



Beyond the Dyad: a Review of the Novel Insights Gained From Studying Consensual Non-monogamy

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Abstract

Purpose of Review The purpose of this review is to highlight the major advancements in our understanding of consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships—or intimate relationships between three or more people who are non-exclusive sexually and/or emotionally. We aim to review key insights from research on the benefits (i.e., diversification of need fulfillment) and challenges (i.e., continued stigma) of CNM relationships and how research on CNM highlights some limitations of the existing theories of relationships.

Recent Findings The last two decades have seen a trend towards increasing diversity of family structures. Although monogamy remains the most common relationship structure, CNM relationships are increasing in prevalence and in interest to both lay people and researchers. Recent research has begun to uncover novel insights into who is more likely to be drawn to and engage in CNM, how CNM relationships compare to monogamous relationships, and the potential benefits and challenges of engaging in CNM relationships.

Summary While people in CNM relationships still experience stigma, for those who desire such relationships, CNM can be a viable and healthy alternative to monogamy, and may even help people meet more of their needs through diversifying need fulfillment across multiple partners. Despite this, many existing relationship theories are not inclusive of CNM relationship experiences and aspects of existing theories of positive relationships and sexuality may not extend to people in CNM relationships. Moving forward it is important to consider whether our concepts and measures are inclusive to people in diverse relationships, including those in CNM relationships.

Keywords Consensual non-monogamy · Romantic relationships · Sexuality · Need fulfillment · Relationship quality · Stigma

The last two decades have seen rapid changes in Western families, with a trend towards increasing diversity of family structures. Longer life spans [1], along with increases in inter-racial, inter-religious, and same-sex marriages [2], and steep fertility declines [3, 4] are only a few of the social trends that are increasing the diversity of families and relationships. However, the nuclear monogamous family remains a powerful normative ideal in much of

the Western world [5, 6], and people who do not follow this pattern may be considered deviant or not even families at all [7, 8]. While monogamy remains the most common romantic relationship arrangement in most parts of the world, consensual non-monogamy (CNM)—or intimate relationships between three or more people who are non-exclusive sexually and/or emotionally [9, 10]—is increasingly prevalent and becoming more visible in mainstream media and in societies as well [11]. In fact, public interest in CNM relationships has increased dramatically in recent years, with searches for information on polyamorous relationships, one type of CNM relationship, being listed among the top 10 relationship queries by Google in 2017 [12]. Increased interest in CNM is apparent not only in rising Google searches ([12]; also see [13]) but also in heightened media attention, with shows like “You Me and Her” and “Unicornland,” as well as the inclusion of polyamory as a relationship orientation

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on the popular dating website OKCupid [14], and in more researchers examining the prevalence and outcomes of CNM arrangements [11, 15].

Over the past decade, research on CNM relationships has gained a greater presence in relationship and sexuality research [16] and has begun to uncover novel insights into who is more likely to be drawn to and engage in CNM, how CNM relationships compare to monogamous relationships, and the potential detriments (e.g., stigma) and benefits (e.g., diversified need fulfillment) of engaging in CNM relationships. This research suggests that for those who desire such relationships, CNM can be a viable and healthy alternative to monogamy (e.g., it can be just as satisfying as a monogamous relationship; [15, 17•]), and having multiple simultaneous relationships can help people meet more of their fundamental needs (e.g., [18–20]). The purpose of this review is to highlight the major advancements in our understanding of CNM relationships based on the most recent work in the field, discuss the ways in which insights from research on CNM relationships raise questions about the inclusivity of relationship theories (e.g., commitment being equated with monogamy or exclusivity), and challenge the boundary conditions of existing theories (e.g., attachment theory; [21]). Through this review and identification of novel advancements in the field, we provide a summary of the current research on CNM relationships and discuss directions for future work.

Prevalence and Engagement in CNM

Past research suggests that a non-trivial number of people have engaged in or are interested in CNM relationships. For example, research using nationally representative samples of people from the USA and Canada has shown that approximately 4–6% of individuals report currently being in a CNM relationship [22, 23]. And, far more people have experience with or interest in CNM, with more than 20% of Americans indicating previous participation in some form of CNM in their lifetime [23] and with CNM sexual experiences (e.g., a threesome) emerging as the most common sexual fantasy people report [24]. Furthermore, the prevalence of experience with CNM is even higher among people who identify as bisexual, with approximately 33% reporting previous participation in CNM [23].

Importantly, CNM is an umbrella term for various non-monogamous relationship agreements that differ based on the degree to which sexual and emotional needs are consensually fulfilled outside of a romantic dyad [16]. The three types of CNM relationships that are often delineated are swinging, open, and polyamorous relationships [15, 25, 26]. Swinging relationships involve temporarily swapping or exchanging partners among couples, often in the context of a specific social event [26, 27]. Open relationships involve extradyadic sex without

love and without a romantic partner's participation [16, 26, 28, 29]. Polyamorous relationships permit loving more than one person, and typically consist of multiple, emotionally close relationships [16, 26]. Although CNM affords emotional and sexual connections with multiple partners simultaneously, polyamory tends to involve close emotional with additional partners than swinging and open relationships, which tend to be primarily about sexual openness [5, 15, 30, 31]. People in CNM relationships often have their own unique agreements with partners and CNM relationship can take on many different structures, but one of the most common configurations, at least for people in polyamorous relationships, is a primary-secondary relationship configuration [17•, 32]. In this configuration, a primary relationship is between two partners who typically share household finances, live together, and who are married, and relationships with partners beyond the primary relationship are often referred to as secondary, non-primary, or tertiary partners [17•, 27, 33•]. Although less research has examined the configurations of people in open and swinging relationships, because these relationships primarily involve extradyadic sexual encounters, they often follow a similar structure with one partner serving as a primary partner and the other(s) as non-primary (e.g., [34, 35]).

Challenges of Deviating Beyond the Dyad: Stigma Towards CNM Relationships

Despite the growing prevalence, people in CNM relationships are stigmatized [36]. For example, 26–43% of people in polyamorous relationships report experiences of stigma and discrimination [37]. To illustrate how pervasive this is, in a series of studies [9], monogamous targets were rated more positively than people in CNM relationships in relationship-relevant and relationship-irrelevant domains. That is, monogamous couples were perceived to not only be more trustworthy and passionate but also to be more likely to pay their taxes on time, to floss their teeth, and to walk their dog [9]. However, some forms of CNM, specifically polyamory, are viewed more favorably than other forms, such as swinging or open relationships [26, 38]. One reason that has been proposed for why people in CNM relationships continue to face stigma is because these relationships are associated with greater perceived promiscuity and likelihood of having sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In fact, research suggests that attitudes towards people in CNM relationships are related to the perception that people in CNM relationships will spread STIs (e.g., among polyamorists, see [39]; and CNM more broadly, see [9]). Indeed, in a study [38] examining stigma towards people in the differing types of CNM compared to monogamists showed that people in monogamous relationships are perceived to be the least promiscuous and to have the lowest STI rates while swingers were perceived as the most, and

those in polyamorous and open relationships were in-between. Results also suggest that stigma towards people in CNM relationships was partially attributed to the perception of STI risk but not to perceptions of promiscuity—suggesting stigmatization towards people in CNM relationships, in part, was a function of perceptions of STI risk. Notwithstanding these perceptions, people in CNM relationships are less likely to contract a sexually transmitted infection than people who identify as monogamous (see [40] for a review), and CNM individuals are more likely to engage in safer sex practices (e.g., using condoms and getting tested for STIs) than people in monogamous relationships [41, 42]. Part of the reason for these differences is that while people in CNM relationships might engage in sex with multiple partners, all partners are aware of the arrangement and can have an open discussion about their sexual health and extradyadic engagement. In the USA, 20–25% of people in monogamous relationships engaged in extramarital sex [43–45] and people who are in monogamous relationships are less likely to practice safer sex in these encounters than CNM individuals [40, 41, 46]. Therefore, with infidelity occurring in a reliable minority of romantic relationships, apprehension about CNM relationships and concern about STI risk might be overblown while concern for STI risk among people in monogamous relationships may be understated. This idea is consistent with recent findings that suggest that monogamy might be less effective at preventing STIs than expected (see [40, 41]).

Stigma about CNM relationships also extends to the idea that opening up a relationship or having multiple romantic or sexual partners indicates that an existing or primary relationship is unsatisfying. However, a growing body of research suggests that people in CNM relationships are as equally satisfied with and committed to their relationships as individuals in monogamous relationships [15], and there is evidence that individuals in CNM relationships report higher sexual satisfaction and passion [47] and lower jealousy [48, 49] than monogamists. Although there is growing evidence that people in CNM relationships report at least as much relationship quality on average as monogamous couples, CNM arrangements involve multiple partners and relationship and sexual outcomes across partner can differ. Recent research has found some differences between primary and secondary partners. For example, individuals in polyamorous relationships report being more satisfied with, committed to, and invested in their relationships with primary partners compared to secondary partners, but, they report higher sexual frequency [17•, 33•], greater sexual satisfaction [47], and met sexual ideals [50] with their secondary partner compared to their primary partner. Research comparing reports for polyamorous partners to monogamous partners suggests that reports for primary partners in polyamorous relationships often mirror reports for monogamous partners. More specifically, a study comparing reports for polyamorous partners to monogamous partners

found that reports for primary partners and monogamous partners do not differ with regard to commitment or investments, but people in polyamorous relationships tend to report higher sexual frequency, more stigma (e.g., less acceptance from friends and family), and stigma management (e.g., maintaining relationships in secrecy) with secondary partners compared to reports for monogamous partners [17•].

Broadening Our Understanding of Need Fulfillment

One of the potential benefits of engaging in CNM relationships is the diversification of need fulfillment across multiple partners simultaneously. For example, in her book based on her experiences as a couples' therapist, Esther Perel [51] talks about how people's expectations for their romantic relationships have changed over time such that people now expect their romantic partners to meet several higher order needs, such as personal growth and emotional and sexual fulfillment. Perel's [51] ideas are in line with a model recently proposed by Finkel and colleagues [52]—the suffocation model of marriage—which argues that in Western culture, today relative to the past, people expect more from their relationships, and although people who can meet these high expectations can flourish, many people are not investing the time and energy to meet the high expectations they place on their relationships. The authors describe this as climbing mount Maslow without sufficient oxygen—meaning, people are aiming to meet higher order need for fulfillment and self-actualization without devoting the proper resources [52]. In response to this model, Conley and Moors (2014, [53]) proposed that adopting the tenets of CNM relationships and offloading some needs to additional partners could help strengthen or *oxygenate* a relationship—serving as one path towards greater need fulfillment.

Recent qualitative research with people in CNM relationships found that the most cited benefit of CNM reported by 42% of the sample was diversified need fulfillment [54•]. In fact, in a study that followed people who were considering opening up an existing relationship found that one reason people seek out additional partners is to meet needs that are unfulfilled in their current relationships [55]. In this study, people who actually opened up to a CNM relationship (compared to those who did not) reported greater sexual satisfaction over the course of two months, and this was especially true if they opened up their relationship to address sexual incompatibilities with their primary partner [55]. Indeed, past research has shown that relationships with primary partners are characterized by more commitment, investments, and satisfaction and greater communication than relationships with secondary partners [17•, 33•], and people tend to rate their primary partners as more desirable long-term partners [56]. But,

relationships with secondary partners are characterized by a greater percentage of time spent on sexual activity [17, 33], more eroticism [18], more passion, and greater sexual satisfaction [47] and yet, secondary partners are considered less desirable long-term mates [56]. Taken together, this work provides preliminary evidence that primary and secondary relationships may meet different needs, with secondary relationships being characterized as more sexually fulfilling while primary relationships might meet more emotional needs.

If individuals in CNM relationships can experience higher need fulfillment through having their needs met across multiple, simultaneous relationships, it is possible that the diversification of needs could be associated with feelings of satisfaction in their relationships. Mitchell and colleagues [19] proposed three different models to explain the role of need fulfillment in CNM relationships. The proposed models posit that having needs met in one relationship could either (1) detract from the relationship satisfaction in another, concurrent relationship (e.g., contrast model), (2) be associated with greater satisfaction in another, concurrent relationship (e.g., additive model; [57]), or (3) be associated with greater satisfaction in another relationship, but particularly when need fulfillment in the initial relationship is low (e.g., compensation model; [58]). Several studies have examined the effects of need fulfillment in CNM relationships, but support for the different models has been mixed. For example, Mitchell and colleagues [19] found that the extent to which one partner met a person's needs was unrelated to satisfaction or commitment with another partner (inconsistent with the additive or contrast models) and need fulfillment across various needs assessed was consistently high with both partners (inconsistent with a compensation effect as people in CNM relationships were fulfilled by both partners). However, in a study [20] that investigated sexual need fulfillment specifically, when a primary partner was more motivated to meet a person's sexual needs, this was associated with greater sexual satisfaction with their secondary partner (evidence for the additive model), though greater sexual need fulfillment with a secondary partner was associated with less satisfaction with a primary partner (evidence for the contrast model). Similarly, a recent study examining sexual and emotional need fulfillment [18] found that when polyamorous individuals reported more eroticism (i.e., feelings of arousal, passion, lust, sexual pleasure) with their primary partners, they reported greater sexual satisfaction with their secondary partner (evidence for the additive model) though greater eroticism with a secondary partner was associated with less sexual satisfaction with a primary partner (evidence for the contrast model). In contrast, ratings of one partner's nurturance (e.g., feelings of intimacy, warmth, and love) were not associated with sexual satisfaction in other, concurrent relationships suggesting that loving, caring feelings with one partner were not associated with sexual satisfaction with the other partner [18].

The findings on need fulfillment across relationships suggest that concurrent relationships can have null, negative, or positive effects on each other, and thus, an important future direction will be understanding when, and under what circumstances, relationships with concurrent partners benefit or detract from relationship quality with the other. Although there is limited research to draw on at this time, it might be the case that certain qualities from a primary partner influence the ability to maximize the benefits of seeking out multiple, simultaneous relationships. For example, Muise and colleagues (2019, [20]) found that when people in CNM relationships had a primary partner who was more communal (e.g., motivated to meet their needs), they were able to be more satisfied in their secondary relationships—suggesting that having a communal primary partner (or other features of the primary) can help people maximize the benefits of multiple concurrent relationships. It also might be the case that people can mitigate the detriments through their own actions. For example, Mogilski and colleagues (2017, [56]) found that CNM participants reported talking about their extra-dyadic sexual experiences and downplaying these sexual experiences more often with their primary partner compared to their secondary partner, perhaps because sexual engagement is higher with this partner and thus restricting information may help individuals meet their needs while also maintaining their relationship with their primary partner.

Expanding Theories of Relationships Theoretical Advancements

One of the unique benefits to studying CNM is that it informs and can challenge the boundaries of our current relationship theories. Indeed, scholars have recently argued that many theories in the psychology of relationships and sexuality include conceptualizations of relationship quality that have an implicit assumption that monogamy is the most desirable relationship style [47]. As such, most of the theories used to understand and predict relationship processes have been tested with a monogamous sample and it is not clear how these might extend to sample of people who are navigating multiple relationships. There are two illustrative examples of this in the field of relationship and sexual science. First, one of the standard approaches for assessing love in relationships involves asking participants about their passionate and companionate love for their partner [59, 60]. However, this approach may inhibit researchers from understanding passionate and companionate love in polyamorous relationships. For example, the Passionate Love Scale [60] includes the item "I'd get jealous if I thought [my partner] were falling in love with someone else." This item has a built-in assumption that more jealousy about a third party is equivalent to more passionate love; however, researchers point out that this may not be true for

individuals in CNM relationships who may actually experience positive affect in response to a partner finding a new relationship (i.e., people in polyamorous relationships may feel positive emotions when a loved one pursues other relationships sexually or emotionally; e.g., [48, 49, 61, 62]). As a result of this assumption, participants who are in CNM relationships would score lower on passionate love due to lower levels of reported jealousy despite experiences of passion with partners (see [47]). To address these issues, recent research has re-conceptualized the concepts of companionate and passionate love developing a measure that assesses eroticism and nurturance and that is applicable to both those in monogamous and CNM relationships [18].

Second, attachment theory is arguably among the most widely studied theories of romantic relationships. Attachment theory posits that romantic bonds are important sources of support, emotional stability, and safety and that secure attachment comes from repeated exposure to safe and supportive care [63]. A small, but growing, body of research has found that individuals in CNM relationships report high relationship quality, open communication, high levels of honesty, trust, and intimacy, and low levels of jealousy (e.g., [17, 33, 48, 56]), all qualities that are analogous to those that characterize a secure attachment [64]. However, one component that differs is relational exclusivity—or the assumption that pair bonding and love occurs among those who are sexually and romantically exclusive with their partners. In fact, sexual and romantic exclusivity are often conflated with ideas of love among attachment theorists (e.g., [65–67]). Therefore, examining attachment among people in CNM relationships and across partners allows for novel theoretical testing of the bounds of attachment theory—and other theories—given that CNM relationships afford people the opportunity to form deep emotional and sexual bonds with more than one person. Indeed, despite the theoretical assumptions (e.g., assuming pair bonds occur among exclusive, romantic dyads), recent work suggests that people in CNM relationships have similar attachment orientations with each of their partners (though greater security was reported for their primary partner) and report greater security [68] compared to established norms among monogamist [21]. This work and other works (e.g., evidence for diversifying need fulfillment; [51, 52]) beg the question of the built-in assumptions in our theories while providing novel tests of the boundaries of existing theories.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The research on CNM to date suggests that a non-trivial number of people are interested in or have experience with CNM relationships, and that CNM relationships can be a healthy and viable alternative for those who are interested in relationships that extend beyond the monogamous dyad. Past work suggests that engaging in CNM can be associated with important benefits, such as the

opportunity to diversify need fulfillment across partners, but also some challenges, such as enduring stigma and misunderstandings. Despite the burgeoning research in this area, many questions remain unanswered and are important future directions for researchers to pursue.

First, the bulk of the data on CNM relationships, as with monogamous relationships, includes people who are highly satisfied with their relationships. Therefore, we have little information about people who experience challenges with CNM or about people who have ended CNM relationship. Due to the stigma around CNM relationships, an early goal of researchers seemed to be to compare CNM relationships to monogamous relationship to determine if engaging in CNM was, in fact, associated with more negative relationship and personal outcomes. Now that we have evidence that CNM relationships are at least as satisfying as monogamous relationships and can be a healthy, viable alternative for those who are interested, future research could explore more nuanced questions about the benefits and challenges of navigating relationships with multiple partners. Recently, a group of prominent CNM researchers have joined forces to develop a Multi-partner Relationship Maintenance Strategies Scale (MRMSS) that will assess how people who pursue multi-partner romance (e.g., polyamory, open relationships, swinging, plural marriage) regulate their own and their partners' sexual and intimate interactions with other people. The researchers seek to understand the practices that help people resolve or agitate common sources of conflict among romantic partners and rivals within multi-partner relationships (e.g., jealousy, partner rivalry, disease transmission, partner abandonment). Additionally, the growing body of research on CNM has either utilized existing scales that have been created with the implicit assumption that monogamy is the most desirable relationship style [47] or has had to create their own scales to more adequately capture relational processes beyond the dyad (e.g., [18]). This is a limitation of much of the existing literature that aspects of existing theories of positive relationships and sexuality may not extend to people in CNM relationships. Moving forward, it is important to think about whether our concepts and measures are inclusive to people in diverse relationships, including those in CNM relationships. This might mean stepping back and re-examining how we ask about commitment (do we assume commitment equates with monogamy?) and how we ask about infidelity (do we assume any extradyadic relationships are cheating?) and other major constructs of interest. Therefore, there are opportunities for future research to expand our understanding of relationship quality and maintenance by re-considering the role of monogamy and by testing whether tenets of CNM relationships have broad implications for understanding need fulfillment.

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