

## Three's a Crowd or Bonus?: College Students' Threesome Experiences

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### Abstract

*Undergraduates (196) at a large southeastern university completed a 59 item Internet survey on threesome attitudes and behaviors. Fifteen percent of the sample reported having engaged in a threesome. Men evidenced more interest in having a threesome than women and persons most likely to report having had a threesome held hedonistic compared to relativistic or absolutist sexual values. The motivation for a threesome was primarily curiosity and the third person invited to join the couple in a threesome was most often a friend/acquaintance of the woman. The outcome of a threesome for the couple was primarily no effect with about a fifth reporting negative outcomes and a similar percentage reporting positive outcomes. Finally, the event happened only once for 83% of the respondents who had a threesome. Symbolic interaction, operant learning, social learning, affective theory and feminist theory were used to interpret the data. Implications and limitations are identified.*

Having a "threesome" (three individuals engaging in the same sexual encounter, all not necessarily with each other) is a sexual fantasy for some, a reality for others, and debauchery for still others. Are threesomes an adventure for the curious or a playground for the deprived? Is three a crowd or a bonus for the couple? And what are the motivations for having a threesome and the relationship outcomes for the couple who have a threesome? This study focused on the frequency of threesomes among undergraduates, the motivations, and the outcomes.

### Background

Monogamy is most commonly defined as the act of being married to one person at a time or being sexually or emotionally committed to one person at a time. Research on non-monogamy has included extra-marital sex (Scuka, 2015), polyamory (Scheff, 2014), and swinging (Vaillancourt and Few-Demo, 2014). While the benefits of monogamy are still debated, research on non-monogamy includes positive interactions and outcomes. Christian Klesse (2011), in his article "Notions of love in polyamory", identified polyamory as a responsible, consensual, and ethical approach to non-monogamy. Similarly, Kimberly (2016) examined the social scripts of swingers, and emphasized the quality of it being consensual. Regardless of whatever benefits non-monogamy may involve, stigma associated

with non-monogamy has been a focus of research (Moors, Matsick, Zielgler, Rubin, & Conley, 2013).

While there has been research on multiple partners in general, none has been specific to the phenomenon of threesomes. The exception is research conducted 25 years ago by Arno Karlen (1988) who interviewed 50 subjects who had been involved in a threesome. He found that threesomes were variable from single encounters to decades-long triads, reflected motives from intimacy to conquest and resulted in consequences from enhancing to ending a relationship.

More recently, Joyal, Cossette & Lapierre (2015) surveyed the sexual fantasies of 1516 Canadians (ages 18-77) and found that 57% of the respondents had fantasized about sex with two men; 85% of men had fantasized about sex with two women. Forty percent of the women had fantasized about sex with two women; 16% of the men with two men. When asked about having fantasized about “engaging in sexual swinging with a couple I know” 18% of the women and 42% percent of the men reported this fantasy. The current study was designed to provide more data on the threesome behavior- how it is negotiated, the frequency with which it occurs and the outcomes for a sample of college students.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Various theories may be applied to the understanding of threesomes. Symbolic interactionism theory suggests that meanings, labels, and definitions are not inherent but learned through interaction with others. According to the interactionist view, individuals respond to their definition of situation rather so that some will view it as an experience to pursue while others, an experience to avoid.

Operant learning theory emphasizes that the consequences of a behavior influence whether or not that behavior will occur in the future. A partner who suggests the possibility of a threesome will be met with interest/reward or disinterest/disapproval/punishment. The experience an individual/couple has with a threesome will determine whether or not a threesome recurs. Social learning theory emphasizes that, through modeling or observing others, behavior can be influenced. Having friends who discuss their experiences with having a threesome will impact an individual's or couple's view of wanting to try a threesome or not.

Affective theories emphasize the fact that emotions, such as love, jealousy, fear, anxiety, embarrassment, and frustration, may be involved in the evaluation of a sexual phenomenon (threesome), may be a component of the sexual expression, and/or may be a consequence of sexual activity. For example, love for the partner or fear of disapproval for not going along with the suggestion of a threesome are emotions which may operate in deciding about a threesome. Anxiety and fear may occur as the time for a threesome occurs and joy or disgust may be the predominant feelings following an encounter.

Feminist theory focuses on the imbalance of power and resources between women and men and explores its effect on sexuality. In the feminist view, women are restricted in

regard to their appearance and sexual activity in that they are stigmatized if they do not fit the culturally identified ideal body (trim and slim) and/or hide their enjoyment for a wide variety of sexual behavior/partners. While men are applauded for their interest/participation in threesomes, women may be slut shamed.

## Hypotheses

With no data on threesome experiences of undergraduates, the goal of this study was to help fill the research gap. Hypotheses included:

1. There is a very small (under 5%) incidence of threesomes among undergraduates.
2. The primary reason for engaging in a threesome will be to live out a sexual fantasy.
3. The person selected to be part of a threesome will most likely to be a stranger.
4. The effects of involvement in a threesome experience will be primarily positive.
5. Persons with hedonistic sexual values will be more likely to report a threesome experience than those with relativistic or absolutist sexual values.
6. Respondents who reported having had a threesome experience will be more interested in a future threesome than those who have not had the experience.
7. Undergraduate men will evidence more interest in threesomes than undergraduate women.

## Sample

A 59 item questionnaire on "Threesomes" was approved by the Institutional Review Board at a large southeastern university and posted on the Internet. Students in the second author's Courtship and Marriage (N = 250) and Human Sexuality (N = 40) courses were emailed the link and asked to complete the anonymous survey. No extra credit was provided for completion of the Internet survey.

A total of 196 respondents completed the survey for analysis. The majority of respondents (85%) were women, white (72% with 16% black, 5% Hispanic, 4% Biracial, 3% Asian and 1% Native American) and heterosexual (92%). Over half (63%) were either first-year or second-year undergraduates. Almost half (46%) were emotionally involved in a committed or engaged relationship, 40% were not seeing anyone/not involved, and 13% were casually dating different people.

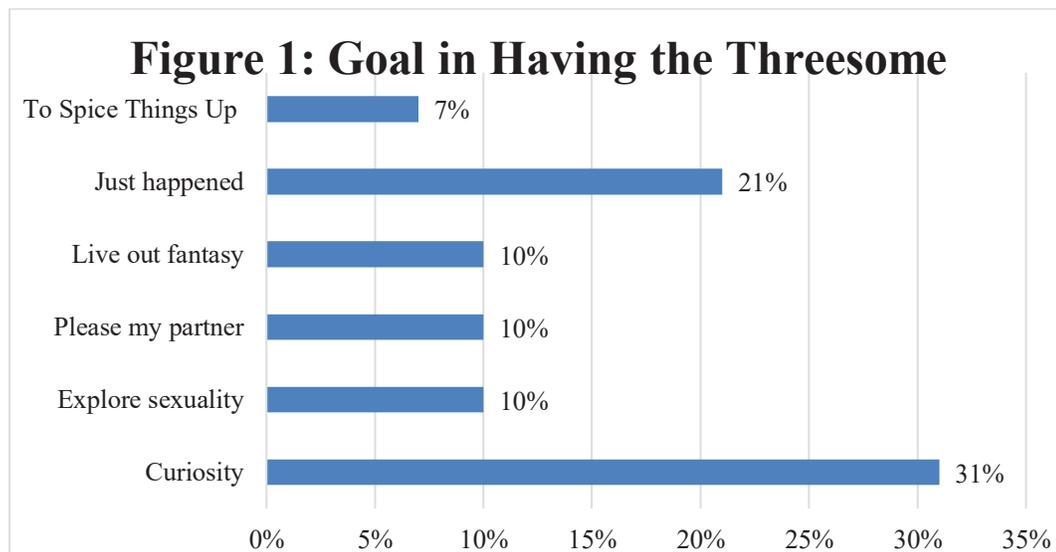
The respondents reported that they were drinkers (57% consumed alcohol 3-5 times a week), sexually experienced (87% had had sexual intercourse), and spiritual ( $M=4.2$ ,  $SD=1.41$  on a 5 point scale). When asked about condom use, 48.3% reporting having used a condom or other contraceptive method during threesome, 41.4% did not and 10.3 % did not answer.

## Results

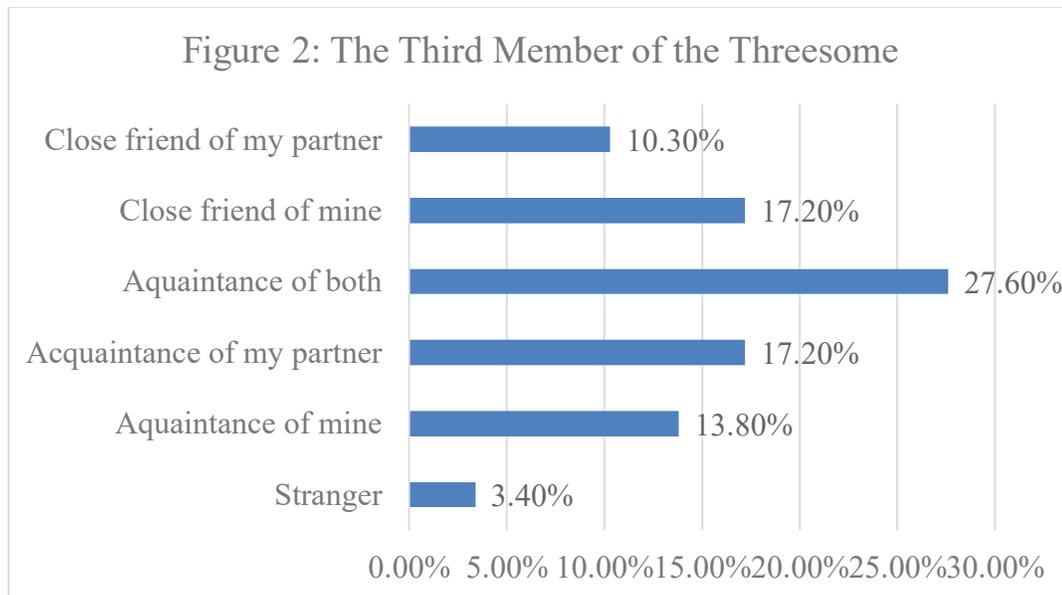
Eight primary results are discussed below.

**Prevalence of Threesome.** As for who suggested the threesome, in 41% of the cases, the third party; 31% of the time the partner (more often the man) suggested the threesome, and 21% of the time the woman suggested the threesome (10.3% did not answer). In regard to the hypothesis which predicted a small (under 5%) incidence of threesomes among college undergraduate, was rejected. Fifteen percent of the sample reported having experienced a threesome and almost half of the respondents (49%) knew a couple who had had a threesome. The majority of the threesome participants (81.5%) did not discuss rules and boundaries. Over two thirds (67.9%) had viewed pornography depicting a threesome. In regard to who brought up the idea of a threesome, 44% reported that their partner had done so. Finally, the event happened only once for 83% of the respondents who reported having had a threesome.

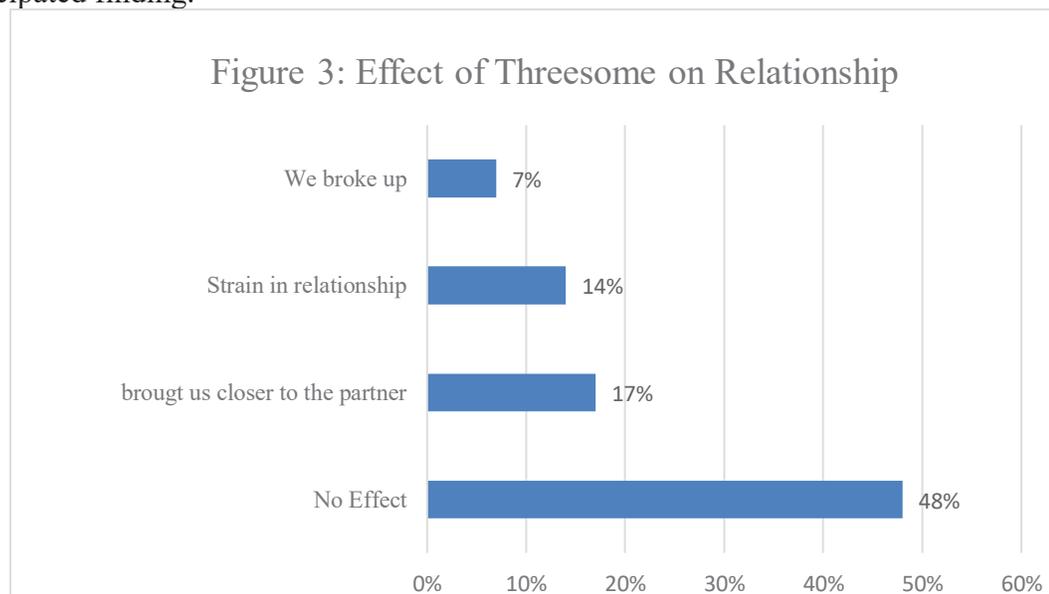
**Reason for Threesome.** The hypothesis which predicted that the primary goal for engaging in a threesome experience would be to “live out a fantasy” was rejected. The number one reason for engaging in a threesome reported by 31% of the participants was “curiosity” with 21% reporting that they were “drunk or it just happened.” Other reasons included “to please my partner” (10%), to explore my sexuality (10%), “to spice things up” (7%) and to live out a fantasy (10%). Ten percent of the respondents did not provide a motive (See Figure 1). Hence, threesome participants seemed to be a curious group of sexual experience seekers. Some were aware of the caution needed if they were in a relationship (17% discussed rules or boundaries prior to the threesome experience).



**Third Member of the Threesome.** The hypothesis which predicted that the third member of the threesome would most likely to be a stranger was rejected. In 97% of the cases, the person the couple invited to join them in a threesome was a close friend or acquaintance of one of the partners- most often a friend of the woman (see Figure 2).



**Effects of Threesome.** The hypothesis which predicted that the outcome for engaging in a threesome would be primarily positive was rejected. Almost half (48%) of the respondents reported “no effect.” About 17% reported the positive effect “felt closer to the partner” (17%). About 20% of the respondents reported a negative relationship outcome with 14% reporting a strained relationship; 7% reported that they broke up. (See Figure 3). Fourteen percent did not answer the question on outcome. There was also caution about wanting to have another threesome- a mean of 4.8 ( $SD= 2.76$ ) on a scale of 0 to 10. Eighty three percent of the respondents reported that they experienced a threesome only once, an unanticipated finding.



**Sexual Value and Threesome.** The hypotheses which predicted that respondents with hedonistic sexual values would be more likely than relativists or absolutists to be interested

in a threesome were accepted. Respondents identified which of three sexual values they adhered to: absolutism (“intercourse before marriage is wrong”), relativism (“if you are in a loving relationship, intercourse OK even if not married”, and hedonism (“if it feels good, do it”- being in love or being married does not matter). One-way analysis of variance revealed a significant sex value effect  $F(2,191) = 8.43, p < 0.001$ . Tukey post hoc comparison test was used to detect the group difference. Participants who endorsed hedonistic sexual values ( $M=4.6, SD=2.8$ ) were more likely to be interested in having a threesome than the Absolutists ( $M= 2.44, SD= 2.42$ ),  $p < .05$ . Participants who were relativists ( $M=3.01, SD= 2.6$ ) were also more likely to be interested in having a threesome than the Absolutists ( $M= 2.44, SD= 2.42$ ),  $p < .05$ . Interest in Sex and Interest in Threesome. Participants who had experienced a threesome were not more interested in sex than those who have not done so. Students were asked to report their interest of sex. The responses were 1 “no interest in sex” to 5 “can’t get enough”. Those who reported having experienced a threesome scored an average of 2.77 ( $SD= 1.18$ ) whereas those who have not experienced a threesome scored higher, an average of 2.97 ( $SD= 1.43$ ). The difference was statistically nonsignificant  $t(191) = .83, p > .05$ .

Interested in Future Threesome. The hypothesis which predicted that respondents who had had a threesome experience would be more interested in a future threesome was accepted. Compared to respondents who had not had a threesome experience ( $M= 3.09, SD= 2.6$ ), people who have had experienced threesome ( $M= 5.76, SD= 2.77$ ) were more likely to be interested in threesome if given the opportunity of another threesome  $t(193)= 5.05, p < .001$ .

Gender Differences. The hypothesis which predicted that men would be more interested in a threesome was accepted. If given the opportunity, men ( $M= 7.17, SD= 2.94$ ) had a higher interest in having a threesome than women ( $M= 2.84, SD= 2.21$ )  $t(193) = 9.25, p < .001$ . Among people who had had a threesome experience, men ( $M=9.2, SD=1.79$ ) reported higher satisfaction than women ( $M= 4.89, SD= 2.85$ )  $t(22)= 3.19 p < .01$ .

Regarding who initiated the threesome experience among respondents who had experienced a threesome, 40 % of the men compared to 18% of the women reported suggesting a threesome. When participants were asked to indicate “how many times were you asked/ did you ask before the threesome took place?”, 37.9% of participants agreed immediately, 41.4% less than five times, and 10.3% were asked between 5-10 times. Hence, there is evidence of some pressure on the part of the person who suggested the threesome to get the partner to agree.

Although women scored higher on jealousy ( $M=3.55, SD= 2.76$ ) than men ( $M= 1.80, SD=1.10$ ), there were no significant gender differences in reported jealous among the participants who reported having had a threesome experience  $t(25) = 1.37, p > .05$ .

## Discussion

While there is no doubt a biological component to male sexuality (e. g. high levels of testosterone), social/cultural influences may be more profound. Men are socialized early to be sexual, to be sexually aggressive, and to be involved in sexual variety. The data for this study reflect higher interest by men, aggressiveness and participation in having a threesome than reported by women.

In regard to symbolic interaction theory, men learn sexual social scripts of seduction to move their partners into sexual contexts. The scripting of a threesome includes defining the sexual situation (“this is going to be an exciting sexual adventure”), naming the actors (“you and I can find someone to make a threesome hot”) and plotting behaviors (“let’s ask your former roommate to come over, we can get liquored up and see if she is up for a threesome”).

Operant learning theory is relevant in that while 48% of the respondents reported that the result of having a threesome had “no effect” on their relationship, 14% said that it “strained” their relationship and 7% reported that they “broke up” after the threesome. Hence, experiencing a threesome was not particularly reinforcing so there was little motivation to repeat the experience. Eighty-percent of the respondents who had experienced a threesome said that the behavior occurred only once.

Social learning theory helps to explain knowledge of threesomes in that almost half (49%) knew someone who had had a threesome. It would have been interesting to know if the experiences of these “others” was positive or negative. We might posit, that rave reviews about having had a threesome did not occur which helped to socialize our sample to approach having a threesome with caution.

Affective theory is relevant to the emotions related to having a threesome. Curiosity was the top motivation for becoming involved in a threesome with “wanting to please the partner” (was this love?) reported by ten percent. Other emotions were revealed as negative consequences of a threesome- strained the relationship and one might assume sadness for the 7% who broke up following the threesome.

Feminist theory reflecting inequities in power between women and men may be relevant to the 10% who reported that their motivation for experiencing a threesome was to please the partner. Reading between the lines, might pleasing the partner be code for avoiding disapproval for not complying?

## Summary

While we expected an incidence below five percent, 15% of the respondents reported having experienced a threesome. Curiosity, not sexual fantasy, was the top motivation. A close friend of the woman, not a stranger, was the person most often invited to join the couple in a threesome. “No effect” was the predominant outcome of involvement in a threesome and over 80 percent did not repeat the experience. The two hypotheses that were confirmed by the data were that hedonists were more likely have had a threesome experience

than relativists or absolutists and men evidenced more interest in having a threesome than women (and may have pressured the partner in at least ten percent of the threesome events).

## Implications

There are two implications of the data. First, the data from this study reflected that for 85% of the sample, a threesome had not occurred. Hence, the idea that most college undergraduates have threesomes was not supported by these data. An undergraduate woman was asked her feelings about a threesome and replied, "Not just no, but hell no."

Second, the outcome of involvement in a threesome was as likely to be positive as negative for couples who participated. Approximately one-fifth of the respondents reported that participating in a threesome brought them closer together, another one-fifth reported a negative experience (strained the relationship or broke up), and almost half reported no effect on the relationship. Some respondents expressed a need for caution before becoming involved in a threesome. A graduate student woman in a stable relationship with her partner said, "I think that threesomes could be a fun and interesting way to explore sexuality, but I think that you have to be careful because it is very easy to make a person feel left out, which defeats the purpose of it being an experience of building the relationship."

## Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. First, the convenience sample of 196 undergraduates, with an overwhelming women representation at one university, is hardly representative of almost 20 million undergraduates in colleges and universities across throughout the United States (*Proquest Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2016*). Second, university students also are not representative of the entire U.S. population; they represent a specific demographic. Third, threesomes may not be a subject college students are comfortable talking about (e.g. no experience, negative experience). Indeed some of our respondents may have experienced a threesome but were reluctant to admit it.

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## Survey on Threesomes

You are invited to participate in a **research** study titled "Threesomes: Data on Engagement and Negotiation," conducted by David Knox, a sociology faculty member at East Carolina University and Hannah Morris, an undergraduate senior majoring in sociology. The goal is to survey 400 individuals enrolled in courses that by Dr. Knox. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The goal of the research is to provide empirical information about the degree to which individuals in a relationship have threesomes, how they are negotiated, and the outcome of these experiences for the respective participants. The survey is anonymous and confidential. No data will be collected which will identify you. Your participation in the research is **voluntary**. You may choose not to answer any or all questions, and you may stop at any time. There is **no penalty for not taking part** in this research study. Please call David Knox at 252 756 3562 for any research related questions or the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at 252-744-2914 for questions about your rights as a research participant.

There is no "capturing of your email or IP address" when you submit this questionnaire. In addition, no identifying code will be attached to any response. Finally, the questionnaire is to be completed by only by individuals age 18 or above. If you are underage, you have received this questionnaire in error; please disregard. The survey can be found at **\*\*insert link here\*\***

### Background/Demographics

1. Sex
  - Male
  - Female
  - Transgender
2. I regard myself as:
  - White    Black    Hispanic    Asian    Native American    Biracial    Other
3. My class standing in college is:
  - Freshman    Sophomore    Junior    Senior    Graduate Student
4. I define my sexual orientation as:
  - heterosexual
  - homosexual
  - bisexual
  - transgender
  - other
5. I consider myself a religious/spiritual person
  - Strongly disagree
  - Somewhat Disagree
  - Neither disagree nor agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Strongly agree
6. My Grade Point Average (GPA) is:
  - 2.0 or lower
  - 2.1-2.8
  - 2.9-3.4
  - 3.5- 3.7

- 3.8 or higher
7. On average, I consume alcohol:
- Once per day
  - Between 3-5 nights a week
  - Once a month
  - Several times a year
  - Almost never
  - I have never consumed alcohol
8. What is your mothers' highest level of education?
- she did not finish high school
  - high school graduate
  - some college but did not graduate
  - college graduate
  - Master's degree
  - Ph.D., MD, or degree in law
9. How would you describe your parents' sexual attitudes?
- They are very open about sex
  - Discussion of sex is a household taboo
  - They hold traditional sexual values (e.g. virginity at marriage)
  - Sex is acknowledged, but not spoken of often
10. How happy is your parents' relationship?
- they divorced
  - very unhappy
  - unhappy
  - okay
  - happy
  - very happy
  - they were never married
11. Has your mother or father ever had an affair?
- yes
  - no
12. Have your parents ever gotten into a physical fight?
- yes
  - no
13. Do your parents believe in an open marriage?
- yes
  - no
14. Approximately what age did you first kiss?
- I have never kissed anyone
  - Younger than 5 years of age
  - Younger than 10 years of age
  - Between the ages of 10-15 years of age
  - Between the ages of 15-20 years of age
15. Approximately what age did you first masturbate?
- I have never masturbated
  - Younger than 5 years of age
  - Younger than 10 years of age

- Between the ages of 10-15 years of age
  - Between the ages of 15-20 years of age
  - Age 21 or older
16. Approximately what age did you first have sexual intercourse?
- I have never had sexual intercourse
  - 13 or younger
  - 14-15
  - 16
  - 17-18
  - 19-20
  - 21 or older
17. Approximately what age did you first have oral sex?
- I have never had oral sex
  - 13 or younger
  - 14-15
  - 16
  - 17-18
  - 19-20
  - 21 or older
18. Have you ever been sexually abused?
- yes
  - no
19. Have you experienced any sexual activities (kissing, touching, fondling, intercourse, oral or anal sex) with someone of the same sex?
- yes
  - no
20. Approximately how many different partners have you had sexual intercourse with?
- I have never had sexual intercourse
  - 1
  - 2-5
  - 6-10
  - 11-20
  - 21 -50
  - 51- 75
  - 76-100
  - More than 100
21. What is your current relationship status?
- not dating and not involved with anyone
  - casually dating different people
  - emotionally involved with one person in a committed relationship
  - Engaged
  - Married
  - Divorced
  - Legally Separated
22. How would you describe the average number of weekly sexual encounters with your partner?
- not sexually active with my partner
  - 1-3 times a week
  - 3-5 times a week

- at least once a day
- several times a day

23. What is your level of sexual satisfaction with your partner?

Not Satisfied Very Satisfied  
 1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9            10

**Sexual Values and Behavior**

24. The sexual value which best describes me is:

- absolutism- intercourse before marriage is wrong
- relativism- if you are in a loving relationship, intercourse is ok even if not married
- hedonism- "if it feels good, do it"- being in love or being married doesn't matter

25. Have you engaged in a threesome (you and two other sexual partners)?

- yes
- no

26. Given the opportunity, what is your level of interest in becoming involved in a threesome?

Not interested Very interested  
 1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9            10

27. How many couples do you know who have had a threesome?

- none
- one
- two
- three
- four
- five or more

**If you have not engaged in a threesome, please answer the following questions. If you have engaged in a threesome, please skip to question 37.**

28. On a ten point scale, to what degree are you open to having a threesome?

Never I am ready now  
 1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9            10

29. On a ten point scale, to what degree do you find the idea of participating in a threesome appealing?

Not appealing Very appealing  
 1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9            10

30. I sometimes feel that I am hypersexual, that I can't get enough.

- strongly disagree
- disagree
- neither agree nor disagree
- agree
- strongly agree

31. Have you ever heard the term ménage a trois (a domestic arrangement in which three people having romantic and/or sexual relations with each other occupy the same household)?

- yes
- no

32. Have you ever watched a pornographic scene involving a threesome?

- yes

no

33. If you have ever watched a pornographic scene involving a threesome, what were the sexes of the participants?

- male-male-female
- male- male- male
- female-female-female
- female-female- male
- unknown
- at least one was transgendered
- I have never witnessed a pornographic scene of a threesome

34. Has any romantic partner ever suggested a threesome?

- yes
- no

35. Have you ever suggested a threesome to a romantic partner?

- yes
- no

36. Would you rather have a threesome with someone you know, or a stranger?

- someone I know
- stranger
- no preference
- I am not interested in a threesome

37. On a ten point scale, to what degree are you open to new sexual experiences?

Not open	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Very open 10
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**If you have not engaged in a threesome, you have finished the survey. If you have engaged in a threesome, complete questions 38 to the end of the survey. If you have had more than one threesome with several partners, refer to the last relationship.**

38. What was the outcome of having a threesome with your partner?

- I have never had a threesome
- brought us closer together
- created stain in our relationship/more emotionally distant
- no effect
- we broke up

39. What happened with the relationship with the third party to the threesome?

- my partner became involved with the third party
- I became involved with the their party
- Neither me nor my partner became involved with the third party

40. What level of jealousy did you experience during the threesome?

Not Jealous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Very Jealous 10
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41. Which party suggested the idea of a threesome?

- I did
- my partner
- the third party

42. Were alcohol/drugs involved during the threesome?

- yes  
 no
43. Before the threesome, did you discuss rules or boundaries about who could do what?  
 yes  
 no
44. What was the sexual orientation of the third party?  
 heterosexual  
 homosexual  
 bisexual  
 transgender  
 other  
 unknown
45. How many times were you asked/ did you ask before the threesome took place?  
 less than 5 times  
 between 5 and 10 times  
 we immediately agreed  
 more than 10 times
46. What was the length of time between first talking about a threesome and having the threesome?  
 around 1 week  
 around 1 month  
 less than six months  
 less than a year  
 greater than a year
47. Describe the nature of your encounter  
 one time occurrence with the same third party  
 occasional occurrence (less than five times) with the same individuals  
 occasional occurrence (less than five times) with different individuals  
 frequent occurrence (more than five times) with the same individuals  
 frequent occurrence (more than five times) with different individuals
48. What was the relationship with the third party?  
 no prior relationship—this person was a stranger  
 this person was an acquaintance of mine  
 this person was an acquaintance of my partner  
 this person was an acquaintance of both me and my partner  
 this person was an ex of my partner  
 this person was my ex  
 this person was a close friend of mine  
 this person was a close friend of my partner  
 this person was a sibling
49. What was your goal in having the threesome?  
 to spice things up  
 to live out a fantasy I have had about threesomes  
 to please my partner (I knew my partner would like it and I wanted them to enjoy)  
 curiosity  
 to explore my sexuality  
 alcohol or drugs were involved and it just happened  
 to stop my partner from pressuring me, I gave in
50. How many people did you ask before you found a willing third party?

