part of the convention crowd. Thus I was familiar with the lifestyle *before* I began analyzing it in my academic work, and I remained a community member during and for some time after my intellectual interests developed. At the peak of my academic interest in monogamy, I attended events on an average of once a month, often speaking informally with dozens of people about my research on sexual exclusivity. My interest in sexuality, disciplinary training in cultural anthropology, and previous use of participant observation (2002) meant that I paid close attention to details and social dynamics in these settings. I had the opportunity to watch, ask questions (at least in some settings), and develop ongoing relationships with participants involved in alternative sexual enclaves. Occasionally, I also wrote fieldnotes as I became aware that my insider position was affording me insights into a world that was usually hidden.

Contemporary scholars increasingly find themselves studying “at home,” or in communities of which they are members; ongoing observations and/or retrospective insights thus become an important complement to structured data-gathering (Bolton 2002; Brodsky 1993; Palson & Palson 1972). Such situations require reflexivity about consent, disclosure, and managing close relationships in a nebulous “field” that are slightly different than those tackled by participant observers (Newmahr 2010; Frank 2014). One cannot, for example, seek consent from a participant in an interaction that is not “research” at the time, but that sparks insight or becomes significant later (Desmond

2008). One can, however, take multiple precautions to preserve anonymity of those involved; for this reason, I report retrospective insights abstractly and without identifying details.

Each of us, in our respective cultural contexts, necessarily had to learn the rules and expectations of these communities in order to access the semi-hidden worlds that we write about here. Places where transgressive sexual activity occurs are often secured with multiple and progressively difficult barriers to entry, such as door policies at sex clubs or bathhouses, membership requirements and vetting processes for more private venues, rules about minimal participation or nudity, and so on (Frank 2013). Breaching the norms or etiquette of such spaces has serious repercussions for researchers *and* participants, such as interpersonal conflict or a potential loss of access (Tewksbury 2002; Hammers 2009; Nash & Bain 2006).

### **The Lifestyle in Context**

A pre-existing community shapes participants' expectations and negotiations at organized lifestyle events. An alternative sexual "community" can be defined as a group with shared means of communication (websites, online groups, national and local publications, etc.), leisure activities, beliefs, expectations and practices (including the development of skills, the production of knowledge, rituals, etc.), and ethics (Frank, 2013). Swinging is often thought of as primarily Western, but is found across the globe. The growth of the Internet has contributed to the spread of swinging, and many websites now cater specifically to lifestylers. The repercussions of being exposed as a participant vary across locales, of course, ranging from social stigma and ostracism to legal penalties; in 2010, a swinger's party organizer in China was charged with promoting "group licentiousness" and sentenced to prison, for example (The Guardian, 2010).

Very little reliable documentation exists on the origins of group sex communities, especially in smaller countries like Finland, although some journalistic accounts of the development of swinging exist (e.g., Gould 1999). In the United States, the contemporary lifestyle is often traced to the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s, becoming meaningful in the context of companionate marriages, critique of monogamy, and belief that recreational sex is possible for both men and women. In those decades, swinging was sometimes associated with utopian and revolutionary ideals (Symonds, 1968; Bergstrand & Sinski 2010), although such sentiments have been overshadowed by the growth of consumer culture around extra-dyadic recreational sex. Throughout the 1990s, the number of lifestyle businesses—swingers' clubs, travel agencies, erotic couples' groups, and so on—increased rapidly. Organized lifestyle events now occur regularly in metropolitan areas like Miami, Los Angeles, New York, or Las Vegas, although informal or non-commercial gatherings have not disappeared.

In the United States, sexual exclusivity remains the norm for committed couples despite social changes making monogamy difficult for some individuals: longer periods of singlehood and increased premarital sex, changing gender roles, more opportunities for meeting extramarital partners, and greater expectations for the role of sexuality in one's life and marriage. The lifestyle allows couples to negotiate conflicting discourses of sex and intimacy—for example, the belief that "casual" sex is possible before marriage but

sex and love are inevitably linked afterward. Sex can thus be understood as an expression of love and commitment in the marriage but as “play” with other partners and in other contexts (Frank, 2013, 66).

In Finland, the lifestyle appears to have developed at roughly the same time and in a similar manner, but the smaller size of the potential market has limited commercial swinger activities. Dyadic sex is similarly privileged, even as expectations of virginity before marriage tend to be considered old-fashioned outside of highly religious communities. Extradynamic sex remains a transgressive, potentially even stigmatizing activity. Openly non-monogamous couples seek other partners through networks of friends, websites, or the rare few swinger organizations that exist in the country. As many connections are made through informal networks, some of the rules discussed here may have more impact in Finland than somewhere like the US, because the small number of active lifestylers means that if people misbehave at one event, they may not find any other parties to go to.

According to Frank (2013), multiple sources of satisfaction must be considered when assessing why participants are drawn to particular sexual enclaves or communities. Swinging does not appeal equally to everyone, and there are differences between lifestyle events occurring at local, national, and international levels. Contemporary lifestylers differ in their preferred sexual activities, substance use (e.g., whether alcohol and/or party drugs are accepted), musical taste, social class or consumption practices, play space preferences (e.g., sex clubs versus parties), or attitudes toward inclusiveness (open versus invitation-only events) (Frank, 2013, 187). Still, however, similarities can be observed across cultures and settings. Many lifestylers enjoy socializing as couples, for example, and prioritize emotional monogamy (Bergstrand & Sinski 2010; Jankowiac & Mixon 2008), viewing outside partners as “friends” and not necessarily striving for legal recognition of multi-partnerships.

In both the US and Finland, the lifestyle is based on ethical ideals such as honesty, open-mindedness, discretion, respect, equality, and consent. These ideals of “ethical hedonism” (Easton & Hardy, 2009) are fairly consistent—that is, “lifestylers may argue about how much disclosure is appropriate and under what conditions, but the general impetus is toward transparency in motivation, identity, and anything else deemed important to one’s sexual partners” (Frank, 2013, 66). Although alcohol is served at many lifestyle events, and occasionally ecstasy or other club drugs are used in smaller, niche groups, the overwhelming emphasis on consent and communication means that intoxication is usually discouraged or even prohibited at many events and parties.

The next sections delve into the specifics of the spatial and social organization of recreational group sex at lifestyle events in both countries.

## **Rules Systems, Rules Negotiation**

### The Setting

To an outsider, lifestyle events appear to unfold in spaces where practically anything could happen. An informant of Harviainen said: *“I walked past a trio of people talking with drinks in their hands. A minute later I turned my head and saw they were engaged in a*

*double penetration.*” Such encounters are not really as spontaneous as they might appear, nor are they forced; rather, they result from negotiations that are performed both before and during each event.

Structured play has rules, some of which are negotiated beforehand and some of which are negotiated during play. The organization and maintenance of a GSE requires several types of rules and negotiation. Where and when participants are allowed or expected engage in sexual activity, for example, is often related to the geographic locale and physical setting. Events can be “on-premise,” where space is provided to pursue sex during the event, or “off-premise,” where potential partners meet at the event and then later regroup in more private settings for sexual activity. When legal regulations prohibit sex in public areas, as in hotels or on cruise ships, the main event can be held in the common areas and guest rooms can be used for smaller semi-private parties. Some lifestyle groups organize complete “takeovers,” such as booking every room in a hotel or at a resort, to offer both types of experiences and protect guest privacy. Because the Finnish scene is not large enough to completely rent entire buildings (excluding a few specific venues designed for sex-related events), event planners usually settle for single hotel suites. Informal events are also held in private homes, particularly in the case of spontaneous parties.

The setting impacts the logistics as well as some of the rules and expectations of the event. Logistics deal with everything from the covering of costs involved with hosting the event—whether guests will be charged to attend or will informally share costs, for example—to the provision of refreshments, condoms and lubricants, the availability of beds or showers, and so on.

Many interviewees disliked the idea of hosting a GSE at home, but those who were willing to do so created specific rules for those occasions as well, such as reserving certain rooms for play or requiring everyone to arrive and depart at the same time to avoid alerting the neighbors. At hotel suite parties, guests may need to control noise levels or prevent objections to the presence of extra guests at late hours. Sex clubs also have lengthy sets of rules regarding attire upon arrival (especially if the club is situated discreetly) and inside the club, the appropriate use of space (social or sexual), which sexual activities are allowed, and so on. Across types of settings, Frank (2013) argues that one finds a segmentation of space into zones for socializing and for sexual activity, and a misuse of an area is grounds for sanctions (75; 185).

### The Guests

Selection of participants is also structured, regardless of the setting. In the US, there are dozens of websites catering to couples in the lifestyle, and special groups may form that include some members while excluding others. People join email lists or party groups on Facebook or other networking sites; some couples use mobile apps. In Finland, only a few communities host large events and the emphasis is on informal networks that generate personal invitations.

In both countries, however, event organizers must balance a need for bringing people together with new sexual partners with a need for participants to feel safe and comfortable enough to engage in transgressive activity. Different types of events have

varying ramifications for individuals' and couples' concerns about discretion, desires for novelty, comfort levels around public or semi-public sexual activity, and experiences of attraction, rejection, excitement, and jealousy. Open events allow for self-selection, although participants are not expected to play with everyone in attendance and potential guests are often still required to provide personal information or offer assurance that their intentions are not hostile. Sex clubs may require membership applications and signed legal documents stating that members are aware of the sexual nature of the venue. Other events pre-select participants based on considerations such as age, physical attractiveness, partner permission and availability, and personality and sexual ability, if participants are already somewhat familiar with each other. Some groups, especially if they are small, must also negotiate the relationship history of potential participants—previous partners may not be comfortable around each other in sexual situations—and pre-existing personal conflicts.

Larger events, then, offer more potential sexual partners and an escape from the ongoing dynamics of interpersonal relationships between familiar couples; smaller, hand-selected groups can offer greater intimacy and privacy.

At most lifestyle events and parties, single women are allowed to attend but the number of single males is limited. Limiting single males ostensibly prevents male aggression, and, as many women are interested in playing with other women as well as men, is expected to make for the most desirable mix. In the US, Frank found that some couples believed that the presence of single men put pressure on the women and often made coupled men uncomfortable. Special events cater to women who enjoy multiple single men; participants are often required to apply ahead of time for admission. In Finland, Harviainen noted some similar sentiments; for example, after a party where several single females cancelled, about half of the women interviewed found the situation enjoyable (*"pleasantly, for once enough cock to go around"*), while the other half expressed misgivings (*"I felt expected to put out to too many guys, some of whom I didn't feel attracted to"*).

### Negotiations, Harder and Softer

"Hard" (as in "less flexible", not "more difficult" or "ironclad") negotiation is usually involved in the foundational aspects of a GSE, such as the scheduling and explicit rules.<sup>3</sup> Most hard negotiation takes place "backstage", meaning that it is typically pre-negotiation meant to make the "front stage" (i.e., actual play time) of the GSE seem more natural (as per Goffman, 1959; Edgley, 2015). Hard negotiation in essence enables GSE participants to focus less attention on some elements of their interactions than others. A private party, for example, might be scheduled in advance so that it does not coincide with any female participant's menstrual cycle or so that participants are able to arrange transportation or babysitting. At sex clubs or larger events with entrance fees, one usually finds strict policies on admission and attire with little room for negotiation (e.g., Frank, 2013, 79). Certain nights may be designated for particular types of guests ("Under 30"; "Women

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<sup>3</sup> The use of "hard" and "soft" rules here comes from sadomasochist parlance, in which hard limits denote those a dominant may not break without the transgression being considered violence, while soft limits define a kind of border zone that can be negotiated, but is by default considered out of bounds unless all parties agree on exploring them (see e.g., Brame, Brame & Jacobs, 1997).

Only”; etc.), themes (toga party; fetish attire; etc.), or activities (body painting; tantra; etc.). Nudity may be prohibited in some spaces and required in others, allowing participants to disrobe when comfortable and freeing them from concerns about where to stash clothing.

Acceptable sexual behaviors are also usually decided in advance and relatively inflexible—for example, rules that intercourse requires a condom except between previously committed partners. Rules and expectations can be enforced explicitly, through verbal reprimands given by staff, hosts, or guests, or implicitly through the behavior of other guests. BDSM activity is considered unusual at mainstream lifestyle events in the US, even though some of the couples may also identify as part of the BDSM community. A couple that engages in spanking, humiliation, choking, or any other number of edgier activities at a lifestyle club or a private party might be asked to leave, or simply ostracized at the event and not invited to the next one.

Hard negotiation thus enables participants to have some sense of who the other guests will be and what types of social and sexual activity to expect at an event, although to different degrees. Pre-negotiated rules and expectations can ensure participant safety, streamline interactions, and foster a sense of freedom for some, but remove the spontaneity and choice for others. Rules that do not allow for enough flexibility—such as an expectation that “everyone attending should have sex”—can create a feeling of artificiality.

As consent is highly valued among lifestylers, along with choice in sexual partners, specific interactions are likely to be subject to soft negotiation, which is typically more fluid than hard negotiation. Soft negotiation often takes place partially implicitly. Simply being present at a GSE is generally *not* taken by participants as indicating global consent. Ascertaining whether another guest is interested in sexual contact may occur verbally or non-verbally, such as through eye-contact, body positioning, or touch (although mixed sex groups tend to rely less on touch than all male groups) (Frank, 2013, 81).

Soft negotiation allows for more spontaneity in interactions, but can also lead to miscommunication. A participant who wishes to initiate sex again with a partner from earlier in an evening may not know whether it is necessary to verbally reaffirm consent. General consent such as “sure, let’s have a foursome...” may later, in action, turn out to have limits that were not discussed—for example, “...I don’t want to have sex with that person, just the two of you”. Many encounters unfold easily and fluidly with regard to consent, and such ambiguities are dealt with in a straightforward manner. When miscommunication happens, however, it can cause dissonance and permanent disagreements.

Similarly, a GSE can involve certain implicit rules that are subject to soft negotiation. For example, in many North American swinger communities women are often expected to behave bisexually, while men play exclusively with women, a tendency noted repeatedly in popular and academic writing (Dixon, 1985; Gould 1999; Lind, 2005; Palson and Palson, 1972; Taormino, 2005). Admission is thus more difficult and/or much more expensive for single men than for single women and couples. In some of the Finnish communities we studied, however, single males were welcome, resulting in the occasional gender imbalance which, as noted earlier, was welcomed by some women but

unappealing to others. As many Finnish men were also interested in exploring male-on-male sexual activity, this imbalance was less problematic overall. In addition to women playing with each other, then, many men who appear to identify as otherwise mostly straight engaged in some homoerotic play (e.g., male-on-male oral sex).

These Finnish male participants are better described as bi-playful than bi-curious; they took part in homoerotic play primarily because it was fun and entertaining under the circumstances. As one interviewee stated, *"I suck cock here because it's a good show if I do so, not because I have any significant interest in man-on-man sex."* Men enjoy playfully transgressing their own limits and, potentially thus also fueling the (visual, vicarious) enjoyment of female participants. As a navigational tool, the men only engaged in such play after obtaining clear verbal (or sometimes gestured) consent from the other man; men who did not want to play simply politely declined, with no hard feelings. Whereas in the US community male-on-male play appears to be a question of hard negotiation or even an implicit hard limit at mainstream events, in Finland such play emerged through soft negotiation in the playfully transgressive atmosphere of the event. Newcomers were informed in advance that the event would be bi- and trans-friendly, but even if they had not been informed directly, participants would likely quickly pick up on the nuances of these fluid negotiations.

Given the emphasis on honesty and transparency in the lifestyle, "cheating" was seen as undesirable in both countries. Some rare few men and women who were known to be cheating on their spouses were admitted to the Finnish events, according to interviewees, but only if the person was trusted in the community and known to have sexual problems in his or her relationship. Even at larger gatherings, such as commercial events in the US, participants express suspicion about couples who do not appear to be "in love" or "really together." Individuals who wish to "play alone", or engage in sexual activity with others without the spouse being present in the same space, are expected to seek the consent of their partner. Consent could be obtained in multiple ways, such as by negotiation before the event between spouses, mutually established long-term trusts (a kind of implicit consent), or soft negotiation during the event.

As Frank (2013) notes, in many instances, women tend to handle verbal negotiations, especially those initiating the encounter or moving it to an explicitly sexual level. An exception exists in cases where the couple is asymmetrical in their interest, however—then, often the more enthusiastic partner handles most of the negotiations while the more reluctant partner sets the parameters and limits for play, potentially even vetoing an interaction. In both studied areas, the more reluctant partner in a heterosexual(ish) couple was more often the woman. Situational factors, such as arousal brought on by intoxication or the presence of particularly attractive individuals can, of course, temporarily alter such dynamics. The fact that women often handle the negotiations or may be more likely to exercise a veto does not necessarily imply that women are wielding more power than men in terms of the couples' participation. The issue of power is complex, and for couples, power struggles play out in multiple locales.

Hard negotiations between partners are usually dealt with in advance; many interviewees stated that if couples cannot agree on how far things can be taken with extradyadic partners, or if one person is not "in the mood", they simply do not attend. Soft negotiation issues are trickier: while flashes of jealousy occasionally occur due to many

factors (e.g., too much time spent with one person, inequity in the type or amount of sexual activity, etc.), these are usually handled politely—at least in public. An individual or a couple experiencing problems would usually leave the event before expressing displeasure. Couples known for having too much “drama” or prone to strong emotional outbursts often find their invitations to events dwindling, regardless of their desirability on other levels.

The common requirement that couples play together—that is, forming a foursome with another couple, or a group of couples—means that occasionally the attraction for outside partners is unequal. The phrase “taking one for the team” is used in the US by both men and women to indicate that one consented to sex without a high level of personal desire so that the group could play. “Taking one for the team” *too often* (however that is individually defined) could become a source of conflict in a relationship, or lead to a couple no longer attending parties. The allusion to team sports is important for understanding some of the specificities of coupled lifestyle negotiations, and also indicates how inequalities can become amplified over time even between people who are supposedly “playing” on the same team.

Following Edgley (2015), we therefore argue that while the hard negotiation takes place “backstage”, the “front stage” is left for subtler responses (see also Frank, 2013, 80-81). The clear boundary between what should be perceivable on the “front stage” and what should not enables the emergence of a temporary, erotic, playful atmosphere (ibid.). People remain aware of the legal, social, psychological, and physical consequences of their transgressive play, however, *and* of the need for maintaining a certain demeanor while interacting with their partners and other participants while within the magic circles of GSE play. This, more than anything, points towards group sex being more about play than a game, regardless of the complex rule structure. Despite what theorists ranging from Piaget (1962) to Klabbers (2009) have suggested, it is not always the presence or nature of rules that separates play from games.

The most important negotiation for many, then, is actually performed with one’s partner before, during, and after events (see De Visser & McDonald 2007; Jankowiac & Mixon 2008; others). Discussions about expectations, rules, and limits can take place just before an event or be something that couples have talked about over the years. We have observed, and many interviewees agreed, that knowing that one’s significant other is pleased with the situation is the key navigational issue of a GSE and ideally establishes the baseline for the couple’s non-monogamous interaction with others (see also Frank, 2013, 77-79; 162-163, for examples). The skillset needed for successful and enjoyable negotiation is large, but it is not impossible to master.

### **Discussion: “Good Players” and Expert Orgiasts?**

Successful group sex practitioners develop what game studies calls “procedural literacy” - the ability to analyze how a current (in this case, social) system works, compare it with the way things normally take place outside the system, and then learn how to navigate that system for pleasurable purposes while remaining aware of its connections and differences with the surrounding world (Bogost, 2007). As in games (Duke, 1974), in group sex this ability grants access to the gestalt of the situation (i.e., a holistic sense of its systems and mood) and therefore allows participants to communicate with one

another on a special, highly effective but situation-bound basis. While the “playing field” of GSEs may be uneven as far as erotic capital and opportunities are concerned (e.g., with some participants being more desirable than others; Green, 2008), experienced lifestylers can learn to transcend such limitations through procedural literacies and playful attitudes.

Within the event, even transgression unfolds according to rules: just as people learn the “proper” ways of behaving while drunk, they learn how to act during group sex (Frank, 2013, 61). Of course, venues and people change from one event to the next, some rules or negotiations are revised, and cultural differences exist across locales. Procedural literacies help participants maneuver, but do not solve every potential problem. Still, although newcomers to a scene will undoubtedly make mistakes, most relatively quickly learn how to interact with participants and negotiate sexual activity without conflict. What, then, makes for a “good player,” or an ideal orgiast? Such an achievement requires more than physical aptitude—attractiveness, sexual stamina or skills, and an ability to respond to an intimate partner. The good player must also quickly and effectively assess the nonverbal responses of other participants to his or her actions, and communicate sexual interest simultaneously with respect and some degree of emotional distance, without inspiring jealousy or concern in other participants. Further, a good team should present to other participants as in agreement, and as a ‘strong couple’ with an emotional bond. Doing so assures other couples that sexual interaction at an event between extradyadic partners does not indicate the existence of love or commitment, and does not pose a threat to either primary relationship.

The procedural literacies used during GSEs enable participants to yield into sexual play with few of the limits and repercussions arising in other realms. In the Finnish scene, for example, men who wish to play with other men can do so as long as they initiate it in the expected way. Within the confines of the event, their behavior is interpreted as playful rather than as revealing something essential about their sexual identities. Elsewhere, however, participants are aware that their actions would take on different meanings. In fact, by enjoying straight male on straight male sex partly *because of* its transgressiveness outside of the GSE environment, these participants both break and reinforce taboos on such behavior.

Given the diversity of lifestylers and their events, there is no “implied orgiast” (as per “implied players” of games; Stenros 2015); hypothetically, anyone could participate in a GSE, should one be motivated to do so and invited to an event. Yet although lifestyle groups do not explicitly list the characteristics necessary for participation, an “ideal orgiast” (in the sense of having desired qualities) can indeed be determined: empathic, discreet, considerate, adaptive, playful, attractive, (usually) coupled, and sexually skilled. Even in transgressive play, good players can enjoy some unpredictability, but are expected to make sure *most* of the disequilibrium remains firmly outside of the play.

GSE attendees may momentarily “gamify” their play—by counting orgasms like game scores, for example—but this does not actually turn the event into a game. Play seems to have a tendency towards formalizing itself, and, as we have argued here, transgressive sexual activity is indeed organized spatially and socially to help ensure psychological, physical, and social safety for participants. Yet sexual encounters at lifestyle events also involve a great deal of fluid negotiation between players with varying aims, both personal

(identity, pleasure, adventure, etc.) and relational (bonding, increased desire, etc.). The play's the thing, but it is not *everything*.

DeKoven (1973/2013) outlines three hypotheses on the connection between play and purpose: that play is based on surprise and requires that attention is partially diverted away from some purposes; that in order to play well, people need a community with which to play; and that when we play well, we do not think of how well we are playing. The central idea is that play becomes something other than play when done for a purpose.

GSEs partially challenge two of DeKoven's hypotheses. GSEs can provide *surprise*, but beneficially only if they are also optimally predictable and safe enough. Further, in contrast to his assertion that play cannot have a purpose, events can serve multiple purposes for participants, from sexual fulfillment to bonding. People do indeed need a community to play, and when a sense of *community* is strongly present for GSE participants, participants learn to play well together. The rules are thus experienced not as impositions but as starting conditions from which to undertake transgressive behavior. As people become accustomed to the rules and expectations, they can simultaneously know what it means to play well and do so without thinking.

## **Conclusion**

GSEs exhibit certain play-like qualities. The participants clearly follow rules, which they negotiate so as to avoid conflict and anxiety, and engage in enjoyable encounters. In contrast to Suits' (1978) views, in group sex the participants do not take up additional rules to make the activity more enjoyable by complicating it. Instead, participants use rules to create more freedom to act within the setting where the activity takes place — to transgress in a socially, emotionally and physically safer manner. They play, in a structured and very rules-bound way, but it is not a game that they are playing.

Pre-planned group sex events take place within a porous "magic circle" where participants remain cognizant of the social, psychological, and physical consequences that their actions would have outside of that circle. In many forms of play, messages between players do not (and often should not) denote that which they would otherwise mean—for example, when animals play, their bites are not lethal (Bateson, 1955). In group sex, however, messages remain serious and literal, as the trust necessary for soft negotiation and transgressive behavior requires a high level of transparency. Some significances remain playful in the Batesonian sense as well, though, with the foremost being a playful deconstruction of societal expectations of monogamy. Here, at the border of interaction and rule-bound recreational behavior, we can witness not just how people engage in group sex, but also gain insight into how social negotiation processes might function in other playful, maybe even game-like, environments.

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