



Motivations for Engaging in Consensually Non-Monogamous Relationships

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Abstract

Sexual, romantic, and intimate relationships provide opportunities for individual and interpersonal fulfillment and the enhancement of well-being. Though research has identified that consensual non-monogamy (CNM) offers unique relational benefits, little work has examined why individuals pursue CNM relationships. Both self-determination theory and self-expansion theory provide frameworks for understanding the range of intra- and interpersonal motives for choosing or negotiating a multipartnered relationship. We explored the reasons for which people engage in CNM and discuss how motivations for CNM might be linked to well-being and need fulfillment. Our study used a qualitative approach to examine the motivations individuals report for engaging in CNM relationships. As part of a larger online survey, participants completed open-ended questions examining motivations for, and experiences of, CNM relationships. Data from participants who indicated that they were currently in a CNM partnership was selected for the analyses ($n = 540$). Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, within a critical realist framework. Motivations were organized into six interconnected themes: reasons related to autonomy, beliefs and value systems, relationality, sexuality, growth and expansion, and pragmatism. Individuals reported diverse reasons for engaging in CNM relationships; reasons addressed both individual and relational needs and well-being. Findings contrast with stereotypic views of CNM relationships as unstable/unfulfilling or that individuals engage in CNM because of relationship problems. The findings may facilitate therapeutic interventions for counselors working with individuals who are in the process of negotiating or re-negotiating relationship boundaries.

Keywords Relationship motivation · Consensual non-monogamy · Thematic analysis · Sexual motivation · Well-being

Introduction

Sexual, romantic, and intimate relationships provide opportunities for individual and interpersonal fulfillment and the enhancement of well-being. Traditional narratives of romantic partnerships position sexually monogamous relationships as the normative, primary, or only process through which sexual and relational well-being occurs (Finn, 2010, 2012; Piper & Bauer, 2005; Wosick, 2012). Individuals are challenging such

relationship norms by creating sexual, romantic, and intimate relationships that are consensually non-monogamous and multipartnered. Consensual non-monogamy (CNM) refers to relationships where all partners openly agree to the possibility or enactment of additional sexual, romantic, and/or intimate relationships (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2013a; Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2013b).

Though many CNM individuals report high levels of relational well-being (Conley, Mastick, Moors, & Ziegler, 2017; Conley, Piemonte, Gusakova, & Rubin, 2018; de Visser, & McDonald, 2007; Mitchell, Bartholemew & Cobb, 2014; Moors, Conley, Edelstein, & Chopik, 2015; Morrison, Beau-lieu, Brockman, & O’Beaglaioich, 2013; Muise, Laughton, Moors, & Impett, 2019b; Séguin et al., 2016; Wood, Desmarais, Burleigh, & Milhausen, 2018), stigma and negative portrayals of CNM relationships persist (Conley et al., 2013a, b; Rubel & Bogaert, 2014; Séguin, 2019). It is often assumed that CNM individuals are motivated solely by the desire for

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“promiscuous” sex, to “fix” a problematic relationship, or because they are mentally unwell (Rubel & Bogaert, 2014; Samuels, 2010).

Research suggests that CNM offers unique relational benefits (Moors, Mastick, & Schechinger, 2017a), though little work has examined why individuals pursue CNM partnerships. Thus far, the development of motivational models and the conceptual understanding of relational motivation has occurred in a largely mono-normative and hetero-normative context. Mono-normativity refers to the expectation/assumption that romantic partnerships should be sexually and emotionally exclusive (Piper & Bauer, 2005); a predominant narrative in romantic relationships research and one frequently associated with relationship stability and health (Moors, 2019; Moors & Schechinger, 2014). Mono-normative assumptions have implications for the ways we construct relational motivation and well-being and determine what is considered to be a “healthy” relationship. CNM relationships provide a unique interpersonal context from which to explore relational motivation and well-being as emotional and sexual needs can be dispersed among multiple partners, thus providing additional opportunities for self-expansion and the enhancement of autonomy.

Further, relational and sexual motivations have significant implications for individual and interpersonal well-being (Brunell & Webster, 2013; Gable & Impett, 2012; Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008; Muise, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013; Smith, 2007; Vrangalova, 2015; Wood et al., 2018). Motivations for engaging in and maintaining romantic and sexual partnerships are linked to how satisfied people feel in relationships (Brunell & Webster, 2013; Muise et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2018), levels of commitment and intimacy (Gaine & LaGuardia, 2009), and as indicators of psychological well-being, such as self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007; Vrangalova, 2015). Therefore, understanding the reasons for which people engage in CNM is key to helping individuals and partners maintain and enhance their personal and interpersonal well-being.

Motivations and Well-Being

Psychological theories of motivation provide a framework for understanding the reasons people engage in CNM and how motives affect aspects of psychological and interpersonal well-being. Self-determination theory (SDT) posits that being autonomous and fully endorsing one’s involvement in a relationship(s) is central to the fulfillment of basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Knee, Hadden, Porter, & Rodriguez, 2013). Given the emphasis of autonomy in CNM relationships (Moors et al., 2017a), SDT may be a particularly salient theoretical perspective for understanding motivations for CNM. A fundamental component of SDT is the proposition that motives fall on a continuum from more or less self-determined (i.e., more or less autonomous/intrinsic vs. controlled/extrinsic) and these

motives differentially impact psychological and interpersonal outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Knee et al., 2013; LaGuardia & Patrick, 2008). In quantitative survey research, motives that reflect autonomy and choice have been positively linked to individual and relational well-being, while motives that reflect pressured situations or the acquisition of external rewards have been negatively associated with psychological and relational outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Knee et al., 2013; LaGuardia & Patrick, 2008; Vallerand, Pelletier, & Koestner, 2008). Such associations have been identified using dyadic approaches to examine motives for engaging in a relationship (Knee et al., 2013; Patrick et al., 2007) and survey research exploring individuals’ motives for specific relational activities (Gaine & LaGuardia, 2009) and motives for engaging in sexual activity with a partner (Brunell & Webster, 2013; Wood et al., 2018). For example, in a series of cross-sectional, daily diary, and dyadic observational studies, participants who reported being in their romantic relationship because they valued the relationship or enjoyed the fun and exciting experiences shared with a partner (i.e., those who had higher scores on autonomous reasons) also reported higher commitment and relationship satisfaction with their partner after a disagreement (Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005). In another study, autonomous motivations for relationship activities such as intimacy, social support, and instrumental support (e.g., for problems or stress) were positively related to relationship commitment and satisfaction (LaGuardia & Patrick, 2008). Daily diary research indicates that autonomous relational motivations are also positively associated with indicators of psychological well-being, such as self-esteem and positive affect (Hadden, Rodriguez, Knee, & Porter, 2015; Patrick et al., 2007).

A somewhat similar perspective is found in self-expansion theory, which proposes that people are fundamentally motivated to expand their sense of self and self-efficacy by engaging in novel activities, attaining new skills and perspectives, and expanding access to resources (Aron & Aron, 1996; Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013). From this perspective, relational well-being occurs when partners engage in exciting and challenging activities together and help facilitate opportunities for expansion (Aron et al., 2013). Research supports the idea that self-expanding activities can positively impact psychological and relational well-being: Across five experiment, survey, and experience sampling studies, Graham and Harf (2015) demonstrated that individuals and couples who engaged in challenging activities within the bounds of their skills had higher positive affect and relationship quality. Similarly, couples who were instructed to engage in self-expanding activities (e.g., new outings or leisure activities) reported higher sexual desire, and in turn, greater relationship and sexual satisfaction (Muise et al., 2019a). Self-expansion theory is particularly relevant to the study of CNM motivations (Conley et al., 2017). Given that CNM allows individuals to engage sexually and relationally with more than one partner, there may be greater

opportunities for self-expansion, which may, in turn, contribute to relational well-being.

Motivations for Consensual Non-Monogamy

Little research has examined individuals' reported reasons for engaging in CNM. However, the literature suggests there may be a range of intra- and interpersonal motives for choosing or negotiating a multipartnered relationship that overlap with the primary concepts identified in SDT and self-expansion theory (e.g., autonomy, self-expanding activities). Key reasons may include diversified need fulfillment, growth, autonomy, connection, and variety (both sexual and non-sexual). In their review article, Moors et al. (2017a) used feminist practices and qualitative methodology to examine trends in the CNM literature; diversified need fulfillment was identified as a primary benefit of engaging in CNM (Moors et al., 2017a). The structure of a CNM relationship was perceived as providing the opportunity to meet a variety of needs and possibly alleviate sexual, relational, and social pressure in a primary partnership. Online survey research examining need fulfillment in polyamorous relationships indicated that participants were more likely to have their nurturance needs met by a primary partner and erotic needs met by a secondary partner (Balzarini, Dharma, Muise, & Kohut, 2019). Together, these findings suggest that people may seek out a CNM relationship in order to fulfill their diverse needs and thus enhance their well-being and satisfaction.

Personal growth and autonomy have also been identified as key benefits of CNM (Moors et al., 2017a). Individuals reported that CNM allowed for freedom and security. Others noted CNM provided an opportunity to actively resist gender, sexuality, and relationship norms (Moors et al., 2017a). Autonomy is also central to sexual motivation in CNM partnerships (Wood et al., 2018). In a cross-sectional survey study, CNM participants strongly endorsed autonomous sexual motives and such motives were positively linked to sexual need fulfillment, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction (Wood et al., 2018).

Connection and relationship enhancement have also been reported as reasons to engage in CNM (Fernandes, Wood, & Schechinger, 2014; Hoff & Beougher, 2010). In qualitative interviews with gay men, trust, love, and security were described as motivations for creating agreements about open relationship structures (Hoff & Beougher, 2010). For some men, having sex with additional partners enhanced the primary partnership by making the sex between them more intimate or more exciting. Similar results were identified in a mixed-methods online survey of people who engaged in swinging: "spicing up" the relationship and enhancing the emotional connection with a partner were among the top five most highly rated reasons for participating in swinging activities (Fernandes et al., 2014).

Current literature underscores the importance of variety (both sexual and non-sexual) for people engaged in CNM

(Jenks, 1998; Moors et al., 2017a; Rossman, Sinnard, & Budge 2019). A review of the early swinging literature noted that a primary reason for participating in swinging included sexual variety (26% of participants), followed by pleasure/excitement (19%; Jenks, 1998). Qualitative research with sexual and gender minority couples also highlighted the importance of sexual exploration and sexual fantasy among people's reasons for engaging in or considering CNM (Rossman et al., 2019). Participants wanted to experience types of sex that differed from what they were experiencing in their current partnership. Moors et al. (2017a) stressed the significance of variety in CNM relationships but emphasized non-sexual activities. That is, CNM provided opportunities for novel experiences, social interactions, and allowed people to engage in activities with others that a primary partner may not enjoy. Thus, novel experiences, whether sexual or non-sexual in nature appear to be highly salient for people wanting multipartnered relationships.

Finally, survey research examining individual differences in attachment and personality characteristics suggests differential motivations for engaging in CNM (Moors et al., 2015; Moors, Selterman, & Conley, 2017b). For example, people in CNM partnerships report lower levels of avoidance on measures of relational attachment compared to monogamous individuals (Moors et al., 2015). Polyamorous people also report low levels of avoidance and anxiety with multiple partners (Moors, Ryan, & Chopik, 2019). Further, individuals who score high in openness and low in conscientiousness are more willing to engage in CNM (Moors et al., 2017b). These differences could impact the reasons why people are drawn to multipartnered relationships, how they approach structuring their relationships with their partners, and their personal well-being.

The Current Research

A great deal of evidence supports the notion that relational and sexual motivations are linked to psychological and relational well-being (Brunell & Webster, 2013; Gaine & LaGuardia, 2009; Hadden et al., 2015., Knee et al., 2013; LaGuardia & Patrick, 2008; Muise et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2018; Vallerand et al., 2008; Vrangalova, 2015).

Although there have been several studies on motivations for engaging in CNM relationships, most of these have focused on smaller or narrow samples and have historically been limited to heterosexual individuals in swinging relationships (e.g., Jenks, 1998). This research has also relied on short surveys with forced-choice responses, presenting participants with limited representation of motivations that may not reflect the diverse and complex motives of CNM individuals. Though some qualitative research has explored the benefits of CNM (Moors et al., 2017a) and examined the reasons why gay men make particular relationship agreements (Hoff & Beougher, 2010), few studies have considered the ways in which complex

relational motives may be linked to individual and relational well-being in CNM partnerships. Examining relational motives among CNM individuals has the potential to contribute to and expand our understandings of autonomy, need fulfillment, self-expansion, and well-being. Thus, we argue that broadly based research on motives across CNM relationship structures and identities is needed. Further, a qualitative approach to examining relational motivations in a large, relationally diverse sample of CNM people can expand upon established interview and survey work to identify detailed, nuanced understandings of the varied reasons for engaging in CNM. With this approach, we can also discuss how motivations may be linked to individual and relational experiences. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to qualitatively examine the motivations that individuals report for engaging in CNM and discuss the ways in which motives may be linked to individual and relational well-being.

Method

Participants

The data were collected as part of a larger study examining the motivations and experiences of CNM individuals and people willing to consider CNM. Participants were recruited by using purposive sampling via social media. Specifically, key individuals, groups, and organizations on Facebook, Twitter, listservs, and reddit.com who worked with or had followers who were interested in sexuality and CNM were targeted and asked to distribute the study ad (e.g., sexual health educators on Twitter, polyweekly.com, and r/polyamory, r/nonmonogamy).

A total of 963 people responded and consented to participate in the survey. The current analyses were limited to the 540 individuals who reported that they were currently in a CNM relationship and answered the open-end question related to motivations for engaging in CNM. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 82 years ($M = 34.54$, $SD = 10.78$) and most lived in Canada (41.3%, $n = 223$) or the United States (49.9%, $n = 269$) and resided in urban ($n = 314$, 58.1%) or suburban areas ($n = 175$, 32.4%). The majority of the sample specified that their racial identity was white ($n = 457$, 85.1%), 8.2% ($n = 44$) indicated multiple racial identities (e.g., White and Inuit; Black, White and Aboriginal), 1.9% ($n = 10$) identified as Latino/Latina/Latinx, 1.5% ($n = 8$) as Black, and the rest of the sample reported several different racial identities (e.g., South Asian, Jewish, Pacific Islander). The number of relationship partners participants had ranged from 1–11, with an average of 2.23 ($SD = 1.32$). Most participants were in a polyamorous relationship (67%). See Table 1 for additional demographic information.

Procedure and Measures

A link to the anonymous survey was provided in all recruitment materials and after reading the consent form, participants completed demographic items (e.g., age, gender identity, sexual orientation, relationship status) and a series of forced-choice and open-ended questions related to their motivations, relationship agreements, and relational experiences. The question reported on in the current study is “Please tell us about your reasons for participating in a multipartnered/consensually non-monogamous relationship.” The survey took approximately 30 min to complete and participants had the option to be entered into a draw for a \$100 Amazon gift card. The Research Ethics Board at the University of Guelph cleared this research.

Analytic Strategy

All qualitative data were organized and coded on MaxQDA 18. Participants provided responses that were varied in terms of their richness and length. For example, some were quite short, explicit, and straightforward; others contained elaborate descriptions, narratives, and metaphors. The average length of response was approximately 46 words and ranged from one to 375 words. We conducted a thematic analysis, within a critical realist framework, to investigate participants’ reasons for engaging in CNM. The first two authors completed all phases of the analyses. Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method, we first read and re-read the data, taking note of initial impressions. We then independently coded phrases, sentences, and paragraphs of the text. We used both semantic and latent levels of analyses to generate codes: in some cases—particularly instances where participants wrote shorter and more direct responses (e.g., “fun, excitement, sexual variety”)—codes were based on what participants said and mirrored their meanings (i.e., a semantic analysis). In other instances, we employed a deeper level of analysis to capture the implicit meaning, ideas, and concepts present in the data (i.e., a latent analysis; see Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017). For example, a participant stating that “I don’t believe love requires monogamy. I don’t believe sex equals love...” reflects the ideas expressed in Theme 2 about the constraints of monogamy. Differences or discrepancies in understandings of codes were discussed among the authors until consensus was reached. In the third step, we collated codes and identified potential themes. The identification of themes went beyond a summary of the data and involved interpreting codes and collapsing them into meaningful patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017). We then reviewed themes, attending to differences and similarities, ensuring that the data extracts were clearly related to the organizing theme constructs, and identified whether overarching themes contained subthemes (Terry et al., 2017). The final themes and subthemes were then named and defined.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics

Variable	<i>N</i>	%
<i>Gender^a</i>		
Agender	4	0.7
Gender queer	32	5.9
Women		
Transgender	7	1.3
Cisgender	308	57.1
Men		
Transgender	6	1.1
Cisgender	135	25.0
Multiple gender identities	28	5.2
Non-binary	12	2.2
Another term best described gender identity (e.g., femme, bear, fluid)		
<i>Sexual orientation^a</i>		
Asexual	7	1.3
Bisexual	117	21.7
Gay	12	2.2
Mostly gay	5	0.9
Heterosexual	99	18.3
Mostly heterosexual	98	18.1
Mostly lesbian	14	2.6
Pansexual	82	15.2
Queer	82	15.2
Uncertain or questioning	6	1.1
Another term best described sexual orientation (e.g., demisexual, fluid, gynephilic)		
<i>CNM relationship type^a</i>		
Polyamorous	361	66.9
Open	223	41.3
Swinging	75	13.9
<i>Relationship status^a</i>		
Casual dating	128	23.7
Living with one partner, but not married or engaged	86	15.9
Living with more than one partner, but not married or engaged	14	2.6
Engaged to a partner	36	6.7
Engaged to more than one partner	1	0.2
Married to one partner	143	26.5
Married to more than one partner	2	0.4
Another status (e.g., relationship anarchy, not living with any partners)		
	50	9.3

^aParticipants were asked to check all that apply; only categories that were selected by participants are shown

Results

The thematic analysis resulted in the generation of six interconnected themes (with several subthemes) which represented participants' reasons for engaging in CNM (see Table 2). Most participants provided multiple reasons for engaging in CNM and their responses demonstrate the interconnectedness of the codes and generated themes (see Fig. 1). Relational ethics and values were underlying many participants' responses, and this

is apparent throughout most of the themes. Illustrative quotes are provided under each theme/subtheme, along with the participant's reported age, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Theme 1: Autonomy

Participants conveyed that autonomy was central to their engagement in CNM. It was important to participants to feel as if they had control over their own bodies and the ways that

they interacted and connected with others. Having sexual and relational autonomy appeared to foster independence and challenge hetero- and mono-normative ideas about control in relationships:

I value autonomy above a great many other things. My partners' bodies and sexualities are theirs to use as they see fit. My body and my sexuality is mine to use as I see fit. I really cannot grasp pretending to myself that I have or should have control of their sexuality when I am not around nor can I pretend to them that they have or should have control of mine. -Queer woman, 40 years old

Participants also indicated that engaging in CNM allowed them to participate in their relationships in ways that felt authentic and natural and that engaging in relationships in these ways was critical to their sense of autonomy.

Authenticity

Authenticity was an essential component of exercising autonomy. One participant stated that CNM “gave us the space to be more fully ourselves” (Bisexual woman, 26), and this sentiment was evident throughout many responses: Engaging in CNM allowed people to express themselves in ways that may not be permitted in a monogamous relationship. CNM enabled participants to have relationships that aligned with their ethics, their sexual and relational identities, and thus provided them with feelings of autonomy:

...I decided to be in a polyamorous relationship because I wanted to preserve my autonomy (over my sexuality and my feelings of love for other people), I wanted to be authentic and be who I really am, and I wanted to be accepted, understood, respected, and supported as a polyamorous person. And I wanted to offer the same to a loving partner.-Mostly heterosexual woman, 20

Naturalness of Consensual Non-Monogamy

This subtheme captures participants' views of CNM as what “feels most natural” (Bisexual woman, 21) or as a relationship orientation (i.e., a predisposed or enduring pattern of attraction to CNM; see Blumer, Haym, Zimmerman, & Prouty, 2014) and a part of who they are: “[I] experience my natural orientation as poly: I have always been sexually &/romantically attracted to multiple people.” (Mostly gay man, 36).

For some participants, this perspective may be linked to a belief in how relationships should naturally be structured (see Theme 2: Belief Systems). However, participants often spoke actively about how structuring their relationships in ways that reflected their relational orientation ensured that they could enact their autonomy, rather than hiding or “boxing in” an essential part of themselves:

For me it has always felt natural. I started dating as a young teen and realized pretty quickly that I was able to have feelings of attraction and love for multiple people at the same time. Limiting myself to one partner didn't feel like the right thing to do. So even though I had never heard of polyamory or open relationships, I decided to explore that part of myself. Over the years it has proved to be the right thing for me time and time again. I have met so many amazing people and have felt free to explore those connections without guilt or fear that what I'm doing isn't alright.-Queer, gender queer person, 24

Theme 2: Belief Systems

Participants described belief systems related to their motivations for engaging in CNM. These beliefs reflected a tension between the constraints of monogamy and the possibilities offered by CNM as well as ideas about how personal and interpersonal needs should be fulfilled.

Constraints of Monogamy versus Possibilities of Consensual Non-Monogamy

Responses reflected a belief that monogamy restricts the development of authentic connections and imposes rigid relational boundaries:

Personally, I think traditional societal views on relationships- sexual, romantic, etc.- are oppressive. Not that monogamous relationships are bad, per se, but it seems too black and white. I love my partner and being able to support them as they explore their sexuality, and vice versa, is a wonderful thing. Being forever tied to one person, no matter what, seems extremely limiting, and I think things like romance, sex, and companionship are a lot more fluid than the strict boundaries they're put under. -Bisexual woman, 21 years old

The restrictions imposed by monogamous norms were not only viewed as inflexible, but were also at times considered harmful to personal and interpersonal well-being:

I disagree with the common idea that having multiple loving relationships somehow devalues love. I don't believe it is OK for people to limit other people's ability to form relationships of any kind, especially when they supposedly love other people. We understand that when someone's partner tells them who they can and cannot be friends with, that that is an abusive and controlling behaviour, so I don't understand why arbitrarily telling them not to love others isn't just as unfair and controlling... -Demisexual, gender queer non-binary person, 30 years old

Table 2 Themes and subthemes identifying reasons for engaging in consensual non-monogamous relationships

Themes	Subthemes	Data excerpt
<p><i>Theme 1: Autonomy</i> This theme describes the importance of feeling as if one has the ability to make their own sexual and relational decisions</p>	<p>Authenticity This subtheme highlights the importance of having space to feel and act authentically in one's relationships</p>	<p>... In high school I always dated multiple people at once, and monogamy always left me feeling overwhelmed, suppressed and unable to express myself for who I really am. Becoming non-monogamous has brought the best out in me, and I have become substantially more patient, stable, loving, encouraging and supportive overall. I no longer feel like I am fighting myself to conform to a standard that was forced upon me. -Heterosexual man, 36 years old</p>
	<p>Naturalness of CNM This subtheme captures participants' desire to express their autonomy in a way that was congruent with their relational orientation</p>	<p>I have always been a poly person but didn't have the terminology. I just cheated in the past to satisfy my sexual needs. I don't think humans should be monogamous. Its unnatural and for me just doesn't work. I would argue I was born this way because I fall in love with every one of my partners, it's just in a different way. -Pansexual genderqueer person, 27 years old</p>
	<p><i>Theme 2: Beliefs and Value Systems</i> This theme identifies participants' ideas and tensions regarding monogamy and CNM and how these beliefs factor into their motives for engaging in CNM</p>	<p>Constraints of Monogamy versus Possibilities of CNM This subtheme reflects the belief that monogamy imposes rigid (and sometimes harmful) relational boundaries, while CNM presents possibilities for exploration and alternative relationship systems</p> <p>I feel like monogamy is an artificial restriction on the intimacy of parties involved. If two partners are capable of having intimate relations with third parties, I see no logical reason why they should be restricted from doing so. -Bisexual man, 27 years old</p> <p>I identify as polyamorous no matter what my current relationship structure is. I do so for philosophical reasons; I do not believe that we have the right to "ownership" of others, nor can we tell others what will make them happy. -Pansexual woman, 28 years old</p>
<p><i>Theme 3: Relationality</i> This theme describes motivations related to relationship formation, maintenance, and nourishment</p>	<p>Need Fulfillment This subtheme highlights participants' beliefs that need fulfillment should be dispersed among multiple individuals</p>	<p>I don't think that anyone should be tied down by rules laid out by their partner. Whether that is monogamy, or excessive rules in polyamory... Having multiple partners allows me to have many of my needs met without having to search for one partner that can fulfill them all... -Pansexual woman, 33 years old</p> <p>I believe we are our own fully formed people. We are not "completed" by being in a relationship. It makes no sense to me to restrict someone's ability to explore their connections with others, just because they have already established a certain type of connection with us. Also, it makes no sense to expect one person to be our everything—our caretaker, our moral support, our confidant. It puts an unrealistic amount of pressure on a person -27-year-old woman, fluid sexual orientation</p>
	<p>Creating community This subtheme describes the importance of creating a community of people with similar ethics and values</p>	<p>Love, chosen family and community and wonderful things—if it can be had with minimal discomfort, it's the emotional and logical choice. -30-year-old panromantic, heteroflexible, gender non-conforming man</p> <p>The social aspect of the lifestyle is a big part of it. We enjoy the clubs and making friends. We love getting dressed up nice or in costume for special events. -Mostly heterosexual man, 52 years old</p>
	<p>Relational Well-Being This subtheme describes the importance of meeting a partner's needs and developing intimacy, love, and connection</p>	<p>I love having emotionally close connections and polyamory allows me to be close with more than one person at a time. Being polyamorous changed the way I connect to people. I believe that my close friendships (sex or not) are very similar in nature to how relationships are for other people. There is a lot more depth, caring and mutual support in this type of friendship/partnership. -Mostly heterosexual woman, 26 years old</p>
	<p>Relational Integrity This subtheme highlights the importance of engaging in multipartnered relationships in ways that maintained personal and relational values</p>	<p>The high levels of honesty, ethical behavior and commitment to open communication. -Bisexual woman, 53 years old</p> <p>I like to have a heavily negotiated and intentional relationship structure. I enjoy being able to cuddle and kiss and be platonic-yet-physically-intimate with people without any fear that it will betray my relationship. I like knowing that I could sleep with other people if it were brought up/transparent. -Bisexual woman, 24 years old</p>

Table 2 (continued)

Themes	Subthemes	Data excerpt
<i>Theme 4: Sexuality</i> This theme captures participants' desire to explore their sexual identities, manage sexual differences, and experience sexual need fulfillment	Sexual identities and expressions This subtheme emphasizes the perspective that CNM offers opportunities to explore new and established sexual identities Variety, Novelty, and Excitement This subtheme highlights the importance of accessing new sexual experiences	As an asexual person I had decided poly relationships would be best for me -Asexual woman, 32 years old I am queer and have been with my husband for most of my adult life. It was an aspect of my sexuality that was important for me to explore, and he encouraged me to explore it on my own. -Queer woman, 31 years old I know one person cannot satisfy my needs, wants, and desires. I have the need to be obeyed. I have the need to be a sadist. Different people like different things. I need that variety. -Mostly lesbian, gender unidentified, 30 years old For the fun, the excitement, the rush it gives us, the ease of meeting others in a completely relaxed and open situation and for the sexiness it injects into our own already exciting relationship. - Mostly heterosexual man, 56 years old
<i>Theme 5: Growth and Expansion</i> This theme conveys the importance of growth, new experiences, and self-reflection in participants' reasons for engaging in CNM	Sexual Discrepancies This subtheme describes CNM as a way to manage sexual discrepancies within a current relationship Personal Growth and Expansion This subtheme describes the ways CNM is viewed as providing opportunities for personal growth and development (e.g., self-discovery) Relational Growth and Expansion This subtheme describes the ways CNM is viewed as providing opportunities for relational growth and development (e.g., deepening intimacy)	Basically my sex drive levels are much higher than his so it started as a way to solve our differing sexual requirements. -Pansexual non-binary man, 27 years old He cannot be a woman and he cannot be submissive, but I never feel resentment that he can't give me those things and I don't let it distract from the fact that he's giving me masculinity and Dominance (something I couldn't get from a submissive female partner). By having multiple partners, I can experience all of my complex sexual and relationship desires AND I can focus on what I only get at home from my primary...and appreciate that even more. - Queer woman, 34 years old Mostly curiosity and self-discovery. I wanted to know if I could handle it, and what it would teach me - Pansexual woman, 28 years old Non-monogamy just makes so much sense to me. It also requires me to own my own emotional reactions and accelerate my personal growth, dramatically widens my support network, and allows me and my partners to experience different aspects of ourselves that come out with different people. -Pansexual agender person, 30 years old It feels right and allows us both to grow. -Mostly heterosexual man, 51 years old We were in a long-term marriage and interested in widening our experience. -Mostly heterosexual woman, 60 years old It's about experiencing things we can't as a couple, not about a piece of strange. -Mostly heterosexual woman, 48 years old
<i>Theme 6: Pragmatism- Making it Work</i> This theme highlights the practical reasons for engaging in CNM and describes how CNM "fits" with participants' lives		I am a sex worker and don't believe that monogamy is right for my wants/needs/job. -Queer, nonbinary trans man, 25 years old Because my primary partner is long distance. -Woman, uncertain sexual orientation, 24 years old

I also think it's theoretically and ethically preferable—jealousy and possessiveness are toxic and borne of the patriarchy. -Bisexual woman, 27 years old

In contrast, CNM was positioned as providing opportunities for individuals to explore and grow, without being bound by traditional expectations of what romantic and sexual relationships entail:

I don't believe in the hierarchy of love, intimacy, or commitment. I believe different people fulfill different needs and I respect my needs and my partners. I want to live as unbounded as possible and not restrict my love, my life, my meaningful relationships or the love, life, and meaningful relationships of my partners. Intentionality, consent, commitment, and on-going dialogue are paramount to me and I don't want my life to be guided by heteronormative notions of love and monogamy and jealousy and the policing of women's sexualities. -Queer woman, 20 years old

The beliefs expressed in this subtheme highlight the connection between monogamy and the surveillance of sexuality, particularly women's sexuality. CNM appeared to present an alternative belief system that allowed for less prescription and the mutual construction of sexual and romantic partnerships.

Need Fulfillment

Many participants expressed the belief that it was unrealistic to expect one person to meet all of the sexual and emotional needs of a partner throughout the entirety of a long-term relationship; for these participants, this appeared to be a strongly held value. One participant stated:

It is not realistic to expect one partner to satisfy all of your romantic/sexual/family needs. It is more true to ourselves to set our own boundaries rather than adopt a standard set of "rules" associated with monogamous relationships in Canadian society. -Queer agender person, 27 years old

Participants also articulated several ways in which such expectations and beliefs could inhibit relational well-being:

I feel like there is too much pressure on one person to be their partner's "everything" when you are in a monogamous relationship, and that our current outlook on monogamy leads to possessive behaviors being misconstrued as romantic ones. Furthermore, I believe that the notion that you can only ever really love one person at a time is harmful. -Mostly lesbian woman, 29 years old

CNM appeared to offer a relationship structure in which participants' ideas about need fulfillment could be enacted and realized. CNM allowed for needs to be met and dispersed among

multiple partners, thus providing opportunities to enhance need fulfillment:

I believe one person can't be all things to their partner, and that exploring love with more than one person is very enriching and wonderful. As long as everyone participating is open and honest we can bring great joy into each other's lives, and also be great supports when life is less than kind. -Bisexual woman, 38 years old

This subtheme emphasizes the link between need fulfillment, personal, and relational well-being; participants noted a belief that having additional romantic and sexual connections available to them made it more likely that diverse needs would be met. Their beliefs about "who could do what and with whom" highlighted an openness, in contrast to the reported restrictions of monogamous beliefs.

Theme 3: Relationality

Participants described motivations for CNM that were associated with the formation, enhancement, and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Though most descriptions referred to sexual and/or romantic partnerships, participants also conveyed that CNM relationships afforded them the ability to develop and maintain friendships, build community, and create their own families. CNM was also a way to meet a partner's needs, to develop connection, and nourish a current partnership. Participants explained that CNM allowed them to engage in interpersonal relationships in ways that reflected their ethics and allowed for relational integrity. One participant captured this overarching theme by stating:

I like the idea of polyamory that love isn't this scarce resource. By giving it to one person you're not taking it away from someone else. Quite the contrary. Developing a relationship with someone new might serve to strengthen your existing relationships. I also like the freedom and intentionality of polyamory, the potential for growth and change and developing an intentional family. -Mostly heterosexual non-binary person, 30 years old

Creating Community

The creation of a community of people who had similar ethics and values was a central reason to engage in CNM. Finding groups of people who had similar approaches to relationships fostered a sense of interconnectedness and contributed to well-being:

I feel strongly that it is the healthiest way for me—emotionally, physically, intellectually—to develop my sense of self and my sense of belonging with others/community. -Pansexual woman, 24 years old

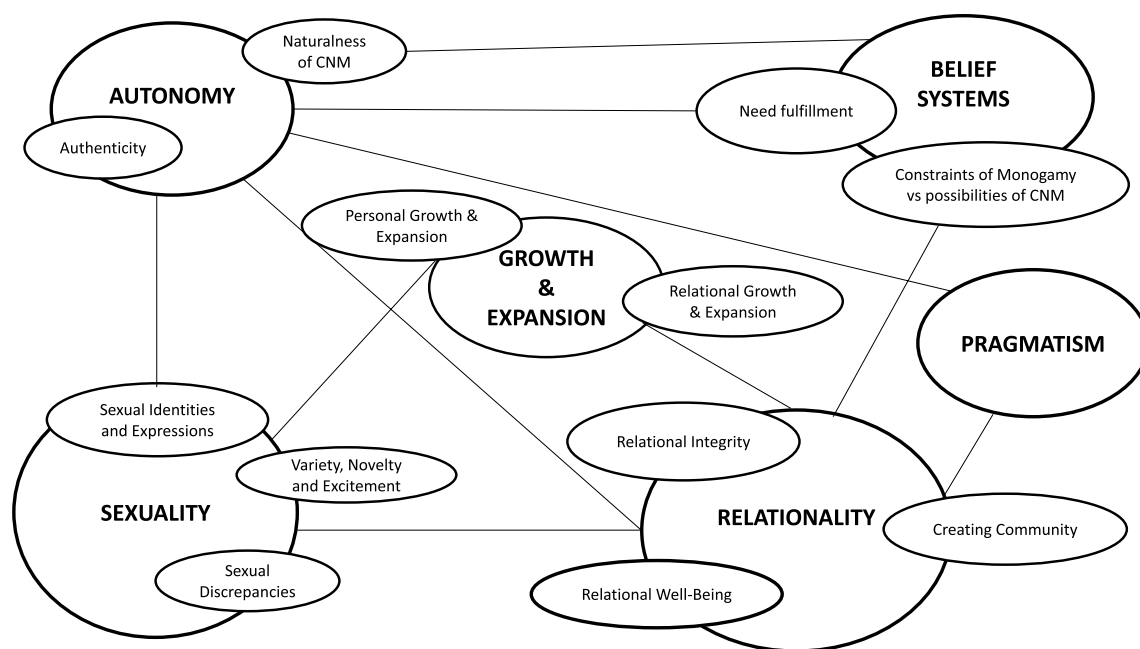


Fig. 1 Thematic map of reasons for engaging in CNM

Being part of a community also appeared to provide validation to some participants: Connecting with other CNM individuals helped them work through the stigma and shame they had experienced as a result of desiring multiple partners. One participant stated:

I have long found myself having feelings for more than one person, sometimes, one man, one woman, other times more than one woman or more than one man. For a long time I thought much of this was "wrong" or "unfair." Thankfully I met some other people that had CNM relationships & they opened my eyes to the idea that there were ways to be who I'd always felt like I was, ethically and honestly and that there were entire groups of people that felt, one way or another much like I did. -Bisexual woman, 43 years old

The potential for additional support found in CNM relationships was another component of creating community. Participants described how CNM provided opportunities for increased social support for both themselves and/or for their partner(s):

Why I want my partner to have other partners: It's good to have a team of people who want my partners happy. It's even better when I'm friends with them. -Bisexual trans man, 26 years old

I am able to meet more of my intimacy needs through multiple people than through a single relationship. It also gives me a larger support network and I can form meaningful friendships with my metamours. -Mostly lesbian trans woman, 28 years old

Relational Well-Being

Participants articulated how important it was to them to meet a current or new partner's (or partners') needs, to develop intimacy, love, and connection, and to nourish current relationships.

Participants expressed engaging in CNM to make a partner(s) happy and meet their needs. Often, these reasons were described positively, such as when a participant stated "I want my partners to be happy and make connections with others that make them happy" (Pansexual woman, 23 years old). At times, these descriptions contained an element of—or direct reference to—experiences of compersion (i.e., positive feelings associated with a partner's interest in/experience with another person; Ritchie & Barker, 2006). For example, one participant noted that "I see the best in my partner when he is loving multiple people" (Pansexual woman, 30 years old), while another indicated "I get to enjoy feelings of compersion whenever I see my partners spending time with their partners, or whenever one of them confides." (Bisexual, genderfluid person, 26 years old)

There were instances where participants described engaging in CNM because new a partner was already in a CNM relationship or because a current monogamous partner desired a change in relationship structure. Many of these descriptions were also positive, such as when participants tried CNM, realized it reflected their values and ethics, and decided to continue in that relationship structure. Other individuals articulated circumstances that highlighted a tension between what they wanted and what their partner wanted. Some participants decided to try CNM to preserve a current partnership, or out

of fear that their partner would grow resentful if they did not have their needs met. For example, one participant stated that:

My husband tried to talk me into this kind of lifestyle for 8 years before I consented to try it. I wanted solely a monogamous marriage at the time, and I knew my husband and I would need to split up if he could never get over his desire and I couldn't get past it. So, I decided to try it, and we agreed if either of us didn't like it, we would stop, and that would be the end of it. -Heterosexual woman, age unknown

Though these cases highlight some of the challenges associated with engaging in CNM, it is important to note that very few participants said that their experiences were detrimental enough to stop them from exploring this relational structure.

Participants frequently expressed a desire for connection and intimacy with multiple partners as a primary reason for engaging in CNM. One participant described the vulnerability associated with intimacy as particularly rewarding:

That moment when you can truly understand someone, when you let down your limits and your guards and you open yourself up to someone else, is one of my favorite feelings in the world.

In addition to connection, many people reported having the capacity to romantically love more than one person at a time and wanted to act on this to have a more fulfilling life. For example, one participant stated: "I feel that I have the capacity to love more than one person, as I believe that love can exist between two people in a multitude of different ways." -Pansexual person, 23 years old, no gender.

Finally, participants often reported that engaging in CNM might provide relational nourishment to a current primary partnership. They noted that this could be in the form of emotional support, a deepened sense of connection, or sexual need fulfillment (see Theme 3: Sexuality). These descriptions were tied to beliefs that CNM could strengthen a current partnership, rather than "take-away" from the love, connection, or intimacy already established with a partner. For example, one participant explained that:

It was something that my husband and myself had joked about for years. We realize the joking started to become more serious. And then finally decided that this was something that both of us wanted and we both felt that this would strengthen our relationship.
-Mostly heterosexual woman, 35 years old.

Another participant indicated that multiple relationships could be strengthened with a CNM approach (i.e., in contrast to only strengthening a primary partnership):

We believe love is more important and can be shared with more than one person. Love is the only thing we

can freely give without costing us anything. I love that I can share intimate thoughts and feelings with more than one person, it allows me to feel more connected to my partner and my partners in general. -Heterosexual man, 27 years old

Relational Integrity

Participants described being dedicated to engaging with partners in ways that maintained the integrity of the relationship and their relational values. They emphasized the importance of honesty, communication, and trust, highlighting the relational ethics they associated with CNM. That is, CNM was positioned as an ethical and responsible approach to romantic, intimate, and sexual relationships. Engaging in CNM necessitated the practice of clear and open communication about boundaries, identifying personal and relational needs, and openly processing challenging emotions:

I also love the open communication that ethical non-monogamy demands of people. When I practiced monogamy, I was eaten alive by jealousy—particularly centered around "not knowing" what was going on and the inherent inability to ever know. In polyamory, jealousy is recognized as a normal emotion and communicated about, rather than a shameful feeling that should be hidden. I think this is healthier and creates happier, more stable relationships. -Pansexual woman, 28 years old

Some participants concluded that CNM was a more ethical relationship structure following experiences with infidelity (either their own or a partner's). They emphasized that CNM offered an opportunity for them to be themselves (see Theme 1: subtheme Authenticity) and meet their needs without the deception involved in an ostensibly monogamous partnership.

I entered a traditional monogamous marriage in my 20s but secretly was compelled to "cheat" from the very beginning. The marriage ended 17 years and 4 kids and let's say 4 or 5 affairs later. (maybe more affairs) Over the next decade I had 2 or 3 serious but monogamous long-term relationships in which I also cheated. Obviously a pattern had evolved. By the end of the last one I had matured enough to finally realize that I cherished the ability to take on new lovers regardless of existing ones and that it was only dignified and moral that I be open about it. I had come to know that many others were like me. I decided to be out about my lifestyle. I love the freedom and the honesty that being openly non-monogamous brings. I have never been happier in my life since then.
-Mostly heterosexual man, 57 years old

Theme 4: Sexuality

Sexuality featured heavily in participants' motives for engaging in CNM. Three subthemes capture how CNM was viewed as a relational structure that provided participants with the opportunity to explore their sexual identities and expressions, experience variety, novelty, and excitement, and manage sexual discrepancies in their partnership(s).

Sexual Identities and Expressions

Participants identified the importance of exploring various and complex sexual identities and expressions. Overall, CNM was positioned as a structure that created space for accessing and exploring queer identities. Participants often highlighted a desire to explore their sexual orientation in a way that was meaningful and ethical.

Monogamy always felt "wrong" for me. Previously identifying as bisexual, now as queer, I generally felt more fulfilled when in simultaneous relationships with multiple genders. -Queer woman, 34 years old

This was particularly salient for individuals who felt that their queerness was not visible at prior points in their lives. These participants indicated that CNM afforded them the chance to engage with a part of themselves that they had previously felt they did not have access to.

As a bisexual woman who often finds herself in long-term committed relationships with cis-men, it feels important to me to explore my sexuality and to have sex (and emotional bonds) with women to nurture a side of myself that I often have kept closeted. -Bisexual woman, 27 years old

Other participants expressed coming to CNM from a desire to explore various sexual expressions. For example, wanting to engage in kink and BDSM activities and suggesting that CNM presented greater opportunity for this exploration.

Enhancing BDSM activities, exploring new physical sensations of multiple people's bodies and minds simultaneously, exploring my own sexual preferences that my fiancé may not have top interest in (e.g. I like being scratched, I have other partners who like scratching me a lot more than my fiancé), discovering new BDSM activities by interacting with others and experiencing new things I may not have explored otherwise. -Mostly heterosexual woman, 29 years old

Variety, Novelty, and Excitement

Participants expressed a desire for access to sexual experiences that included a sense of adventure, fun, excitement, and novelty. They often reported on these types of motives with a sense of

playfulness and appeared to view sex as something that could connect people but that was also a fun and engaging activity: "It is fun to have kinky sex with other queers. It's fun to have friends who we have sex with" (Queer woman, 37 years old). At times, participants' descriptions of their desire for variety, excitement, and novelty was also tied to the tensions discussed in Theme 2; CNM was believed to provide the opportunity for sexual exploration, while monogamy was positioned as sexually stifling.

I thrive on sexual novelty, group sex, sex parties, casual sex, kinky sex. CNM = freedom, excitement, adventure. Monogamy = monotony, prison, death. This is the only relationship structure that works for me. Monogamy never made sense to me, even when I as a young teenager (I would try to convince all my boyfriends and girlfriends to be open), and always felt incredibly suffocating to me (and I sucked at it—cheated at all my "monogamous" partners). -Bisexual woman, 35 years old

Further, variety and novelty were often positioned as central to sexual need fulfillment. As mentioned in Theme 2 (Beliefs and Values Systems) and Theme 3 (Relationality), CNM was perceived as a more ethical route to sexual need fulfillment when participants desired multiple sexual partners.

I crave variety and get off on/fetishize cheating/cuck-queaning but ethically abhor the idea of doing any of that without consent. Sex clubs as exhibitionist/voyeur is also in my wheelhouse of reasonably normal sexual adventures. As is group sex. Just the idea of only having sex with one person ever again seemed crazy. -Mostly heterosexual man, 30 years old

For some participants, exploring sex with multiple partners was a way to gain sexual experience that they may not have had in previous relationships.

I felt sexually restless. My husband was certainly not my first partner, and our relationship was solid. We had sex every other day or so, and we're very happy. But he took up the majority of my 20s, and I didn't feel "done" experiencing things. I still don't. Fortunately for me, he was very open and understanding of that feeling. -Mostly heterosexual woman, 33 years old

In addition to the individual benefits of sexual need fulfillment and sexual experience, participants noted that having a variety of sexual partners offered relational benefits. For example, having sex with someone outside of a current partnership could infuse the current relationship with sexual energy and revive passion in a long-standing partnership. One participant described the preparation period of a group sex event as particularly arousing for them and their partner:

We find that it enhances our sex life as we use the experience as a chance to get out and let our guard down. The preparation and talk before the date is super sexy and it's great to talk about it later. -Bisexual woman, 61 years old.

Another person reported that this enhanced feeling could have lasting effects: "Fun, exciting, sexually charged evenings, both during, and after—sometimes for days after we talk about the night and what we did and fantasize about the next time." -Heterosexual man, 55 years old.

Sexual Discrepancies

Discrepancies in sexual desire were frequently described as a reason for engaging in CNM. Often these responses were from individuals who were previously in a monogamous relationship and wanted to explore ways to manage the differences in their partnership while still meeting each person's needs.

My husband and I have very different sex drives, and it was becoming a huge problem in our marriage. We decided to open the marriage so that I could pursue sexual relationships with others. Now I am also pursuing emotionally intimate and romantic relationships as well, and I now identify as polyamorous. My husband is also interested in pursuing additional relationships. -Mostly heterosexual woman, 37 years old.

Discrepancies in the types of sexual experiences that partners desired were also reported. For example, some participants wanted to engage in specific kink activities that their partner did not desire, or instances where both partners had the same desire but these were not compatible, as reflected in one participant's comment that "Both my partner and I prefer to bottom, so it is nice to have other relationships" (Queer woman, 46 years old). Others indicated that their partner explicitly did not want to engage in certain sexual behaviours that they themselves wanted to explore and that this was detrimental to the partnership.

I wanted to try something in bed with a partner who did not want to do that activity. We were in a monogamous relationship for 3 years, and he was the only man I had ever slept with, and we talked about marriage. But I knew that if I married him, I would never get to try that thing- or I would have to pressure/coerce him into it. Both options were horrible. So I bounced. Because I'm non-monogamous, I'll never have that problem again- there will always be more options to deal with situations that can be intractable and zero sum in monogamy. -Mostly heterosexual woman, 27 years old

Often, participants portrayed the discrepancies as challenging but manageable. They described an understanding and acceptance that they had different sexual needs than their partner and

viewed it as a positive opportunity to self-reflect and ensure that each person was having their needs fulfilled.

The catalyst was sexual incompatibility between my husband and I. I am a kinky (interest in BDSM and D/S) person and he is "vanilla". After opening our relationship and gaining more exposure to alternative relationship models and gender/sexual orientation, my husband realized and has since accepted that he is asexual. Needless to say, I had sexual needs that weren't being fulfilled, and I wanted to expand. I joined our local kink community and discovered the concept of polyamory. It fits me well, because I am not interested in casual sex, and am a romantic and emotional person. -Mostly heterosexual woman, 31 years old

However, others highlighted the challenges associated with this process and emphasized that the transition from a monogamous to CNM relationship occurred over an extended period of time.

About a year into it he told me he wouldn't be happy having sex with me and only me forever. I didn't handle that well. We talked about and for the next two years were 100% monogamous. Then we, after a lot of discussion about our mismatched sex drives (mine is MUCH higher) decided to allow me to have sex outside the relationship on occasion. I gave him permission on a couple of occasions to have sex with someone else. These caused a great deal of anxiety with me and he has agreed and seems happy to not sleep with anyone else while allowing me to do so. -Gay man, 28 years old

Theme 5: Growth and Expansion

Participants were also motivated to engage in CNM by a desire for growth. Many observed that having multiple partners fostered both personal and relational growth and provided opportunities for self-expansion.

Personal Growth and Expansion

Participants were motivated to broaden their sense of self, engage in self-discovery, and learn new things. CNM provided novel experiences, a chance to learn from different partners, and to experience non-sexual variety (e.g., hobbies, activities). Some indicated that CNM removed pressure from a current relationship, and allowed them to pursue non-sexual activities that a current partner was not interested in. CNM challenged people to reflect on their ideas about relationships and discover what they wanted from relationships. One genderqueer individual stated that by engaging in CNM they could:

Learn new things about self by engaging in relationships with others. Learn to better appreciate a variety of relationship styles as we find the places/ways new partners fit for us (some may work physically but aren't good for deep conversation, some are wonderfully romantic but should only be seen a few times a year, etc.). -Pansexual, genderqueer person, 34

Participants emphasized aspects of personal growth that reflected psychological well-being. For example, some said that having CNM relationships positively impacted their self-confidence, their self-worth, and their overall mental health and well-being. One pansexual woman (age 34) stated:

I suffer from mental health issues and find connecting with people to be helpful in the management of my symptoms. I feel healthier when I engage with others, whether the intimacy is platonic, or sexual.

Relational Growth and Expansion

In addition to personal discovery and growth, participants described how CNM allowed for growth with current and new partners. Participants expressed a desire to allow relationships space to grow and change in ways that were "natural." (see Theme 1: subtheme Naturalness of CNM). For example, one woman indicated that.

I see relationships as living and breathing, and I like that! I like the capacity relationships have to grow, and I have no interest in limiting that, which is to say, I have no interest in saying "because of my relationship with Abby, I can't grow my relationship with Sydney." -Fluid woman, age 24

The process of opening up a current relationship, though challenging, also offered the opportunity to deepen intimacy and increase communication. This is demonstrated by one trans woman's account of how navigating this process with her partner allowed them to grow closer, more secure, and work through feelings of shame:

Though participating in a monogamous relationship was wonderful, it couldn't suppress the feelings that I would eventually develop for other people. Originally, the discovery of these feelings lead to a lot of shame, pain and confusion. I felt vexed at the desire to express this love and affection for another while not wanting to damage my existing, phenomenal relationship. Since my partner is my best friend and we've always been open with one another, I told her about my feelings and we were able to talk openly about how I felt. There was some pain in this process, but ultimately, she encouraged me never to suppress myself, secure in the fact that though life would change, our commitment and love would not.

After that "coming out", I discovered Polyamory and was completely taken with how others made this work and intrigued at the idea of compersion. The thoughts and values many poly partners had mirrored my own and found it quite fit how I wanted my life to be moving forward. Since doing so, I've seen communication, empathy, love, and the feeling of security actually increase, somewhat counter-intuitive to what might be thought otherwise. -Gynephilic trans woman, 36 years old¹

The final aspect of this subtheme is connected to personal growth and expansion and to relational integrity (See Theme 3). Participants expressed a desire to honor their current partnerships while also wanting to grow either as an individual or grow in new relationships with other partners. They articulated a tension between wanting to honor their own expansion while attending to a current partner's well-being and ensuring that the relationship(s) felt bonded, connected, valued, and respected.

With my ex-primary partner, we had opened up our relationship together because we had both found that we were having feelings for other people, whilst still feeling the same for, and wanting the same level of commitment with, each other. Once I discovered I could love multiple people at the same time, I decided this was how I wanted to pursue my relationships from now on; more than one person, wide open communication. -Queer, nonbinary person, age 23

Theme 6: Pragmatism

A final theme that was developed from our analyses is the concept of pragmatism. That is, CNM was articulated as more practical than monogamy and fit with participants' current lifestyle and life stage. They described the ways that CNM allowed them to meet the demands of their work and family life, to maintain long-distance relationships, and have relationships that were suitable for their stage of life.

Participants specified that CNM offered sexual and relational autonomy (see Theme 1) but also enabled them to achieve other goals in life and provided the support to achieve those goals:

I like to say that I'm in an open relationship with my work. I have a lot I want to achieve. At the same time, I like being in partnerships from time to time, so my ideal is to have other partners to build a community with so that we can all focus on our priorities and share the work of supporting each other. -Asexual man, 35 years old

Further, CNM helped to practically manage daily tasks and fit with busy schedules. As one woman stated: "For my best friend and I it is about having help with the kids and the home more

¹ In cases where participants wrote in their own gender identities and sexual orientations, we are using the identities that they wrote verbatim.

than the sexual. She and I are very very close and that is why it works.” (Heterosexual woman, 36 years old). Another reported that “I also have a very busy life, with children and a job that require a lot of time. So I like that one person is not constantly expecting something from me” (Bisexual woman, 37 years old).

For others, CNM offered the opportunity to have their needs met when a partner was permanently far away or when work required a temporary geographical separation or other duties that might cause disruption in a traditional monogamous partnership.

He had already committed to leaving the province for work for 6 months. Both he and I were interested in non-monogamy, as well. I also perform in porn, which was non-negotiable for me (aka, I wasn't going to stop). We decided that if either of us had sex with anyone else while he was gone, that was okay. -Queer, gender queer woman, 28 years old

Poly allows us to be in a committed long-distance relationship with each other without all the typical 'restrictions' that monogamy in LDR implies. -Mostly heterosexual woman, 45 years old

Some individuals conveyed that engaging in CNM was a practical strategy to ensure the continuation of their relationship. One woman reported that “My husband has medical issues that prevent him from fully meeting my needs. He suggested going outside of the marriage to have my needs met” (Heterosexual woman, 35 years old). In some cases, the continuation of the relationship was directly dependent on participants' stage of life, such as when young children were involved:

I also choose CNM because my wife and I have two children and it is important to us that we make our marriage work, if for no other reason than for the kids' sake. If we tried to format as mono we would most likely fail ourselves and our children. -Heterosexual man, 35 years old

Several participants reported that CNM just “fit” or “worked” for them at this point in their lives, whether due to work responsibilities or a because they did not currently desire a long-term committed monogamous relationship. In some cases, participants equated CNM with casual dating and avoiding a “serious relationship.” For these individuals, it appeared that CNM allowed them to engage in casual relationships in an ethical manner (see Theme 3), while avoiding relationships that would not fit with their current stage of their life.

Having just come out of a serious year-long monogamous relationship that led to an emotionally devastating break up, I decided that any romantic/sexual partners I had had to be casual by way of non-monogamy, because I knew that entering into a monogamous relationship might end up becoming serious, and I am not ready to be so emo-

tionally invested and attached as I was with my last partner. -Heterosexual woman, 21 years old

Discussion

We began this research project with the goal to qualitatively explore why individuals engage in CNM. We hoped to contribute to the current literature by providing an in-depth qualitative account of motives for engaging in CNM in a relationally varied sample. We believe that we achieved these objectives. Participants reported diverse reasons to engage in CNM relationships that addressed both individual and relational needs. We generated six interconnected themes that highlighted the importance of personal and interpersonal well-being and focused on autonomy, beliefs, relationships, sexuality, growth, and practicality. Our results indicate that motives for multipartnered relationships contrast with popular views of CNM as inherently problematic or unfulfilling: participants in our sample described CNM as offering opportunities for them to fulfill a variety of personal and relational needs in ways that aligned with their beliefs, ethics, and values.

Consensual Non-Monogamy as a Potential Avenue for Self-Determination

CNM was viewed as a relationship structure that allowed for a great deal of autonomy and freedom. Both sexual and relational autonomy were described as central values to many participants. This is in line with previous survey research that reported high levels of autonomy in polyamorous relationships (Mitchell et al., 2014) and qualitative review work that identified autonomy and freedom as a unique benefit of CNM (Moors et al., 2017a). Moors et al. (2017b) highlighted one component of autonomy by describing how people engaged in CNM actively resisted gender, sexuality, and relationship norms. Similarly, participants in the current study emphasized ways that CNM allowed them to go against cultural ideas about relationships and thus provide them with a sense of authenticity and a way to enact their autonomy.

Participants in the current research also expressed how important it was for them to engage in relationships in ways consistent with their sense of self and allowed for the exploration (or acceptance) of their sexual and relationship orientation. Being able to engage in ways that felt authentic was key to creating a sense of volition in their relational lives. Previous work has identified that polyamory is experienced as a both an orientation (Tweedy, 2011) and a sense of identity (Barker, 2005), with individuals often emphasizing its “naturalness” (Klesse, 2014). Further, qualitative research suggests that engaging in CNM is one way for some bisexual people to strategically manage (Robinson, 2013) or affirm their identity (Manley, Legg, Flanders, Goldberg, & Ross, 2018). Our results align with

these findings as participants explained how important it was to express their relational orientation and, in some cases, visibly manage or explore their queer identities. It is important to note that a monogamous relationship structure does not preclude the exploration and understanding of one's identity (e.g., bisexuality). However, it may be that for some people, being able to express their sexual orientation or queerness in certain ways (i.e., by being with more than one partner or gender) is key to feeling authentic and enacting their autonomy.

Autonomy is a key concept in SDT and is considered one of three basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In previous cross-sectional and dyadic daily diary surveys, self-determined (i.e., autonomous and intrinsic) motives have been positively linked to need fulfillment and psychological and interpersonal well-being (Brunell & Webster, 2013; Knee et al., 2013; LaGuardia & Patrick, 2008; Wood et al., 2018). Participants' motives in the current study reflected a range of self-determined relational and sexual motives, though they appeared generally intrinsic in their description. Motives focused on exploration, beliefs, values, connection, and need fulfillment in general. While some participants did report motives that appeared less intrinsic (e.g., trying CNM because a partner wanted to), these were often positioned as a positive way to meet a partner's needs, rather than out of fear of losing a partner. Thus, for the participants in our sample, motives for engaging in CNM were largely autonomous and intrinsic. Further, our findings indicate that these motives were related to participants' need fulfillment and their relational and psychological well-being. This pattern suggests that, for some people, CNM could be one avenue through which self-determination may be developed through the pursuit of autonomous interpersonal relationships.

Consensual Non-Monogamy as an Opportunity for Self-Expansion

According to self-expansion theory, people are motivated to expand their sense of self by engaging in new experiences, understanding new perspectives, and by including close others (such as sexual and romantic partners) in understandings of the self (Aron et al., 2013). Research using experimental, longitudinal, and dyadic methods has shown that romantic relationships provide one avenue for self-expansion (Aron et al., 2013) and that engaging in self-expanding activities can positively impact sexual desire, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction in monogamous relationships (Muisse et al., 2019b). Our qualitative findings also suggest that CNM may be one route for engagement in activities that promote self-expansion. Participants described the importance of new sexual experiences in their reasons for engaging in CNM. These experiences occurred together with a partner(s) (e.g., threesomes or swinging), or separately but with the support of a partner(s) (e.g., polyamory, open relationships). Often descriptions were tied

to feelings of excitement, fun, and the enhancement of personal and relational well-being. Participants also highlighted various non-sexual experiences as reasons to engage in CNM: they were able to learn novel activities and hobbies from different partners, and thus experience personal growth. As noted by Moors et al. (2017a), CNM may offer some people more flexibility in terms of the range of non-sexual activities partners have access to; if one partner is not interested in exploring a particular interest, it may be possible to engage another partner in the activity. Further, new partners continually expose one another to their worldviews and their interests, thus providing extensive opportunities for self-expansion.

Consensual Non-Monogamy and Relating to Others

Romantic and Sexual Partners

Themes in the current research highlight the romantic and sexual relational scripts operating in CNM relationships. Participants emphasized the belief that one person should not be expected to fulfill all of another person's needs, and many spoke of a capacity to connect romantically and sexually with multiple partners. This finding is in clear contrast to monogamous ideas about relationships, which position sexual and emotional fidelity as central to relationship commitment and well-being (Moors, 2019; Moors & Schechinger, 2014; Piper & Bauer, 2005). Similar relationship norms have been reported in qualitative and mixed methods studies examining the benefits of CNM (Moors et al., 2017a) and the agreements made in polyamorous relationships whereby participants conveyed a rejection of sexual and emotional exclusivity and embraced commitment through choice and expression of intimacy with multiple partners (Wosick, 2012).

Though monogamy is often viewed as the only relationship structure that enables relational well-being (e.g., happiness, commitment, etc.), participants in our study highlighted several ways in which CNM offered the opportunity for relational growth and enhancement. They noted that they expected to—and directly experienced—enhance/d intimacy, better communication, and better sexual experiences with a long-term partner (i.e., having multiple partners infused their current sexual relationship). Similar findings have been noted in interviews with gay men in open relationships (Bonello & Cross, 2010), surveys of people engaged in swinging (Jenks, 1998), and qualitative examinations of people in polyamorous communities (Ritchie & Barker 2006). In recent research using cross-sectional surveys, CNM participants who had greater sexual need fulfillment with a primary partner reported higher relationship and sexual satisfaction with a second partner (Muisse et al., 2019b). Additionally, men who reported more sexual need fulfillment with a second partner also reported higher levels of satisfaction with their primary partner. Thus, it appears that for some

individuals, CNM may offer new ideas about relationships that have the potential to positively impact relational well-being.

However, it is important to consider instances where our participants engaged in CNM because they wanted to maintain a current relationship or to meet a current or new partner's needs. While these responses were often framed positively (i.e., because they valued their partner and wanted to see them fulfilled), some participants noted that they did it to avoid conflict or losing their partner. It is possible that in these contexts, individuals may experience greater stress or lower levels of relational satisfaction. Dyadic survey and daily diary research with monogamous individuals and couples indicates that avoidance motives are negatively related to psychological and relational well-being, whereas approach motives (such as engaging in sex or a relationship in order to experience pleasure or intimacy) are positively associated with indicators of relational well-being (Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005; Muise, Boudreau, & Rosen, 2017; Muise et al., 2013). One study described evidence of a cumulative impact of avoidance goals on heterosexual couples' relational outcomes over the course of four months: though participants reported daily increases in their sexual satisfaction compared to when they did not engage in sex at all, having sex more frequently for avoidance-related goals predicted lower levels of sexual satisfaction and relationship commitment at a four month follow up (Muise et al., 2013). Though it is possible that the associations between avoidance motives and well-being are different in CNM relationships—perhaps moderated by the explicit communication about need fulfillment often engaged in by CNM individuals (Montenegro, 2010; Wosick-Correa, 2010)—more research, using varied methodologies, is needed to determine how such motives might be linked to psychological and relational well-being.

Community

Our results indicate that CNM is viewed as offering substantial relational benefits beyond those that are sexual or romantic in nature. Participants emphasized the importance of creating a community of people with shared values, of choosing their family, and having an extended community of friends that they could rely on. These results highlight the importance of finding a chosen social network that provides support and validation, in ways that may not reflect traditional norms of biological or legal familial relationships. Other research has identified similar aspects of community as being important benefits to CNM relationships (Manley et al., 2018; Moors et al., 2017a; Sheff, 2010). In a longitudinal study consisting of interviews and observations of polyamorous families, shared parenting and resources was viewed as a benefit of polyamory (Sheff, 2010). Co-parenting and an extended social network allowed not only for social and economic support but also more personal time, allowing each person to meet their individual needs. Thus, having

an extended community appears to aid need fulfillment and well-being.

The Practicality of Consensual Non-Monogamy

Participants described CNM as a relationship structure that “fit” with their current stage or style of life. Some reasons were linked to developing an extended community, such as when participants indicated that they appreciated the shared responsibility of daily tasks associated with parenting. Sheff's (2010) longitudinal work with polyamorous families identified similar results: participants emphasized that the distribution of parenting responsibilities was a benefit of polyamorous parenting. In the current study, participants also stressed the importance of having a relational structure that was suitable for one's current social context or stage of life (e.g., geographical location, work preferences and goals etc.). Though we did not ask if participants moved in and out of monogamy and CNM, this novel finding may highlight the possible fluidity of CNM; it may be that some individuals shift in and out of different relational structures depending on their social context and stage of life.

Implications

The reasons for participating in consensual non-monogamy are diverse, capturing the multiplicity of motivations and needs that traverse individuality, relationality, and sexuality. This is in contrast to problematizing views of CNM as inherently “unhealthy” or “unsatisfying” (see Conley et al., 2013a, b; Rubel & Bogaert, 2015; Séguin, 2019 for discussions). Thus, our findings contribute to the growing bodies of quantitative and qualitative work that suggest CNM is viewed (and experienced) as a fulfilling relational approach (Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Mitchell, Bartholomew, & Cobb, 2014; Moors et al., 2017a; Muise et al., 2019b; Wood et al., 2018).

Our work also has several clinical implications. First, we note the importance of considering each partner's reasons for CNM within the therapeutic context. Different reasons for having CNM relationships could raise tension and conflict about how people “do CNM” and what will work for each person. That is, how they navigate the balance between personal autonomy and relational well-being and how CNM is connected to the expression and practice of sexuality. It is possible that a person might be very comfortable “sexually playing” with others and less comfortable with more emotional connection, whereas another person might need and want more holistic intimacy. Therapists should be aware of this possibility in order to avoid privileging one approach over the other. Further, clinicians can help partners identify their reasons for CNM, assess instances where motives may be detracting from well-being, and examine what changes need to occur in the social and relational context for people to

move toward more intrinsic relational motives and potentially enhance their well-being.

Relatedly, it is important that clinicians working with CNM partners understand there are myriad reasons for engaging in CNM that have implications for individual and relational well-being. Our findings demonstrated that for some people, CNM reflected a relational orientation; it was something they had known about themselves throughout their lives or throughout an extended period of time. For others, there was some form of cognitive or relational process involved to engage in CNM (e.g., identifying with and taking on certain beliefs; navigating desire discrepancies). We encourage clinicians to attend to these experiences and processes when people express a desire to explore CNM in the therapeutic context; it is likely that some individuals will propose to open a relationship due to relational discrepancies (i.e., sexual interests, relational needs), while others might want or need to “come out” to their partners about their relational orientation. Regardless of the reasons, clinicians need to provide a safe, affirming, and non-judgmental space for all parties to process the implication of CNM on both an individual and relational level. (see Orion, 2018; Schechinger, Sakaluk, & Moors, 2018).

Limitations and Future Directions

The current research adds to the growing bodies of work examining the motivational and relational processes of people engaged in CNM. Our work provides an in-depth examination of the diverse reasons individuals report for engaging in CNM and describes how these motivations may be linked to psychological and relational well-being. However, the methods and analyses we used do not allow us to directly test the theoretical associations described in SDT and self-expansion theory. Though the results from our thematic analyses align with—and add to—previous findings from research using varied quantitative methods (i.e., experiments, daily diaries, surveys), future work employing a mixed-methods approach would be beneficial. Such an approach would allow for in-depth, contextual understanding of relational motives and the ability to test theoretical links between motives and psychological and relational well-being.

There are several specific methodological limitations worth noting that could be addressed in future studies. We asked participants to anonymously write about their reasons for engaging in CNM. While our methods allowed us to obtain a large and diverse sample of participants, this approach limited our ability to probe participants for a deeper understanding of their motivations and ask follow-up questions about how these motivations were linked to relational and psychological processes. Though the data we obtained was rich and suggested a level of interconnectivity between the developed themes, we are limited in understanding how certain reasons may be more or less relevant

to our participants and to participants within certain social contexts (e.g., older vs. younger, people in open vs. polyamorous relationships etc.). Future research using in-depth interviews or online interviewing prompts could help expand and deepen our understanding of the links between the themes identified in the current study.

Participants spoke quite positively about their reasons for CNM and our findings suggest that their reasons were largely intrinsic. It is possible that the participants in the current sample were more intrinsically motivated in general prior to engaging in the research, compared to people who did not respond. It may also be that our sample included individuals who were generally content with their partnerships and for whom CNM has worked well, and not those who may have tried CNM and since disengaged from this relationship structure. It is possible that participants would indicate different motives where there is notable conflict in a relationship(s) or where one person wishes to engage in CNM and another desires monogamy. Some participants did highlight the challenges and negative experiences they had with CNM, though these were few. Future research should examine the ways in which diverse relational motivations differentially impact personal and interpersonal outcomes among CNM partners.

Relatedly, the findings may reflect the interconnection (or cyclical dynamic of) relational benefits and motivations. It is possible that participants were thinking about the benefits they receive from CNM and reporting on those, which motivate them to continue in CNM relationships. Research distinguishing between initial and current reasons for engaging in CNM could help differentiate between motives and relational benefits. Exploring motivations with a sample of people who are just starting to explore CNM and following these individuals over time could also help distinguish between initial motives and relational benefits, and help us to understand how motives for CNM affect relational processes over the course of a relationship(s) (i.e., why it works for some people and not for others).

Finally, though we had great variation in our sample in terms of gender and sexual identities, our findings reflect the motivations of a particular sample of individuals (i.e., mostly polyamorous, mostly white, living in North America). Future research should examine whether similar motivations are identified among more diverse samples and geographic locations. Future research could also include mixed methods and large-scale quantitative approaches to determine similarities and differences in motivations among various groups (e.g., people in open versus polyamorous relationships) and conduct measurement testing on thematic constructs.

Conclusions

Reasons for engaging in CNM are complex, diverse, and reflect a range of intrinsic motives that are related to individual and

relational well-being. This is in contrast with assumptions that people pursue CNM relationships solely for “promiscuous” sex, or as a result of relationship problems (Rubel & Bogaert, 2015; Samuels, 2010). Though more research is needed to illuminate the relational processes involved in navigating different types of motives for CNM among different partners, the current study contributes to the growing bodies of work demonstrating the viability of CNM as one fulfilling and satisfying approach to relationships.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Guelph (#15SE013).

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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