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The Perceived Satisfaction Derived From Various Relationship Configurations

Marisa T. Cohen
St. Francis College, Brooklyn, New York, USA

Experimental research focusing on consensually non-monogamous relationships is lacking. This study examined perceptions of relationship satisfaction of participants ($N = 321$) randomly assigned to conditions in which they were presented with either a passage depicting a monogamous, open, or polyamorous couple. Results demonstrated that there was a significant difference between the groups exposed to the various relationship configurations in terms of the perceptions of the hypothetical couples' relationship satisfaction, $F(2,318) = 3.12$, $p = .045$. Specifically, the monogamous couple was rated as having higher relationship satisfaction than the open couple. Such a study has implications for garnering a better understanding of the preconceived notions we hold about the lifestyles of others. As this area warrants further investigation, exploration is still ongoing.

■ **Keywords:** relationship satisfaction, consensual non-monogamy, open relationship, polyamory, monogamy

Research has demonstrated that individuals in romantic relationships report more happiness than those who are not (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000; Khaleque & Rohner, 2004). Relationships also positively contribute to our personality and wellbeing (Farooqi, 2014). While there is a great deal of research examining the benefits conferred by partnerships, a major shortcoming is that most work focuses on the traditional and 'typical' monogamous dyad. Other types of configurations are largely ignored, thus approaching relationships from a mono-normative perspective.

We may assume that there are two types of relationships: those that are monogamous and those that are not. However, many configurations exist that are often underrepresented by research. There is a need to experimentally examine the public's perceptions of those in various non-monogamous configurations, as popular opinion may in fact influence the satisfaction partners derive from their relationships.

Monogamy is presented as an ideal standard in relationships; however, many people seem to ignore the high rates of divorce and infidelity that '. . . challenge assumptions about its universal desirability' (Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2013, p. 124). Conley, Ziegler et al. (2013) note that there is no research that specifically asserts that monogamy is more psychologically beneficial for the individuals when compared to other non-monogamous relationships structures. Specifically, the researchers highlight the lack of evidence linking sexual exclusivity to intimacy and relationship satisfaction. Rather, it appears that any advantages that those in monogamous relationships may have are a result of the bias we have in favour of this structure. This is a bias that will be explored by the present study.

Consensual Non-Monogamy

Conley, Moors, Matsick, and Ziegler (2013) use the term *consensually non-monogamous* (CNM) to define any arrangement in which the partners have extra-dyadic sexual or romantic relationships. Similarly, Hosking (2013) uses the term 'open' relationship to imply a non-monogamous sexual agreement that is characterised by rules that define which extra-dyadic sexual activities are permitted. These rules may be explicit or implicit. Despite the appearance of terms associated with alternative relationships in popular culture, there is little agreement on how to accurately define the various groupings that exist.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Marisa T. Cohen, Assistant Professor of Psychology, St. Francis College, 180 Remsen Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201, USA. Email: mcohen@sfc.edu

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Zimmerman (2012) notes that an open relationship is an umbrella term that encompasses any non-monogamous relationship. Under this umbrella are structures such as: partnered non-monogamy, a couple who enjoy sex with outside individuals; swinging, or non-monogamy in social settings; polyamory, in which partners are free to explore loving relationships with others; solo polyamory, or non-monogamous individuals who do not want a primary partner; polyfidelity, a commitment structure involving three or more people; and monogamous/non-monogamous partnerships in which only one member is monogamous (Zimmerman, 2012). Typically, the defining feature of the overarching open relationship structure is that the two individuals consider each other to be the primary partners in the relationship; however, this is not always the case.

Other researchers have made different distinctions when it comes to non-monogamous relationship structures. Barker (2011) focuses on the sexual orientation of those practising, and notes that the three most common types of non-monogamy are swinging, open relationships, and polyamory. Her research has demonstrated that swinging is typically practised by heterosexuals and bisexuals. In this arrangement, partners separate sex and love, with only sex with others being accepted. The open relationship primarily applies to gay men, in which partners may have sex with others either separately or together. Often, the rules in which sex with others is permitted come in the form of mutually agreed-upon terms. Polyamory is different, in that it is acceptable to love more than one person.

There are many ways to distinguish among the configurations that exist; however, the definitions are vague and often carry different meanings for researchers. Despite the type of non-monogamy that is practised, it is clear that there are often biases that come along with engaging in these relationships.

Mono-Normativity

Relationships are typically viewed from a heteronormic and mono-normative perspective, and as such, a dyad consisting of a man and woman is considered the standard to which we hold other pairings. This is because monogamous relationships are often viewed as the healthy ideal (Conley, Moors et al., 2013). As a result, there is a stigma surrounding relationships that are not monogamous in structure.

Those in CNM relationships are portrayed as being incapable of making typical monogamous relationships work and are often viewed as troubled and deviant. These beliefs are pervasive, and many therapists suggest that relationships of this nature are a result of the failure of the primary relationship (Conley, Moors et al., 2013) and attempt to help their clients return to monogamy. Therapists' difficulty or unwillingness to help their clients work on their non-monogamous lifestyle is due to the fact that the CNM structure challenges the '. . . fundamental clinical assumptions that "affair" or extra-relationship sex or romantic involvements, are symptoms of troubled relationships and are always a form of "sexual acting out"' (Shernoff, 2006, p. 407). It is important to challenge these beliefs regarding non-monogamy so we can fully address the biases that exist.

As mentioned, the negative bias toward those engaging in non-monogamous structures is not only limited to the general public, as therapists often associate non-monogamy with relationship dysfunction and individual psychopathology (Finn, Tunariu, & Lee, 2012). However, the idea that individuals seek outsiders as a result of an inherent problem with the primary relationship is flawed. Glass and Wright (1985, as cited in Zimmerman, 2012) have shown that more than half of the men in their studies who indicated that they had extramarital sex reported that they were happy or very happy in their marriages. This suggests that even those who are engaging in sexual relationships outside of their marriage do not necessarily feel that their primary relationship is failing.

Stigma Toward Non-Monogamy

Researchers have estimated that approximately 4% of participants identify themselves as CNM (Conley, Moors et al., 2013). This information was gathered through self-reported answers to marital status questions on surveys, and most likely is under-representative of the actual size of the non-monogamous population. As a result of attention in popular media and people being more often about their relationship configurations, research in this field has blossomed. Not only are researchers starting to investigate the types of structures that exist and their impact on relationship satisfaction, but they are examining people's beliefs about those engaging in CNM relationships.

Conley, Moors et al. (2013) documented the presence and magnitude of the stigma toward non-monogamy through a series of four studies. Two of the studies examined participants' beliefs about monogamous and CNM relationships, and two had participants rate their impressions of monogamous and CNM relationships. The results demonstrated that monogamous relationships are favoured, as it is believed that this structure fosters commitment, health, and trust. It was also assumed by the participants that monogamous couples have an overall better relationship, which demonstrates a halo effect. These results show that monogamous relationships are seen as more successful, which can be damaging to those not involved in these traditional dyads.

The judgment that individuals engaged in CNM relationships face is not only a result of negative stereotypes that are held by those who are monogamous. Even within the non-monogamous community, different groups pit themselves against one another. Wilkinson (2010)

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states that many polyamorists are quick to distance themselves from swingers. Polyamorists emphasise that their lifestyle focuses on love, rather than sex. Essentially, many polyamorists see themselves as superior to those who are engaged in other types of open relationships.

To examine whether all non-monogamous structures are equally stigmatised, Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, and Rubin (2014) set out to determine people's perceptions of the various relationship structures that fall under CNM. In their study, they focused on whether people were more likely to stigmatise relationships that focus on loving more than one person (polyamory), or on sex without love (swinging), or on sex without love without a partner's participation (open relationships).

A total of 2,277 participants read definitions of one of three relationships (swinging, polyamorous, or open relationships) and indicated whether they believed the individuals in the relationship possessed certain characteristics from a total of 18 descriptions such as clean/dirty, immoral/moral, and so on. Results derived from analysing a random subsample of 126 participants demonstrated that impressions of the three styles significantly differed on 13 items. Those in polyamorous relationships were seen as more moral and less self-oriented than those in swinging and open relationships. They were also seen as more mature, conventional, and comforting than swingers. Swingers were perceived as dirtier but also more radical and open to new experiences compared to those in polyamorous relationships. They were perceived as kinkier and less responsible than those in both polyamorous and open relationships. Overall, polyamorous relationships were judged more favourably than swinging and open relationships. These results suggests that people disapprove of multiple sexual relationships more than multiple loving relationships. As a result, polyamory, compared to swinging and open relationships, is deemed as more socially acceptable.

Further investigation of consensual non-monogamy paired attachment with relationship configurations. Moors et al. (2015) conducted a study to examine whether attachment insecurity plays a role in attitudes toward and desire to engage in CNM. With regard to attachment and relationships, the different styles each result in various attitudes and behaviours. Anxious individuals are usually preoccupied with concerns that their partners will leave them and, as a result, it is less likely that these individuals will have positive views of CNM. Avoidant individuals, on the other hand, tend to minimise expression of intimacy. Avoidant individuals may prefer CNM relationship as they can invest less but across multiple partners. As a result, avoidant individuals should also hold more positive views toward CNM relationships.

In addition to attachment style, Moors, Conley, Edelstein, and Chopik (2015) believed that gender would also influence participants' attitudes towards CNM. The researchers hypothesised that women may view certain types of CNM relationships (i.e., polyamory) as more positive than men, because females are more oriented toward friendship-based love.

The study focused on 1,281 heterosexual individuals who had never been in a CNM relationship with the goal of examining both how attachment styles influence attitudes toward and willingness to engage in CNM relationships, as well as actual engagement in these relationships. Results demonstrated that avoidance positively correlated with both attitudes toward and a willingness to engage in CNM. Also, '. . . men reported higher levels of avoidance, more positive attitudes toward CNM, and greater willingness to engage in CNM than women' (Moors et al., 2015, p. 228).

Satisfaction Derived From Non-Monogamous Configurations

While people's perceptions of monogamous and non-monogamous relationships may differ, research suggests that CNM relationships may be just as satisfying, if not more, than traditional relationship dyads. Knapp (1976), through administration of a battery of standardised psychological assessment measures, found no significant differences between polyamorous couples and the general population norms. Other research has shown that there were no differences between open couples and sexually exclusive ones in terms of adjustment or happiness (Rubin, 1982, as cited in Weitzman, Davidson, & Phillips, 2009).

Research on the satisfaction experienced by individuals in open relationships, focusing on homosexual men, has been mixed. While some research has revealed lower relationship quality (Hoff, Beougher, Chakravarty, Darbes, & Neilands, 2010), other studies have shown that these relationship arrangements are equally as satisfying as monogamous relationships (Bonello, 2009, as cited in Hosking, 2013). The majority of research suggests that those with open arrangements are just as capable of '. . . maintaining a satisfying, successful relationship as those who conform to the more conventional model of monogamy (Hosking, 2013, p. 1309).

Rationale

Zimmerman (2012) notes that research on open relationships is sparse, despite the fact that they have existed for centuries. Conley, Moors et al. (2013) also note that little empirical research has focused on CNM relationships, despite gaining attention in the popular press. While it is clear that there is a bias against those in CNM relationships, there is a need to experimentally examine people's views of others, both within and outside of the CNM community.

In addition, Conley, Ziegler et al. (2013) note that individuals who are monogamous assume that those who are non-monogamous enter into such relationships as

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a result of experiencing dissatisfaction with their partners. They also state that there are no studies that have '. . . directly examined the link between satisfaction and relationship structure (i.e., comparing monogamous with various types of CNM arrangements) in heterosexual couples' (p. 129). This is precisely the focus of the present study.

Methodology

Participants

A sample of 321 adults, who were all in a relationship at the time of the study, were recruited via social media. The link to a Survey Monkey survey was posted on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as posted on The Social Psychology Network and subreddit (/r/samplesize), with the goal of obtaining a large, diverse sample.

Pre-Condition Measures

Informed consent. Participants received a Survey Monkey link and were first presented with an informed consent describing the requirements for, and risks and benefits of, participating in the study.

Demographic questionnaire. Participants took the researcher-designed questionnaire, which elicited demographic information from the participants, such as their age, gender, sexual orientation/identity and marital status. Questions regarding their relationship status were also presented.

Relationship assessment scale. The relationship assessment scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988) was used to assess both participants' satisfaction with their own relationships as well as that of a hypothetical couple. This scale was initially designed to assess a person's satisfaction with his/her relationship. The scale consists of seven statements, each with a 5-point Likert-type response scale. A sample statement was, 'How well does your partner meet your needs?' (1 = *poorly*, 5 = *extremely well*). The scale has an alpha reliability of .86, and is '. . . a brief, psychometrically sound, generic measure of relationship satisfaction' (Hendrick, 1988, p. 93).

Relationship vignettes. Each participant was randomly presented with one of three scenarios involving hypothetical couple, Kyle and Denise. The first and third paragraphs of the vignette were the same in each condition and described a satisfied couple with two children and a strong social support system. The second paragraph alternated between conditions, and described the couple as either being monogamous, open to having sexual relations with others, or polyamorous.

Conditions

The second paragraph was altered based upon the condition the participant was randomly exposed to. The second paragraphs in each of the conditions consisted of 86 words.

Monogamy. In this condition, Kyle and Denise were presented as a monogamous couple, and embedded within the paragraph was the statement: 'This is why they felt that it was important to always be honest with one another and have a monogamous relationship, in which they would be faithful to each other.' This paragraph had a Flesh-Kincaid Reading Ease score of 67.2.

Sexually open. In this condition, Kyle and Denise were presented as a couple that was open to having sexual relations with other partners, which included the statement: 'This is why they felt that it was important to always be honest with one another and maintain an open marriage, in which they could explore sexual relations with others, but reserve their love and emotions for their family.' This paragraph had a Flesh-Kincaid Reading Ease score of 64.6.

Polyamorous. In this condition, Kyle and Denise were presented as a couple that was open to forming loving relationships with other partners. This vignette included the statement: 'This is why they felt that it was important to always be honest with one another and maintain a polyamorous lifestyle, in which they could explore loving relationships with others, sharing their love and emotions with their partners and their family.' This paragraph had a Flesh-Kincaid Reading Ease score of 63.4.

Post-Condition Measures

Relationship Assessment Scale — Revised. The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988) was again presented to the participants. However, the statements were slightly revised to enable to participants to rate the satisfaction experienced by the couple in the vignette presented. A sample statement was: 'How well do Kyle and Denise meet each other's needs?' (1 = *poorly*, 5 = *extremely well*). Two items were reverse scored and the composite score was then divided by 7 to obtain the average relationship satisfaction score.

Procedure

Participants were provided with a link to Survey Monkey. Once they accessed the survey, they were presented with the informed consent, demographic questionnaire, and RAS. They were randomly assigned one of the three vignettes, and finally were presented with the revised version of the RAS. After completion, they were thanked for their participation.

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Results

Demographics

The sample consisted of 321 participants (195 females, 119 males, and 7 who identified as transgender or evolving). A majority (54.21%) were between the ages of 18 and 24. An additional 35.83% were between the ages of 25 and 34, and 5.92% were between 35 and 44 years of age. In terms of ethnicity, a majority (82.24%) identified as Caucasian, 7.17% identified as Asian, 4.36% as Hispanic, 0.62% as African American, and the remaining 5.61% identified as 'Other'. Regarding location of birth, 69.2% were from the United States, 10.9% from Canada, and 7.8% from Europe.

Of the 321 participants, 72.27% identified as heterosexual, 19% as bisexual, and 3.74% as homosexual. The remaining participants selected 'Other' or declined to answer. When asked which term best described their current relationship status, a majority (89.41%) of the participants selected monogamous, 3.43% selected polyamorous, 3.74% selected consensually non-monogamous, 1.87% selected open, and the remaining participants selected 'Other'. The mean current relationship length of participants was 3.98 years (median = 2.5 years) with a range from 2 weeks to 37.25 years.

Relationship Satisfaction

There was a significant difference between the groups exposed to the three different passages in terms of the perceptions of the hypothetical couple's relationship satisfaction $F(2,318) = 3.12$, $p = .045$. Despite reaching statistical significance, the effect size of the difference in mean scores between the groups was quite small ($\eta^2 = .02$). Those exposed to the monogamous passage had the highest mean satisfaction score ($M = 4.31$, $SD = .493$), followed by those exposed to the polyamorous passage ($M = 4.15$, $SD = .720$), finally followed by those exposed to the open relationship passage ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .803$). Using post-hoc analysis, it was shown that those exposed to the monogamous passage were significantly different from those exposed to the open relationship passage ($p = .042$). This supports the first hypothesis; there was a significant difference in perceptions of individuals in monogamous and non-monogamous relationships.

There was no statistically significant difference between individuals from various relationship configurations in terms of their own overall relationship satisfaction, $F(4,316) = .775$, $p = .542$. However, there was a significant difference between those with different configurations in terms of the perceived satisfaction rating of the hypothetical couple, $F(4,316) = 3.232$, $p = .013$, ($\eta^2 = .04$). Post-hoc analysis demonstrated that the difference was between participants who identified as monogamous ($M = 4.15$, $SD = .686$) and those who identified as polyamorous ($M = 4.75$, $SD = .264$).

To examine any other potential effects, two-way analyses of variance were calculated. An interaction effect between gender and passage presented to the participants was not statistically significant in terms of the perceived satisfaction rating of Kyle and Denise, $F(5,310) = .623$, $p = .682$. An interaction between gender and passage presented was also not witnessed for the participants' own relationship satisfaction, $F(5,310) = 1.835$, $p = .106$.

While there was a main effect of the participants' own relationship configuration on the perceived satisfaction of the hypothetical couple, there was no interaction between the participants' relationship structure and the passage they were given, $F(6,308) = .732$, $p = .624$ in how they rated Kyle and Denise. Finally, there was no interaction between participant relationship configuration and passage presentation in terms of the participants' own relationship satisfaction, $F(6,308) = .310$, $p = .931$.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict the perceived satisfaction of the hypothetical couple based on the participants' own relationship satisfaction. A significant regression equation was found, $F(1, 319) = 7.942$, $p = .005$, with an R^2 of .024.

Correlations

There was a significant correlation between relationship length and relationship satisfactions score, $r(319) = .127$, $p = .023$, demonstrating that the longer a person had been in a relationship, the higher they rated his/her own relationship satisfaction. There was also a significant correlation between the participants' own relationship satisfaction score and the perceived satisfaction score of Kyle and Denise's relationship, $r(319) = .156$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .01$. This shows that the more satisfied a person was in his/her relationship, the more satisfied he/she rated Kyle and Denise's relationship, supporting the second hypothesis.

Discussion

This is a preliminary attempt to experimentally assess people's perceptions of the satisfaction derived from various relationship configurations. Research largely ignores those in relationships that deviate from monogamy, especially with regards to experimental methodology, and as such, this is one of the first studies to date in this field.

Relationship Satisfaction

A significant difference was found between the perceived satisfaction ratings of the hypothetical couple based on the passage the participants were given. The trends support the hypothesis set forth in that those who read about the monogamous couple perceived them to be the most satisfied with their relationship, followed by those who read about the polyamorous couple, finally followed by the ratings of those who read about the open couple. This also supports previous research demonstrating a bias in

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favour of those in monogamous pairings (Conley, Moors et al., 2013). However, caution must be taken with these results as the effect size was small.

It was shown through post hoc analysis that the significant difference was between the rating of those exposed to the monogamous couple and those exposed to the passage about the open couple. This suggests that we may be more tolerant of people loving more than one person than we are of those having sex with more than one person. This is consistent with previous findings by Matsick et al. (2014).

It is interesting that overall, those who identified as polyamorous viewed the hypothetical couple as being more satisfied. However, there were no differences when it came to participants rating their own relationships. Perhaps, as polyamorous individuals adopt a much more open lifestyle, they are able to see the positive aspects of others' relationships to a greater extent, and as such, view people in relationships as more satisfied. Also, the absence of a difference between those in various relationship configurations in rating their own relationship satisfaction suggests that we all view our relationships from our own perspective (rather than from the basis of societal conventions). This is important, because ignoring commonly held biases of others may protect our wellbeing and self-esteem.

Correlations

While it may seem obvious that those who have been in a relationship longer are more satisfied with their relationship, this observation also contends that couples continue to be satisfied over time, even after the passion from the early stages declines. Also, the significant correlation between the relationship satisfaction score of the participants and those they gave to the hypothetical couple suggests that people use their own relationship as a lens through which to judge the satisfaction of others. This may be why a strong effect size was not shown for the difference in satisfaction ratings of the different couples, as perceptions of satisfaction may be based more on one's own relationship than the description of the relationship of the hypothetical couple. This warrants further investigation.

Limitations

There were many limitations to this study, and as such, additional research is needed. The use of a snowball sampling technique did not garner a representative sample as the researcher had initially hoped. The sample was largely Caucasian, heterosexual, and between 18 and 24 years of age. This may be a result of using social media to disseminate the survey link. Also, as the sample was not diverse in nature, interpretation of the results may be problematic. Furthermore, while statistically significant results were found, they lacked a large effect size.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should aim to collect a more diverse sample. Careful attention should also be placed on obtaining participants from alternative relationship configurations to examine potential differences in how one's own structure can influence their judgments of others.

Implications

Confronting the biases people hold against those in the CNM community is of utmost importance. Once we are aware of these biases, we can better understand them and confront our own assumptions. Knapp (1976) has noted that many non-monogamous individuals have a fear of obtaining proper therapeutic support. This is because they worry their clinicians may condemn their lifestyle and pressure them to return to a monogamous structure. Marianne Brandon (2011), a clinical psychologist, asks:

> *If we as treators cannot accept and contain the monogamy challenge, how can we help our patients to do the same? . . . And if we chose to criticize our patients' non-monogamous choices can we still optimally assist them in the intimate challenges for which they seek help? Probably not. And our patients need our help now more than ever. (p. 272)*

Furthermore, Brandon (2011) notes that addressing the issues associated with monogamy may improve our relationship with our partners and our children. She explains that many people may not find monogamy sexually or emotionally satisfying, and exploring alternatives to this practice enables people to make more realistic life decisions. This also leads to important implications for child rearing. Instilling in children that there is only one match for them can be problematic.

This study lays the groundwork for understanding our relationship-related biases. People in non-monogamous relationships are often viewed as deviating from the norm, and by experimentally examining how people view different lifestyles, we can determine where our prejudices lie. Once we have a better understanding of how we view others, we can attempt to effectively combat our preconceived notions and misconceptions.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

Ethical Standards

The authors assert that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human

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experimentation and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

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