



Consensual Non-monogamy as a Practice, Stigma, and Social Movement

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Date: April 30, 2024

Consensual Non-monogamy as a Practice, Stigma, and Social Movement

A dissertation presented
by
Mark Griffith
to
The Department of Sociology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Sociology

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts
April 30, 2024

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Consensual Non-Monogamy as a Practice, Stigma, and Social Movement

Abstract

Consensual non-monogamy (CNM) encompasses any relationship(s) in which all parties agree that they can have multiple sexual and/or romantic partners. CNM has seen increased visibility in the form of representation in popular media and even legal gains. This momentum comes as somewhat of a puzzle due to nearly ubiquitous societal mononormativity. Mononormativity refers to the societal phenomena that signal that monogamy is the only “true” or “good” relationship structure, that reward people for being monogamous, and punish them for not. In order to better understand CNM against the backdrop of both increased visibility and pervasive mononormativity, I ask, how do the consensually non-monogamous define their CNM, encounter mononormativity, and legitimate CNM as a social movement? I draw from 44 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with laypeople who practice CNM, and 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key actors in CNM advocacy and/or activism. I supplement the interviews with content analysis of webpages and articles about the work that these key actors perform, as well as books about CNM produced by these actors. I find that most people define their CNM not by sex, but instead by notions of emotional intimacy and morality. Respondents experienced mononormativity in two forms: anticipated stigma, or expectations that others would treat them poorly, and received stigma, or direct experiences of discrimination. CNM activists engage in two main discursive strategies: so-called sexual libertarianism—expressions that sex is positive, joyous, and has multiple meanings beyond showing love in a marital heterosexual context—and what I call familial libertarianism—expressions that families are any unit that

provide love, care, and resources, and that there are multiple valid kinds of families beyond two-parent nuclear ones. The findings illustrate the necessity for a sociology of relationships, within which sexualities are housed, that adequately addresses the link between sex and emotionally intimate relationships, be them romantic or familial. The study also reveals mononormativity's embeddedness in critically important institutions, such as the family, and even to those seemingly unrelated to sex and romance, such as the workplace. Finally, the findings invite us to better theorize the relationship between sexuality and morality, as, rather than trying to decouple morality from sexuality, CNM practitioners assert that their sexual practice *is* moral.

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Copyright	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	v
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: “Love is Not a Finite Resource”: How People Define Their Consensual Non-Monogamy	6
Introduction	6
Theoretical Framework	9
Data and Methods	14
Findings	20
<i>Not Solely, or Even Primarily, about Sex</i>	20
<i>CNM as Morality</i>	27
<i>CNM as Counterculture</i>	29
<i>CNM as Identity</i>	31
Conclusion	33
Chapter 2: “I Don’t Want to Be Slut-Shamed”: Consensual Non-Monogamists’ Experiences with Mononormativity and Stigma	37
Introduction	37
Theoretical Framework	41
<i>Mononormativity and Consensual Non-monogamy</i>	41
<i>Stigma and Consensual Non-monogamy</i>	43
Data and Methods	45
Findings	52
<i>Anticipated Stigma</i>	52
<i>Received Stigma</i>	60
Conclusion	66
Chapter 3: “Modern Family” or “Sexual Freedom?”: The Tactics and Discursive Strategies of the Consensual Non-Monogamy Social Movement	71
Introduction	71
Theoretical Framework	73

<i>Uncovering a CNM Movement</i>	73
<i>The Case for CNM as a Social Movement</i>	78
Data and Methods	79
<i>List of Key Actors</i>	80
<i>Interviews</i>	81
<i>Content Analysis</i>	84
Findings	84
<i>Borrowing Tactics from the LGBTQ+ Movement</i>	85
<i>The Most Visible Discursive Strategy: Familial Libertarianism</i>	87
<i>Additional Discursive Strategies: Sexual Libertarianism and Decolonization</i>	94
<i>Internal Conflict and Feuding Discursive Strategies</i>	101
Conclusion	105
Conclusion	110
Appendices	115
Laypeople Interview Guide	115
Activist Interview Guide	121
Demographic Questionnaire	125
Bibliography	127

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Introduction

Caleb is a 39-year-old heterosexual man married to his wife of eleven years. They have two young kids together, whom he supports with his high-paying government job. To the majority of people in Caleb's life, he and his family fit the stereotypical picture of the American nuclear family, with little deviation from the norm.

In reality, there is more to Caleb's life than meets the eye. Caleb and his wife have been legally separated for four years. Post-separation, Caleb began to explore polyamory. Sometimes referred to as "poly" or "polyam"¹ for short, polyamory is an openness to romantically loving more than one person and/or engaging in multiple consensual romantic relationships. Early in his polyamory journey, Caleb fell in love with a woman who had a husband who had a girlfriend.

I had met a married woman and fell really hard, really fast. I opened up to the idea of, "No, this isn't just casual fun. I am really into this woman." And I met her husband. I would go and make dinner at their place. He would bring his girlfriend over. I'd come over and make, like, chicken marsala for the four of us. It was just kind of, "Oh, this is a different way of having a family life. And I kind of love it."

Caleb, Caleb's love interest, her husband, and his girlfriend all knew about each other. Not only that, but they would all spend time together—not even in a sexual context. Instead, it was more of a "different way of having a family life." Often, this would look like homemade dinners, or "[hanging] out for about four straight hours playing *Smash Brothers* and just getting to know one another." Clearly, the dynamic between the four of them differs greatly from cheating. Instead, it falls under the umbrella of consensual non-monogamy (CNM). CNM encompasses any

¹ "Poly" is a very common abbreviation of the word "polyamorous" or "polyamory." Some individuals and organizations have opted for "polyam" instead, since, among other reasons, the Polynesian community also refers to themselves as "poly." See Manduley 2015.

relationship in which all parties explicitly permit romantic and/or sexual relationships with others (Rubin et al. 2014).

Unfortunately, Caleb's relationship with this woman ultimately fell through. It was a challenging and emotional time for him. "It was literally the first abrupt breakup I've experienced since I was maybe 19," he told me. "I haven't had to deal with this in two decades, 'cause even [my] marriage imploding was a very slow-moving process." Understandably, he arrived at his workplace visibly dejected. After being asked by concerned coworkers what was wrong, he decided to come out to them—about the separation, about the polyamory, and about the breakup. One of the people he came out to was his boss.

My boss at the time, she could see that I was having a really rough time. She's actually the head of an LGBTQIA organization at where I work. I came out to her and said, "I recognize that this is not a gender identity thing, but it is a sexuality thing. And I have no fucking clue what I'm doing."

Feeling somewhat reassured by his previous conversations with other coworkers, Caleb thought it might make sense to talk about what he was going through with the head of the LGBTQ+ organization at his job.

Caleb's boss's response was to file a sexual harassment claim against him. The claim alleged that Caleb discussing his polyamory at work was creating a sexually hostile work environment.

She got very indignant that I would seek guidance or resources from the LGBTQ community on managing sexual identity issues... then filed a sexual harassment case on me. ...My discussions of polyamory with people, the implication was that that was creating a sexually hostile work environment. ...The investigators interviewed every goddamn person in the division. ...They went through all of my emails. ...I had to be very careful with how I socialized with people. I couldn't go out to happy hours or do things. I felt like I could not be myself with all of these people because I had this hanging over my head. ...I've now been outed officially at work in official documents, which is really fucking uncool.

The investigation outed Caleb to every coworker in his division. It invaded his privacy, isolated him from his peers, and sent a very clear message that his boss associated his polyamory with sexual threat. In the end, investigators found no evidence that anything Caleb had done constituted sexual harassment, but the damage was done. The investigation is now a matter of public record. This means that any time Caleb pursues a promotion at his place of work, his higher-ups will know that he is polyamorous, whether Caleb wants them to or not.

Caleb's experience is evidence of what sociologists dub mononormativity.²

Mononormativity refers to the societal phenomena that signal that monogamy is the only "good" or "true" relationship structure, reward the monogamous, and punish the non-monogamous (Schippers 2016). By discussing his polyamory at work, Caleb breached the norm of monogamy. He was swiftly punished by his boss in the form of a sexual harassment claim.

Admittedly, I was a bit surprised to hear Caleb's story. In any work environment that I have ever been in, it has always been quite normal for monogamous people to bring up their partners. What Caleb described to me sounded like discrimination in the workplace, but on the basis of what? Clearly not sexual orientation, considering that Caleb is heterosexual. Puzzled, I asked him, "Do you wish that there were formal protections for non-monogamous people, or something like that?" He responded,

You know, six months ago, I would've been like, "Ah, we don't need that." But yeah, after having gone through this, I'm kind of like, "This is bullshit." I would love for this to be something that falls under a protected class. Because if we're gonna protect people who love people of the same gender, well, if I wanna love more than one person, is that all that much different?"

² A distinct but related concept to mononormativity is compulsory monogamy, which refers to the "institutionalized arrangements that compel or force people into monogamous, dyadic relationships" (Schippers 2016:13). Compulsory monogamy does not feature as centrally in this dissertation, given that I interviewed people who were ultimately not compelled to enter a monogamous relationship. This is not to say that compulsory monogamy is any less important or pervasive than mononormativity.

Caleb, too, felt like there should be legal protections to prevent other people from going through what he had gone through. He also recognized that current bans on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation inadequately addressed his situation. Yet, by his logic, if we are committed to protecting people who love people of the same gender, would it be so much of a leap to protect people who love more than one person?

Many CNM activists agree that loving more than one person is not all that different from loving someone of the same gender, and are working to ensure that practitioners of CNM are protected under the law just the same. Maggie, the board member of a CNM advocacy group, is just one of many people working to ensure that people like Caleb are protected against discrimination at work. She explained to me one of her organization's most successful tactics:

One of the things we're borrowing directly from the LGBTQ movement is this move to have workplaces add family and relationship structure as a protected group in their employee handbooks. That can sound like kind of small potatoes in some sense, but it means that any employee who works at a company that puts that in their handbook is guaranteed legal protection against discrimination on the basis of relationship structure. So, it's a really amazing thing. It's a great way to both literally protect people who are involved in the movement, but also grow the movement while legislation lags behind.

By working with individual corporations to ensure that they include family and relationship structure as a protected class in their employee handbooks, Maggie's organization is able to provide consensually non-monogamous people with guaranteed legal protection against discrimination on the basis of their CNM. This legal protection is able to occur without change at the local governmental level, although that is also starting to change. Due to the organizing of members of groups such as the Polyamory Legal Advocacy Coalition or the Organization for Polyamory and Ethical Non-monogamy, three U.S. cities have passed nondiscrimination ordinances on the basis of family and relationship structure as of April 2024 (Anon 2024a; M. 2023; Spiropoulos 2023). Evidently, a growing number of consensual non-monogamists are

participating in collective action to make claims on target authorities. In other words, CNM has become a social movement.

In this dissertation, I perform a deep dive into consensual non-monogamy. I ask, how do practitioners of CNM define their CNM, confront mononormativity, and legitimate CNM as a social movement? The data for the project consist of interviews with 44 laypeople who practice CNM, interviews with 17 key actors in CNM advocacy and/or activism, and content analysis of books, articles, and websites about CNM advocacy and activism. Chapter 1 explores how consensual non-monogamists define their CNM. Chapter 2 investigates how mononormativity manifests in consensual non-monogamists' lives. Chapter 3 details the tactics and discursive strategies that CNM activists use to legitimize CNM in a mononormative society.

It was a pleasure and an honor to speak to a wide range of people who practice CNM and who fight for the rights of those who do. My interviews uncovered touching stories of love, tantalizing stories of sexual adventure, disheartening stories of pushback and discrimination, and hopeful stories of legal and cultural victories. It became clear that CNM is a choose-your-own-adventure, where no two experiences are exactly alike. However, taken in conjunction, the data reveal that CNM has the power to highlight shortcomings of the sociology of sexualities, illuminate the pervasiveness of mononormativity in our social fabric, and reveal contemporary debates about sexuality, morality, and identity.

Chapter 1: “Love is Not a Finite Resource”: How People Define Their Consensual Non-Monogamy

Introduction

Olivia is dating a man who has a wife. There are words and phrases that society often applies to people who engage in behaviors like Olivia’s. Few of them are kind. Maybe some of them popped into your head as soon as you read about Olivia: “the other woman,” “home-wrecker,” or perhaps something far more derogatory. These labels imply that Olivia is acting immorally and causing harm to others. Yet, no one is actually being hurt by what Olivia is doing, because it is done with the knowledge and consent of everyone involved. Olivia is polyamorous, meaning that she is open to multiple consensual romantic relationships (Deri 2018). Olivia’s boyfriend’s wife knows about Olivia, and they treat each other warmly. The wife even has a boyfriend herself. Olivia reflected on her cordial relationship with her metamour—the term for someone with whom one consensually shares a lover (Deri 2018):

I like to think of where we were two and a half years ago versus where we are now. I never thought I'd be talking to her on the phone while I'm at their house and she's out with her boyfriend. I never thought she would leave me an apple crisp to take home after I've been at theirs. I think that there's a mutual respect and understanding that we both love this man very, very much. And each of us loving him only helps all of us.

Olivia dates this man with the approval of his wife. Olivia’s relationship with her metamour is one of “mutual respect and understanding,” bound by their shared love for the same man.

Elsewhere in the country, Ed and his wife Michaela have sex with other people. Most people, without any more context, would probably be quick to label this as cheating or infidelity. In actuality, this is also done with both Ed’s and his wife’s consent, because they only have sex with other people together. Ed and Michaela are swingers, meaning that they are in a romantically closed dyad, but engage in sexually open practices with other people (Deri 2018).

For them, this means that they only have sex, together, with other couples. Ed reflected on how he and his wife began their journey of joint sexual adventure:

We started seriously talking about non-monogamy, about having sex with others. And we decided that we always wanted each other to be involved. This was going to be a team sport—something we did together to add to our sex life. ...We were waiting for some sign that we were ready to do this in person. During the pandemic, we had friends that we were in a pod with, and the other couple and us decided to get an Airbnb and go away for a weekend, and we ended up having a sexual encounter with them that weekend. And it was positive. And on the drive home, my wife and I looked at each other and said, “I think that’s our sign.” So, we literally set up our profile on [swinging website] on the drive home, and have been into meeting other couples ever since.

Ed and Michaela’s behavior stands in contrast to infidelity. Rather than being something that they do that undermines their commitment to their relationship, Ed asserts that it actually strengthens it. Their swinging is a “team sport,” meant only to add to their sex life, not to detract from it. Like Olivia’s polyamory, Ed’s swinging is done with the consent and knowledge of his partner(s).

Olivia, her boyfriend, and their metamours; Ed, his wife, and the couples they have sex with; and many others, all engage different forms of a practice that scholars call consensual non-monogamy (CNM). CNM encompasses all relationships in which all parties agree that they can have more than one sexual and/or romantic relationship (Rubin et al. 2014). CNM is not to be confused with nonconsensual non-monogamy, i.e., cheating. As evidenced by Olivia’s and Ed’s stories, their CNM is rooted in a mutual respect for their partners and open communication with the parties involved.

Societal understandings of CNM do not always match consensual non-monogamists’ understandings their own CNM. As I previously mentioned, there are a host of words and phrases with negative connotations that describe people who have multiple sexual or romantic partners. Studies have shown that people view those who are non-monogamous, even consensually, as less trustworthy, caring, and generally favorable compared to monogamous

people (Conley et al. 2013). Yet, Olivia and Ed seem to trust and care about their partners quite a lot. In 2023, Meta released a chatbot meant to provide “practical dating advice,” which proclaimed that open relationships “aren’t a good idea” because they lead to “jealousy, insecurity, and emotional distance” (OPEN [@openloveorg] 2023). Yet, Ed maintains that his and his wife’s swinging brings them closer together.

The sparse media representations of CNM do not seem to accurately reflect the experiences of Ed or Olivia either. For example, *Sister Wives* follows a polygamous man, his four wives, and their eighteen children. *Couple to Throuple* features exclusively heterosexual couples looking to bring another woman into their relationship (sans one gay male couple looking to bring in another man). These reality shows, on top of plenty of other cultural messaging, paint CNM as something largely meant for the heterosexual male gaze. They suggest that, for the most part, CNM is a way for men to have access to multiple women. Yet, Olivia’s female metamour has a husband and a boyfriend. Ed and his wife are both bisexual, and more often than not, the couples that they have sex with consist of both a man and a woman. These types of shows also often portray CNM as something sexually scandalous. While sexual adventure is certainly a part of swinging for Ed and his wife, for Olivia, polyamory looks like apple crisps and loving a man “very, very much.” Clearly, in many ways, the perspectives of many consensual non-monogamists do not match media portrayals or cultural understandings of CNM.

In this study, I use data from interviews with 44 consensually non-monogamous individuals to answer the following question: how do people define their CNM? I ask this question to provide a clear, firsthand account of what CNM looks like by a diversity of people who practice it. I find that most people do not define their CNM solely, or even primarily, by

sex. Regardless of CNM type, most people emphasize emotional intimacy, ethics, and morality. For some, CNM is intrinsic to who they are. For others, CNM is a way of rebelling against the monogamous (and often heterosexual) norm.

The findings allow for a rich understanding of CNM as a practice. They stand in contrast to the—at best, misconstrued, and at worst, reductive—cultural understandings of CNM. Not only do the findings have implications for how we understand CNM in our everyday lives, but they also have implications for academic understandings of sexualities at large. This chapter encourages scholars of sexualities to focus on *how* people are in relationships, not just *with whom* people are in relationships. We should not just additionally consider the *number* of partners people have, but also how people come to “partner” (or “throuple,” etc.) in general.

Theoretical Framework

The sociology of sexualities emerged as a subfield in the 1970s, as scholars began to more systematically identify and document how sexuality was culturally constructed, thus challenging earlier understandings of sexuality as a biologically-determined fact of life (Fischer and Seidman 2016; Gamson and Moon 2004). Scholars have since developed a broad research agenda in sexualities, which interrogates how these cultural narratives about sexuality seldom reflect actual sexual practices, and instead the narratives are used to accrue power to the privileged and deny it to the marginalized (D’Emilio 2012; Foucault 1988). Many works explore how this social construction of sexuality has, for example, denied women sexual subjectivity and obscured female sexual pleasure (e.g. Connell 1987; Martin 1996; see Fischer, Seidman, and Meeks 2016 for review). Others examine how the social construction of the homosexual has been used to privilege a heterosexual bourgeois class (e.g. Green 2002; Nardi and Schneider 1998). Still others demonstrate how legal and cultural justifications for racial hierarchies and

racial violence—from slavery, rape, and lynchings to racially-disparate welfare distributions—have been historically created through narratives about the “uncivilized” sexuality of marginalized groups (Roberts 1999; Wells-Barnett 1895). In short, the broad field of sexualities in sociology is overwhelmingly united by a focus on how societies construct culturally-specific, normative understandings of sexuality to justify the marginalization of people based on their own gender, or their race, or the gender and race of the person to whom they are attracted.

Key to these studies is the concept of morality, or how societies assign notions of “right” or “wrong” to particular behaviors. Sexuality scholars such as Rubin (1984) demonstrate how cultural norms, reinforced by legislation and judicial rulings, push societies to define some sex acts as moral, or “charmed,” while others are defined as immoral, and outside the boundaries of acceptable human behavior. As one example, Rubin notes how judicial rulings engage in verbal gymnastics to explain why two individuals can legally consent to beating each other up in a boxing ring or on a football field, but those same two individuals are guilty of a crime if they consensually harm each other in a sadomasochistic sex act. As such, “morality” becomes the key mechanism linking sexuality to hierarchy in sexuality studies.

Remarkably, although sexuality scholars have studied how moral constructions of sexuality privilege masculinity over femininity, white over non-white, and heterosexuality over homosexuality, researchers have yet to seriously interrogate the moral value assigned to another aspect of sexuality: monogamy. Contemporary television shows, movies, and music are replete with messages of finding “the one.” These public portrayals of monogamy are captured easily and uncritically in sociological studies that examine questions of “coupling,” or marriage formation, or “single- versus dual-parent” families. If the social construction of sexuality

historically denies marginalized people sexual subjectivity, sexual pleasure, and even dignity and respect, ought we to explore whether it has done this for people who are not monogamous?

The relative omission of non-monogamy from the sociology of sexualities is doubly concerning given how central non-monogamy is to the invention of sexuality itself. Durba Mitra (2021) argues that the first theorizers of sexuality were European colonizers in India, who were appalled by the non-monogamy (more specifically, the polyandry) present there. They created a typology of sexuality that associated Europeanness, whiteness, and monogamy with “advanced” society, and cast non-monogamy, non-whiteness, and “primitive” sexuality as its opposite (Mitra 2020, 2021; Rusert 2017). European settlers effectively controlled this non-monogamy in India and throughout the world via colonial violence. As non-monogamy was forcibly removed from visible society, monogamy’s centrality to Western understandings of sexuality went unchallenged (Mitra 2021).

In an effort to decolonize sociology (Go 2017) and expand our understandings of sexualities, this dissertation examines the socially constructed binary of monogamous and non-monogamous through interviews with practitioners of consensually non-monogamous individuals, plus analyses of activist efforts to challenge the monogamy/non-monogamy binary. My findings extend existing notions of sexuality studies in three important ways.

First, by extending existing theories of sexuality to incorporate consensual non-monogamy, scholars will improve their understanding of the connection between sexualities and morality. To date, sexualities scholars have demonstrated how society defines only a narrow few sexualities as good, moral, and natural, while all others are marginalized and deemed bad, immoral, and unnatural (Rubin 1984). Seidman (1992) argues that sexual liberation movements challenge the notion that sexuality is inherently moral by arguing that sex is also pleasurable,

joyous, and meaningful beyond a heterosexual marital context. The suggestion is that morality should simply be divorced from discussions of sexuality. Notably, the people I interviewed challenge this call, and argue instead that morality—or better, ethics—are fundamental to their sexuality. Indeed, consensual non-monogamists—or ethical non-monogamists, as they typically call themselves (Hardy & Easton 2017)—largely define their sexuality by its presumed moral or ethical status. However, they understand ethical sexuality as defined by care, honesty, and respecting the humanity of everyone involved in the intimate relationship—and not determined in any way by the sexual acts in which they engage, or the genders, identities, or preferences of the individuals engaging in the acts. By observing CNM, scholars of sexualities are challenged to imagine whether notions of moral or ethical sexualities should truly be divorced from discussions of sexuality due to their presumed role as mechanisms to maintain hierarchy, or whether notions of morality could, if transformed, actually be a route toward emancipating sexual identities and practices from historical relations of power.

Second, critically examining the mononormative bias in sexuality studies requires scholars to acknowledge the mononormative basis not only of many sexual relationships, but also of a variety of social institutions. Mononormativity is institutionalized in marriage, in that only marriages between two people are legal in the United States. It appears in the workplace, in that people like Caleb have sexual harassment claims filed against them for discussing their CNM at work. It relates to the family, in that most legal definitions of family in the U.S. begin from a monogamous and nuclear ideal and define other family formations in contrast to it (Meadow 2013; Smith 1993). It connects to social movements, in that CNM activists are working to legitimize CNM in our mononormative society. Therefore, serious attention to

mononormativity enhances not only sociological understandings of sexualities, but also broader patterns of social life.

Third, critical attention to monogamy requires scholars to more accurately theorize sex as (often related to, but) distinct from intimate relationships. Sociology has a robust subfield of sexualities, but a relatively underdeveloped analysis of relationships. I argue that we need a sociology of relationships, of which sexualities is a part, and that studying CNM illuminates this need. Obviously, not every sexual encounter leads to a romantic relationship, and not every romantic relationship includes sex, but sociologists have yet to adequately interrogate the interplay between sex and relationships, and how this interplay shapes social life. The practitioners of consensual sexual non-monogamy interviewed here overwhelmingly assert that emotional intimacy is central to their CNM. Many liken their relationship structures to those of other non-traditional family units, such as multigenerational families, or families where two single parents may live together to jointly raise children in an intimate—but not sexual—relationship. This sentiment is evident in Caleb’s and others’ descriptions of CNM as a “different way of having a family.” Sociology is a discipline fundamentally concerned with interactions between people. Developing a sociology of relationships not only does a better job of connecting sexualities to broader questions of social organization, but also sheds light on the poorly explored question of how people choose and define the relationships in which they live their lives. Certainly, most people do not practice consensual non-monogamy, but if we expand theories of sexuality to capture the consensually non-monogamous, then these new theories will likely have applications to many other kinds of relationship formations in our social world. What exactly is a relationship? How do people pursue them? How are relationship structures distributed across society and how are they changing? Which kinds of relationships are most

consequential for people's well-being, be it emotional, financial, educational, etc.? The possibilities are numerous. Although I do not develop a sociology of relationships in this dissertation, my findings clearly point to the intellectual deficits of theorizing sexuality without a concomitant commitment to theorizing the relationships in which sexual relations may be embedded. I hope to develop such theories in future research.

In summary, my analysis of CNM highlights limitations in how sociologists have theorized sexuality to date. It calls on future scholars of sexualities to problematize mononormativity, interrogate the potentially emancipatory role of morality for equalizing power in sexual relations, and develop a new sociology of relationships. These changes would move the sociology of sexualities beyond a focus on *with whom* people are in relationships, toward a focus on *how* people are in relationships.

Data and Methods

In this chapter, I investigate how people define their CNM in order to focus on how exactly people are in relationships. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 44 people in the U.S., Canada, and one U.S.-born respondent in El Salvador who practice some form of CNM.³ I conducted these interviews in three phases.

The first phase included 8 interviews that I conducted between March and April 2020. I conducted 4 in-person interviews before the COVID-19 quarantine, and 4 virtual interviews during the COVID-19 quarantine. All Phase 1 respondents were from the greater Boston area, loosely defined. (Some lived elsewhere in New England but occasionally traveled to the area.)

³ I chose to speak to people from the U.S. and Canada, as these are locations where much of the scholarly, activist, and popular press work on CNM is produced (e.g. Deri 2018; Hardy and Easton 2017) and due to their relatively similar cultural contexts.

The second phase of interviews took place between October and November 2021. During Phase 2, I conducted an additional 19 interviews, all of which were remote, with respondents across the U.S. and Canada. 17 of these respondents practiced some form of CNM at the time of the interview, while 2 had practiced CNM in the past but were not currently practicing CNM at the time of the interview.

The third phase of interviews took place in September of 2022. During Phase 3, I conducted an additional 17 interviews, all of which were remote, with respondents across the U.S., Canada, and one U.S.-born respondent in El Salvador. All respondents were currently practicing some form of CNM at the time of the interview.

My respondents typically identified as practicing one of three types of CNM, which reflect three types of CNM that appear most commonly in academic literature and popular press: polyamory (e.g. Barker 2005; Deri 2018; Robinson 2013; Sheff 2005, 2006), swinging (e.g. Gould 1999; de Visser and McDonald 2007), and the open relationship (e.g. Labriola 2013; Taormino 2008). Practitioners of polyamory believe that it is possible and acceptable both to romantically love more than one person and to have multiple romantic partners (Barker 2005). While polyamorous people might also have multiple sexual partners, polyamory is primarily about love and romance (Barker 2005).

Swingers, or people in “the lifestyle,” as many swingers call it, “tend to be emotionally monogamous in a dyad and engage in sexually open practices on delineated occasions (sometimes meeting regularly over long periods of time) without developing emotional attachments to their sexual partners outside of the primary relationship” (Deri 2018:28). In other words, swingers are often romantically monogamous but sexually non-monogamous. In the most traditional sense of the word, swinging refers to “swapping” partners between couples, in which

two heterosexual couples might trade off partners and have sex. However, not all swingers do this, as Deri (2018) is careful to note in her definition. Deri (2018) also notes that male swingers tend to be strictly heterosexual while women may engage in sexual encounters with other women, although this is not universally the case.

Open relationships can be defined in one of two ways. People in an open relationship can be said to “[have] sexual but non-emotional relations outside of a primary relationship” (Deri 2018). Alternatively, and less specifically, “open relationship” can be used as an umbrella term to refer to any relationship in which non-monogamy is allowed. Swinging, polyamory, and open relationships are not rigid, mutually exclusive categories. A person may identify with more than one of these labels. (For example, a person in a heterosexual committed romantic relationship that is sexually non-monogamous may think of herself as a swinger *and* in an open relationship.)

The sample criteria required respondents to be practicing some form of CNM currently, be philosophically consensually non-monogamous despite being single, or to have practiced CNM in the past.

Since practitioners of CNM are somewhat hard-to-reach due to relative rarity (Levine et al. 2018) and stigma (Conley et al. 2013), I had to cast a wide net and recruit my respondents in a variety of ways. My recruitment materials ask if the potential respondent is considering ethical non-monogamy⁴; has or has ever had multiple romantic partners; has one romantic partner but multiple sexual partners; is practicing or has ever practiced polyamory, an open relationship, swinging, or any form of ethical non-monogamy; or rejects the idea of monogamy for herself.

⁴ I used “ethical non-monogamy” rather than “consensual non-monogamy” in most of the recruitment materials. These phrases are synonymous, but the word “consensual” tends to be used more in academic works (e.g. Conley et al. 2013; Finn and Malson 2008; Hauptert et al. 2017; Rubin et al. 2014), whereas “ethical” tends to be favored in popular media (e.g. Hardy and Easton 2017). Subsequently, I suspected that practitioners of CNM might be more likely to recognize “ethical non-monogamy” rather than “consensual non-monogamy.”

Since a broad range of practices fall under the umbrella of CNM, I wanted to use a broad range of terms to capture as many eligible respondents as possible. In all phases, participants were told that the project is about “the experiences of people who are non-monogamous or who practice some form of consensual non-monogamy,” to be as inclusive as possible of all types of CNM.

During Phase 1, I recruited 8 respondents in one of four ways. The first group ($n = 3$) consists of some people I met in February 2020 when I conducted a participant-observation at a dinner for polyamorous people in the Boston area. The rest were acquaintances from my extended network ($n = 2$), referrals from my extended network ($n = 1$), or referrals from two prior respondents ($n = 2$).

While respondents from later phases are from all over the U.S., Canada, and El Salvador, there is an oversample of respondents from the greater Boston area in Phase 1. This is a function of my sampling criteria, but there is utility to this, as the greater Boston area contains the only three cities in the country that recognize domestic partnerships between more than two people. In July 2020, Somerville, Massachusetts, a city in the greater Boston area, became the first U.S. city to legalize domestic partnerships between more than two people (Snyder and Alsharif 2020). Cambridge and Arlington, nearby Massachusetts cities, followed suit in 2021 (Anon 2021; Collings 2021). In March 2023, Somerville became the nation’s first city to pass nondiscrimination ordinances for polyamorous people (Spiropoulos 2023). Not surprisingly, the greater Boston area has a vibrant consensually non-monogamous community. The region is home to numerous meetup groups related to consensual non-monogamy. At the same time, it has a population large enough to provide a sample of consensually non-monogamous people who choose not to engage with the community. As the largest city in New England by far, Boston

also attracts people across New England who are interested in CNM, as a few of my respondents mentioned to me.

During Phase 2, I recruited 19 respondents via a variety of channels. I advertised the study in an online forum dedicated to swinging. Some respondents ($n = 8$) found out from that forum or others on the same site. Not all respondents who found the study this way were swingers; two were polyamorous. Other respondents ($n = 5$) found out about the study from a cross-post on another website. The remaining respondents from Phase 2 were referrals from my extended network ($n = 2$), referrals from a previous respondent ($n = 1$), or the partners of previously recruited respondents ($n = 3$).

During Phase 3, I recruited an additional 17 respondents. I once again advertised the study in the same online forum dedicated to swinging that I had used during Phase 2. Most Phase 3 respondents ($n = 15$) found out about the study from this site, while the rest ($n = 2$) were partners of a different Phase 3 respondent.

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample. Gay and bi-/pansexual individuals make up the majority (about 59%) of the sample. While diverse in terms of sexual orientation, gender, primary type of CNM, and age, the sample is largely white (84%).

During Phase 1, I interviewed four respondents in person. All remaining interviews in Phases 1, 2, and 3 were done virtually. Interviews averaged about 90 minutes, but some were as short as 45 minutes and some were as long as 2 hours. On the occasion that I interviewed a partner of a prior respondent, I interviewed them within a couple days of each other at most, and asked them not to discuss the interview with their partner until the other partner had been interviewed. All interviews were audio recorded, with the permission of the respondent.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Lay Sample

Gender:	
Female	22 (50%)
Male	19 (43%)
Nonbinary	3 (7%)
Sexual Orientation:	
Heterosexual	17 (39%)
Gay	3 (7%)
Bi-/pansexual	24 (55%)
Race:	
White	37 (84%)
Black	2 (5%)
American Indian	1 (2%)
Latinx	2 (5%)
Asian	2 (5%)
Primary Type of CNM:	
Polyamory	23 (52%)
Swinging	18 (41%)
Open relationship	3 (7%)
Age:	
Mean age	38.4
Range	23 to 54
Total:	44

Note: Counts shown for nonquantitative variables; percentages in parentheses.

The interview guide asked about a range of topics. The section of the interview guide relevant to people's self-definitions of their CNM is the one that dealt with the nature of the respondent's current relationship(s). In this section, I asked questions such as how many partners the respondent has, how they met, whether they live together or have kids together, what the rules or terms of their relationships are, what they like and dislike about their CNM, what labels they apply to their CNM, and how they arrived at their CNM. These questions were meant to identify the contours and nuances of each respondent's relationship(s), in order to paint the

clearest possible picture of how people define their CNM. After each interview, I sent respondents a short demographic questionnaire to fill out.

After transcribing each interview, I coded transcriptions for themes in NVivo. I first created broad codes to “anchor” responses to the questions in the interview guide that they pertained to (Deterding and Waters 2021). For example, I created a code titled “relationship rules/terms” to organize all responses about the terms of one’s relationship. Then, I created codes for specific patterns that emerged in people’s definitions of their CNM, e.g. “love,” “sex,” “consent,” and “communication.”

Findings

Not Solely, or Even Primarily, about Sex

The majority of respondents, regardless of CNM type, did not solely, or even primarily, define their CNM in terms of sex. Not surprisingly, and consistent with the literature (e.g. Barker 2005; Deri 2018), polyamorous respondents centered love and romance when they defined their CNM. For example, Katherine, who is polyamorous, said, “You can be poly[amorous] and single or poly[amorous] and seeing one person because you know that you have the capacity to love and be with multiple people.” For Katherine, it is the ability to love more than one person that defines her CNM. Courtney had a similar definition: “polyamory is openness to multiple loving, committed relationships.” In other words, Courtney views polyamory as an orientation toward multiple relationships defined by both commitment and love. Similarly, Olivia said that love is the first thing that comes to her mind when she thinks of polyamory,

because there's just so much love. There's so many people who care about you. There's more people in your support system. There's more people to step in when a kid is sick, or you need someone to pet-sit your dog, or something like that. It's just a lot of caring and nurturing love, in my experience.

For Olivia, love is central to her CNM. Her polyamory is about the support that she feels from the people around her, which signals to her that she is loved.

Many polyamorous respondents not only emphasized love in their definitions of their CNM, but also distinguished their CNM from other types of CNM that they viewed as being primarily about sex. Shannon, also polyamorous, did so in her comparison between polyamory and swinging: “[Swinging] is about going out and having recreational sex, but poly[amory] is about building those relationships first and foremost.” By “those relationships,” Shannon is referring to interpersonal relationships that are more intimate and romantic than those between people who only have recreational sex. Jared, another polyamorous respondent, made a similar distinction between polyamory and open relationships: “I feel like [polyamory and open relationships] are two different—I don’t want to think of it as tiers—but they’re just two different ways of practicing the non-monogamy. One is multiple romantic partners, and the other one is just more sexual.” Jared defines open relationships as “more sexual” than polyamory. Polyamory’s emphasis, for him, is on having multiple *romantic* partners. Evidently, many polyamorous respondents viewed their CNM as primarily romantic in a way that is distinct from more sexual kinds of CNM.

However, people whose CNM is ostensibly more sexual did not solely define their CNM by sex, if they defined it that way at all. Take, for example, Ed’s definition of his swinging:

To me, swingers are people who are in a relationship, but invite or engage in sexual encounters with other consenting adults, and they are into it for the fun of the sex. To me, there's a line between swinger and poly[amorous]. We're not looking for a romantic relationship outside of the one that we have together, though we do kind of tiptoe up to it. Because for us, it's important to be friends with the other couples that we have sex with. It's not purely sexual. We do enjoy socializing and getting to know the other couples.

At first glance, Ed does define swinging in terms of “sexual encounters” and “the fun of sex.” Whereas many polyamorous respondents maintained that sex is not that important to their CNM, Ed did not shy away from it. However, he views his swinging as distinct from, but not so distant from, polyamory. His swinging “tiptoes up” to that line because friendship and socializing are also central to his CNM. While his swinging is not necessarily defined by multiple romantic connections, it is certainly defined by multiple emotionally close connections.

Other swingers also defined their CNM by factors in addition to sex, such as socialization and community. For example, Aaron saw his swinging as both sexual and social. He elaborated, “Swinging, to me, is engaging in social and sexual activity with other like-minded individuals for the sake of sexual exploration.” While sex is an integral part of Aaron’s definition of his CNM, it is not the only part; he mentions a social element, too. Other swingers also identified a strong social component of their CNM. For example, Kim thinks of her sexual partners as her friends:

So, swinging would be sex without an emotional or relationship component, which is kind of not true, because we’re friends, we’re just not boyfriend or girlfriend. There’s no relationship, but there is a relationship that’s just a friendship relationship. So, they’re basically friends that we have sex with. And they’re other couples.

Kim struggles to define what exactly her relationship is with her sexual partners who are not her husband. These relationships are clearly more than just sexual, as she is resistant to saying that she does not have an emotional relationship with them. While sex is an important part of her CNM, so is friendship. Connor, another respondent who practices swinging, felt that community was integral to his CNM. He explained,

There’s definitely a culture to [swinging], right? There’s a language, and symbols, and lots of different elements of a cultural aspect to it that I feel comfortable in. It’s very much [a] community. It feels like a community for [my partner and me].

Connor, who frequents swinger events, felt like a part of a swinger community. For him, his CNM is just as much about the community and culture that he experiences as it is about the sex

he is having. So, even for respondents for whom sex was a central part of their CNM, they still defined it as more than just sex.

In fact, many swingers expressed that they did not like the term “swinging,” precisely because it implied a lack of emotional intimacy that was actually uncharacteristic of their CNM. Philip was one such respondent. He explained, “I kind of don't like the term swingers, but that's sort of where [my wife and I] fall. One of the reasons I don't like that term is because it sort of implies non-emotion and non-intimacy. No connection.” Although Philip identifies as a swinger in practice, he rejects the notion that his CNM is defined by a complete lack of emotional intimacy. Miles also felt that his CNM was more emotionally intimate than the term “swinging” implied:

[My wife and I] have similar opinions with a caveat. You could call us swingers, but we know people that really stand on that label that aren't like us. They're very much more about the physical experience, and that doesn't even appeal to us, so much so that I personally would have trouble performing in that kind of setting. And she wouldn't feel that experience. I need the human connection. I need chemistry with people that we play with, that we hang with, that we know.

Miles, like many polyamorous respondents, also drew a distinction between his CNM and CNM that he viewed as being purely physically sexual. He asserts that he actually needs a level of “human connection” to be able to perform sexually. Notably, he also describes his partners as not just people that he “plays with,” but also “hangs with” or just generally knows.

Miles' wife Cassandra defined her CNM by emotional connection first and foremost. She claimed that her and her husband's CNM “tends to lean more towards poly[amory].” When I asked what she meant, she elaborated that their CNM

is an emotional connection with other people as well as a physical connection. And we're very emotionally connected with our friends. We care about them a lot. We are very close to them. They come to our kids' birthday parties, and we go to their house or things like

that that are completely non-lifestyle⁵ related. They're just a big part of our lives, on top of having that physical relationship, and we actually prefer it that way, because it makes all the other things we do more meaningful and more fun.

Not only did Cassandra not primarily define her CNM by sex, but she also defined it by things that largely occur outside of the bedroom. Miles and Cassandra and their partners go to each other's children's birthday parties, they hang out together, they share an emotional connection, and all of these are necessary premises for the sexual connection.

Lindsay is another respondent who practices swinging but felt that the label of "swinger" was reductive. The term that she has settled on to adequately describe herself as CNM is "swoly," which is a portmanteau of "swinger" and "poly[amorous]." She explained that she and her husband explore relationships with other people, including another couple whom they have grown close to: "So, we're not exclusive with this couple at all. I do have another guy that I go on dates with. We're not exclusive in that relationship, but we do everything together. I've met their children, I hang out and have dinner. They're like my best friends." For Lindsay, it is not the sex that defines being "swoly." Instead, it is the fact that the lives of this other couple and her and her husband are deeply intertwined. She has met their kids, they hang out regularly, and they are "like her best friends." Overwhelmingly, even so-called swingers emphasized emotional, intimate, human connection when defining their CNM.

A minority of respondents did, at first, describe their CNM purely in terms of sex. However, deeper into the interview, more complex definitions emerged. For example, Tony is in an open relationship with his boyfriend. He had a short, simple definition of what his open relationship means: that he and his partner "are free to have sex with other people." Based on this definition alone, his CNM falls into the more purely physical kind of CNM that most

⁵ The "lifestyle" is how many swingers refer to swinging.

polyamorous and many swinger respondents distanced themselves from. However, despite the fact that he and his partner only have sex with other people, romantic non-monogamy was also central to his understanding of his CNM. He elaborated, “I subscribe to the belief that love is not a finite resource, and you can love more than one person. And if you can love somebody else, then it doesn’t detract from the other person that you love.” Here, Tony is talking about loving multiple people, which is also something by which many polyamorous respondents defined their CNM. Even for Tony, whose CNM centered sex, love was a component of his CNM.

Drake is another respondent whose initial definition of CNM was purely sexual, but further conversations revealed additional important components. Drake identifies as a swinger. His definition of swinging was firmly defined by sex: “Baseline definition of swinging is not really searching for extramarital emotional attachment. Strictly sexual.” He contrasts the sexual nature of his swinging with other kinds of CNM that might involve more emotional attachment. Later in the interview, however, he also defined swinging as a community. He said he feels like a part of a community

both small and big. The couples that we like, we’ve really clicked with as people as well as sexually. And so that’s even a level of micro-community, but then also more macroscopically with [name of a swingers club that Drake and his wife frequent] in particular. And also through the one-on-one couples that we’ve met. I feel like there’s definitely a community of people around that are doing what we’re doing, and sort of a support system in that sense.

Drake had said that he does not define swinging by “emotional attachment,” which is likely best understood as romantic attachment. Interpersonal relationships were also a key part of his CNM. It is an avenue to find one’s people and have a system of support. Evidently, his CNM is more than just sex.

Joel defined his open relationship by sex, but even implicit in this definition were other important factors. When discussing the rationale behind his open relationship, he explained,

The drive to have sex or pursue sexual interests is integral to the human condition, certainly for the males of the species. The customs around marriage and monogamy, they're trying to control that very natural impulse. [My partner and I] decided that our defining connection isn't sexual monogamy, 'cause I think it's contrary to human nature. There's certainly the place for loyalty and trust and commitment and fidelity and all of that, but sexual exclusivity isn't the only way to manifest that. And perhaps not even the best.

Sex is the defining feature of Joel's open relationship. He couches his open relationship in essentialist understandings of what it means to be human and, especially, male. However, his definition also reveals other non-sexual factors that are integral to his understanding of his CNM: loyalty, trust, commitment, and fidelity. He maintains that these are also important to his CNM, as, in his view, sexual monogamy does not guarantee any of those factors. Evidently, even when people define their CNM in sexual terms, other values are also central.

While defining one's CNM by sex was relatively rare, men were not the only people to do so. However, even when women did this, implicit in these definitions were additional components. Take, for example, Michaela's definition of her swinging: "[My husband and I] are just two people that want to find other people who we want to rub our genitals together [with], and it's gonna be fun, and it's gonna feel good for everybody. And we're all consenting adults, and we want to do this. So, let's just do it." On one level, Michaela defines her CNM by engaging in sexual acts with other people. However, also central to her definition is the notion of consent. In fact, consent was widely emphasized by respondents as a crucial part of their CNM. In the previous section, I have demonstrated that most respondents did not define their CNM solely, or even primarily, by sex. Instead, they also incorporated components such as love,

emotional intimacy, and community. In the next section I demonstrate how many people defined their CNM by consent, ethics, and morality.

CNM as Morality

Regardless of how central people understood sex to be to their CNM, most respondents felt that factors such as consent, honesty, communication, and ethics were the defining features of their CNM.

Many people positioned ethics and morality as the defining characteristics of their CNM. For example, when Ed explained his ethical non-monogamy, he emphasized,

[My wife and I] do focus on the “ethical” part, and we want the situations to be ones that we're comfortable with. We want to feel like the other people are in it for the right reasons, meaning they want to find other good people to have positive sexual encounters with, but that aren't looking to replace a romantic relationship or to hide anything from their partner.

Engaging with “good people” is central to Ed and his wife’s CNM. By “good people,” Ed is referring to those who are not looking to come between anybody’s romantic relationship (as Ed and his wife are not looking for multiple romantic partners) and who do not act in secrecy from their partners. For Ed and his wife, practicing CNM means being ethical. Art also emphasized ethics in his definition of his CNM:

It’s the idea that it's up to the individual to figure out what makes them happy, and then pursue that, and everybody else understanding that, so long as nobody gets hurt. That's where the “ethical” part comes in. So long as it's all aboveboard, and everybody knows what's going on, and you're all buying into it.

Pursuing pleasure while not causing others harm defines Art’s CNM. It is this harm reduction that, for Art, makes his CNM ethical.

Nearly all respondents viewed communication as imperative to their CNM, and felt that this was actually what made it ethical or consensual. For example, when I asked Gregory, “What makes what you’re doing ethical non-monogamy?”, he responded, “Well, really just talking

about it.” What is ethical about his swinging is that he and his partner communicate about what they do. Similarly, for Tony, the “first rule” of his open relationship is that “we have to tell each other about who we are meeting with, either platonically or sexually.” Communication is so important to respondents’ CNM because it is a way to be honest with everyone involved. Caitlin identified honesty and communication as the two primary rules of her and her partners’ polyamory: “We’re very open and honest with one another about any new partners that we have. So that’s our only real ground rule. Other than that, just communication is really important.” Honesty and communication were similarly central to Olivia and her partner’s polyamory:

Honesty and communication is our ground rule. Like, if for some reason, I wanted to date other people, it would be something we discussed beforehand. It wouldn’t be me going out on my own and going on dates, and then being like, “Oh, yeah, I went on two dates this week.” Same with him. If he was interested in something casual with a girl, or something like that, he would talk to me first about it. But him and I together are open to group sex, threesomes, couple swap, [and] stuff like that. So, we’re more open to “Oh, you found that girl hot? You can talk to her if you’d like to. Just let me know.”

Olivia and her partner, like many other respondents and their partners, always talk to each other beforehand if they are romantically or sexually interested in other people. The purpose of this communication is to be honest with each other about their CNM. The centrality of honest and open communication in my respondents’ CNM was apparent.

The purpose of such honest communication is to establish the consent of everyone involved. Kim, a swinger, made this clear: “[My husband and I] have to talk about everything. Make sure that everyone’s on board. ... We talk about it and clear it with the other person.” By “making sure that everyone’s on board” and “clearing it with the other person,” Kim and her husband make sure that everyone consents to any non-monogamous activity that they engage in. Consent was referenced explicitly by many respondents as a core value of their CNM. For example, George, who is polyamorous, recounted a time when he found out that one of his

partners had a sexual encounter with someone she had only just met, but she never learned his name. From then on, he

insisted that she at least find out who she's doing what with—that she at least get their names. I do like my partner to know the names of the people that she's doing stuff with. For the sake of consent, for the sake of my peace of mind, [and] my knowing of what's going on with whom. Part of my core philosophy is that consent is the highest thing that people should strive for in human relationships.

For him, having anonymous sex went against the terms of his relationship, because it meant that he could not verify that everyone consented to the activity involved. Quite overtly, George values consent. Ashley, a swinger, placed a similar, outright emphasis on consent in her CNM.

Her appreciation for consent was clear in her description of her debut in the swinging scene:

It was an entrance into the very consent-based lifestyle that [my partner and I] live. And I had never known [such a lifestyle]. I'm a survivor of sexual assault from my former stepfather. ...So, going into a lifestyle where people did things that I had never seen or done consensually, and what it means to be asked if I'm okay with something happening before it happens, was wonderful. It was refreshing, and it was a new world.

For Ashley, a sexual assault survivor, consent is invaluable. It is clear that swinging and consent are synonymous for her, and that she learned a lot about consent from the swinger community.

For multiple respondents, explicit consent was central to their CNM.

Thus far, I have shown that the majority of respondents defined their CNM 1) not solely or even primarily by sex and 2) by ethics, consent, and morality. The remaining subsections of the Findings explore themes that were common for some respondents, but not necessarily the majority.

CNM as Counterculture

A number of respondents felt that their CNM was a way of countering the norm. For example, Miles defined “the lifestyle” as “something along the lines of an openness to explore nontraditional intimate relationships.” In other words, people in “the lifestyle” have in common a

willingness to explore relationship forms that veer from tradition. Joel, in an open relationship, also defined his CNM by countering the norm:

I think one of the best things about a—I'll call it a nonnormative relationship, is that you get to redefine your own rules once you're outside of the societal norms and the thousands of years of civilization and socialization. When you've allowed yourself to operate outside of that framework, then you're free to redefine things really however you want.

Joel actually used the word “nonnormative” to define his open relationship. He feels that stepping outside of the social prescription of monogamy grants him a freedom to define the way he and his partner want to relate to each other. Notably, Joel identifies as a gay man. While he did not necessarily define his “nonnormative” as an extension of his queerness, he did point out that “Most, although not all, of the same-sex male couples I know have some degree of non-monogamy.” In other words, amongst other gay men, he did not necessarily feel that it was unusual to be in an open relationship. Compared to broader society, his open relationship is “nonnormative.”

Many queer respondents defined their CNM as a way to challenge the heterosexual hegemony. Tony, another gay man, explained his open relationship as a logical conclusion of his queerness:

[Gay people have] already broken the mold of the mainstream where we are. We already step outside of what people consider to be mainstream, and at that point, you have a liberty and freedom that heterosexual people aren't expected to have. I mean, you've already established yourself as gay or bisexual, and you're out with it, and you have now unchained your freedom to explore, whereas heterosexual people have these expectations of the way you're gonna be. Then you're stuck to that.

According to Tony, coming out as gay grants a person freedom from confining societal constructs, including monogamy. For him, his CNM is the natural conclusion of his being a gay man. Jared, who identifies as nonbinary and queer, explicitly defined their polyamory as a way of performing queerness. They explained, “[Polyamory] feels more like an offshoot of being

queer to me than a primary identifier. It just feels like a different way of being queer than it does as its own community.” For Jared, polyamory and queerness are inseparable. Rather than feeling like a part of a polyamorous community per se, Jared feels that their polyamory is just an extension of their queerness. Art, a bisexual man, practices relationship anarchy. He defined the term as a fundamental opposition to monogamy, and by extension, toxic heterosexuality:

It’s basically questioning, at the very root, the idea of monogamy, and that also implies a sort of a nuclear family ideal in terms of the immediate social environment that you want to live your life in. I’m certainly not anti-hetero, but I would definitely call myself a hetero-pessimist. ... You know the cartoons that are in the newspaper or whatever? You remember Dagwood and Blondie? That relationship where it’s like, they both kind of hate each other? Her role is to be hot. His role is to be a slob. And how that is the default within Western culture of what marriage is like. Look at any stand-up comedian talk about marriage. That idea of “the ball and chain.” That’s hetero-pessimism in a nutshell. It’s this idea that we’re all condemned to a toxic, monogamous relationship.

Art, a self-described hetero-pessimist, views his CNM as standing in direct contrast to monogamy, and, by extension, prescribed heterosexuality. In his view, monogamy in Western culture tends to look like less-than-aspirational nuclear families, marked by a married heterosexual couple who fits harmful gender stereotypes. His relationship anarchy is a direct critique of Western monogamy and the pessimism-inspiring heterosexuality it seems to produce. For Art, much like for Tony, Jared, and other LGBTQ+ non-monogamists, CNM is a way to perform queerness and shake up the heterosexual status quo.

CNM as Identity

A few respondents explicitly defined their CNM as a part of their identity. For most respondents who defined it as such, they felt like consensually non-monogamous was how they had to be in order to be themselves. For example, I asked Riley if his polyamory is something he *does* versus something that he *is*, and he responded,

Immediately I’d say it’s something that I am. It’s just how I feel about people. It’s how I feel about the connections that I make with people. The value of those relationships. I

enjoy that expression of love with multiple people at once and not just with a single person. And it's not just about sex. Like it's connecting on all different levels. It's like how someone is just straight or gay or bi or monogamous. It's how I have to live. It's how I have to be able to engage with and relate with people. Otherwise I feel like I'm living a lie.

Riley felt very strongly that polyamorous is who he is. In order to live authentically, he needs to be able to be polyamorous. He likened his being polyamorous to sexual orientations such as straight or gay. Relying on born-this-way narratives of sexual orientation as intrinsic to a person's nature, Riley similarly asserted that polyamorous is simply who he is. Madeline felt similarly about her relationship anarchy:

It just allows me to be me. Being a relationship anarchist, it's who I am. Some people conceive of polyamory or relationship anarchy as a lifestyle choice, like being a vegan. But then, I guess, actually, that's a bad analogy, because there's people who are vegans, where they're like, "This is who I am as a person." And that's pretty much how I feel, that this is who I am. It is literally the only way I might be even capable of being.

Madeline views her relationship anarchy as a fundamental part of who she is. She struggles to imagine herself any other way, as she asserts that "it is literally the only way" she might even be capable of existing. For Riley and Madeline, CNM is a way of being oneself and acting authentically.

Respondents who felt that CNM was fundamental to who they are disagreed on to what extent CNM is actually a choice. Chloe felt that, for her, it was not a choice, which became clear after I asked her if her polyamory is a choice versus something that she *is*. She responded, "That's kind of blowing my mind, you phrasing the question that way, because now that you say that, I don't feel like it's a choice. I feel like it's part of me, like it's intrinsic to my nature and my personality. It's just felt like it has to be a choice in our culture." Chloe, prior to our conversation, had not actually considered that CNM might not be a choice. Since the norm of monogamy is so pervasive, Chloe simply understood all CNM to be a deliberate choice that people have made. While this can still be true, Chloe acknowledged that her CNM actually feels

much more “intrinsic to her nature” than that. The idea that CNM is fundamental to her personality was much more compelling. Courtney, on the other hand, maintained that her polyamory was both a strong part of her identity and a choice:

Being polyamorous isn't a sexuality, and it's not a gender identity, but it is, for me, part of my identity. And I think that a lot of people are like, "Oh, well, [CNM] is a choice that you've made, or an agreement you've made in your relationship, and it's not the same thing [as LGBTQ+] at all." And it's not the same thing at all. But, regardless of whether or not people have made choices to arrive at their identity, you should be able to feel comfortable and included, regardless of where you are, as long as you're not feeding puppies to babies, or whatever.

Courtney is using “sexuality” here as a synonym for “sexual orientation.” She acknowledges that CNM is neither a sexual orientation nor a gender identity, but it is still a part of her identity. Her comment shows the inadequacy of the way we typically think about sexual orientation for explaining her situation. Where is there room for CNM? Although CNM does not feel like a sexual orientation to her, she maintains that she should still be afforded the same social rights as long as she is not doing harm to others. Her understanding of her CNM differs from those who do not think their CNM is a choice, but she argues that this lack of “innateness” does not make her CNM any less valid of a sexual identity than, say, that of a gay man who feels he was born this way.

Conclusion

In this study, I asked the following question: how do people define their CNM? I found that respondents defined their CNM by a number of factors. Overwhelmingly, respondents did not define their CNM solely, or even primarily, by sex. Instead, notions of love, emotional intimacy, and especially consent, ethics, morality, and communication were more common. For fewer respondents, especially many who identify as LGBTQ+, CNM is a way to perform queerness and challenge the heterosexual status quo. Some respondents also defined CNM as a

part of their identity, often meaning that they believed their CNM to be intrinsic to who they are and how they need to behave in order to live authentically.

The findings have both societal and academic implications. The findings stand in contrast to popular understandings of CNM. Rather than defined by lasciviousness or sexist inequality, respondents' consensual non-monogamies are better defined by a radical commitment to open communication and honesty. The findings call into question the efficacy of the dichotomy of "sexual non-monogamy" versus "emotional/romantic non-monogamy" (e.g. Guitar et al. 2017). Few respondents practiced a type of CNM that could be neatly categorized into one of these labels over the other. For example, many swingers, whose CNM would typically be categorized as sexual non-monogamy in these studies, actually expressed dissatisfaction with the term "swinger" because it did not accurately account for the emotional intimacy that is central to their CNM. In actuality, the dichotomy of sexual versus romantic non-monogamy may be an oversimplification that does not accurately capture people's understandings of their CNM. This mismatch reveals the need for more rigorous theorizing of a sociology of relationships. Sociologists have not adequately addressed the often indelible interplay between sex and emotionally intimate relationships.

Respondents' assertion that their CNM is a way of being ethical or moral invites sexualities scholars to reimagine the relationship between sexuality and morality. Rather than attempting to divorce sexuality from notions of morality, respondents define an emergent practice through which one's way of being sexual or romantic can actually *be* moral. This framing is an emergent strategy of fighting against the way that narrow conceptions of sexual morality marginalize other forms of sexuality.

While the study has its implications, it also has its limitations. The sample is not meant to be statistically representative of the broader CNM population. By design, my sampling methodology is not random. There may be types of CNM that none of the respondents I spoke to practiced. However, it is important to remember that the goal of the study is not generalizability. Additionally, these respondents' self-definitions may be heavily influenced by popular writings on CNM, especially given that many were recruited from forums dedicated to CNM. Perhaps consensual non-monogamists who are less tuned in to discourse, so to speak, would feature sex more centrally in their self-definitions. Even if these potential shortcomings are the case, the findings still detail great diversity in people's practices. Additionally, they show that contemporary understandings of the sociology of sexualities do not adequately explain people's self-definitions.

I did not observe major differences in how people define their CNM by gender, but still, more intersectional analyses are needed. This is particularly true when it comes to race. 84% of respondents identify as white, which means that I am unable to explore how self-definitions of CNM differ by race. Future studies should examine the way that race intersects with CNM.

Respondents' self-definitions of their CNM uncover numerous innovative topics for future research. One such topic is the underexplored popular association of heterosexuality with monogamy, as many respondents drew an intrinsic connection between heterosexuality and monogamy. Another topic ripe for future research is the emergence of sexual identities like relationship anarchy and "swoly," which are not neatly captured by the letters of the LGBTQIA+ umbrella. What, if anything, is the relationship between these types of CNM and "expanding" notions of LGBTQ+ (Russell, Bishop, and Fish 2023)? Respondents' de-emphasis of sex in their definitions of CNM also encourages us to ask just how relevant sexual intercourse actually is to

sexualities. Can something be a sexuality if the actor does not view sex as central to it? Finally, people's definitions of their CNM demonstrate the continued importance of certain recurrent questions in the sociology of sexualities. Namely, respondents' insistence that their CNM is a way of being ethical shows the evergreen relevance of asking how sexuality is a site for debates about morality (Seidman 1992). Evidently, monogamy and its alternatives are quite generative for the sociology of sexualities. The time has come to take consensual non-monogamies seriously as sexualities.

Chapter 2: “I Don’t Want to Be Slut-Shamed”: Consensual Non-Monogamists’ Experiences with Mononormativity and Stigma

Introduction

“I’m sure that there are [celebrity] relationships out there that are practicing [consensual] non-monogamy. [They’re] just not talking about it as [consensual] non-monogamy because it’s stigmatized. I mean, I don’t talk about mine very openly because it’s stigmatized. ...Society still assumes one to one. I’m aware of how society regards all of this. ...I just know enough of the rules to know when to assert and when to keep my mouth closed.” – Joel, 49, in an open relationship

“I put months into working with clients before ever getting paid, and if the deal falls through, ...I just have to swallow that. So yeah, I would not be honest with my clients about [my polyamory]. I think that relationships don’t have a place in work anyway. Like, why would you be talking about relationships with clients? But that being said, our culture is so accepting of traditional monogamous relationships that my clients do still bring up talking about their girlfriend or their wife or asking me questions about my boyfriend. I just don’t give all the details.” – Chloe, 27, polyamorous

Joel is in an open relationship, which, for him, means that he has a boyfriend, but both he and his boyfriend have sexual relationships with other people. Chloe is polyamorous, which, for her, means that she has the capacity to romantically love more than one person, and that she is allowed to do so under the terms of her relationship. By definition, Joel and Chloe both practice forms of consensual non-monogamy (CNM henceforth). CNM comprises “relationships in which all partners agree that engaging in sexual and/or romantic relationships with other people is allowed and part of their relationship arrangement” (Rubin et al. 2014:1).

Chloe’s and Joel’s CNM directly contradicts a social norm: monogamy. The fact that “society still assumes one to one,” as Joel puts it, or that “our culture is so accepting of traditional monogamous relationships,” as Chloe puts it, indicates a deep societal favoring of monogamy. Sociologists call this norm “mononormativity.” Mononormativity encompasses the

societal factors that position monogamy as the one “true” relationship status, reward people who perform or appear to perform monogamy, and punish those who do not (Schippers 2016).

Joel goes as far as to say that the pervasive norm of monogamy renders CNM “stigmatized.” A stigma, as defined by sociologist Erving Goffman, is “an attribute that makes (one) different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind” (Goffman 1963:3). In other words, Joel believes that his CNM sets him apart as someone whom people might view unfavorably.

To mitigate any ramifications that might come from the CNM stigma, both Joel and Chloe engage in a kind of concealment work. Joel does not “talk about [his CNM] very openly,” while Chloe chooses to “not be honest with [her] clients” about her polyamory. One must “know the rules,” as Joel so aptly states, lest he face the blowback of violating the norm of monogamy.

Despite these insights from Joel and Chloe, we know relatively little about how exactly mononormativity plays a role in consensually non-monogamous people’s lives. A few studies provide some indication. Assessing people’s reactions to vignettes about hypothetical couples, Conley et al. (2013) find that, overwhelmingly, people assume monogamous people to be more virtuous, loving, and trustworthy, while they assume ethically non-monogamous people to be devious and immoral. Based on these findings, Conley et al. (2013) argue that CNM is indeed a stigmatized behavior. Via autoethnography, Schippers (2016), a practitioner of CNM herself, presents further evidence of mononormativity conferring reputational and legal disadvantages to consensually non-monogamous people.

Still, we lack an empirical study that investigates the processes through which mononormativity shows up in CNM people’s lives. This is cause for concern because of

mononormativity's likely omnipresence. Popular media has long pushed messages of finding your one-and-only (Coontz 2006; Swidler 2001). Celebrity couples that practice non-monogamy, even consensually, are regularly chastised by the media (e.g. Bonner 2022; Murphy 2022).

Moreover, a dearth of empirical studies on consensually non-monogamous people's experiences with mononormativity is concerning because the disadvantages that the sociological literature has shown mononormativity to confer are both wide-ranging and quite serious. Defamations of character, an inability to be open and honest with friends and loved ones, and the legal incapacity to have one's relationship recognized by the state are just some of the realities facing CNM people that research has exposed (Conley et al. 2013; Rothmüller 2021; Schippers 2016). We can imagine the consequences these sorts of punishments might have on people's interpersonal relationships and self-esteem. Recall that Chloe does not disclose her polyamory at work for fear that it would prevent clients from closing deals with her. If her hunch is correct, then that means that her failing to adequately perform monogamy at work could actually affect her livelihood. Even if she is incorrect, the concealment work that she, Joel, and likely many others engage in further suggests that there are a range of not-so-harmless ways that mononormativity shows up in CNM people's lives. If it is our job as sociologists to mitigate social harm and understand inequality, then these processes are worth interrogating.

In this study, I use data from interviews with 44 consensually non-monogamous individuals to answer the following question: how does mononormativity manifest in consensually non-monogamous people's lives? Results indicate that many respondents experienced mononormativity in two forms—anticipated and received stigma. Anticipated stigma, referring to “individuals’ or groups’ expectations that others will devalue and discriminate against them” (Pescosolido and Martin 2015:94), resulted in a kind of double

consciousness (Du Bois 1903) that caused many respondents to evaluate themselves through their expectations of how people would evaluate their CNM. Anticipated stigma also meant that many respondents engaged in a kind of concealment work to hide their CNM from others. While experiences of received stigma—“overt behaviors of rejection and devaluation experiences of negative interactions” (Pescosolido and Martin 2015:92)—were less common than those of anticipated stigma, they were still prevalent. Received stigma took many forms, ranging from verbal harassment, to being “outed,” to workplace discrimination. Such experiences interfered with individuals’ careers, reputations, and relationships. My respondents’ experiences suggest that one’s monogamy status even affords her advantages or disadvantages in arenas seemingly unrelated to sex and romance, such as between friends, strangers, family, and coworkers. Thus, mononormativity is both pervasive and powerful.

With a richer understanding of mononormativity, we broaden our understanding of sexualities. The findings suggest that mononormativity is a common, hegemonic, sexual phenomenon that affords privileges to the monogamous and denies them to others. The data confront us with the reality that individuals are frequently called upon to present their monogamy in multiple facets of life—even those that are seemingly not romantic or sexual in nature. Studies of romantic and sexual relationships that have not considered monogamy status have likely missed such power dynamics. The relative lack of attention that sociologists have given monogamy suggests that the discipline itself may be guilty of having been mononormative in the questions it has asked and the people it has chosen to study.

Theoretical Framework

Mononormativity and Consensual Non-monogamy

While a formal conception of mononormativity was missing from the sexualities literature until very recently (see Schippers 2016), investigations of a norm of monogamy were not wholly absent. For example, Rich (1980) coined the term “compulsory heterosexuality,” which refers to the societal factors that compel or force people to perform heterosexuality, or at least to appear heterosexual. Though she does not take her argument in this direction, one could argue that compulsory heterosexuality works to arrange people in heterosexual dyads, thus also encouraging monogamy.

Shortly after, Rubin (2012) argued that sex that society deems to be good, normal, or natural exists within a “charmed circle” of sexual normalcy, while sex deemed to be immoral, abnormal, or unnatural exists within the marginalized “outer limits.” Among other types of sex, she lists monogamous sex as within the charmed circle. Thus, we see inklings of an early conception of mononormativity. Her conception of monogamy’s counterpart in the outer limits, is “promiscuous sex.” With this, Rubin captures the negative value judgment frequently superimposed onto sex that is not monogamous. Rubin’s work is valuable for showing that the charmed circle is not innocuous. The charmed circle, she argues, is used to “rationalize the well-being of the sexually privileged and the adversity of the sexual rabble” (Rubin 2012:151). In other words, monogamy’s existence within the charmed circle makes it so that monogamous people are afforded privileges and non-monogamous people are given adversity.

Thus, Rubin’s work is a useful springboard for generating a formal theory of mononormativity—a task recently taken up by Schippers (2016). Schippers (2016) explicitly

defines mononormativity as the societal factors that signal that monogamous coupling is the only good relationship structure. Mononormativity advantages those who adhere to monogamy and disadvantages those who do not.

The greatest empirical insight into mononormativity has come from academic investigations of CNM. Recall that CNM refers to relationships in which sexual and/or romantic relationships with other people are allowed as part of the relationship agreement. Schippers (2016), consensually non-monogamous herself, combines autoethnography and film analysis to suggest that mononormativity affords a range of economic, social, and legal disadvantages to practitioners of CNM, from couple's discounts, to defamations of character, to the inability to have one's relationship recognized by the state. Despite this, empirical investigations of consensually non-monogamous people's experiences with mononormativity are sparse.

It is worth interrogating people's experiences with mononormativity because limited but promising evidence suggests that it confers a wide range of advantages and disadvantages, and that these have notable consequences. Conley et al. (2013) show that mononormativity affords monogamous people perceived trustworthiness and positive reputations and denies these to non-monogamous people. Rothmüller's (2021) study suggest that mononormativity makes it so that people practicing non-monogamy feel that they cannot be honest with the people they are close to about their behavior, or that they fear or actually experience pushback. Schippers (2016) lists the existence of couples' discounts and the legal ability to have one's relationship recognized by the state as just a few other privileges dictated by mononormativity. We can imagine the impact that all of these realities may have on people's well-being, interpersonal relationships, and livelihoods. In order to determine whether mononormativity is actually as pervasive and

powerful as the literature suggests, we ought to investigate how people are confronted by this often-overlooked societal force.

Stigma and Consensual Non-monogamy

Though a study has not yet answered the question “how does mononormativity manifest in the lives of practitioners of CNM,” existing literature provides reason to believe that the answer is “in the form of stigma.” Recall that a stigma is “an attribute that makes (one) different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind,” i.e., an attribute possessed by a person that causes others to discredit or devalue her (Goffman 1963:3). Conley et al. (2013) find strong evidence for the existence of a societal favoring of monogamy. In a series of experiments, they show that, overwhelmingly, respondents assume monogamous people to be more virtuous, loving, and trustworthy, while they assume ethically non-monogamous people to be devious and immoral. The authors argue that this is strong evidence for a halo effect surrounding monogamy and a stigma surrounding CNM.

While Conley et al.’s (2013) study is useful for demonstrating that there is a stigma against CNM, it only assesses one dimension of stigma: enacted stigma. Enacted stigma is that which is performed by the stigmatizers. However, Pescosolido and Martin (2015:92) identify an additional four types of stigma:

1. Perceived: a person’s belief that there is widely held devaluation of or prejudice against an attribute (can be asked of the stigmatizer or the stigmatized)
2. Endorsed: a person’s agreement with the stereotypes and prejudice that a stigma arouses (can be asked of the stigmatizer or the stigmatized)
3. Anticipated: a person’s expectations that she will experience prejudice and/or discrimination because of a stigma (can only be asked of the stigmatized)
4. Received: a person’s direct experiences of devaluation and discrimination due to a stigma (can only be asked of the stigmatized)

Research on the CNM stigma is generally limited, but some work has been done on perceived and endorsed stigma. Schippers (2016) provides strong evidence of a deeply socially embedded devaluation of consensual non-monogamy, i.e., perceived stigma. Moors et al. (2021) explore how CNM people internalize CNM negativity, i.e., how endorsed stigma affects them. There is far less research on the types of stigma that solely concern the stigmatized—anticipated and received stigma. The most holistic understanding of stigma is one that explores all five of these types. Therefore, in order to understand CNM people’s confrontations with the likely omnipresent and influential system that is mononormativity, we ought to implement a well-rounded investigation of the CNM stigma that includes anticipated and received stigma.

In summary, mononormativity as a distinct theoretical concept is not totally absent from the sociology of sexualities, but it has only recently been formally theorized. The relative scholarly inattention given to mononormativity should be cause for concern, as preliminary evidence shows that it may be widespread and significant in people’s lives. Thus, this study examines consensually non-monogamous people’s confrontations with mononormativity. This research is crucial because it takes seriously the sociology of sexualities’ core mission of investigating the ways in which sexual power runs through all facets of life (Gamson and Moon 2004; Stein and Plummer 1994). Via mononormativity, privileges and punishments are likely conferred throughout several arenas of social life—even those that are ostensibly nonsexual. Understanding what exactly these privileges and punishments are, and how they are conferred, is an important step in decoding mononormativity.

Data and Methods

In order to investigate practitioners of CNM's experiences with mononormativity, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 44 people in the U.S., Canada, and El Salvador who practice some form of CNM.⁶ I conducted these interviews in three phases.

The first phase included 8 interviews that I conducted between March and April 2020. I conducted 4 in-person interviews before the COVID-19 quarantine, and 4 virtual interviews during the COVID-19 quarantine. All Phase 1 respondents were from the greater Boston area, loosely defined. (Some lived elsewhere in New England but occasionally traveled to the area.)

The second phase of interviews took place between October and November 2021. During Phase 2, I conducted an additional 19 interviews, all of which were remote, with respondents across the U.S. and Canada. 17 of these respondents practiced some form of CNM at the time of the interview, while 2 had practiced CNM in the past but were not currently practicing CNM at the time of the interview.

The third phase of interviews took place in September of 2022. During Phase 3, I conducted an additional 17 interviews, all of which were remote, with respondents across the U.S., Canada, and one U.S.-born respondent in El Salvador. All respondents were currently practicing some form of CNM at the time of the interview.

Studying practitioners of CNM is theoretically and methodologically useful for investigating mononormativity. My decision to interview practitioners of CNM is a form of the extreme case selection technique (Gerring 2006), which is a widely used strategy in the social

⁶ I chose to speak to people from the U.S. and Canada, as these are locations where much of the scholarly, activist, and popular press work on CNM is produced (e.g. Deri 2018; Hardy and Easton 2017) and due to their relatively similar cultural contexts.

sciences (e.g. Browne 1989; Deyo 2018; Monroe 1998). With this technique, researchers examine cases that hold extreme or unusual values on a variable of interest. The goal of such research is to explore possible effects of that or another variable in an open-ended way (Gerring 2006). We can think of “monogamy status” as a variable with two values: “monogamous” or “not monogamous.” Since “monogamous” is the value that is more common, “not monogamous” would be the extreme value for the monogamy status variable. We can think of each consensually non-monogamous individual ($N = 44$) as an extreme case, since each respondent, being consensually non-monogamous, has the extreme value for the monogamy status variable. The utility of studying people who share this extreme case is to explore how they are confronted by mononormativity, by seeing whether advantages or disadvantages are conferred to these respondents and how.

Under an extreme case selection strategy, the rarity of the value is what makes a case valuable (Gerring 2006). Gerring (2006) gives the example that if a researcher is interested in incest taboos, a culture where that taboo is weak or nonexistent may be more generative than one where it is present. Likewise, since I am interested in the norm of monogamy, interviewing people who are not monogamous is quite generative. People who are not monogamous are likely to have experienced mononormative pushback (Conley et al. 2013; Rothmüller 2021; Schippers 2016), or to at least see the results of engaging in a behavior that most people are not (at least openly) engaging in. Although they do not reference this case selection strategy explicitly, a small number of studies have used consensual non-monogamy in order to study the norm of monogamy, further demonstrating the method’s utility (e.g. Conley et al. 2013; Schippers 2016).

The sample criteria required respondents to be practicing some form of CNM currently, be philosophically consensually non-monogamous despite being single, or to have practiced

CNM in the past. An advantage of using practitioners of CNM to examine mononormativity is that they are more likely to be intentional about their non-monogamy than other non-monogamous people, such as the nonconsensually non-monogamous (i.e. people having affairs or cheating on their partners). This intentionality is reflected in the fact that there are books in the popular press such as *Polysecure* or *The Ethical Slut* (which is on its third edition), which attempt to create a community of consensually non-monogamous people with similar practices who see themselves in solidarity and use similar vocabulary (Fern 2020; Hardy and Easton 2017). Thus, many consensually non-monogamous people are quite aware of the existence of a pervasive societal favoring of monogamy, and may be well-equipped to speak about it. They are prime subjects to help us understand mononormativity.

While there are numerous theoretical and methodological advantages to studying practitioners of CNM, there are also potential concerns. One potential concern is that due to the existence of books and groups and forums that push a common identity and vocabulary, all of my respondents may be particularly active in the community, or particularly enthusiastic about their non-monogamy in a way that other non-monogamous people are not. The concern would be that my sample captures a very specific kind of consensually non-monogamous person, whose encounters with mononormativity are not typical of most non-monogamous people's.

While this is a valid concern, I believe there is little cause for it. First, this research is *not* a case study of types of non-monogamy. Instead, it is an investigation of 44 different extreme cases (see Gerring 2006)—that is, 44 different individuals who are unusual in that they are not monogamous in a society that expects that most people are. So, this study aims to probe mononormativity, rather than inform about a larger population of non-monogamous people. Thus, the sample need not be representative of all non-monogamous people. Furthermore, I

found notable variety in my respondents' relationship to a community. Not everyone felt like they were part of a community because of their CNM; not everyone went to events related to their type of CNM; not everyone had read *The Ethical Slut*, *Polysecure*, or *More Than Two*; not everyone felt that CNM was central to their life; and not everyone wanted to be a part of any kind of CNM community. Even if my sample is specific or unusual, my respondents' experiences with mononormativity are still useful for understanding how the norm manifests and persists, which has been largely overlooked in previous studies.

Since practitioners of CNM are somewhat hard-to-reach due to relative rarity (Levine et al. 2018) and stigma (Conley et al. 2013), I had to cast a wide net and recruit my respondents in a variety of ways. My recruitment materials ask if the potential respondent is considering ethical non-monogamy⁷; has or has ever had multiple romantic partners; has one romantic partner but multiple sexual partners; is practicing or has ever practiced polyamory, an open relationship, swinging, or any form of ethical non-monogamy; or rejects the idea of monogamy for herself. Since a broad range of practices fall under the umbrella of CNM, I wanted to use a broad range of terms to capture as many eligible respondents as possible. In all phases, participants were told that the project is about "the experiences of people who are non-monogamous or who practice some form of consensual non-monogamy," to be as inclusive as possible of all types of CNM, to avoid priming the respondents to speak about the norm of monogamy, and to hide that a bulk of the interview guide would focus on pushback and stigma.

⁷ I used "ethical non-monogamy" rather than "consensual non-monogamy" in most of the recruitment materials. These phrases are synonymous, but the word "consensual" tends to be used more in academic works (e.g. Conley et al. 2013; Finn and Malson 2008; Hauptert et al. 2017; Rubin et al. 2014), whereas "ethical" tends to be favored in popular media (e.g. Hardy and Easton 2017). Subsequently, I suspected that practitioners of CNM might be more likely to recognize "ethical non-monogamy" rather than "consensual non-monogamy."

During Phase 1, I recruited 8 respondents in one of four ways. The first group ($n = 3$) consists of some people I met in February 2020 when I conducted a participant-observation at a dinner for polyamorous people in the Boston area. The rest were acquaintances from my extended network ($n = 2$), referrals from my extended network ($n = 1$), or referrals from two prior respondents ($n = 2$).

While respondents from later phases are from all over the U.S., Canada, and El Salvador, there is an oversample of respondents from the greater Boston area in Phase 1. This is a function of my sampling criteria, but there is utility to this, as the greater Boston area contains the only three cities in the country that recognize domestic partnerships between more than two people. In July 2020, Somerville, Massachusetts, a city in the greater Boston area, became the first U.S. city to legalize domestic partnerships between more than two people (Snyder and Alsharif 2020). Cambridge and Arlington, nearby Massachusetts cities, followed suit in 2021 (Anon 2021; Collings 2021). In March 2023, Somerville became the nation's first city to pass nondiscrimination ordinances for polyamorous people (Spiropoulos 2023). Not surprisingly, the greater Boston area has a vibrant consensually non-monogamous community. The region is home to numerous meetup groups related to consensual non-monogamy. At the same time, it has a population large enough to provide a sample of consensually non-monogamous people who choose not to engage with the community. As the largest city in New England by far, Boston also attracts people across New England who are interested in CNM, as a few of my respondents mentioned to me.

During Phase 2, I recruited 19 respondents via a variety of channels. I advertised the study in an online forum dedicated to swinging. Some respondents ($n = 8$) found out from that forum or others on the same site. Not all respondents who found the study this way were

swingers; two were polyamorous. Other respondents ($n = 5$) found out about the study from a cross-post on another website. The remaining respondents from Phase 2 were referrals from my extended network ($n = 2$), referrals from a previous respondent ($n = 1$), or the partners of previously recruited respondents ($n = 3$).

During Phase 3, I recruited an additional 17 respondents. I once again advertised the study in the same online forum dedicated to swinging that I had used during Phase 2. Most Phase 3 respondents ($n = 15$) found out about the study from this site, while the rest ($n = 2$) were partners of a different Phase 3 respondent.

Table 2 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample. Gay and bi-/pansexual individuals make up the majority (about 59%) of the sample. While diverse in terms of sexual orientation, gender, primary type of CNM, and age, the sample is largely white (84%).

During Phase 1, I interviewed four respondents in person. All remaining interviews in Phases 1, 2, and 3 were done virtually. Interviews averaged about 90 minutes, but some were as short as 45 minutes and some were as long as 2 hours. On the occasion that I interviewed a partner of a prior respondent, I interviewed them within a couple days of each other at most, and asked them not to discuss the interview with their partner until the other partner had been interviewed. All interviews were audio recorded, with the permission of the respondent.

The section of the interview guide most relevant to this chapter was designed to unearth respondents' experiences with mononormativity. It contained questions such as who knows or does not know about the respondent's CNM, if she has ever experienced pushback for it, and how she thinks people would react if they found out. After each interview, I sent respondents a short demographic questionnaire to fill out.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Lay Sample

Gender:	
Female	22 (50%)
Male	19 (43%)
Nonbinary	3 (7%)
Sexual Orientation:	
Heterosexual	17 (39%)
Gay	3 (7%)
Bi-/pansexual	24 (55%)
Race:	
White	37 (84%)
Black	2 (5%)
American Indian	1 (2%)
Latinx	2 (5%)
Asian	2 (5%)
Primary Type of CNM:	
Polyamory	23 (52%)
Swinging	18 (41%)
Open relationship	3 (7%)
Age:	
Mean age	38.4
Range	23 to 54
Total:	
	44

Note: Counts shown for nonquantitative variables; percentages in parentheses.

After transcribing each interview, I coded transcriptions for general themes using NVivo. I was quickly struck by the prevalence of the norm of monogamy and the way it shaped my respondents' behavior and afforded them disadvantages. In subsequent rounds of reading, memoing, and coding, I looked for themes of mononormativity and the stigma of CNM. This process generated codes such as "pushback," "harassment," "discrimination," "concealment," and "ostracization," as well as domains in which these instances occurred (e.g. "friends,"

“workplace,” “family,” “strangers.”) This iterative approach to my research best enabled me to uncover practitioners of CNM’s experiences with mononormativity.

Findings

Mononormativity manifested itself in my consensually non-monogamous respondents’ lives in two ways: anticipated and received stigma. Anticipated stigma refers to a person’s expectation that she will experience prejudice and/or discrimination due to a stigma, while received stigma refers to a person’s actual experiences of prejudice and/or discrimination due to a stigma (Pescosolido and Martin 2015).

Anticipated Stigma

Anticipated stigma made it so that many respondents evaluated themselves based on their assessment of how others would evaluate their CNM. Danielle, a polyamorous woman, was one such respondent. She suspected that while she views her CNM as a means of sexual agency, men with whom she has sex might think otherwise:

A man might approach a woman who’s polyamorous and be like, “Yeah, this is fuckin’ awesome! I’m just gonna get laid.” ...I feel sometimes that there’s a lot of burden on me to enlighten the other person, and it’s like, I might come away from a situation feeling empowered, but what if that person comes away from that situation feeling that I’m disempowered, and they’re happy about it? A lot of people have a lot of expectations or preconceived notions in their mind about open relationships. I even found myself battling that in my own mind. It’s very hard to not slut-shame yourself or other people.

Danielle worries that people’s “preconceived notions about open relationships”⁸ might make it so that people look at her as someone who is undiscerningly promiscuous. In other words, she found herself preoccupied by her anticipation of other people’s mononormative assumptions, which is a form of anticipated stigma. The result of this anticipated stigma is not innocuous; she

⁸ Here, Danielle is using “open relationship” as an umbrella term that encompasses all relationships in which sex or dating outside of the dyad is permitted.

notes that it creates a “burden” on her. Additionally, it reinforced her own internalized stigma and made that harder to discard. Notably, all of these processes happened without her experiencing overt pushback. This provides some insight into how mononormativity persists. She self-regulates even in the absence of received stigma, based on her anticipations of how others might perceive her CNM—i.e., based on anticipated stigma.

While anticipated stigma did not result in additional discretion for Danielle, it did for other respondents. Kim, a swinger, explained to me that she keeps her swinging relatively secret because of her anticipations of being slut-shamed:

I grew up in a small town, and I was bullied for being promiscuous. And I learned to kind of be discreet. I don't need to be judged and bullied by people that don't agree or don't understand. I wouldn't want other people to find out. I could just see so-and-so being like, "Oh, did you hear Kim is a swinger?" to some highly religious person, and then just having them flame me on Facebook for being a slut or something. So, I don't think that that would happen. But that's just a fear that I have, is that I don't want to be bullied for it.

For Kim, an experience of received stigma—being bullied for being promiscuous as a youth—resulted in anticipated stigma later in life. She anticipates that people might engage in similar judgmental behavior if she is forthcoming about her swinging, so she “learned to be kind of discreet.” Notably, despite the fear of receiving pushback, she admits that she does not think that would actually happen. Still, the fear is strong enough to compel her to be discreet. Thus, we see how mononormativity is able to endure, in that a consensually non-monogamous person may continue to anticipate stigma years after experiences of received stigma. Additionally, we see that mononormativity does not only occur in the dating sphere; she engages in this concealment work in front of her community members. Thus, there is evidence that mononormativity manifests itself in multiple domains of life.

Women were not the only respondents to anticipate being slut-shamed; many male respondents anticipated this as well. For example, Connor, a swinger, explained why he and his female partner are not “out” to most people about their CNM:

There's risk there of altering [others'] perceptions of [my partner and me] as people. ...They could be like, “Are you okay? Is your relationship okay? Why are you doing this? Don't do this. It's dangerous.” ...We don't even talk about sex freely in this country. Like, being a sexual person is shameful, you know? I don't want to be slut-shamed.

Connor, like Danielle and Kim, anticipates that people might stigmatize his CNM due assumptions they would make about him being sexually promiscuous. He fears that others might view his CNM as not only shameful, but also “dangerous.” In order to avoid these connotations, Connor conceals his CNM, lest he be “slut-shamed.” Connor engages in this concealment work without having experienced overt criticism of his CNM, once again showing how powerful anticipated stigma can be. Mononormativity's stability is likely due, at least in part, to the fact that people are compelled to appear monogamous even when no one has directly criticized them for their CNM.

Additionally, Connor's anticipations reveal that a critical view of mononormativity expands our understanding of sexuality. Connor is a cisgender (albeit bisexual) man in a primary relationship with a woman. Yet, he shares Danielle's and Kim's concern that he could be slut-shamed for his CNM. Previous research has suggested that slut-shaming is largely a feminine phenomenon (e.g. Miller 2016). However, male respondents feared that this was a possibility for them as well. A critical examination of mononormativity reveals that not all cisgender men in heterosexual relationships hold hegemonic sexual power.

While many respondents anticipated prejudice from the general public, many others cited the family as a particular source of anticipated stigma. When I asked Aaron, a heterosexual man, why he had not told his family about his swinging, he explained to me his anticipated reaction:

[My mom is] super religious. ...My mother's belief is you get married, you get married once, and you have sex with that one person, and that's it. Nobody else ever again. ...She would take my behavior as a failure on her part as a parent. And then she would just rack herself with guilt and go into prayer. And she would cry. It's an undue, unnecessary, emotional burden. That does nothing but hurt her. She'll never understand it. She'll never accept it. So, what's the point of telling her just to hurt her?

Aaron anticipates that his mother would view his swinging as a “failure on her part as a parent,” so rather than hurt her, he opts to keep it a secret. Aaron’s suspicion provides some insight into where consensually non-monogamous people are receiving the mononormative signals that they use to anticipate stigma. For him, religion is the suspected source of the opposition he anticipates receiving from his mother. Religion was a key component for many other respondents who anticipated stigma from family. Take Jamie, a heterosexual polyamorous woman, for example:

I'm sure if my mom knew, there would be pushback. My mom is religiously monogamous. She is very Catholic. Monogamy is really important to her, 'cause my dad was not monogamous with my mom and ended up leaving my mom for my stepmom. So, that whole piece makes my mom very anti-non-monogamous. I mean, the whole definition of non-monogamy is having more than one sexual partner. She would just say that's against whatever she was taught at church.

Men and women alike anticipated that family members would disapprove of their CNM due to their religiosity. Both Aaron and Jamie suspect that their mothers would view their CNM as antithetical to what they have been taught in church. Jamie adds an additional suspicion that her mother would conflate her polyamory with cheating, which is a mononormative stereotype that relegates CNM to the outer limits of the charmed circle (Rubin 2012). Evidently, anticipated stigma from family, often via religion, compelled people to keep their CNM secret, which illuminates how mononormativity is able to persist.

For some respondents, it was the family domain's interconnectedness with other domains of life that encouraged them to hide their CNM. For Ingrid, the relationship between her family life and work life was too intertwined for her to want to come out as polyamorous at work, due to her boss and his wife's relationship with her parents:

Ingrid: They're friends with my parents and their kids are all friends with my siblings, et cetera. So, basically, anything I wouldn't feel comfortable telling to my parents, I don't tell them also. It'll probably get passed on eventually whether by accident or not.

Interviewer: ...Why don't you want to tell your parents about your polyamory?

Ingrid: Because they didn't react well when I told 'em I was bisexual. They didn't react well when I dated a trans woman. ...They're very firmly Catholic. Catholics are big into the heterosexual, monogamy, forced birther [thing]. ...A recurring background fear in my mind, ever since I figured out that I wasn't straight, has been that my parents would eventually decide enough was enough and ban me from seeing my siblings as a bad influence.

Like Aaron and Jamie, Ingrid cites religion as the reason why she anticipates her parents' disapproval of her CNM. Additionally, prior experiences of received stigma—Ingrid's parents' negative reactions to her sexual preferences and who she has chosen to date—reinforce her anticipations of stigma from family. These experiences help her to predict what might happen if she were to tell her parents about her polyamory, which is why she has opted not to tell them. Given that her parents and her boss are so close, she opts to hide her polyamory at work as well. This is especially noteworthy given that she expressed to me that it was not unusual for she and her boss to discuss romantic relationships at work: "I was kind of kvetching [to a friend] about my boss giving me all this love life advice. ...He ended up giving me a lot of advice that was really good if you were 100% monogamous." Despite her frustration with her boss's mononormative advice, she cannot correct him due to the stigma she anticipates—not even from her boss, but from her family. Due to her anticipations of stigma from her family, Ingrid feels compelled to perform monogamy in the workplace. Thus, we see that mononormativity

manifests itself in multiple facets of life, including those that are seemingly unrelated to sex and romance, such as the workplace.

The reality is that for many respondents, their CNM was not totally divorced from their work, which created anticipated stigma in the workplace. Jamie, a polyamorous school teacher with a husband and a boyfriend, felt that she had to perform monogamy at work, lest it affect her reputation:

Interviewer: What do you think could happen or would happen if people found out [about your polyamory]?

Jamie: Everything from whispers around town to possibly even affecting my job with the public school system.

Interviewer: You're worried that you could lose your job?

Jamie: Not lose my job, but people would look at me differently at work. And I get along really well at work right now. ...It would be kind of cool if I could just give my boyfriend a hug when we're at a school event or something like that, but people talk and they don't know what they're talking about. And there's a negative connotation attached to that.

In an ideal world, Jamie would probably “give my boyfriend a hug when we’re at a school event,” but she avoids this because of the “negative connotation attached” to such a behavior. This “negative connotation” is the stigma of CNM. She anticipates that this stigma would take the form of people “looking at her differently at work,” which would taint her professional reputation. Rather than sacrifice the fact that she “gets along really well at work right now,” she opts to perform monogamy in the workplace. Evidently, many respondents felt compelled to perform monogamy in the workplace, and reputational hits and restriction of PDA are two disadvantages conferred to practitioners of CNM by mononormativity.

Indeed, it was people’s professional reputations that they did not want to damage by coming out as consensually non-monogamous at work. This concern was shared by Olivia, a

polyamorous respondent. She explained, “I’m not open about [my polyamory] at work. I don’t tell my coworkers that my boyfriend’s married, because then I would be known as the woman who’s dating a married man, not the woman who’s great at her job or a team player.” She felt that if coworkers were to find out about her CNM, that would take center stage in their evaluations of her. No longer would she be seen as an asset, but as a stigmatized individual. Thus, she opts to perform monogamy in her workplace.

Men feared that coming out in the workplace would bring about blows to their professional reputations as well. This was the case for Connor, who does not disclose his swinging at work. He explained,

I’m a Title IX coordinator for [an educational institution]. So, sex and relationships are a component of what I do. And I wouldn’t want anybody to have any reason to ever doubt the place where I’m coming from when I do that work, or have any other additional questions or information. They do not need to know what I do with my penis on a weekend in order to evaluate my job performance. And I wouldn’t want that to become even a question for anybody about what I’m doing. It’s not like I’d get fired or anything, but I think I’d be getting the side eye from a lot of people.

Connor anticipates that if his coworkers knew about his swinging, coworkers would view him as untrustworthy, because they would associate his CNM with the kind of nonconsensual sex that they deal with in their work. Thus, Connor feels compelled to perform monogamy in the workplace, unless he wants coworkers to view him as less competent. Respondents’ anticipations of people’s mononormative assumptions made it so that people hid their CNM in the workplace, lest their reputation at work suffer. Clearly, mononormativity manifests itself in the workplace quite often.

While many people’s fears about coming out in the workplace were just that others would treat them differently, some anticipated direct interferences with their livelihood. Ashley was one such respondent. She explained, “I’m a therapist for children. I think all the time, what will

happen if a client's mom or dad sees me walking into that [swinger's] club? I'll probably get fired." Even when off the clock, Ashley has to wonder whether going against the norm of monogamy might result in her losing her job. For Ashley, this fear was not strong enough to result in her disengaging in that behavior, but for others, the anticipated threat to one's livelihood was enough for them to perform monogamy. Chloe, a polyamorous independent contractor, performed monogamy for her clients to maximize the chances of her getting paid:

I put months into working with clients before ever getting paid, and if the deal falls through, ...I just have to swallow that. So yeah, I would not be honest with my clients about [my polyamory]. I think that relationships don't have a place in work anyway. Like, why would you be talking about relationships with clients? But that being said, our culture is so accepting of traditional monogamous relationships that my clients do still bring up talking about their girlfriend or their wife or asking me questions about my boyfriend. I just don't give all the details.

Chloe's experience reveals how deeply embedded mononormativity is in our society. She rightly points out that there is no real reason that her job should require her to discuss her romantic relationships with clients. Nevertheless, mononormativity is so ingrained that her clients regularly ask her about her relationship status. Since she only gets paid upon closing a deal with a client, she chooses to appear monogamous to them, due to her anticipation that the alternative might result in a client ceasing business with her. In other words, even the act of clients continually asking Chloe about her relationships and discussing their own allows mononormativity to persist, as it compels her to perform monogamy in a setting that, at first glance, seems as though that should be unnecessary. In reality, mononormativity manifests itself in multiple facets of life.

In summary, respondents anticipated stigma from multiple people in their lives, including from dates, friends, peers, family, and coworkers. Notably, respondents anticipated stigma even in domains seemingly unrelated to sex and romance, such as the workplace. This speaks to

mononormativity's pervasive nature. Often, anticipated stigma resulted in respondents choosing to conceal their CNM from others. That is to say that people can feel compelled to hide their CNM even in the absence of direct experiences of stigma, which may be why mononormativity is so lasting. How can the norm be changed if society compels those who are going against it to hide their behaviors?

In the next section, I interrogate respondents' confrontations with *received* stigma—that is, actual experiences of prejudice and discrimination due to their CNM.

Received Stigma

While experiences of received stigma were less common among respondents than those of anticipated stigma, they were still prevalent. Received stigma took many forms, ranging from verbal harassment, to being “outed,” to workplace discrimination. Such experiences interfered with individuals' careers, reputations, and relationships. Moreover, received stigma, like anticipated stigma, often occurred in arenas seemingly unrelated to sex and romance, such as between friends, family, and coworkers.

For some, received stigma took the form of microaggressive comments. Chloe, a bisexual polyamorous woman, experienced some of these when expressing her interest in polyamory to ex-boyfriends:

[When I was] making nods to elements of that [polyamorous] lifestyle to ex-boyfriends of mine, they all had some intense visceral reaction to it that either I was viewing them as inadequate, or making a joke about me not being “good girl” or not whoring around or something. There are these little terms that are thrown out there totally in a joking manner that are microaggressions—maybe even more than microaggressions.

Chloe received stigma in the form of verbal warnings from ex-boyfriends, who said that she was a “bad girl” or “whoring around.” While these comments may seem small, Chloe suggests that these terms are “more than microaggressions.” What she is hinting at is that these terms serve

mononormativity; they are meant to make people feel guilty for not adhering to monogamy, which helps to establish monogamy as the only valid relationship structure. While these comments were not enough to deter Chloe from pursuing polyamory, they help uncover the forms that received stigma can take in consensually non-monogamous people's lives.

Some male respondents also received stigma in the form of microaggressive comments. Russell was one such respondent. He described the judgments that people made of his character when he was practicing polyamory:

[I] was being looked at like being a homewrecker, and [like I'm] instigating some stuff, and that's their opinion. Yeah, I did get some pushback on that a little bit, and to each their own. I wish they would never have thought of me that way, but I can't change your mind on that.

Russell received judgment from friends that he was “being a homewrecker.” This is a term typically reserved for people who help others cheat on their partners, which reveals the mononormative assumptions that people make about even consensual non-monogamy. Russell's response to these challenges to his character was to resign himself to them. He claims he cannot change people's minds on that, despite “wishing they would never have thought of me that way.” His experience provides insight into how mononormativity endures. If mononormativity is powerful enough to resign consensual non-monogamists to the image of themselves as sexually immoral, then monogamy continues to be venerated and CNM continues to be denigrated.

Russell's experience also complicates our understanding of hegemonic sexuality. Research has shown that a common strategy for bullying women and girls is to accuse them of being lascivious (Miller 2016), but that it is not necessarily shameful for men and boys to be sexual as long as they are heterosexual (Pascoe 2005). Russell is a cisgender, heterosexual, white man, yet he received criticism of his sexuality due to his CNM. Furthermore, he was criticized in

a way that seems to be gendered quite femininely—by being made out to be a “homewrecker.”

Without a critical view of mononormativity, one would assume that Russell is unequivocally part of the sexually privileged, but his experience with pushback for his CNM suggests otherwise.

Indeed, heterosexual men were not immune to receiving stigma for their CNM. Caleb, a heterosexual polyamorous man, experienced discrimination in the workplace because of his polyamory. A partner had just broken up with him, so he came to work visibly dejected. Prior to that day, no one at his job even knew that he was separated from his wife—let alone polyamorous. Since people could see that he was upset and asked what was wrong, he decided to tell them about the breakup and his polyamory. He then reached out to his boss about it, since she was head of the LGBTQ+ organization at his job. He recounts:

She got very indignant that I would seek guidance or resources from the LGBTQ community on managing sexual identity issues... then filed a sexual harassment case on me in our organization. ...My discussions of polyamory with people, the implication was that that was creating a sexually hostile work environment ...The investigators interviewed every god-damn person in the division. ...They went through all of my emails. ...I had to be very careful with how I socialized with people. I couldn't go out to happy hours or do things. I felt like I could not be myself with all of these people because I had this hanging over my head. ...I've now been outed officially at work in official documents, which is really fucking uncool. So, I'm going through the process of figuring out what was actually on paper so that I can actually get some of that redacted, 'cause my sex shouldn't be a matter of permanent record of anybody but myself.

Caleb's boss filed a sexual harassment claim against him for talking about his polyamory at work. Caleb did not do anything differently from, say, Ingrid's boss, who gives mononormative love-life advice at work, or Chloe's clients, who talk about their monogamous relationships unprompted. Yet, just discussing his polyamory was viewed as creating a hostile work environment. The formal sexual harassment claim that was filed and the investigation that ensued served as public punishments for Caleb's failure to perform monogamy in the workplace. These punishments had numerous consequences. First, they affected his interpersonal

relationships with coworkers. They strained his relationship with his former boss, and they made it so that he could not freely associate with or talk to other coworkers until the investigation was complete. Second, they denied him a right to privacy, as he was outed as polyamorous in a very public manner and his emails were perused. Third, they affected his reputation. If he ever wants a promotion, there is permanent record of his polyamory in his files, which means that that is something that higher-ups could consider in their evaluations of him. Interestingly enough, despite him now being outed to everyone in his workplace, this received stigma still compelled him to attempt to perform monogamy; he is working to have mention of his polyamory redacted from public record. Therefore, received stigma, like anticipated stigma, can encourage practitioners of CNM to perform concealment work. We also see the numerous punishments that mononormativity confers to the non-monogamous, and that these can be conferred very publicly and formally.

Caleb's story further illustrates that a critical view of mononormativity expands our understanding of sexuality. Caleb is a cisgender, heterosexual man. If we were to ignore mononormativity, we would assume that Caleb is part of a sexually privileged class. Yet, his sexuality was chastised in a very public way, and viewed as dangerous and immoral. In fact, it was a lesbian that filed the sexual harassment case against him. In this scenario, by virtue of her being monogamous, she is actually the person exerting sexual power in this situation. Thus, a critical understanding of mononormativity expands our view of sexual power. We also see that the workplace is an arena that frequently requires monogamy and distributes disadvantages to the non-monogamous.

Received stigma in the workplace can also take the form of verbal harassment. This was the case for Olivia, a polyamorous woman dating a man who has a wife. At an old job, when a

coworker found out that Olivia was polyamorous, the coworker harassed her to the point of Olivia having to quit her job:

I don't know how she heard, but she figured out that [my partner] was married. So, she got it in her head that I was a homewrecker. She told everybody that I was dating, or I was sleeping with, a married guy. And then, if I would even have a conversation with a male member of staff, that was like, "Oh, she must be fucking him too. He has a wife too." ...It got bad. I remember her just screaming at me, like, "You're just a fucking piece of shit!" And then my boss didn't do anything about it. So, I was like, "Well, that tells me all I need to know." So, then I was out.

Evidently, verbal pushback does not always take the form of the microaggressions that Chloe and Russell had to deal with; sometimes, it looks like public verbal harassment. Even without Olivia telling anybody that she was polyamorous, her coworker brought this information to the workplace, once again illustrating how mononormativity manifests itself in multiple facets of life. Her monogamous coworker felt so emboldened as to harass Olivia in front of their boss, creating a work environment so hostile that Olivia chose to quit. Thus, we see that a failure to perform monogamy actually can affect a person's livelihood, corroborating the fears of many of my other respondents. The disadvantages that mononormativity confers to the non-monogamous, then, can be quite severe. Additionally, this experience of received stigma encouraged concealment work moving forward; Olivia is not out at her current job. The coworker effectively enforced mononormativity by purging the workplace of a person who was going against that norm, and encouraging her to conceal her CNM moving forward.

The workplace was not the only domain in which respondents received stigma quite publicly. Courtney, a polyamorous woman, had to deal with her ex-husband trying to use her polyamory against her in their divorce proceedings:

When we were going through the divorce, I was very upfront with my attorney. ...[I] was just like, "We were non-monogamous. ...We had multiple other relationships." And [my ex-husband] tried to turn it into, like, I was cheating and a crazy slut. ...If my ex had a

good lawyer that really wanted to screw me over, they potentially could have found the right judge to say, “Yeah, you were infidelitous.” And take children away.

Courtney chose to be forthcoming about her CNM in the divorce proceedings, and her ex-husband tried to use that against her to gain custody of the children. Notably, her ex-husband is also consensually non-monogamous. In other words, the stigmatizers of CNM need not be monogamous themselves. While the ex-husband was not successful in trying to get the attorney and judge to view Courtney as “cheating and a crazy slut,” the fact that he thought this was a viable strategy speaks to the diffuse nature of mononormativity. It is not so outlandish to believe that a person might be prejudiced toward a consensually non-monogamous individual and distribute disadvantages to them accordingly.

Indeed, consensually non-monogamous individuals can receive stigma from other consensually non-monogamous individuals. Courtney’s ex-husband also outed her as polyamorous to others in her life. She recounts,

A few months after I left [my ex-husband], I got into a car accident. I had called [him] to let him know, because our son was in the car. ...[He] got so mad, he started calling people in my life. He called my best friend from high school, and he called my father, and told both of them, "Courtney crashed the car with her married lover in the car and our son." And outed me to several people in that context. And then, my dad and stepmom ...still are, several years later now, very put off by the idea [of my CNM].

In this case, received stigma took the form of being outed. It was Courtney’s consensually non-monogamous ex-husband that outed her to numerous people. By roping in her friend and father, Courtney’s ex-husband forced her to confront mononormativity from her peers as well as from family members. This once again shows that mononormativity pervades multiple facets of life.

In summary, received stigma took many forms, from microaggressions, to verbal harassment, to legal action being taken. Received stigma existed in multiple domains of life, including at home and in the workplace. In some cases, received stigma, like anticipated stigma,

encouraged respondents to conceal their CNM. Both anticipated and received stigma shed light on how mononormativity persists and is reproduced, as both stigmas make it so that people can reasonably predict the consequences of going against the norm of monogamy. People then often choose to hide their CNM. When they do not, they sometimes experienced received stigma that has negative implications on their reputations, relationships, and careers.

Conclusion

This study is among the first to answer the following question: how does mononormativity manifest in consensually non-monogamous people's lives? Using data from in-depth interviews with 44 people who practice consensual non-monogamy, I show that mononormativity manifests itself in two ways: anticipated and received stigma. Both stigmas often compelled people to engage in a kind of concealment work to hide their CNM from others. Thus, mononormativity is persuasive, in that it often encourages consensually non-monogamous people to perform monogamy. Additionally, both stigmas occurred in multiple facets of life, including those that are ostensibly unrelated to sex and romance. In other words, mononormativity is pervasive, and people are called upon to present their monogamy frequently. Furthermore, the disadvantages conferred to the consensually non-monogamous were numerous, ranging from microaggressions, to public verbal harassment, to sexual harassment allegations. Evidently, the consequences of going against mononormativity can be severe.

This study reaffirms one of the tenets of the sociology of sexuality: that sexual power runs through all facets of life, even those not traditionally seen as sexual (Gamson and Moon 2004; Stein and Plummer 1996). The frequency with which mononormativity manifested itself in the workplace serves as particular proof of sexual power's omnipresence. Therefore,

mononormativity is a phenomenon that grants sexual power to the monogamous and withholds it from the non-monogamous, even in seemingly nonsexual locales.

Further, this study finds ample evidence for the following assertion: monogamy and various consensual non-monogamies *are* sexualities. Just as heteronormativity marginalizes queer people (Warner and Social Text Collective 1993), so too does mononormativity marginalize the non-monogamous. This is especially evident in the fact that one respondent had a sexual harassment claim filed against him at work for discussing his polyamorous relationship in the office, which is something that monogamous people likely do freely. I argue that his experience is an instance of discrimination on the basis of sexuality. Yet, this respondent is a cisgender, heterosexual man. Without a critical understanding of mononormativity, sociologists of sexualities might be primed to believe that he is among the sexually privileged. Yet, his experience with discrimination suggests a marginalized sexuality. Prior to this research, the idea that monogamy is a hegemonic sexuality has received inadequate attention in the literature.

These findings have great implications for the sociology of sexualities. They illustrate the importance of taking mononormativity seriously as topics of study in research on sex and romantic relationships. Failure to do so limits our understanding of sexual privilege, by ignoring the benefits afforded to monogamous people and disadvantages given to non-monogamous people. Such an omission would mean that sociologists themselves would continue to be mononormatively biased in the populations they choose to study and the questions they ask. Now is the time to rectify mononormative bias in sexualities research.

Despite the advances that this study has made, there are limitations and unanswered questions that reveal areas of future research. For example, I have shown the disadvantages that mononormativity confers to respondents' careers and reputations, but further research is needed

on the implications of such marginalization for people's well-being. Many studies have documented worse mental health among queer individuals compared to heterosexual individuals for a variety of reasons, including the bullying, victimization, and discrimination that this population faces (D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington 1998; Ryan and Rivers 2003; Ueno, Vaghela, and Ritter 2014; Whitbeck et al. 2004). Does mononormativity have similar implications for non-monogamous people's mental health? Examining the inequalities between monogamous and non-monogamous people is a great opportunity for future research. Such research could examine differences by monogamy status not only in mental health, but also in income, morbidity, and even life expectancy

Additionally, the present study is limited in what it can say about how monogamous people are impacted by mononormativity, since I did not interview monogamous people. What exactly are the advantages mononormativity affords to the monogamous? Future research should also investigate what Schippers (2016:13) calls compulsory monogamy, which consists of "the institutionalized arrangements that compel or force people into monogamous, dyadic relationships." The fact that so many of my respondents attempted to appear monogamous speaks a little bit to compulsory monogamy, but ultimately, we need a study of monogamous people in order to investigate how exactly people are compelled to be monogamous. This research is a logical extension of the plethora of research that studies union formation and mate selection. The fact that a formal theorization of monogamy and mononormativity is largely absent from such research further demonstrates the extent to which scholars have been mononormatively biased in the questions they ask.

Another limitation of the study is the relative lack of racial diversity in the sample. 84% of respondents identify as white, which means that I cannot examine differences in experiences

with mononormativity by race. How does mononormativity intersect with racism and other systems of oppression? Rubin et al. (2014) argue that CNM is a more racially diverse practice than studies have claimed, and that the relative racial homogeneity documented in this population may be a function of sampling design. Future research should explore ways to better reach people of color who practice CNM. Then, we could rigorously explore the quality of consensually non-monogamous people's experiences with mononormativity.

Reducing the inequality between the monogamous and non-monogamous will likely require social and legal change. At the individual level, we should not assume that people are monogamous. We should make sure that people are equally allowed to talk about their relationships in settings where such discussions are normal. Change is needed at the legal level as well. Three cities in Massachusetts have legalized domestic partnerships between more than two people, thus giving people the ability to visit their partners in the hospital or give their partners their health insurance, among other benefits (Anon 2021; Collings 2021; Snyder and Alsharif 2020). Other cities should consider this option. Furthermore, legislators should work to formalize discrimination protections for consensually non-monogamous people, as some cities have done (Anon 2024a; M. 2023; Spiropoulos 2023). Protections on the basis of sexual orientation in the United States are limited as is, and there is virtually no precedent that says that these protections also apply to consensually non-monogamous people. Establishing formal protections would give people legal recourse if they experience verbal harassment at work, like Olivia, or are discriminated against at work, like Caleb, due to their CNM. It would also prevent people from losing their job because of their CNM, which was a fear of several respondents.

Sociologists of sexuality should also give monogamy and mononormativity the level of rigorous attention that they have given sexual orientation. A long line of research has

interrogated heteronormativity and the socially constructed heterosexual/homosexual binary (see Epstein 1994; Green 2002; Nardi and Schneider 1998; Rich 1980; Warner and Social Text Collective 1993). That work has been essential for exposing the heteronormative biases built into our society on multiple levels, and the disadvantages conferred to those who do not adhere to the norm of heterosexuality. It has also changed the way we think about sexuality; scholars no longer think of the “heterosexual” as a biological given, but as a category that was socially constructed to maintain a bourgeois orthodoxy (Epstein 1994; Hawkes 1996). Such systematic attention to monogamy and mononormativity would likely reveal similar conclusions; that mononormative biases are embedded in our institutions, and that monogamy is not a biological given, but something that was constructed and given value in order to create a privileged group. The mononormative biases and the systemic disadvantages conferred to non-monogamous people that were exposed in this paper are just the tip of the iceberg. Serious theorization of a monogamous orthodoxy is just beginning. The future of research on monogamy and mononormativity is promising—and sociologists of sexuality should lead that charge.

Chapter 3: “Modern Family” or “Sexual Freedom?”: The Tactics and Discursive Strategies of the Consensual Non-Monogamy Social Movement

Introduction

Consensual non-monogamy (CNM) has seen major legal victories over the last few years. In July 2020, Somerville, Massachusetts, a city in the greater Boston area, became the first U.S. city to legalize domestic partnerships between more than two people (Snyder and Alsharif 2020). Cambridge and Arlington, nearby Massachusetts cities, followed suit in 2021 (Collings 2021; Anon 2021). In March 2023, Somerville became the nation’s first city to pass nondiscrimination ordinances for polyamorous people (Spiropoulos 2023). Cambridge followed suit in November 2023, followed by Oakland, California in April 2024 (Anon 2024a; M. 2023). Not all CNM legal victories have occurred in Massachusetts; a court in British Columbia, Canada ruled that three parents in a polyamorous relationship can all be legal parents of their child in 2021 (Mitchell 2021), and it is estimated that as many as ten U.S. states have granted at least one three-parent family legal parentage in cases of adoption (Emanuel 2014).⁹

While legal victories such as these have garnered little media attention, the practice of CNM has nevertheless been gaining public visibility across the last decade. The American Psychological Association has launched a committee on consensual non-monogamy (Anon n.d.); the CNM guidebook *The Ethical Slut* is on its third edition (Hardy and Easton 2017);

⁹ As one lawyer explained to me, adoption files are impounded by statute. This means that they are private; i.e., adoption files are never open to the public (unlike, say, divorce files). Due to the private nature of court matters of adoption, and the fact that many cases of legal triple parentage were granted in cases involving adoption, we cannot 100% confirm the exact number of states that have issued legal parentage to a three-parent family. Issuances of (three-parent) birth certificates *are* of public record, and, sometimes, people in three-parent arrangements choose to go public about the fact that they have been granted legal parentage. It is through these two ways that experts have landed on the estimate of 10 states having issued legal parentage to at least one three-parent family. While the number is likely not any lower, it could potentially be higher.

consensually non-monogamous dating apps such as Feeld or #open are emerging; and polyamorous characters have even tentatively appeared on television shows including ABC's *The Good Doctor* (Season 4), Netflix's *Sense8* (Season 2), and a new reality show titled *Couple to Throuple*, which premiered on Peacock in February 2024 (Phillips 2024).

How did these legal and cultural gains develop? This is a puzzle. Existing research on sexuality movements suggests that mobilizing on behalf of consensual non-monogamy should be difficult, if not impossible. Although the LGBTQ+ movement, which is arguably the largest sexuality-based movement in recent history, rarely referenced mononormativity explicitly, their most successful movement frames clearly promoted mononormative ideals: marriage equality, “love is love,” and two-parent families (Kimport 2013). So, if sexuality movements historically have gained mainstream acceptance and legal protections by emphasizing that sexuality's morality is derived through its mononormativity rather than its heteronormativity, then how would a movement that is defined by a *rejection* of mononormativity gain legibility and legal protections? Does the CNM movement simply avoid moral arguments about sexuality altogether, or do they follow the example of the LGBTQ+ movement, and seek to redefine notions of sexual morality among the general public? If the latter, what tactics and strategies do they develop in their efforts to articulate CNM as compatible with existing notions of sexual morality in the West? Finally, how might these CNM strategies help sociologists develop better theories of sexuality?

In this study, I gathered primary data from 17 interviews with American and Canadian key actors in CNM advocacy and supplemental data from articles and websites about these

actors. I used these data to analyze the tactics and discursive strategies¹⁰ that CNM activists use to legitimize CNM in the minds of the broader public, and to advocate for legal protections. I find that activists often deliberately borrow tactics directly from the LGBTQ+ community, again often focusing on narratives of love, care, and family. However, within these family-based discursive strategies, CNM activists aim to de-emphasize mononormativity *and* sex. Strikingly, they aim to do this by forming coalitions with groups such as single parents, non-Western immigrant families, and others who desire to exist outside of the married, two-parent, heterosexual nuclear family—an innovative tactic not engaged by the LGBTQ+ movement. I refer to this overarching strategy as “familial libertarianism.” These findings, when combined with the findings of chapters one and two, force scholars of sexualities to grapple with questions of how we should study sexuality and gender within relationships. The CNM movement demands that we try to expand our theories to make space for a relationship system that, at least in theory, moves beyond systems of sex and gender and mononormativity to focus more broadly on systems of care, intimacy, and ethical engagements.

Theoretical Framework

Uncovering a CNM Movement

Social movements are a popular object of inquiry for sociologists. Tilly and Wood (2016) define social movements as a synthesis of three elements: a *campaign*, or a sustained, organized effort to make collective claims on target authorities; use of the *social movement repertoire*, or a combination of popular forms of political action such as the creation of coalitions, media statements, pamphleteering, etc.; and *WUNC displays*, or public representations

¹⁰ In this paper, I sometimes use “discursive strategies” and “frames” interchangeably. Frames are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that both inspire actors and legitimate a social movement’s aims and activities (Benford and Snow 2000).

of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. Scholars of social movements focus on a number of moves that social movements make. One such move is framing, or the work of creating action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings (i.e. frames) that inspire actors and legitimate a social movement's aims and activities (Benford and Snow 2000). Others are the strategies and tactics of a social movement. A movement's strategies are its general goals or blueprints for action, while its tactics are the specific activities performed to realize this strategic plan (Stone 2012). For example, a movement may have increased media visibility as its general strategy, while street protests, press conferences, or guerrilla theater are just some of the possible tactics that activists could perform in service of this strategy (Stone 2012).

Identity-based social movements are of particular interest to sociologists. Sociologists have long been fascinated by so-called "identity politics," or the "activism engaged in by status-based social movements" (Bernstein 2005:48). Bernstein (2005) identifies a number of research questions central to the study of identity politics. Among other lines of inquiry, identity politics research is concerned with the relationship between the personal and the political, the strategic and tactical challenges that arise when a status characteristic is both the basis for one's organizing and the basis of one's oppression, and what a movement's political and cultural goals reveal about the structure and distribution of power in society (Bernstein 2005). Therefore, identity politics serve as a useful site for understanding movement goals and tactics, as well as for understanding societal power. Though the term "identity politics" has fallen out of fashion, Bernstein (2005) maintains that the questions addressed by the literature on this topic hold great intellectual merit.

Perhaps the most common form of identity politics that social movement scholars study is the gay and lesbian movement (e.g. Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 1997; Ghaziani 2011;

Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone 2016; Kimport 2013; Stone 2012; Valverde 2006). Indeed, the gay and lesbian movement has been called the “quintessential identity movement” (Bernstein 1997).

Scholars are particularly fascinated by two seemingly contradictory characteristics of the gay and lesbian movement. On the one hand, the gay and lesbian movement has sought to emphasize similarities to heterosexuals and be included in mainstream society. This point has been made with varying terminology. For example, Seidman (1988) talks about the construction of a “respectable homosexual” that emerged out of the AIDS crisis, Duggan (2003) of a “homonormativity” ushered in by the push for same-sex marriage, Valverde (2006) of a “respectable same-sex couple” that developed in the 2000s during early legalizations of same-sex marriage, and Ghaziani (2011) of a “post-gay” LGBT movement that seeks to incorporate members of the dominant group rather than draw boundaries against them. On the other hand, more critical members of the gay and lesbian movement have maintained their cultural distinctness from heterosexuals and sought to dismantle heteronormativity (Duggan 2003; Seidman 1997). The prevailing consensus is that these seemingly antithetical goals of the movement are—and have been—simultaneously coexistent. This point has been made using various verbiage, whether it’s the “assimilationist” versus “liberationist” approach (Rimmerman 2008); “mainstream, liberal, identity politics” versus “radical, nonidentitarian politics of difference” (Epstein 1998); “identity elaboration” versus “identity building” (Armstrong 2002); or “cycles of sameness and difference” (Ghaziani et al. 2016). Evidently, ample research on the gay and lesbian movement is interested in how and when the movements’ constituents decide to liken themselves to or distances themselves from heterosexuals.

The gay and lesbian movement’s relationship to heterosexuality has received ample attention; its relationship to monogamy has not, despite monogamy’s similar relevance to the

core challenges faced by the movement. Seidman (1992) argues that the gay and lesbian movement—and sexual liberation movements at large—face backlash from those who subscribe to the “sexual romanticism” school of thought. These adherents believe in a “monogamous, romantic, and marital sexual ethic” (Seidman 1992:156). Thus, the project of advancing gay and lesbian rights means appealing to or succeeding in spite of sexual romantics. As mentioned earlier, one response from the gay and lesbian movement was the propagation of the “respectable homosexual,” in order to assert that a “sexual ethic of monogamy and romance” was consistent with homosexuality (Seidman 1992:156). Monogamy, according to Seidman, has become a central part of the sexual morality governing both the gay and lesbian movement and their opposition.

Others have also noted the centrality of monogamy to activists’ portrayals of the gay and lesbian movement, although these works do not explicitly reference monogamy. In 2004, same-sex marriages were briefly legal in San Francisco (Kimport 2013; Valverde 2006). Valverde (2006), in her analysis of photographs and news articles about the marriages that took place during this so-called “Winter of Love,” notes the emergence of a “respectable same sex *couple*” (italics for emphasis). It was formally (and gender-appropriately) dressed, mostly white, upper-middle class male and female *couples* lining up at the courthouse, despite the fact that monogamy is less common among LGB individuals than heterosexuals (Levine et al. 2018). Even though most of the people participating in the Winter of Love expected that the legal recognition of their marriages would be ephemeral (Kimport 2013), they still desired to participate in these public and legal displays of dyadic marriage. Although marriage is an institution with multiple meanings that have changed over time, monogamous commitment is one of the most widely accepted meanings of marriage in American culture (Coontz 2005;

Kimport 2013). Thus, it is clear that at many points throughout history, the most visible face of the gay and lesbian movement has adopted monogamy as a core part of its ethic.

Yet, there is evidence of an emergent sexuality-based identity movement that rejects monogamy: the consensual non-monogamy movement. These challenges to monogamy are apparent in their pushes for plural domestic partnership ordinances (Anon 2021; Collings 2021; Snyder and Alsharif 2020) and nondiscrimination ordinances on the basis of relationship structure (Anon 2024a; M. 2023; Spiropoulos 2023). While these particular moves are akin to those of the assimilationist camp of the gay and lesbian movement, there is evidence of “sameness and difference” tensions (Ghaziani et al. 2016) in the CNM movement as well. Critiques of mononormativity are abundant in the CNM movement, from the creation of non-monogamous identities such as polyamory or “the ethical slut” (Hardy and Easton 2017), to academic works that position mononormativity as a system of disadvantage, inequality, and discrimination (Schippers 2016).

Despite the parallels between CNM and the gay and lesbian movement, the small but growing literature on CNM does not conceive of it as a social movement. The work that comes closest to doing so is Christopher M. Gleason’s (2023) *American Poly*, which traces a history of one particular type of CNM—polyamory. Yet, even he claims that “in the end [polyamorists] failed to produce a cohesive social movement” (Gleason 2023:16).

I argue that our understandings of identity politics, sexual morality, and social movements fall short when we fail to conceive of CNM as a social movement. In the next section, I make the case for why CNM is a social movement, and how that advances our understanding of identity, sexuality, and social movements.

The Case for CNM as a Social Movement

CNM fits widely accepted sociological definitions of social movements. Recall that Tilly and Wood (2013) define social movements as a synthesis of three components: a campaign; use of the social movement repertoire; and displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. Indications from both the news and academic literature on CNM suggest that CNM fits these criteria. The passage of nondiscrimination ordinances in multiple cities (Anon 2024a; M. 2023; Spiropoulos 2023) constitute a sustained, organized effort to make collective claims on local governmental authorities—i.e., a campaign. Special-purpose associations, demonstrations, and coalitions are just a few elements of the social movement repertoire that the CNM movement appears to employ. *American Poly* (Gleason 2023) describes the proliferation of numerous polyamory advocacy organizations such as Loving More and Black and Poly. The book also describes demonstrations such as public celebrations for Polyamory Day. Furthermore, it notes that CNM activists formed coalitions with bisexuals who were similarly shunned from the larger gay and lesbian movement (Gleason 2023). From Day of Visibility events (Anon 2024b) to studies that try to quantify the number of people engaging in CNM (Hauptert et al. 2017; Levine et al. 2018), the CNM movement shows ample evidence of WUNC displays as well.

Conceiving of CNM as another sexuality-based identity movement enhances our understanding of identity politics and social movements. Recall that identity politics research is concerned with the relationship between the personal and the political, the strategic and tactical challenges that arise when a status characteristic is both the basis for one's organizing and the basis of one's oppression, and what a movement's political and cultural goals reveal about the structure and distribution of power in society (Bernstein 2005). With the premise that CNM is indeed a social movement, we are offered another avenue to observe how sexuality is politicized.

We have the opportunity to look for innovations and consistencies in the tactics and discursive strategies of the CNM movement.

Conceiving of CNM as a social movement also enhances our understanding of contemporary debates about sexual morality. As Seidman (1992:5) so aptly states, “sex functions as a key site of national conflict in the United States.” Sexual liberation movements of the past, Seidman (1992) argues, are always marked by discourse between two feuding schools of thought: sexual libertarians, who want to divorce sexuality from notions of morality, and sexual romantics, who believe that the only moral way to have sex is within a marital heterosexual context. The CNM movement is one of the newest sites where this discourse is taking place. Many consensual non-monogamists assert that their way of being sexual actually *is* moral or ethical (e.g. Hardy and Easton 2017). In other words, there appears to be evidence of an emergent discursive strategy used by CNM activists that reshapes our understandings of the relationship between sexuality and morality. Thus, examining this movement is our key to has the power to advance the sociology of sexuality’s conceptions of sexual morality. In service of these goals, in this chapter, I examine the tactics and discursive strategies that CNM activists have innovated to mobilize a CNM movement.

Data and Methods

In order to investigate the tactics and discursive strategies used by CNM activists, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 American and Canadian key actors in CNM activism and/or advocacy. To supplement these interviews, I also conducted a content analysis of CNM advocacy organizations’ webpages, the personal websites of CNM activists, and articles about the work that these activists and organizations perform.

List of Key Actors

When I first sat down to make a list of key actors in this movement, I separated the list into three sections: “politicians,” “organizations,” and “other key actors.” The “politicians” section consists of public servants, namely city councilors, who were involved in the passing of nondiscrimination or plural domestic partnership ordinances in their cities. I read articles written about these ordinances and jotted down the names of any politicians named as influential in its drafting or passage.

The “organizations” section consists of associations who explicitly have CNM advocacy or activism as part of their missions. This could have been reflected in their actual mission statement on their website, or in the name of the organization (e.g. Polyamory Legal Advocacy Coalition). I started this section by writing down organizations mentioned in articles about recent nondiscrimination and plural domestic partnership ordinances. For each such organization, I looked at their website and took down the names of all board members. I then searched these board members’ names in Google to see if they were board members of other CNM advocacy groups. If so, I wrote down the names of those organizations’ and their board members as well.

“Other key actors” consisted of individuals who were not politicians or members of CNM advocacy groups, but who had a demonstrated commitment to CNM advocacy. Just as Epstein (1998:77) asserts that “gay and lesbian movements in the United States are not strictly bounded by or encapsulated within formal movement organizations,” neither are CNM movements. I wanted to include actors beyond politicians and board members of formal organizations in order to capture this breadth of activism. These “other key actors” were mainly authors of influential academic and popular press books on CNM, lawyers who have secured important legal victories for consensually non-monogamous families, and social media influencers who have created

content that makes CNM legible to a lay audience. For all subsections of the key actor list, I continued to add new names if anyone I interviewed mentioned another person who might be useful for me to talk to.

Interviews

I conducted interviews with key actors in CNM advocacy and/or activism between November 2023 and January 2024. My sampling strategy consisted of purposive and snowball sampling. From the list of key actors that I had produced, I first reached out to people with whom I had connections through my previous work. After interviewing them, I asked if there were any key actors with whom they thought I should speak, and asked if they could refer me to those people. I continued snowball sampling from there, while also reaching out to other key actors from my list. In total, I have reached out to 28 unique individuals. To date, I have received responses back from 19 of them, and was able to successfully follow through on an interview with 17 of them.

I use Small and Calarco's (2022) concept of "exposure" to justify my number of respondents. Sample size, they argue, is a much less helpful indicator of quality for interview research than exposure, or the number of hours spent in the field. The greater the extent of the contact, the richer the data. I have a high level of exposure to this subject matter. In addition to these 17 interviews, I have conducted 44 other interviews with CNM individuals for related projects, totaling about 83 hours spent talking to people about CNM. Put differently, I have the same amount of exposure as someone who conducted 83 one-hour interviews. I supplement the interviews with content analysis of websites and articles about these key actors' activism and advocacy, many of which I had reviewed prior to formally coding over the course of my research

on this topic. Across these metrics, I have met Small and Calarco's (2022) precondition for scientifically sound qualitative research.

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of the Key Actor Sample

Gender:	
Female	8 (47%)
Male	5 (29%)
Nonbinary	4 (24%)
Sexual Orientation:	
Heterosexual	2 (12%)
Gay	2 (12%)
Bi-/pansexual	13 (76%)
Race:	
White	14 (82%)
Black	2 (12%)
Asian	1 (6%)
Age:	
Mean age	51.8
Median age	45.5
Range	32 to 85
Primary Type of Actor:	
Org. board member/founder	6 (35%)
Author	4 (24%)
Academic	3 (18%)
Lawyer	2 (12%)
Public servant	1 (6%)
Influencer	1 (6%)
Total:	
	17

Note: Counts shown for nonquantitative variables; percentages in parentheses.

Missing age data for one respondent.

Table 3 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the key actor sample. Bi- and pansexual individuals make up the majority (about 76%) of the sample. While diverse in terms of gender and age, the sample is largely white (82%). I spoke to a range of types of key actors:

board members of advocacy organizations, authors, academics, lawyers, one public servant, and one influencer.

The ultimate goal of the interview guide was to understand the tactics and frames that CNM activists employ in order to legitimize CNM in a mononormative society. So, much of the interview guide concerned questions about the nature of the respondents' activism: what are their goals, why are these goals important, what do they do in service of these goals, etc. Another section of the interview guide concerned the CNM movement's relationship with the LGBTQ+ movement, if any. The LGBTQ+ movement is arguably the most successful sexuality-based movement to date. Practitioners of CNM whom I have interviewed in the past have had complex and sometimes contradictory feelings about whether CNM activism was welcome in LGBTQ+ activist spaces. So, I wanted to know what people on the front lines saw as the relationship between the CNM movement and the LGBTQ+ movement. The rest of the interview asked how respondents felt about the recent legal advances in Massachusetts, whether these were goals of their own work in their local contexts, what people saw as the future of their activism, and what everyday people can do to help. After every interview, I sent respondents a short demographic questionnaire to fill out.

After transcribing each interview, I coded for themes using NVivo. I created broad codes called "tactics" and "frames," and then created smaller codes for each unique tactic or frame that I noticed activists to be employing. I also created a broad code called "LGBTQ+ movement" to capture any time someone brought up a comparison to that movement. I created two sub-codes within that: "intertwined" and "tension," to capture whether people were talking about the LGBTQ+ movement as related to or at odds with the LGBTQ+ movement.

Content Analysis

In order to further understand the tactics and discursive strategies used by CNM activists to make change, I supplemented the interview data with content analysis. I constructed a database of webpages from the websites of the organizations and individuals on my key actor list, as well as articles about the CNM advocacy and activism that these actors have performed. The database also consists of some popular press and academic books on CNM written by key actors on the list. For the digital components of the database, I captured the webpages with Zotero. I paid particular attention to websites' home pages and mission statements to see how they framed their work. I also examined sections such as "Events" or "What We Do" in order to understand the specific work that these actors do and what their aims are. This means that for each website, I often captured multiple webpages. I collected the web data between October 2023 and March 2024. In total, the database consists of 64 unique webpages and 5 books.

The coding strategy for the content analysis was very similar to that for the interviews. I created broad codes called "tactics" and "frames," and then created smaller codes for each unique tactic or frame that I noticed activists to be employing. "Family" was one salient frame that emerged quickly, so I made sure to code for that specifically. I also created a code to capture comparisons and appeals to the LGBTQ+ movement.

Findings

Activists legitimate CNM in a mononormative society by employing discursive strategies that encourage the consensually non-monogamous to see themselves as a political entity.

Harrison, a board member of a CNM advocacy group, explained this process:

It's hard to get polyamorous people to see their polyamory as a key aspect of their political identities, as opposed to an aspect of their personal identity. ...I don't think that that's necessarily some pathology of the polyamorous. I think it's more the result of an

environment that hasn't really encouraged an imagination of what's possible. And so, a fair amount of work of building an effective political movement... is actually getting polyamorous people to see that dimension of their identity as political and then to see themselves as political agents who can move behind a common goal.

The work of Harrison's organization is to encourage consensual non-monogamists to see themselves as part of a political entity, that can then share collective goals and make collective claims. This is indeed work, due to "an environment that hasn't really encouraged an imagination of what's possible." In other words, our mononormative society and sexuality movements of the past have not yielded a visible and coherent CNM movement with strong traditions and a storied past. Activists are currently doing the work to form a viable CNM movement.

So, what exactly does it look like to foster an action-oriented, consensually non-monogamous political consciousness? The following sections explore the tactics and discursive strategies that these activists employ in order to legitimate a CNM social movement.

Borrowing Tactics from the LGBTQ+ Movement

A variety of tactics and strategies that activists used were borrowed directly from the LGBTQ+ movement. One such strategy was the goal of mainstreaming CNM. Tanner, a board member of a CNM advocacy group, explained:

There's a lot of ways that we can really pull from the playbook of the LGBTQ movement, and some of what that looks like is, first of all, visibility and normalizations. One strategy that people in the queer liberation movement used is just opening up about their identity, or "coming out," as it's called, and working to help normalize it. Saying, "Hey, I'm just like you. I just happen to construct relationships with people of the same gender."

Positioning CNM as a phenomenon that is both normal and visible is one of the goals of Tanner's organization. This goal is borrowed directly from the "coming out" strategy favored by the LGBTQ+ movement. Just as many LGBTQ+ activists maintained that they were "just like" heterosexuals, Tanner finds it useful to maintain that the consensually non-monogamous are just like the monogamous. Here, he employs a logic similar to that of the "assimilationist" camp of

LGBTQ+ activists, in that he is interested in likening practitioners of CNM to the mainstream (Rimmerman 2008).

CNM activists pursue a number of projects in service of this mainstreaming/assimilationist strategy. Seth, a board member of several CNM advocacy groups, detailed some of these projects, also borrowed from the LGBTQ+ movement:

Our strategy is essentially following the footsteps of the people who advocated in support of LGBTQIA+ relationships. [Our goals include] ...nondiscrimination policies, empirical and inclusive education, unbiased and empirically informed clinical practice, and encouraging the field to conduct research on the topic. These are all asks that were made by the LGBTQ movement, and we are functionally asking for similar things. And in some ways, our perspective is why reinvent the wheel? This path has already been paved. Let's work smarter, not harder.

The overarching strategy of integrating CNM into broader society extends itself to multiple domains: policy, education, clinical practice, and research. Notably, Seth's organizations chose these domains after observing the LGBTQ+ movement's success with similar projects. This suggests a direct and purposeful borrowing from the LGBTQ+ community.

Combatting discrimination was a particular focus for many CNM activists pursuing this mainstreaming strategy. This took the form ensuring legal protections for consensually non-monogamous people. Despite the fact that a small number of cities have recently passed nondiscrimination ordinances protecting practitioners of CNM (Anon 2024a; M. 2023; Spiropoulos 2023), much of this work took place at the level of individual workplaces. Tanner explained,

The workplace advocacy strategy is also another part of [pulling from the LGBTQ+ movement playbook]. In 1990, less than 10% of Fortune 500 companies had policies prohibiting discrimination or harassment on the basis of sexual orientation. And now it's over 90%. And that's a really important strategy because, first of all, we spend a ton of our lives at work, which we're economically dependent on. And the workplace is a very important part of people's identities. And it can be sometimes easier to actually affect

change at that level, compared to the often very slow and politically laborious process of working through municipal or state or federal systems.

Members of Tanner’s organization observed that LGBTQ+ activists were able to enshrine nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation by having corporations explicitly prohibit this in their company policy. In the short term, this is more favorable and much faster than trying to enact change at the local, state, or federal level. Due to the success of this practice for the LGBTQ+ movement, CNM activists are currently working to have companies condemn discrimination against the consensually non-monogamous in their company policy.

If nondiscrimination on the basis of “sexual orientation” is what LGBTQ+ activists pursued, what language are CNM activists encouraging? Maggie, another member of Tanner’s CNM advocacy group, explained the verbiage used in these nondiscrimination addendums to employee handbooks: “One of the things we’re borrowing directly from the LGBTQ movement is this move to have workplaces add family and relationship structure as a protected group in their employee handbooks.” The language her organization uses is not about sexual orientation—or sexual *anything*, for that matter. Instead, the language refers to *family* and *relationship* structure. The specific language used in these nondiscrimination policies uncovers a powerful discursive strategy employed by assimilationist factions of the CNM movement—those of what I call familial libertarianism.

The Most Visible Discursive Strategy: Familial Libertarianism

When discussing their work to protect the consensually non-monogamous, many CNM activists employed discursive strategies that invoked notions of family. Dexter, a lawyer at a CNM advocacy group, worried that using just a discursive strategy of “polyamory” or “consensual non-monogamy” can be limiting, as it may prevent coalition-building with other groups of people who may be interested in similar issues. He explained,

There are ways in which framing things in that lens might lose some of your ability to advocate on issues that extend beyond that particular group. So, for example, when it comes to these restrictive zoning ordinances that often say that unrelated people can't live together, or that only a certain number of people can live together, or that are designed to make it harder for extended families to live together, does it help or hurt to advocate on that issue as somebody who's identifying as consensually non-monogamous? Versus being in coalition with other groups that might be interested in that issue, like single mothers, or people who want to live with parents, or who want to cohabitate with each other, or other kinds of minority groups that would be interested in this issue?

CNM activists are interested in changing restrictive zoning ordinances that enforce mononormativity. However, many recognize that the consensually non-monogamous are not the only people who would want to get rid of these ordinances. Other people who may also be adversely affected by these ordinances are those in family structures alternative to the nuclear family, e.g. single parents, cohabiters, and extended families. Framing the issue as solely a CNM issue runs the risk of alienating potential coalitions, but framing it as a family issue incorporates other marginalized groups. Thus, we begin to see the utility of discursive strategies that invoke notions of family. We also see that CNM activists interested in mainstreaming and assimilation favor broad coalitions and expanding the constituency of the movement.

Activists incorporated language of family into nondiscrimination bills in order to form coalitions with members of non-nuclear families. Tanner explained the rationale behind trying to position “family and relationship structure” as protected classes:

Obviously, “relationship structure” accounts for non-monogamy. “Family structure” not only encompasses multiple partner, multi-parent families; it also reinforces existing protections for LGBTQ folks. And it also accounts for a variety of other non-nuclear family structures, including single parent by choice, multi-generational families, blended families, and so on. So that's one other space that we're working to really build a broader coalition in supporting these bills, such that it's not just non-monogamous people, but we're also accounting for the range of other families and individuals that would benefit from these protections.

Tanner claims that the language of “family structure” was adopted not just to protect consensually non-monogamous people, but a variety of people who exist in non-nuclear family

forms. This language also acts as an additional safeguard for LGBTQ+ families. This once again reiterates assimilationist CNM activists' interest in forming broad coalitions. The discursive strategy of family is particularly salient in the nondiscrimination realm of work performed by these activists.

The “chosen family” is one specific discursive strategy that assimilationist CNM organizations employ. One of the most prominent organizations defending consensually non-monogamous people's legal rights is actually called the Chosen Family Law Center. The New York-based organization details its aims on its website:

The Chosen Family Law Center, Inc. is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to cultivating equitable social and legal recognition of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA) and polyamorous families and individuals, as well as other underserved family forms such as platonic co-parents or multigenerational families; eliminate prejudice and discrimination and defend human, civil, and other rights for these communities; and offering education to lawyers, therapists, and other professionals to enable them to best serve these communities.

The Chosen Family Law Center shares the mainstreaming ethos of other activists' organizations. Their goals involve eroding social and legal barriers to consensually non-monogamous people, as well as providing holistic education to key actors who work with these groups. Of course, they do not only serve the consensually non-monogamous—they also work with other “chosen families” such as platonic co-parents and multigenerational families.

Indeed, the “chosen family” discursive strategy lends itself to broad coalition-building with other groups outside of the heterosexual, married, nuclear family. Consider the Chosen Family Law Center's list of families and communities served on their website:



Figure 1: The Chosen Family Law Center's "Our Families + Communities." Six groups are listed: same-sex parents, platonic co-parents, polyamorous + multi-parent families, trans + gender non-conforming, caretakers of disabled people, and immigrants + asylees.

Consensually non-monogamous families are encapsulated by “polyamorous + multi-parent families,” but that is just one portion of the families served by this organization. The Chosen Family Law Center also supports LGBTQ+ families, as evidenced by their listing of “same-sex parents” and “trans + gender non-conforming.” However, the Chosen Family Law Center forms alliances not only with the LGBTQ+ community, but also with various non-nuclear families: “platonic co-parents, caretakers of disabled people, and immigrants + asylees.” Again, we see that discursive strategies of family are able to encapsulate broad coalitions. An additional strength of the “family” frame is that it invokes positive associations. The Chosen Family Law Center refers to the groups they serve as “families and communities.” By juxtaposing these two terms, they draw upon widely-held positive connotations with the word family.

Commitment is another connotation elicited by the “family” frame that activists invoked.

Consider the Chosen Family Law Center’s definition of family:

Our definition of family is people committed to be there for each other no matter what. This includes chosen family, who have no biological relationship or legal marriage, but create a connection with dedication. Many BIPOC families have chosen aunties and

uncles with no blood relationship, but a decision to stay connected as family and commitment to the children. Many LGBTQ+ people throughout history and today build chosen families when rejected by their biological families of origin, or when wanting families that share their values.

The Chosen Family Law Center expands the definition of family by using the word to encompass any group of people engaging in the core virtues of family: commitment, connection, and dedication. This definition contributes to the assimilation project of many CNM advocacy organizations. They maintain that marginalized groups, from BIPOC families to LGBTQ+ people, also want to exist in units defined by commitment, connection, and dedication. Their definition of family lends itself to the broad coalition-forming characteristic of this faction of the movement, while also asserting that these diverse families are just like yours.

The “chosen family” frame has proliferated. Chosen Family Law Texas is another organization that invokes the virtues associated with family in order to advocate for the consensually non-monogamous and others. Their mission statement reads “build the life you choose with the people you love.” This organization raises another association with family that makes us feel warm inside: love. Even “people whose lives don’t fit in standard forms,” as the website later reads, still want to exist in units that provide family’s fundamental purpose: love.

Notably, the use of the “chosen family” frame sometimes obscures how CNM fits into any of this at all. At first glance of Chosen Family Law Texas’ website, almost nothing immediately jumps out at the viewer as related to CNM. Nevertheless, it appears with a closer look. The organization’s website features a blog providing advice for the consensually non-monogamous, from “living with your poly-pod” to “introducing your marriage to non-monogamy.” Additionally, the organization’s logo features the polyamorous flag. A key feature of the polyamorous flag is a heart. By incorporating this flag into the logo, Chosen Family Law

Texas once again invites us to associate family with love. This is further reiterated by the organization's slogan placed above the flag: "Build the life you want with the ones you love." CNM is clearly not absent from the "chosen family" discursive strategy, but organizations that employ this strategy rely more on appealing to popular positive associations with family, such as love.

In addition to the "chosen family" discursive strategy, some assimilationist CNM organizations employ a "modern family" discursive strategy. This is a similar frame that invites us to define families by their purpose, not their arrangement. Consider the Modern Family Institute's mission statement:

Everyone deserves a healthy family. Yet our modern society is not designed for modern families. Our vision is to create a future where all people have access to a consistent community of care. We believe family should be defined by its purpose rather than its biological or legal structure. This purpose is to provide a consistent network of people who look out for one another, care for each other, share resources together, and love one another.

The "modern family" frame rejects defining a family by biological relation or legal recognition. Instead, it defines families by virtues that all humans deserve: care, love, community, and consistency.

It is not readily obvious from the front page of the Modern Family Institute's website that it has anything to do with CNM. This becomes slightly more apparent after clicking around the website. Blog posts describe partnerships with popular podcasts on polyamory, and some board members' bios mention being involved with the American Psychological Association's Committee on Consensual Non-monogamy. The decision to couch discussions of CNM in rhetoric of family is a deliberate one, as one of the Modern Family Institute's board members explained to me:

My approach to advocacy is being mindful of where we are culturally. People, if they're in stage two, are going to be turned off by stage five messages. ...Right now, I would say that there's an increasing momentum to structure non-monogamy with family. To reclaim, in some ways, the concept of family and how people are structuring their families in increasingly diverse ways. And some of our core strategy is to partner with groups that fall outside of the nuclear family norm. ...There are a lot of shared interests with people who are in blended families, and single parents by choice, and the ace and aromantic communities, for example, that overlap with the interests of the polyamory community. So really, my strategy with the organizations that I am a part of is to build a broad coalition that is inclusive.

The “modern family” discursive strategy is a careful choice that activists have made given the current cultural climate. “Stage five” messaging of mononormativity as a system of oppression may alienate people from the movement, but “stage two” messaging of CNM as another way to structure a family may be more successful. A perceived advantage of this family frame is that it appeals to marginalized groups beyond the consensually non-monogamous. In addition to the non-nuclear family forms that “chosen family” groups identify as allies, asexual and aromantic individuals are another group that this respondent identifies as having similar interests to the CNM movement. Not only is this “modern family” frame perceived to be appropriate for the cultural context, but it also lends itself to the broad coalition-building that assimilationist CNM activists deem so important.

I have demonstrated thus far that many activists in the CNM movement are invested in assimilation. These activists seek to dismantle the legal and social barriers that prevent practitioners of CNM from participating in mainstream society. Rather than employing a discursive strategy of “consensual non-monogamy,” these activists instead often opt for discursive strategies of family. I refer to these discursive strategies of family as familial libertarianism. Familial libertarianism is the idea that families are any unit that provides love and care; that there are multiple valid kinds of families beyond two-parent, married, nuclear ones; and that families should be able to define themselves. As I have demonstrated, familial

libertarians often form coalitions with other groups that exist outside of the typical nuclear family structure, such as single parents, cohabiters, and extended families. Their broad coalition-building is reflective of a “post-gay” ideology that has taken off in sexuality activism, in which sexual minorities seek to draw bridges between themselves and others rather than draw up boundaries between themselves and dominant society (Ghaziani 2011).

The fact that familial libertarian discursive strategies are favored by lawyers and activists pursuing nondiscrimination ordinances makes them particularly visible. It would be tempting to say that the discursive strategies of these activists represent “the CNM movement.” However, it is important not to fall into this trap. Epstein (1998) finds that gay and lesbian activists who pursue a liberal agenda of equal rights and inclusion tend to call themselves “the movement,” when, in reality, it is probably most appropriate to assert that there are multiple gay and lesbian movements. The same can be said of CNM activists. Those who employ familial libertarianism in order to pursue integration in to mainstream society are just one highly prominent faction of a diversity of CNM activists. The next section explores alternative discursive strategies employed by other actors involved in CNM advocacy.

Additional Discursive Strategies: Sexual Libertarianism and Decolonization

Thus far, I have shown that many CNM activists situate their discussion of CNM in rhetoric of family. In doing so, they also de-emphasize the extent to which sex is relevant to their CNM. This is a discursive strategy employed by a visible, prominent faction of CNM activists.

However, there are still other CNM activists who keep sex central to their discursive strategy. Many adopt what Seidman (1992) calls a “sexual libertarian” discursive strategy. This strategy seeks to assert that sex is positive and joyous, and that it can hold multiple meanings beyond showing love and affection within a marital heterosexual context. Sonya, a co-producer

of a large CNM community, employed a sexually libertarian ethic when describing the importance of the events that her group organizes: “This is a valid life choice. And not just for the sex or the pleasure or the hedonism. [But also] play. A lot of what we see is that self-expression and play at our parties is really important. Self-expression, play, celebration, letting off steam, a fantasy. All of those things, I think, are incredibly important.” The value of the sex parties that she co-produces, she argues, are about more than just sex. She contends that sex can be pleasurable and hedonistic, but her parties also unlock other valuable aspects of sex: self-expression, play, celebration, fantasy, and outlet.

Another example of a sexual libertarian discursive strategy is popular CNM guidebook *The Ethical Slut*’s titular “ethical slut” frame. The authors reframe the word “slut” as a positive identifier: “We are proud to reclaim the word *slut* as a term of approval, even endearment. To us, a slut is a person of any gender who celebrates sexuality according to the radical proposition that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you. Sluts may choose to have no sex at all or to get cozy with the Fifth Fleet.” The authors do not shy away from associating their CNM with sex. They assert that sex is positive, and that sluts celebrate sexuality. At the same time, they assert that having a lot of sex is not the only thing an ethical slut does. Some ethical sluts celebrate sexuality without actually choosing to have sex. While the authors emphasize sex, they also maintain that it is not all that CNM (or, as one of the authors told me that she prefers to call it, “sluttery”) is.

The claim that some ethical sluts have no sex while some have a lot echoes the orientation for broad coalitions and a big constituency that more family-focused CNM activists share. Despite the authors of *The Ethical Slut* not shying away from sex in their discursive strategy, they still express “post-gay” sentiments that suggest a desire to draw bridges between

people rather than draw boundaries against a dominant mainstream (Ghaziani 2011). For example, when defining who is an ethical slut, the authors write, “They may be heterosexual, homosexual, asexual, or bisexual, radical activists or peaceful suburbanites.” According to the authors, being an ethical slut knows no sexual nor political orientation. This desire for diversity is amplified in the most recent edition of the book:

In the eight years since the previous edition of *The Ethical Slut* was published, polyamory has become hugely more visible, which means that a very wide variety of people of all races, genders, orientations, and backgrounds are becoming interested in exploring the possibilities of relationships beyond culturally compelled monogamy. In this edition, we have done our best to speak to as wide a range of potential readers as we can. Hence, you’ll find that we’ve given more attention to people of color, asexual and aromantic people, people in their teens and early twenties, people of nonbinary gender, and other groups that too often receive short shrift from sex-positive communities.

In the third edition, the authors of *The Ethical Slut* seek not to alienate anyone on the basis of race, gender, or sexual orientation. They give specific attention to marginalized groups, such as people of color and asexuals and aromantics. Evidently, despite using discursive strategies that prioritize sexual pleasure rather than family, the authors of this book favor inclusivity in a manner similar to those of familial libertarians.

Other organizations that kept sex central to their work also sought large, diverse constituencies. Sonya described the process of trying to diversify the sexual orientation of members of her sex parties:

Gay men would be the obvious choice of, “Oh, you go to sex parties. Come to our sex parties!” But why would they come? Because if there’s not a whole bunch of gay men there, it’s not that interesting [to them]. So, I have been trying to figure out how we get gay men to come to some of our parties, because I would love for all of us to be together. To me, that’s the next edge of how can we all—all sexualities, all genders, all queer spectrum—come together and just be able to be in relational network, sexual connection, or at least even next to each other? How can we all just be together?

Sonya seeks to integrate more gay men into her CNM community's events. She expresses a desire to have "all sexualities" and "all genders" fully connected, or at least physically together.

When I asked why this was important, she responded,

I feel like the gay community has been doing sex-positivity and non-monogamy for a really long time. And I think they probably have things to teach us. ...I think they probably have an ancestral knowledge or group mind that they could transmit to support us as a community, and we would just be stronger if we were all together.

One motivation for her desire for a diverse constituency is to inherit the tactical knowledge that gay men could transfer due to their involvement with the gay and lesbian movement. I have previously discussed that many familial libertarians directly and purposefully borrow from the LGBTQ+ community. Sonya's desires demonstrate that even when some CNM organizations are not borrowing directly from the LGBTQ+ community, they would like to. Regardless of discursive strategy, a large number of organizations in CNM activism seek broad, diverse constituencies, characteristic with a post-gay ethos.

In addition to sharing family organizations' desires for large constituencies, sexual libertarian organizations also shared a focus on nondiscrimination. The National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, not surprisingly, employs a discursive strategy of "sexual freedom." One of the board members explained the organization's goal as "to fight discrimination, and change social services and repressive laws around kink and non-monogamous behaviors." Despite not necessarily rooting their rhetoric in notions of family, NCSF shares more family-oriented organizations' focus on nondiscrimination.

With different discursive strategies come slightly different coalitions. The main group that NCSF sees themselves as serving besides practitioners of CNM is kinky people. Marianne,

one of NCSF's members, explained why these two groups became the organizations' primary communities:

When we first started it, NCSF was for sexual freedom. And it certainly was protecting non-monogamous folks, because there were issues around non-monogamy as well as kink. I came into the BDSM community in New York City in 1991. It was just as non-monogamous as it was kinky. I mean, for us, it kind of was all the same thing. It was the idea that we are not having sex in a traditional way, we're not creating our relationships in a traditional way. We play with our friends, we have multiple partners, we have extended networks. And, so, the non-monogamy and the kink were kind of all together.

For the founders of NCSF, CNM and kink were inextricable. Their essence was summed up by the discursive strategy of "sexual freedom." In contrast to some of the familial libertarian CNM organizations, NCSF asserts that sex is central to their CNM. Moreover, for NCSF, what specifically unites CNM and kink is their difference from—not similarity to—the mainstream. It is that many practitioners of kink and CNM have sex and relationships in a nontraditional way. Marianne reiterated this later in the conversation: "I do think of [CNM] as a movement because it is counter to the mainstream. We're coming out of a mainstream that is very monogamous-focused, and has been for a long time." What makes CNM a movement, to Marianne, is that it is actually *counter* to the mainstream. This stands in contrast to the we're-just-like-you rhetoric of many of the organizations that engage in familial libertarianism.

Aside from kinky people, other groups that NCSF forms coalitions with are organizations against sexual violence. This became apparent when a board member listed NCSF's allies:

There are some LGBTQIA groups in there, and there are harm reduction groups. [There are] these State Coalitions Against Sexual Assault, State Coalitions Against Domestic Violence, those are some of our biggest allies, because we're kind of fighting for the same thing that they're fighting for, which is to stop violence and stop harm from happening. Like many of the familial libertarian organizations, NCSF forms coalitions with LGBTQ+ organizations. However, a sexual libertarian discursive strategy of "sexual freedom" also lends

itself to new coalition partners: organizations that combat sexual assault and domestic violence.

With sex as an explicit part of the discursive strategy, NCSF is able to make itself legible to groups interested in eradicating sexual harm.

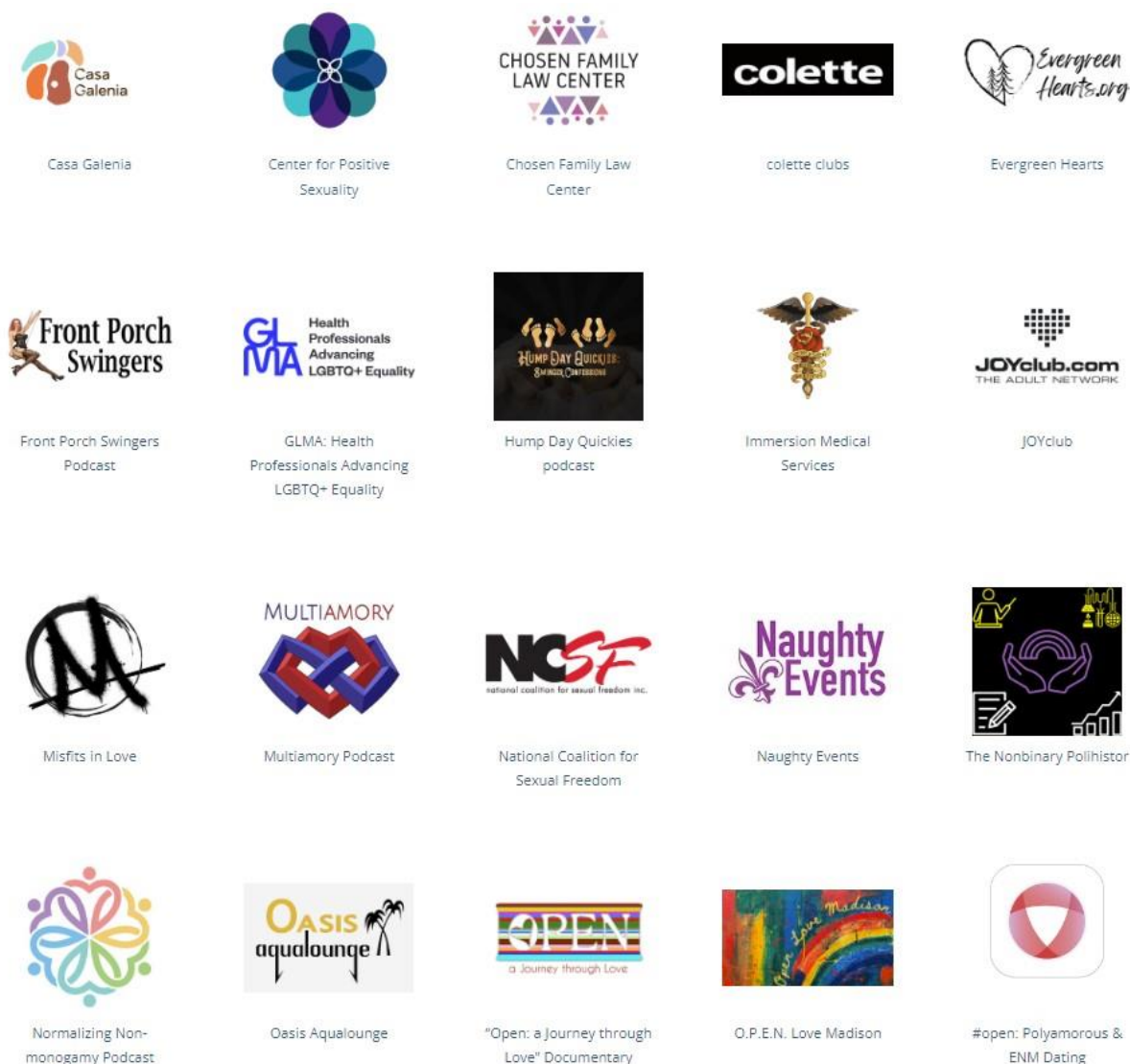


Figure 2: A screenshot of just some of the organizations that support OPEN's Week of Visibility. From left to right, Casa Galenia, Center for Positive Sexuality, Chosen Family Law Center, Colette Clubs, Evergreen Hearts, Front Porch Swingers Podcast, GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ+ Equality, Hump Day Quickies Podcast, Immersion Medical Services, JOYclub, Misfits in Love, Multiamory Podcast, National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, Naughty Events, The Nonbinary Polihistor, Normalizing Non-monogamy Podcast, Oasis Aqualounge, "Open: a Journey through Love" Documentary, O.P.E.N. Love Madison, and #open: Polyamorous and ENM dating.

Sexual libertarian and family-oriented CNM organizations diverge somewhat in the coalitions they form, but there is evidence that their discursive strategies coexist within the CNM movement. For example, the Organization for Polyamory and Ethical Non-monogamy (OPEN), an organization that frequently deploys familial libertarian discursive strategies, lists a wide range of CNM organizations as its partners. These organizations engage in diverse discursive strategies. These listed partners include swinger groups, polyamorous groups, open relationship advocates, sex-positive groups, sexual freedom groups, kink groups, and family law centers. Although OPEN has favored a particularly family-oriented discursive strategy, it does not shun organizations that center sex or kink. Evidently, sexual libertarian and familial libertarian frames are not necessarily inconsistent with each other.

In addition to sexual libertarian and familial libertarian discursive strategies, a smaller number of activists also engaged in discursive strategies of decolonization. An influencer who runs a popular page using this frame explained that her goals were

to raise awareness about the fact that, and educate people on how, non-monogamy as it [exists] now as a mainstream orientation, is a social construct that was globalized by European colonization. And to give people more tools about how to unlearn that, and how to have healthier relationships that aren't based on colonial mentalities.

For this influencer, CNM is not necessarily about the right to a chosen family. It is also not necessarily about sexual pleasure or freedom. It is actually about dismantling settler colonialism.

Even though this influencer's discursive strategy of decolonization is a challenge to the way that CNM is currently practiced, even members of more assimilationist familial libertarian organizations sometimes deployed a postcolonial discursive strategy too. A lawyer at a CNM advocacy organization did so when explaining the importance of his legal advocacy work. He explained that the traditional nuclear family is not actually natural, nor is it rooted in equality:

There was tremendous diversity across the family and relationship structures that you see at the time of the 17th and 18th centuries, when America was first being settled. But the American state had an ideological interest in constructing those alternative family structures as being inferior, barbaric, or uncivilized, compared to American white settler ideals that were centered around a Western interpretation of Christianity that involved the idea of a nuclear family involving a man at the head of the family.

While decolonization is not necessarily the main discursive strategy displayed on this organization's website, this particular member of the organization used a discursive strategy of decolonization when explaining why the organization's goals are important. This is further evidence that the CNM movement engages in a diversity of discursive strategies, and that these strategies can coexist.

In this section, I have introduced discursive strategies alternative to familial libertarianism. Some actors within the movement opt for more sexual libertarian discursive strategies that do not shy away from the centrality of sex to their CNM. A smaller number employ discursive strategies of decolonization. Thus far, I have shown that these discursive strategies can coexist. The post-gay ethos (Ghaziani 2011) of many CNM activists encourages large constituencies and multiple discursive strategies.

However, it is not true that these discursive strategies or factions of the movement are always concordant. The next and final part of the Findings section explores the internal conflict within the CNM activist community that can arise as conflicting discursive strategies vie for legitimacy.

Internal Conflict and Feuding Discursive Strategies

One tension among CNM activists is the conflict over whether the movement should emphasize its similarities to monogamous people and integrate into broader society, versus maintain its difference. These tensions have been amply explored in the context of the gay and lesbian movement (Armstrong 2002; Epstein 1998; Ghaziani et al. 2016; Rimmerman 2008). I

find that similar “sameness and difference tensions” exist in the CNM movement (Ghaziani et al. 2016).

On one hand, some members of the mainstreaming faction of the movement want to fully integrate CNM into the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Seth, a board member of several CNM organizations, had this desire. He explained,

I think it is an interesting question of is non-monogamy different [from LGBTQ+], in the sense of whether we should create separate containers versus integrate non-monogamy into the LGBTQ community. And I'm a big fan of integrating into the LGBTQ community. One, just given the significant overlap, in that the LGBTQ community is three times more likely to engage in consensual non-monogamy than people who identify as straight, and two, I believe that the movement, broadly, is stronger with a large coalition.

The desire to have a large constituency naturally lends itself to the desire to be integrated within the LGBTQ+ community. This desire is reflected by many assimilationist CNM organizations borrowing tactics directly from the LGBTQ+ movement and forming coalitions with LGBTQ+ groups.

While every activist I spoke to was supportive of the LGBTQ+ community, some feared that a full integration into the LGBTQ+ umbrella would be inappropriate and potentially harmful. Marianne at the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom explained to me why borrowing tactics from the LGBTQ+ community may not always work for CNM:

Pride parades have been really important for the LGBT community. ...I think the drag queens, that's great. But when you see kinky people actually, like, flogging each other down the street, that's when you're kind of crossing a line, because then you're actually doing these kinds of erotic, often considered sexual behaviors, in front of kids, right in front of people who haven't consented to that. I love to see kinky people marching in these parades. And I've fought long and hard to get them included and done fundraising. But I do think the thing about doing public displays is that it can backlash on you. People who don't want to see that don't want to see it, and they shouldn't have to. But with non-monogamy, seeing three people walk down the street holding hands, that's not sexual, that's not erotic. That's companionship, that's love. That should be allowed in every instance.

NCSF serves both non-monogamous and kinky people, as the founding of this organization always considered those two communities not to be fully separable. Marianne notes that public displays of visibility do not necessarily lend themselves neatly to all factions of the CNM community, as public kink displays can be inappropriate. Notably, though, she maintains that CNM in and of itself is not erotic. It is only the kind of CNM that is kinky that may not be appropriate for pride parades. Evidently, while CNM activists certainly seek partnerships with LGBTQ+ groups, they disagree to what extent they fit under the LGBTQ+ umbrella.

Another tension within the CNM movement concerns the move to place polyamory at the forefront. On one hand, familial libertarian CNM activists invested in mainstreaming want to assimilate and root their discursive strategies in notions of polyamory and love. Seth explained his decision to rely more on discursive strategies of love and family:

I think that, broadly speaking, every movement has to go through an assimilation phase. ...I think the non-monogamy movement, just like the LGBTQ movement, just like the racial movement, just like the gender movement, has to go through appearing as the polyamorous neighbor next door, and really focusing on messages of assimilation and similarity, before we have enough power to really articulate the differences and the importance of protecting those differences or acknowledging those differences. So, I think it'll be frustrating for a while, and I can understand even how some of the work that I'm doing will be frustrating to perhaps more progressive-leaning groups that want to stand up for our rights. And I would say, "I see you, and I agree, and I want to be there, and I can't wait till we are there."

For Seth, assimilationist discursive strategies are inevitable for any identity movement.

Appearing as the "polyamorous neighbor next door" is a necessary precursor to discursive strategies that are more critical of the mononormative mainstream. His choice to invoke notions of love and family is a deliberate one.

On the other hand, many sexual libertarians do not feel fully represented by discursive strategies of polyamory and love. Some of these activists are cautious of these love-based

discursive strategies, but ultimately find them rational. Sonya, who organizes sex parties for the CNM community, offered her reasoning for why she thinks activists often opt for discursive frames of love rather than sex: “I think it's just easier for people to come out and say it's about love and family, rather than, ‘I like to fuck a lot of people.’ That’s a harder thing to come out to because sex is still very stigmatized and shamed in our society.” While it is not necessarily a discursive strategy that Sonya uses, she understands why some CNM activists would.

Other sexual libertarians were far more critical of these love-based discursive strategies. Leann, the author of a popular CNM guidebook, expressed disapproval of the total de-emphasis of sex that certain activists employ: “It's a bid for public acceptance, but I think it will bite us in the ass in the end and I wish we weren't doing it. I wish that we were acknowledging that sex is part of many of our poly[amorous] lives—probably most of our poly[amorous] lives—but it's certainly not essential.” Rather than discursive strategies that completely obscure the sexual nature of CNM, Leann prefers more sexual libertarian strategies that acknowledge that sex is one part of CNM, but not the only part of CNM.

Marianne at NCSF similarly found polyamory to be an incomplete representation of CNM: “Through the ‘90s, non-monogamy kind of got its voice through the polyamory community, which is really only one subset of the non-monogamy communities. And at one point, [NCSF] clarified, in 2002, that we are for the kink and non-monogamy communities, because there's a lot of other sexual stuff that needs addressing.” To Marianne, polyamorous discursive strategies often omit discussions of sex. However, for NCSF, discursive strategies that do not address the “sexual stuff” cannot adequately help practitioners of CNM. When I asked specifically what “sexual stuff” needs addressing, she elaborated, “Somebody needs to destigmatize sex, because really, that's what it comes down to. ... We will always be the National

Coalition for Sexual Freedom, because until we've battled back that stigma, we're gonna have work to do." Destigmatizing sex is an essential part of NCSF's advocacy that Marianne feels is inadequately addressed by familial libertarian discursive strategies. As some actors within the CNM movement push polyamory to the forefront and root discussions of CNM in family rather than sex, others worry that this move will marginalize forms of CNM for which sex is central.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have used primary data from interviews with 17 key actors in CNM activism and supplemental data from articles and websites about these actors to ask: what tactics and discursive strategies have CNM activists innovated? Many activists deliberately borrow tactics directly from the LGBTQ+ community, namely those that combat discrimination. I also observe a number of discursive strategies, namely those of sexual libertarianism (Seidman 1992)—which argue that sex is positive, joyous, and can hold multiple meanings—and those of what I call familial libertarianism—which argue that families are any unit that provide love and care and that there are multiple valid kinds of families beyond two-parent nuclear families.

One implication of the findings is the importance of critically theorizing intimate relationships, as well as sex, in sexuality studies. Many of the discursive strategies used by the ostensible sexuality activists that I interviewed do not reference sex very much at all. Based on the precedent set by the LGBTQ+ movement, pursuing a nondiscrimination/legal inclusion focus often means taking the sex out of discussions of sexuality. Instead, many CNM activists interested in this mainstreaming focus opt for familial libertarian discursive strategies. This focus on family in sexual politics is relatively new. While the gay and lesbian movement's discursive strategies concerning marriage equality are not necessarily *unrelated* to family, the promotion of familial libertarian discursive strategies such as the "modern" and "chosen" family seems like a

particular innovation of the CNM movement. It of course remains to be seen whether and how this familial libertarianism will reshape existing social patterns and policies on a larger scale. Regardless, this new discursive strategy invites scholars of sexualities to try to expand our theories to make space for a relationship system that, at least in theory, moves beyond systems of sex and gender and mononormativity to focus more broadly on systems of care, intimacy, and ethical engagements. Can we theorize a discipline that studies intimate relationships and captures the constraints of sex, gender, and mononormativity, but also theorizes a way to overcome those constraints? Familial libertarianism may be the first step in that direction.

Another implication of the findings is a new understanding of the link between sexuality and morality. Seidman (1992) has argued that American sexual conflicts have always been between two sides: sexual romantics who assert that sex in a heterosexual marital context is the only moral way to have sex, and sexual libertarians who want to decouple morality from sex altogether. Many CNM activists argue that their sexuality *is* inherently ethical or moral, whether that is due to it being rooted in a mission of providing love, care, and resources as a family, or in a practice of radically open, honest, consensual communication and/or sexual practices. In other words, the discursive strategies employed by CNM activists reveal that sexuality movements can and do make moral arguments about sexuality without being mononormative.

A third implication of the findings is that critically examining the CNM social movement has the power to change our understanding of gender's relationship to both sexuality and family. Not only do many CNM activists de-emphasize sex, but they also de-emphasize gender. Despite the increasing popularity of gender-egalitarian beliefs in U.S. society, popular notions still conceive of "family" as, primarily, the domain of the woman (e.g. Daminger 2019, 2020; Hochschild 1989). Yet, rarely do CNM activists and organizations gender their conversations of

families and parenting. Occasionally, an actor would reference “single mothers” (as opposed to single parents) in a one-on-one conversation with me, but on their websites and in public discourse, almost all organizations refer to “parents and families” rather than “mothers and women.” Additionally, people of all genders engage in CNM activism, and a variety of discursive strategies were employed by people of a variety of genders. Plenty of people who employed sexual libertarian frames identify as women, and plenty of people who employed familial libertarian frames identify as men. With the emergence of the CNM movement perhaps comes the emergence of gender-neutral family frames. If familial libertarian frames continue to gain popularity, it is possible that they may lead to more gender-neutral, and even more gender-egalitarian, popular conceptions of family.

While the research has numerous implications, it also has its limitations. The aims of this chapter are descriptive. I sought to make explicit the tactics and discursive strategies that CNM activists employ. We know less about how these tactics and discursive strategies emerge. There is ample evidence that many of these are the result CNM activists directly borrowing from the LGBTQ+ movement. However, where do new tactics and discursive strategies come from? What are the origins of these familial libertarian frames? Another area for future research is whether or not these tactics and discursive strategies are successful. Due to the relative infancy of some of these tactics and discursive strategies, as well as of the CNM movement at large, it is difficult at this stage to make claims about their success. As the movement evolves, researchers should assess whether these strategies fail or prevail.

It is difficult to say how “well” my sample represents the CNM movement. By design, my sampling methodology is in no way random. Therefore, I am not able to say much about the representativeness of my sample, especially given the relative subjectivity of who exists within

the CNM movement and who exists outside of it. I employed a broad and inclusive definition of “CNM activists,” given the fact that many activists themselves were eager to welcome as many people into the movement as possible. Even if my research does not capture the full range of tactics and discursive strategies employed by CNM activists, it certainly captures a diversity of them.

Another limitation of my interview sample is that it is not particularly racially diverse. Of the 17 activists interviewed, 14 were white. Given CNM activists’ interest in a diverse constituency and one study’s claim that there is no statistically significant difference by race in terms of who practices CNM (Rubin et al. 2014), there is reason to believe that CNM activism is much more racially diverse than what is presented in my sample.

Future research should investigate how race fits into discussions of internal conflict within the CNM movement. Epstein (1998) notes that internal conflict within the gay and lesbian movement often consists of a faction of activists who employ “radical, nonidentitarian politics of difference” by calling attention to internal differences within the movement and asserting that a liberal agenda of civil rights cannot serve all members equally. These critiques often take the form of a proliferation of race-based groups within the movement who call attention to the color-blindness of the larger movement. In my limited sample, I found some evidence of this. Black and Poly is a prominent organization within the CNM activist realm that serves black polyamorous people. While they are well-integrated within the larger CNM activist community (the group receives a shout-out in *American Poly* and *The Ethical Slut*), the existence of a Black and Poly group suggests some attention to internal racial difference within the CNM movement. Influencer page Decolonizing Love even has a post that describes *The Ethical Slut* as “white

feminist.” More research is needed on the extent to which race factors into internal conflict within the CNM movement.

My research takes place at a time when the legal landscape is changing rapidly. At the time of my writing this, nondiscrimination and plural domestic partnership ordinances have only taken off in the last five years (Anon 2021; Anon 2024a; Collings 2021; M. 2023; Spiropoulos 2023; Snyder and Alsharif 2020). These legal changes have occurred as the legal landscape across the United States has become increasingly hostile to LGBTQ+ individuals (Diaz 2022; HRC Foundation 2024). Future research should keep an eye on whether practitioners of CNM become a new target for conservative legislators.

The future of the CNM movement is unclear. Its recent successes with nondiscrimination and domestic partnership ordinances suggest that the assimilationist, familial libertarian faction of the movement will continue in its civil rights crusade. This plan may render more sexual discursive strategies less visible, but they will never disappear. Regardless of the discursive and tactical strategies chosen by the movement, CNM activists’ vision for the future is clear. As long as there are CNM activists, there are people working towards a future in which families are assisted in providing the best care they can, individuals are free to love who they love, and people are safe to engage in pleasurable, respectful sex with as many (or as few!) people as they would like.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have asked how practitioners of CNM define their CNM, confront mononormativity, and legitimate CNM as a social movement.

In the first chapter, I explored how consensual non-monogamists define their CNM. The chapter has four major findings. The first is that, regardless of the type of CNM respondents practiced, the majority of interviewees did not define their CNM solely, or even primarily, by sex. Second, most respondents emphasized the centrality of ethics, consent, honesty, and morality to their CNM. Third, a minority of respondents considered CNM to be an identity, meaning that they saw it as fundamental to their personality. Fourth, and finally, some respondents defined CNM as a means of challenging the monogamous—and often heterosexual—status quo. The findings reshape our understanding of sexuality's connection to morality. They paint CNM as, for many, an emergent way of being both sexual *and* moral. This framing potentially has the power to combat the ways that sexual hegemony has marginalized sexualities in the “outer limits” of the charmed circle (Rubin 2012). The findings also draw attention to the need for a sociology of relationships. People's assertion that emotional intimacy is central to their CNM demonstrates that sociologists of sexualities have not adequately theorized the link between sex and emotionally intimate relationships, be them familial or romantic. In conjunction, the findings move the sociology of sexualities beyond a focus on *with whom* people are in relationships, but also *how* people are in relationships.

In the second chapter, I investigated how mononormativity manifests in consensual non-monogamists' lives. Results indicate that many respondents experienced mononormativity in two forms: anticipated stigma, or expectations that others would treat them poorly, and received stigma, or direct experiences of discrimination. Both stigmas often encouraged respondents to

perform concealment work to hide their CNM. Received stigma interfered with people's relationships, reputations, and careers. Thus, many people were expected to perform monogamy in domains seemingly unrelated to sex and romance. Chapter two reveals that the performance of monogamy is often essential to making interactions run smoothly, even in ostensibly nonsexual domains like the workplace. Indeed, mononormativity is deeply embedded in our institutions. The results echo the assertion of queer theorists that sexual power runs through all facets of life (Gamson and Moon 2004; Stein and Plummer 1996).

In the third chapter, I detailed the tactics and discursive strategies that CNM activists have innovated to mobilize a CNM movement. I found that many activists deliberately borrow their tactics and discursive strategies from the LGBTQ+ movement. A visible faction that I call familial libertarians decouple their CNM from sex by instead rooting CNM in discursive strategies of the “modern” or “chosen” family. Other actors, sexual libertarians, opt for discursive strategies that do not shy away from talking about sex. For the most part, these divergent discursive strategies are able to coexist. However, these feuding discursive strategies sometimes clash, revealing conflict within the movement about the extent to which practitioners of CNM should assimilate to the mononormative mainstream or maintain their difference. The findings of chapter 3 once again demonstrate the need for better theorizing about the link between sexuality and relationships, as many people assert that family is central to their CNM. It also illustrates CNM's power as an explicitly moral sexuality, whether it is rooted in a family that fulfills its duty of providing love and care, or in a sexual practice characterized by radical openness and harm reduction.

Examining these chapters in conjunction reveals additional insights. As Russell et al. (2023:292) astutely note, “at the root of sexual identity has been the dynamic interplay of

sexualities, identities, and stigma.” As I detailed in Chapter 1, CNM is a sexual identity for many. In the spirit of academic analyses of sexual identity that have preceded this one, this dissertation has used CNM as a site to interrogate the relationship between sexuality, identity, and stigma.

The dissertation shows that CNM is not just a personal practice, but often a shared experience. For example, when practitioners of CNM define their CNM, they often define it as a community. Many consensual non-monogamists shared certain values, namely those of consent and open communication. The second chapter shows that practitioners of CNM also share similar experiences of anticipated stigma, or fear of pushback. Less often, many share the experience of direct discrimination in domains such as the workplace. Chapter two also reveals that many practitioners of CNM understand the stigma they face to be the result of monogamous outsiders reducing all CNM to insidious sexual threat. Chapter three demonstrates that CNM is a social movement. CNM is a means for actors with a shared goal to come together and make collective claims on target authorities. Yes, CNM is a personalized agreement only between the parties involved, but it is also a community with shared experiences.

In the first chapter, findings showed that people often do not emphasize sex in their definitions of CNM. In the third chapter, findings showed that many CNM organizations also deemphasize sex in their discursive strategies. The directionality of this is unclear. Is it that activists have decided that not talking about sex is the best path forward, and they have nudged movement constituents to use the same language? Alternatively, is it that the true feelings of the constituents shaped the discursive strategies that activists decided to pursue? It is likely a bit of both. Still, future research should explore the directionality of this relationship.

Despite most respondents not viewing sex as the most relevant aspect of their CNM, their expectations and experiences of stigma were due to the understanding that broader society may flatten their CNM to sexual threat. Despite people describing their CNM as a different way of having a family, or by love and care and honesty, people had experiences of having sexual harassment claims filed against them, or of people cursing them out for being homewreckers. Given the mismatch between consensual non-monogamists' understandings of their CNM as nonsexual and outsiders understanding it as sexually hostile, the discursive strategies of the movement make perfect sense. Sexual libertarian frames, such as those of "sexual freedom," emphasize that consensually non-monogamous sex is actually positive, pleasurable, and not hurting anyone in a consensual adult context. Familial libertarian frames do not root CNM in sex at all, but instead couch CNM in notions of family, love, and care. Both discursive strategies work toward producing a culture that no longer views CNM as sexually dangerous, and, therefore, views CNM in line with how consensual non-monogamists view it themselves.

Throughout the dissertation, we also see that mononormativity reshapes our understanding of the sexual hegemony. We observe realities that analyses devoid of a critical examination of mononormativity might not lead us to expect: straight men fearing slut-shaming, lesbians filing sexual harassment claims against straight men for talking about their partners at work, men turned off by sexual relationships lacking emotional intimacy, and female activists asserting that their CNM is sexual. These surprising findings bring attention to the intersection of mononormativity and gender. How exactly do these systems interact? More intersectional analyses of mononormativity and other systems of oppression is needed. This is especially true when it comes to race, as my sample was predominantly white. Does critically examining mononormativity reshape our understanding of how certain racial groups access sexual power?

The dissertation also details the power and privilege that is often withheld from the consensually non-monogamous. This will likely only be rectified via a combination of legal and social change. In the legal realm, nondiscrimination ordinances based on family and relationship status *and* sexual orientation seem like the best route. Per CNM activists, the implementation of this at the level of workplace handbooks serves as a failsafe until these kinds of laws can be passed at the local, state, and federal levels. Creating a more welcoming social environment will mean challenging our biases. We should not assume that people only have one partner. If, as a monogamous person, you feel that it is appropriate to talk about your relationship in a certain setting, then you should afford that same grace to people who are consensually non-monogamous.

Scholars of sexualities should also challenge their biases. We should expand the study of sexualities to ask different kinds of questions about how people form intimate relationships. How do people even come to be in relationships with people? What do the nature of people's relationships look like? A focus on monogamy, CNM, and mononormativity pushes forward interdisciplinary studies to think about not just sex, but also family, community, and organizing.

When I first endeavored to study CNM, I was surprised that the sociology of sexualities had left it largely untouched. What I did not expect was that studying CNM would force me to rethink how we structure community and family in the United States, and how central monogamy is to our performance in spaces like the workplace. This project has left me in agreement with the queer theorists; sexual power, often in the form of mononormativity, runs through all facets of life.

Appendices

Laypeople Interview Guide

Preamble:

I want to thank you for your time and your willingness to participate in this project. The objective of this project is to understand the experiences of people who are non-monogamous and/or practice any form of consensual non-monogamy. In the interview, I will ask about your relationships, your partners, intimacy, your love life, and dating.

The interview will take about 90 minutes, although I am happy to go longer if you have the time and feel that you have more to say. Your participation in this project is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time.

I will now present you with a consent form. If you have any questions after reading it over, please let me know and I will be happy to answer them.

I will send you a thank you email after this is over that you may reply to, but if you would like to contact me, then you can email me, Mark Griffith, at markgriffith@g.harvard.edu.

I would like to audio-record this interview so that I can transcribe it for my analysis. I will not record any names or identifying information. Do I have your permission to do so? Your identity will remain confidential during all parts of this project.

Before we start, do you have any questions?

Nature of Current Romantic Situation

1. Do you consider yourself to have any partners currently? How many?

- a. If yes: Tell me about them. (One at a time). How did you meet them? Where?
What do you like about them? How different are your partners from each other?
How well do they know each other? Do you consider your relationships with them to be equal? How long have you been with your (each) partner(s)? Do you live with your partner(s)? How often do you see your partner(s)? Are you married or engaged to any of them?
 - b. If no: Are you dating/seeing people? How many people? What does that look like? (Probes: Do you go on dates? Dating apps/websites? Which ones?)
2. (Skip if answer to question 1 was no). Does your relationship have rules/terms? What are they?
 3. How do you feel about your ethical non-monogamy? Is it satisfying to you? What do you like about it? Do you wish there was anything different about it? What labels would you apply to the type of ethical non-monogamy you practice? (Probe: polyamory? Open relationship? Swinging? CNM?) Why do you apply that label to what you practice? What about your non-monogamy is indicative of [type of CNM]?
 4. Has your relationship structure always been this way as long as you've been dating (e.g. polyamorous, open, ethical non-monogamy, etc.)? When did it change? What prompted that change? How did you feel about your past monogamous relationships? Were they satisfying to you? Was there anything particularly limiting or unsatisfying about monogamy specifically? Tell me about it. What was your first introduction to [your type of CNM?] Tell me about it. What drew you to it?

Community – Do you have other ethically non-monogamous people in your network?

1. Do you have other people in your life who practice [your same non-monogamy]? How did you meet those people? What role do they play in your life? Are these the majority of people you choose to interact with?
2. How often would you say that you talk about [polyamory/open relationship/non-monogamy] with other people who practice that? What was the last conversation you had about this? Who was it with? How did it go?
3. Do you feel like a part of a community because of your [type of non-monogamy]? Why or why not? If no, do you want a community? Do you consider yourself an active member of this community? What kind of events do you go to? Do you host or coordinate any events? (Probe: Tell me about that event. What is it like? How many people come? What kinds of people show up? What do you do at these events, typically?)

Stigma

1. Do you talk to anyone who does *not* practice consensual non-monogamy about [your type of CNM]? Who? When was the last time you talked about this with someone who you were not sexually or romantically involved with? What did you say? How did they react?
2. Have you ever faced criticism or pushback because of your [polyamory/open relationships/swinging/non-monogamy]? From whom? Tell me about it. What happened? How did you react? Did you change your behavior at all after this? Does this happen often? In general, how do you deal with any pushback that you receive toward your non-monogamy? (Probe: Cut ties with that person? Try to educate? Ignore it?)
3. Do your coworkers know about your [CNM]? If yes, when/how/why did you tell them? How did they receive it? What did they say? Why do you think they responded that way? If no, why not? Would you ever consider “coming out” at work? Why or why not? How

do you think it would be received? Would there be consequences? Why do you think that?

4. Does your family know about your [CNM]? Do your children know? If yes, when/how/why did you tell them? How did they receive it? What did they say? Why do you think they responded that way? If no, why not? Would you ever consider telling them? Why or why not? How do you think it would be received? Would there be consequences? Why do you think that?
5. Do your friends know about your [CNM]? If yes, when/how/why did you tell them? How did they receive it? What did they say? Why do you think they responded that way? If no, why not? Would you ever consider telling them? Why or why not? How do you think it would be received? Would there be consequences? Why do you think that?
6. Have you ever had to tell someone about your [CNM] when you didn't want to or before you were ready? How come? How did that go? Who did you tell? How did they react? Why do you think they reacted that way?
7. Have you ever lied about your relationship status? How come?
8. In general, would you say you are "out" about practicing [your type of CNM]? Why or why not? If yes, what makes you feel comfortable enough to be open and honest about that? Do you fear pushback? Why or why not? If no, why not? Are you afraid of receiving pushback? From whom? Why? Who does not know about your CNM? In an ideal world, would you be more forthcoming?
9. What are the advantages of being monogamous as opposed to consensually non-monogamous? Are there disadvantages?

10. Can you tell me about specific representation of [your type of non-monogamy] that you've seen in the media (e.g. the news, TV shows, movies, fiction, literature)? How did you feel about it? (If negative) Can you name a positive example that you've seen in the media? (If positive) Can you name a negative example that you've seen in the media? How did you feel about it? (If they can think of any examples at all) What would you say that representation of [your kind of consensual non-monogamy] in the media is like in general? Do you wish there was more representation? Better representation? What would that look like? Do you see that as changing/happening soon?

Challenges

1. Have you ever had to deal with jealousy in [your ethically non-monogamous relationship(s)]? Can you tell me about it? What happened? How did you navigate that? Has it been resolved? What do you think led to that?
2. What is it like to be [male/female/nonbinary/transgender/straight/gay/bisexual/a POC/identifier(s) that fit the respondent] and [polyamorous/in an open relationship/a swinger]? Are there lots of people like you who do your type of CNM? Do you feel like you get a lot of romantic/sexual attention? Not that much attention? What are some of the challenges you've faced being [identifier] and practicing [type of CNM]? What are the advantages?

Sentiments & Future Aspirations

1. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when I say "monogamy?" Why that? How do you feel about monogamy? Do you see that/want that for yourself ever? (If in a relationship) How does your current relationship differ from a monogamous one, if at all?

2. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when I say “polyamory?” Why that? How do you feel about polyamory? Do you see that/want that for yourself ever? (If in a non-poly relationship) How does your current relationship structure differ from polyamory, if at all?
3. (If different from polyamory) What is the first thing that comes to your mind when I say “[your type of non-monogamy]?” Why that? How do you feel about [your type of non-monogamy]? What makes your current relationship structure [that type of non-monogamy]?
4. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when I say “marriage?” Why that? How do you feel about marriage? Do you see that/want that for yourself ever? Why or why not? Do you think that marriage is inconsistent with [your type of CNM?] Why or why not?
5. Are you aware that the cities of Cambridge, Arlington, and Somerville have legalized civil unions between more than two people? How do you feel about that? Do you feel that it is helpful? Is there more that still needs to be done?
6. How do you envision your romantic situation in 15 years? (Probe: Do you think you’ll be married? To whom? Do you ever want to get married? Do you currently have kids? Do you think you’ll have kids in 15 years? Do you ever want to have kids? Do you think having kids is inconsistent with [your type of CNM?] Why or why not?)

Close

1. Ask the respondent to fill out the demographic questionnaire.
2. Turn recorder off and ask for at max 2 referrals.

Activist Interview Guide

Preamble:

I want to thank you for your time and your willingness to participate in this project. The objective of this project is to learn from key actors in consensual non-monogamy advocacy and/or activism.

The interview will take about 60 minutes, although I am happy to go longer if you have the time and feel that you have more to say. Your participation in this project is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time.

I will now present you with a consent form. If you have any questions after reading it over, please let me know and I will be happy to answer them.

I will send you a thank you email after this is over that you may reply to, but if you would like to contact me, then you can email me, Mark Griffith, at markgriffith@g.harvard.edu.

I would like to audio-record this interview so that I can transcribe it for my analysis. I will not record any names or identifying information. Do I have your permission to do so? Your identity will remain confidential during all parts of this project.

Before we start, do you have any questions?

Concerning your activism:

1. What do you consider to be the goals of your activism regarding CNM? (Tailor this question to specific actions of the person/organization that they're a part of. E.g., for author of the book about parenting as a throuple, what were your goals in publishing this book? Or, for someone working at PLAC, what are the goals of PLAC?) Why are those

goals important? What kind of work do you do in service of those goals? How did you come to this work? What are your organization's goals?

2. What do you consider to be the goals of CNM activism at large? Do you think those are important or helpful goals? Why or why not?
3. Do you consider there to be a consensual non-monogamy movement? Why or why not? What evidence is there of a movement (or lack thereof?) (Probe could be to break this into smaller types of CNM if the answer is no – a polyamory movement?). If not, do you wish that there were a CNM movement? What would that look like? If yes, how “recent” do you consider this movement to be? Do you get the sense that it's growing, declining? Why now?
4. What are the challenges of CNM activism? Can you give me an example of a time you were presented with a challenge in this line of work? How did you navigate that challenge?

Relationship with LGBT:

5. Have you tried forming coalitions with other groups? Why or why not? If yes: with whom? Why them? How did that go?
6. What, if anything, do you see as the relationship between the LGBTQ+ movement and the CNM movement? In what ways are the movements similar? In what ways are they different? Are there particular strategies or takeaways from the LGBTQ+ movement that you find particularly helpful for the CNM cause? Why are those helpful? Are there any strategies or takeaways from the LGBTQ+ movement that you find particularly *unhelpful*? Why are those not helpful?

7. Movements often have frames that they use to market their cause to the public. A few examples from the LGBTQ+ movement are “love is love,” or the “born this way” narrative. Does the CNM movement have frames? What are they? If so, do you have a sense of where these came from? Do you find these frames useful? Why or why not? If there are no frames, can you think of what frames might be useful? Why would those be useful?
8. What does the legislation you have been working on look like? What is the recommended language?

Massachusetts:

9. Are you aware that the cities of Cambridge, Arlington, and Somerville, MA have legalized domestic partnerships between more than two people? How do you feel about that? Do you feel that it is helpful? Is there more that still needs to be done? Is the legalization of multiple marriages/marriages involving more than two people something we should be working toward? Why or why not?
10. Are you aware that Massachusetts issued its first three-parent birth certificate in 2021? How do you feel about that? Do you feel that it is helpful? Is there more that still needs to be done?
11. (Mostly for MA activists, and legal scholars) Why do you think that Massachusetts has seen so many legal victories for the CNM cause as opposed to any other place? Do you have a sense of whether people have tried these things in other places? What happened?
12. In my interviews with everyday people who practice CNM, I’ve uncovered a fair amount of interpersonal backlash. Yet, to my knowledge, I haven’t really seen much pushback

against these advances on a legal level or a major anti-CNM campaign. Why do you think that's the case?

What can we do:

13. Should people who practice CNM come out? Why or why not? (probe: some people I've been talking to are afraid of coming out at work – is that one of your goals?)
14. What can people who practice CNM do to further the cause?
15. What can allies do to further the cause?
16. Which people or organizations do you consider to be key actors in CNM activism? Why them? What have they done?
17. Are there other legal advances or setbacks you think that I should be aware of? Is there anything else you'd like me to know about CNM activism?

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What would you say is your gender identity?
2. What are your pronouns?
3. What would you say is your sexual orientation?
4. What is your age?
5. How do you identify racially?
6. What is your religious affiliation, if any?
7. Where are you located?
8. Please select your highest level of education received:
 - a. Less than high school diploma
 - b. High school diploma or equivalent
 - c. Some college, no degree
 - d. Associate degree
 - e. Bachelor's degree
 - f. Master's degree
 - g. Doctorate or professional degree
9. Please select the range that best represents your personal yearly wages:
 - a. Less than \$20,000
 - b. \$20,000 to \$49,999
 - c. \$50,000 to \$74,999
 - d. \$75,000 to \$99,999
 - e. \$100,000 to \$149,999
 - f. \$150,000 or more

g. Prefer not to say.

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