

Border Wars: Swinging and Polyamory

by Pepper Mint, 2004

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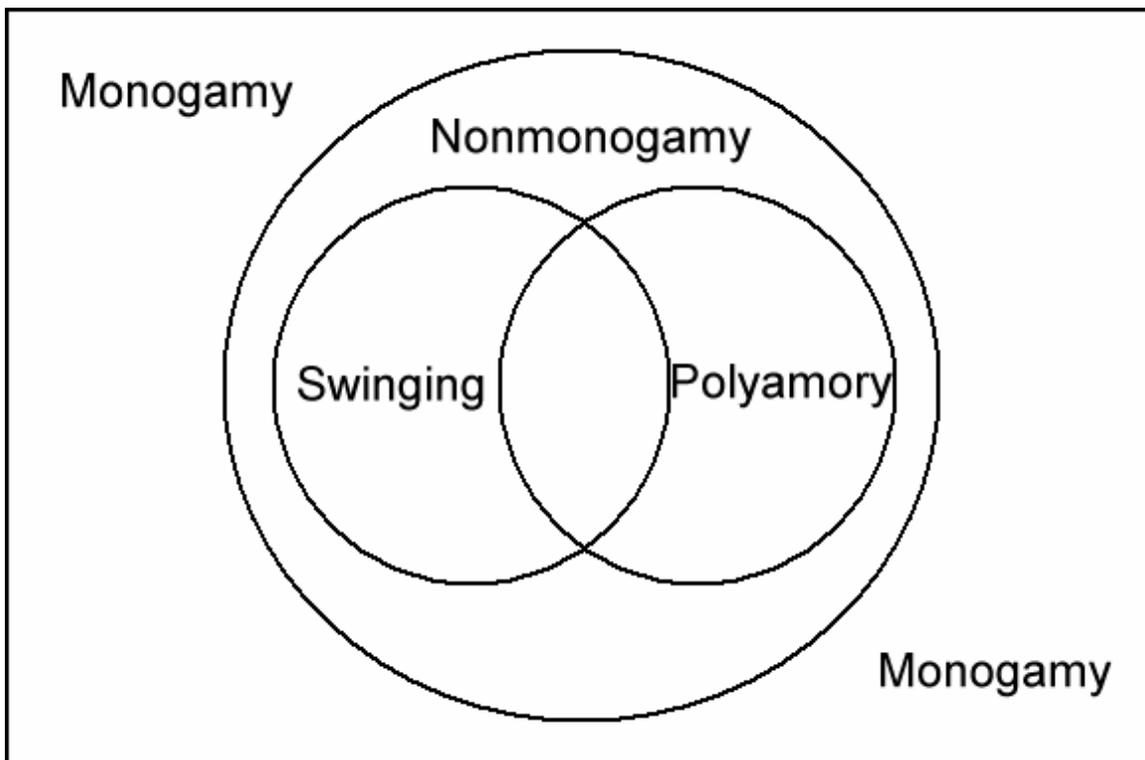
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Introduction

Border wars are identity definition struggles in the murky area between two sexual identities. In this paper/presentation, I will discuss the overlap between swinging and polyamory, the various viewpoints involved, and how the process of identification in our culture leads to tension between identity communities. I will be focusing on the view of swinging from polyamory, because that is the viewpoint I have the most experience with, and it demonstrates the idea of a border war well.

Mainstream Views

If we draw out a community diagram of swinging and polyamory, it usually looks like this:



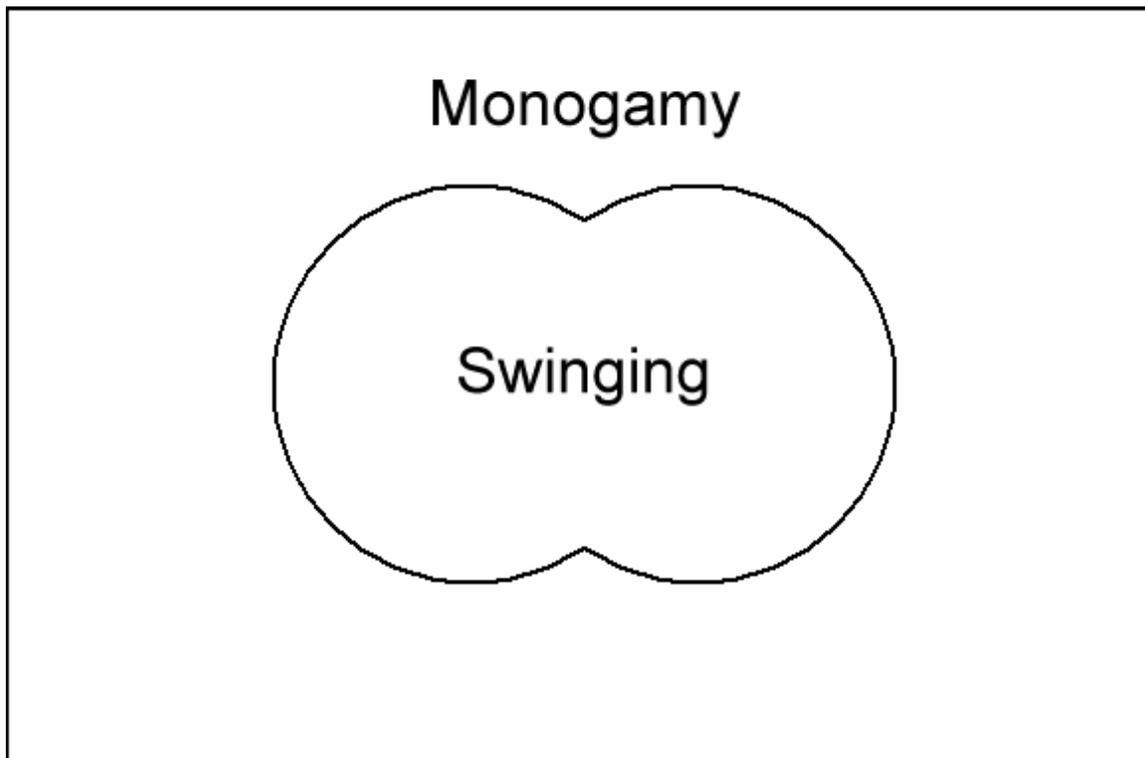
This diagram is basically a community or identity diagram. Some people consider themselves poly, some people consider themselves swingers, and some hold a place in both communities. Also, they generally agree that what they are doing is not monogamy.

There are of course folks who would disagree with this drawing. For example, various swingers and poly people define monogamy in emotional instead of sexual terms and call themselves monogamous. Some poly people think that there is no way to swing and still be poly. However, the above seems to represent a common viewpoint of people who have experience or knowledge of both communities.

Unfortunately this is not also the view from the mainstream. Due to the long history of swingers and various forms of media attention, swinging is definitely known to mainstream U.S. culture, though perhaps not well understood. Also, swinging is definitely demonized in the wider culture to some extent.

Polyamory however is still widely unknown in the larger culture. The word has existed for less than two decades, with almost zero media coverage, and so it has comparatively less currency than swinging.

So, if we were to draw the view of the communities as seen from the mainstream, we would get a diagram like so:



In other words, any form of consensual nonmonogamy is swinging. Furthermore, swinging operates as a general oppositional bucket for the mainstream to throw descriptions of nonmonogamy into. If you're aboveboard, and you're not monogamous, you must be a swinger.

(I've left Mormon polygamy out for these purposes, since people aren't likely to consider their neighbors polygamists whatever their behavior. Also, for this entire presentation I have not addressed issues of cheating/affairs/adultery, as they form their own special imposed category.)

This presents a problem for poly people, and it will continue until polyamory has visibility in its own right. When a poly person tries to describe polyamory to the uninformed, the typical reaction is "so you're swingers?". The confusion of polyamory

with swinging of course carries with it the mainstream's negative connotations of swinging that have been built up over the decades.

Also, while the direct comparison to swinging shows up sometimes, other times it is more subtle but still present in underlying assumptions. For example, people will often assume that you are looking for recreational sex simply because you are consensually nonmonogamous. In addition, explaining to the uninformed is only one situation where this shows up, but poly people often have difficulties with this in other situations, for example when they are looking for dating partners the people they contact may assume they are trying to swing.

As a side note, immediate identification with swinging is only one of a set of misunderstandings with negative baggage. "Cheating" and "sinning" are two others, and I am sure there are more.

Behavioral Distinctions

When non-swinger poly people are faced with this comparison to swinging, they get kind of defensive, and their defensiveness is understandable. First, they do not actually identify as swingers, nor do they participate in the swinging community, so the identification is incorrect. Second, swinging has managed to gain a somewhat negative reputation in the mainstream over the decades. Poly people, being from the mainstream on some level, share this negative view of swinging.

So, poly people faced with the question "so you're just swingers" usually come up with a no answer, and then try to distance themselves from swinging. Usually they do this by attempting to define swinging and polyamory in such a way that they are clearly distinct. Unfortunately, they are extremely difficult to distinguish this way. I have included some common tactics here, along with some factual rebuttals that illustrate the kind of murkiness we are dealing with.

"Swinging is about sex, polyamory is about love."

Plenty of (though not all) poly people will tell you that, actually, polyamory is about sex as well as love. In some ways, sex is where the rubber of polyamory really hits the road: because monogamy is defined sexually in our culture, an opposition to monogamy (polyamory) is almost required to definitively include a sexual component. Similarly, at various points in history and in various subgroups, swinging has included love or emotional attachment. This is not a distinction which clearly leaves some people or behaviors on one side and others on the other.

"Swinging is having sex parties, polyamory is about having relationships."

I keep having sex parties, and I am poly, and I'm not a swinger. The people attending my parties are almost entirely poly-identified, so the parties are definitely poly sex parties.

Similarly, swinging couples can form long-term friendships with other couples or singles in a manner that strongly resembles poly couple dating. Some swingers never go to parties. And really, if we think of relationships as relating over time instead of identifying as “in a relationship”, it is clear that swingers have relationships.

“Swinging is just about having fun. Polyamory is serious.”

I hope most poly people are having fun. And the swingers I’ve met have all been perfectly serious about what they are doing. Often they are quite committed to swinging, to the point of only dating other swingers.

“Swinging is sexist (and/or homophobic).”

Plenty of poly people are sexist and/or homophobic. Plenty of swingers (and swing scenes) are not.

Note that these distinctions are somewhat or very negative towards swinging. They reproduce the mainstream’s conception of swinging, for the simple reason that the poly people coming up with these distinctions are usually not swingers, and so the mainstream idea of swinging is really all they know about it.

Also note that these distinctions are entirely based on people’s behavior, doubly so if we consider people’s emotional actions to also constitute behavior. Our culture defines sexual identity based on behaviors, so when attempting to distinguish two sexual identity groups, we tend to focus on the behaviors of the group. I will discuss this in depth below.

Similarities and Differences

There are real similarities and differences between the two communities. However, the similarities actually tend to eclipse the differences. This is because both communities are trying to solve the same problem: compulsory monogamy. Because they are working against the same cultural imperatives, the two communities tend to employ similar strategies and behaviors.

For example, both groups have a certain defensive reaction towards single men. In swinging this shows up as a common “no single men at parties” rule. In polyamory, there is more of a vague dissatisfaction with or fear of single men, with individual people (usually women) often declaring that they will not date men who do not already have a partner. These are both defensive reactions to underlying issues of gender, power, and possessiveness in our culture.

If we take the long perspective, both groups are also really employing the same behaviors, which is again not too surprising since they are opposing the same cultural system. In both communities, people form short-term and long-term sexual and/or intimate friendships and relationships.

This is nicely illustrated by the common definition of polyamory, “open responsible nonmonogamy”. Leaving aside the “open” part for now, we can certainly say that swinging is responsible nonmonogamy, and therefore may well qualify for inclusion under the polyamory umbrella, much as that might trouble both groups. In fact, there was a round in the poly community of trying to create a new term, “poly*”, that includes any responsible nonmonogamy, and which definitely included swinging.

We can discuss tendencies (“swingers are more likely to go to sex parties”) but these are just tendencies, and they do not provide the clear distinction that satisfies people confronted with the “so you’re a swinger” question. Also, even with tendencies there are a lot of murky areas and questions. For example, since we definitely lack reliable data, I cannot say for sure that swingers are more likely to go to sex parties than poly people. In fact, if you based your understanding of polyamory on my circle in San Francisco, you might conclude the opposite.

There are other very real differences between the two communities, but those differences are cultural and ideological. If you sit down and talk about nonmonogamy with members of each community, you will have very different conversations. Different ideas are emphasized. Polyamory and swinging tend to spread or grow through different subcultures and methods (though both depend heavily on the internet). There are different attitudes to be found in the two communities. For example, male bisexuality is less tolerated in the swinger community, and there are very few entirely same-sex swinging venues (though there are groups and individuals who are definite exceptions, and the overall attitude seems to be changing).

The Problem

The truth is that when we are talking about behaviors, drawing a nice solid line that separates all the swingers from all the poly people is impossible.

When poly people respond to the swinger question in this way, it causes problems. First, it directly harms the relationship between the two communities, as swingers see these negative remarks as evidence that poly people are full of themselves. Second, it harms the people who live in both communities. Swingers who are also poly are often not out in the poly community because they (correctly) perceive a negative attitude towards swinging.

Third, because of the distance between the two communities caused by the invisibility of the crossover population and the negativity, it is difficult to get the swinger and poly communities to work together. This is sad, because the two communities have common opposition: the same laws will be used to punish us, the same prejudices will cause our bosses to fire us, and so on. Also, because both communities are sexually nonmonogamous, we share concerns and needs in common, the only the most obvious of which are STD knowledge and prevention tactics.

Identification Distinctions

The easy way to distinguish between swinger and poly people is to focus on identity and community. Swinging and polyamory are two mostly separate communities and two definitively separate communities.

Let's start with community-based distinctions. Here are some things that a non-swinger poly person might say:

“Swinging is a different nonmonogamous community that I am not a member of.”

“I don't consider myself a swinger because I don't spend time with swingers or in the swinger community.”

Similarly, identification-based responses might be:

“Some poly people are also swingers; I am not one of them.”

“Swingers have a valid but different take on nonmonogamy than poly people.”

Note that I had to add some positive reinforcement to both of the identity statements. This is because simply stating “I am not a swinger” inevitably comes across as defensive, even when it is factually true and the person is not defensive. If we remember that swinging is a negative category when viewed from the mainstream, this makes sense. It is similar to saying “I am not gay” or “I am a heterosexual”, which tends to always lead one to believe that the speaker is at least uncomfortable in their sexuality. If they were not, would they have to say this? Similarly, “I am not a swinger” sounds more like a denial than anything else. Tempering it by reminding the listener that swinging is not actually a problem helps.

There are other positive ways to answer this question. I am starting to see people challenging the questioner's understanding of swinging, for example. “How would you know what swinging is like? Have you ever been a swinger?” If poly people can remember that they need to not put down swinging while distancing themselves from it, it is pretty easy to do.

Sexual Identity

What we are stumbling across here is a basic problem with the way we understand sexual identity. On the one hand, sexual identity is judged in our culture based on behavior. It is sleeping with the same sex that makes you gay, lesbian, or bisexual. It is enjoying BDSM play that makes you kinky. It is having or wanting multiple relationships that makes you poly, and so on. On the other hand, identity is supposed to represent an

immutable truth about the person that comes from within, and has all sorts of implications for the person's past, future, and personality. The result is that people in sexual minority identity categories are forced into a constant struggle to maintain that their behavior places them in their identity, or that their identity actually matches their behavior. And this is not some sort of abstract struggle, but a question that strikes to the core of their being.

Swinging is not quite in the same sexual minority class as LBGT identities, because the implications of swinging to the person are not imagined as being as complete and overwhelming as LBGT identities. People move more (conceptually) easily into and out of the swinging community, and they are not as likely to imagine that their swinging represents something crucial in their being or life. (We can make a similar argument for polyamory, even though polyamory has adopted much of the language of LBGT liberation: poly people are more likely to consider polyamory as something they do rather than something they are, when compared with LBGT folks.) However, swinging effectively functions like a sexual minority identity, and as we can see it runs into some of the same problems that other identities experience.

There is a medical history which has produced this current problematic identity crisis. Originally, homosexual identities were imposed on patients by doctors. The doctors would base their judgment of homosexuality on the behaviors of the patient, but the identity once imposed would have implications reaching straight into the patient's soul, would define their past behavior in a new light, and would produce horrible pronouncements on their future happiness. We have not really abandoned this model. We try to identify sexual identities in ourselves and others based on behavior, but the identities in turn are imagined to represent something crucial about a person's essence. To put in more bluntly, we are doctors diagnosing minority sexual identity in ourselves and others, and imposing wide-ranging conclusions based on those diagnoses. This is difficult, particularly on people who identify as sexual minorities.

Border Wars

There is a general category of sexual minority infighting called a *border war*. (I have borrowed the term from Judith Halberstam's book *Female Masculinities*.) A border war happens when two sexual minority identities overlap enough that it is difficult, from a more mainstream perspective, to distinguish between them. Halberstam specifically discusses butch lesbians and formerly lesbian FTMs.

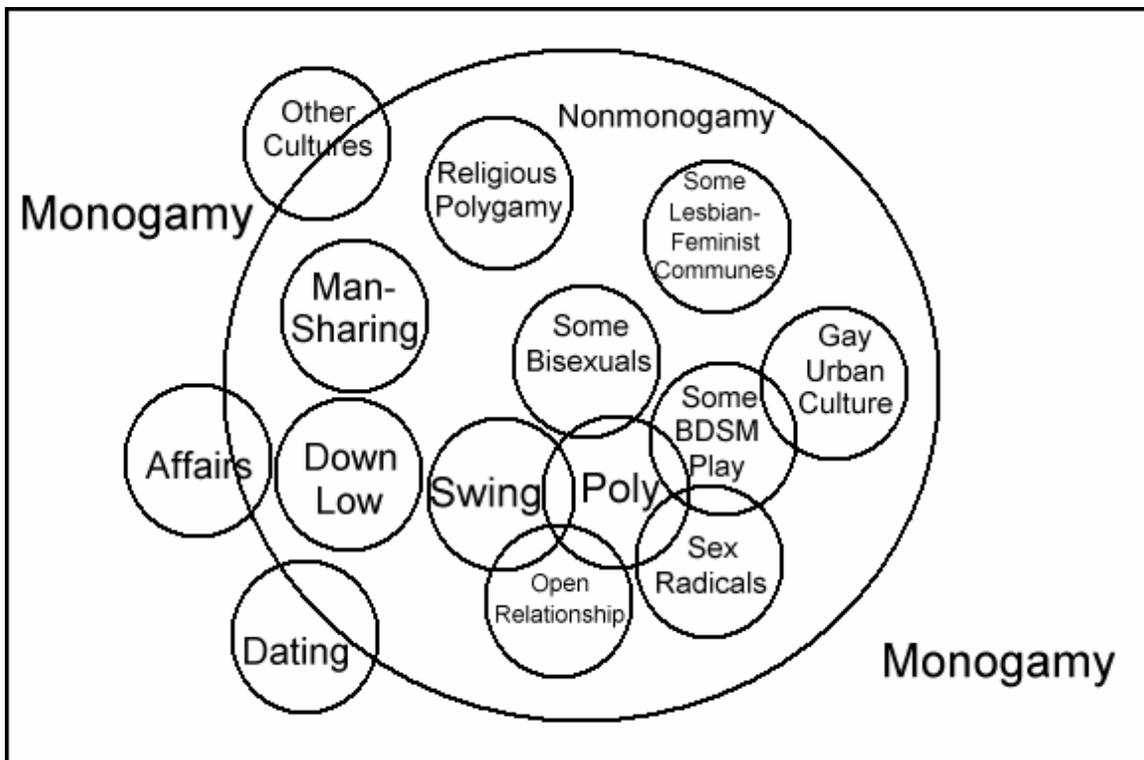
It is not too difficult to find other border wars out there. Arguably, homosexuality and bisexuality have been in a long-running struggle for the last couple decades. Historical medical practice has conflated bisexuality with homosexuality, but at the same time the modern bisexual category is wide enough that it could theoretically engulf many gay and lesbian people (and straight folks), if applied based on behavior alone. The result is a certain ongoing tension between the two communities, which is nowhere near resolution.

A border war occurs because of the basic identity problem I have described above. Each identity group in the border war strives to distance itself from the other through descriptions of the other identity's behavior, performance, or appearance. These lines in the sand are inevitably inaccurate, since the two identities do in fact overlap to some extent and separating them via presentation or behavior is impossible. Furthermore, the cross-claims tend to create tensions between the groups, who should otherwise be allies due to their strong similarities.

For individual people in the border war, the repercussions are serious. Typically a person in one or the other identity category has strong personal reasons for needing to distance themselves from the other category. In Halberstam's example, the very gender of the participants is at stake. As a result, they put serious effort into the project of delineating the communities, but the tendency to base this delineation on performance dooms the effort, with a negative result on both sides.

Respecting Identities

As sexual identity categories get more numerous, complex, and specific, we will see this sort of problem more. To give you some idea of the scope of the problem for nonmonogamous identities, here is a more complex version of the picture I showed you earlier:



I tried to overlap these as much as they actually do, but I was limited by two dimensions, so some community overlap that should be there is missing. Also, I am sure that I have

some nonmonogamous identities or subcultures, for example group marriage. Some of these are strong identifications and others are not so strong or are incidental to other identifications. Also, note that we could draw equally complex diagrams for sexuality and gender.

What should be clear from this picture is that people find a lot of different ways to be nonmonogamous. This is understandable – monogamy is harsh on many people, and they will create solutions that are contingent on and specific to their particular situation, personality, community, or inclinations. People disinclined to monogamy for whatever reason will use whatever nonmonogamous ideological tools are available to them.

The solution to this mess is simple – avoid behavioral distinctions, and remember to respect the identifications of others, even if we don't understand those identities well. People are particularly attached to their identities, because those identities allow them to live their lives the way they want to. Getting in petty squabbles over who belongs or does not belong in a particular identity keeps us from focusing on our similarities.

Also, it is important to remember that the negative attitudes and stereotypes we are dealing with are coming from mainstream understanding. With that in mind, it is important to avoid relying on mainstream myths for our understanding of people in other subcultures. Instead, we should try to educate ourselves by talking to the people in the subcultures or researching. Once educated, then we are able to actually correct mainstream myths when we encounter them.

On that note, the attitude towards swinging within the poly community has improved dramatically in the last 5 years. These days poly people who take a negative view of swinging are generally shouted down or ridiculed, and relations between the two communities seem to be improving as a result. However, people who are new to polyamory tend to spontaneously reproduce the problems I have described, and they often have to go through a learning cycle before reaching a level of tolerance.