Abstract: The increased media and public curiosity on the topic of consensual non-monogamy (CNM) presents an interesting case, given that these types of relationships are highly stigmatized. In the present review piece, we first situate common themes of benefits that people believe are afforded to them by their CNM relationships within the current state of the literature to provide insight into unique and shared (with monogamy) relationship benefits. This approach helps uncover relationship benefits and theoretical advances for research on CNM by highlighting some of the key features of CNM relationships that people find rewarding, including need fulfillment, variety of activities, and personal growth and development. Second, we discuss common misconceptions about CNM and stigma toward CNM. Finally, we conclude with future directions and recommendations for scholars interested in pursuing research on CNM.

Keywords: consensual non-monogamy, relationship qualities, relationship benefits, stigma

A quick Internet search uncovers numerous media headlines touting the benefits as well as pitfalls of consensual non-monogamy (CNM) – relationships where people involved consensually agree to have more than one concurrent sexual and/or romantic partner. From blogs to landmark outlets (e.g., New York Times, Telegraph, Scientific American), there is an online market of information to fulfill the public’s curiosity about departures from coupledom. In fact, Google searches related to polyamory and open relationships have markedly increased over the past decade in the United States (Moors, 2016). Coinciding with the general public’s interest in seeking more information about CNM, dozens of “how to” guides and scientific books on the topic have emerged within the last few years (Anapol, 2010; Beckett, 2015; Minx, 2014; Ryan & Jethá, 2010; Sheff, 2015; Veaux & Rickert, 2014). It seems safe to assume that people want to know more. Arguably, research interest in CNM has dwindled since the 1980s (Cole & Spanier, 1973; Jenks, 1985); however, there has recently been a resurgence of empirical pursuit (see Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2013; Rubel & Bogaert, 2015, for reviews).

This increased curiosity, especially by the public, is interesting given the robust stigma that surrounds CNM relationships (e.g., Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2013). For example, a recent survey indicated that over one-quarter of people in polyamorous relationships have experienced discrimination based on their relationship status in the past 10 years (Cox, Flinkenstein, & Bergstrand, 2013). For this reason and many others, people in CNM relationships strategically manage to whom they disclose their relationship styles (Nearing, 2000; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010) and, further, some communities who openly practice CNM purposefully remain geographically isolated (Aguilar, 2013). Overall, these experiences reflect a fear of being “out” with one’s relationship style...
and, unfortunately, research on relationship stigma suggests that these fears are not irrational.

In the present review of the CNM literature, we draw on elements of feminist practice and qualitative methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2004; Stewart, 1998) to situate the voices of people engaged in CNM within extant research on CNM, with the goal of identifying trends in the literature and directions for future research. Thus, we asked people engaged in CNM “What are the benefits of consensual non-monogamy?”1 and use these benefits of CNM as a guide to reappraise the growing body of academic inquiry in Western cultures on consensual departures from monogamy. We conceptually mapped relationship benefits that people engaged in CNM believe are afforded to them which provides insight into: (1) unique relationship benefits – features of CNM relationships that are not characteristic of monogamy and vice versa, and (2) shared relationship benefits – common features of both CNM and monogamous relationships.

With this approach, we structure the current review in three parts. First, we review research and theory related to three relationship benefits that were uniquely mentioned by people engaged in CNM: diversified need fulfillment, variety of nonsexual activities, and individual growth and development. In other words, these relationship benefits did not spontaneously emerge in previous research when people in monogamous relationships were asked about the benefits of monogamy (see Conley, Moors, Matsick, et al., 2013). Second, we take a closer look at two relationship benefits, health and morality, that were uniquely mentioned as benefits by people in monogamous relationships. Finally, after synthesizing research on CNM, we provide recommendations and future directions for moving forward with scholarly pursuits in this area. To provide additional context on the framing of this review and to help generate future research directions, Table 1 describes relationship benefits associated with CNM relationships. Of note, the research reviewed in this piece predominantly focuses on scholarship from Western countries (e.g., the United States and the United Kingdom).

What Is Consensual Non-Monogamy?

Romantic and/or sexual relationships can be thought of as agreements or “rules” that all partners decide upon, whether they be explicitly discussed or assumed. Some relationships might be built on the rule that people can have only one sexual and romantic partner – the foundation of contemporary monogamous relationships (see Ziegler, Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Rubin, 2015, for an overview of social and sexual monogamy). However, many variations of rules exist to create other relationship configurations. In CNM relationships, all partners involved make consensual agreements to engage (or not) in concurrent romantic and/or sexual relationships (Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013). CNM can take a variety of forms; for instance, some relationship agreements are characterized by some, but not all, partners engaging in concurrent relationships. Another agreement might involve partners engaging in multiple romantic, but not sexual relationships (or having “rules” that permit which types of sex are permitted with various partners). Regardless of the exact relational configuration, these types of non-monogamy are consensual, whereas sexual infidelity (having more than one partner without consent) is nonconsensual non-monogamy. CNM relationships include (but are not limited to) polyamory, swinging, open relationships, and “monogamish” relationships, and these types of CNM embody different relationship agreements.

Polyamory typically refers to romantic and/or sexual involvement with multiple partners. Emotionally intimate relationships, but not sexual, also fall into this practice (Klesse, 2006; Scherrer, 2010). Although not exhaustive, some common ways polyamorous relationships are configured include one or two “primary” partners (often the focal or longest relationship partner) and other “secondary” partner(s), triads (three people involved with each other), or quads (four involved with each other; Barker, 2005; Munson & Stelboom, 1999; Sheff & Tesene, 2015). Moreover, some polyamorous relationships are not open for everyone, per se, as “polyfidelity” refers to remaining

---

1 To assist in the framing of the present literature review, we asked 175 people currently engaged in CNM to list up to five benefits of their relationship type (for further details see Conley, Moors, Matsick, et al., 2013). Thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was utilized to identify the major and minor benefit themes. The responses were independently coded into nine major themes (and minor themes within each major theme) by the last author and a trained research assistant with an inter-rater reliability of 91%. Major themes that emerged for CNM were compared to themes that emerged for monogamy in Conley, Moors, and colleagues’ (2013) research to identify relationship benefits that were unique to either type of relationship and shared between relationship styles. Of those who provided benefits of CNM, 43% identified as part of a polyamorous relationship, 30% identified as part of an open relationship, 16% identified as part of a swinging relationship, and 11% identified as part of CNM relationships (i.e., without a specific label). On average, participants were 35.41 years old (SD = 10.39) and indicated they were currently romantically and/or sexually involved with 2.49 partners (SD = 1.27). Fifty-eight percent of participants identified as female, 35% identified as male, and 7% identified as trans, nonbinary, or gender queer. Nearly half of the sample identified as bisexual (46%), followed by 32% heterosexual/straight, 18% pansexual/omnisexual/queer, and 5% gay or lesbian.
Table 1. What are the benefits of consensual non-monogamy? Percentages of major and minor themes that emerged

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major themes</th>
<th>% of major themes mentioned</th>
<th>Example responses</th>
<th>Minor themes</th>
<th>% of minor theme mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DIVERSIFIED NEED</strong></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>“Getting different mental/emotional/physical needs met”</td>
<td>More people to meet needs (and more of own needs met)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FULFILLMENT</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Spreading the burden of having my and my partners’ needs met”</td>
<td>Decreased pressure to meet all needs (of partner)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not expecting one partner to be ‘everything’ to me”</td>
<td>Satisfaction (because of multiple partners)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“More satisfied because of multiple people meeting many needs”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACTIVITY VARIETY</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>“Variety of everyday activities”</td>
<td>More activities and variety</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(NONSEXUAL)</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Having partners for various non-sexual activities that a primary partner might not enjoy”</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Always something fun to do with partners, like date nights and movies”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PERSONAL GROWTH/DEVELOPMENT</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>“Freedom from restrictions”</td>
<td>Autonomy/freedom</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Self-growth”</td>
<td>Introspection</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I can express my full range of sexuality - not possible when monogamous”</td>
<td>Ability to explore connections with same-gender/queer partners</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FAMILY/COMMUNITY BENEFITS</strong></td>
<td>45</td>
<td>“Being part of a big, happy, close-knit chosen family”</td>
<td>Large social network (family and friendship)</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Strong friendship network”</td>
<td>Increased/shared financial resources</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Improved financial stability for all partners if all contribute to the household”</td>
<td>Shared household/parenting responsibilities</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Co-parenting”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TRUST</strong></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>“Complete trust. (I know my partner isn’t going to cheat on me because if he calls me first I’ll say ok)”</td>
<td>Honesty/no deception</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“True honesty”</td>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Encourages greater openness”</td>
<td>Compersion (conceptualized as opposite of jealousy)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Compersion (joy of seeing partners fall in love with someone else)”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SEX</strong></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>“More variety to sex”</td>
<td>Increased variety of sex/experimentation</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Better sex”</td>
<td>Better/great sex</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“More sex”</td>
<td>High frequency of sex</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LOVE</strong></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>“Grown closer to my partner and love him more because of our [consensual non-monogamous] relationship”</td>
<td>Experience greater amounts/depth of love</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“More love”</td>
<td>Able to love multiple people/not having to “choose”</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Not having to break up with someone when you fall in love with someone else”</td>
<td>Open/honest communication</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Open communication”</td>
<td>More opinions/perspectives</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Relationships must be more conscious and well-communicated, which makes them stronger”</td>
<td>Enhances communication skills</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Different perspectives are valuable when you need someone to talk to”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Develop better communication skills”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMMUNICATION</strong></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>“Web of emotional support”</td>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“A strong and secure relationship not marred by fears of infidelity”</td>
<td>Security/stability</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Not relying solely on one person, committed to many”</td>
<td>Can depend on multiple people</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. The major themes are ordered by percentage mentioned by participants, beginning with the item that was most frequently mentioned by participants, separated by benefits that were unique to consensual non-monogamy and shared with monogamy.
faithful to a specific multi-person relationship. Co-marital sex, popularly known as swinging, refers to couples exchanging partners or engaging in group sex (Buunk & van Driel, 1989; Jenks, 1985). This type of relationship typically involves sexual (not emotional) activities outside a primary relationship; although, long-term friendships and, sometimes, romantic relationships with other couples are formed (Kimberly & Hans, 2015). Open relationships are often presented in the literature as the overarching term for non-monogamy (e.g., Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986). However, the meaning of this relationship appears to be flexible (although the focus is typically on independent sexual, not romantic relationships, as opposed to swinging relationships which involve partners mutually seeking out other relationships together). Similarly, the term “monogamish” was more recently made popular by sex columnist, Dan Savage, to refer to people who are mostly monogamous (adhering to social monogamy), but have permeable sexual relationship boundaries (e.g., engagement in threesomes; Savage, 2012). Thus, there is a great diversity of relationship agreements among partners who consensually depart from monogamy.2 Throughout this review, we tend to focus on CNM relationships collectively; however, we note when we discuss a specific type of relationship agreement.

Engagement in CNM relationships appears to be relatively common. Utilizing two separate national samples of single adults in the US (a total of 8,718 people), Haupert, Gesselman, Moors, Fisher, and Garcia (2016) found that approximately one in five Americans has previously been a part of a CNM relationship at some point during their lifetime. In terms of current engagement, Rubin, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, and Conley (2014) used convenience sampling techniques to ask 2,876 people in North America to report on either behavior-related or identity-related relationship status items. Averaging across both samples, 5.3% of participants indicated they were currently part of a CNM relationship (Rubin et al., 2014). Importantly, both of these large-scale studies did not recruit people on the basis of previous or current engagement in CNM (i.e., participants were unaware of the research questions at hand). Men and sexual minorities were more likely to report previous and current engagement in CNM (compared to women and heterosexual individuals, respectively; Haupert et al., 2016; Rubin et al., 2014). Moreover, no differences in previous engagement in CNM emerged based on race/ethnicity, age, education level, income, religion, geographic region, or political affiliation (Haupert et al., 2016). Thus, not only is CNM commonly practiced but is practiced by a variety of people. At the same time, other researchers (albeit small samples sizes often acquired with targeted CNM recruitment techniques) have noted that people engaged in CNM (in particular, polyamory) tend to be upper-class, white, and highly educated (e.g., Klesse, 2014; Sheff & Hammers, 2011; Wosick-Correa, 2010).

Are Relationship Benefits Uniquely Mentioned by People Engaged in CNM?

Inquiries about the benefits of relationship type tap into which features of relationships are most salient and desirable and, perhaps, fuel people’s motivation for engaging in particular types of relationships. It is not to say that benefits mentioned by people engaged in CNM about their particular romantic and/or sexual arrangement are only experienced in CNM (and the same logic for the perceived benefits of monogamy). But, answers to this question provide insight into important and common benefits that people believe are afforded by being a part of a CNM relationship. In this section, we discuss three relationship benefits that uniquely characterize CNM: need fulfillment, variety of nonsexual activities, and personal growth and development. That is, these common relationship benefits were spontaneously mentioned by people who are currently in a CNM relationship (i.e., major themes that did not emerge in previous research on benefits of monogamy; Conley, Moors, Matsick, et al., 2013) and acts as a framework for understanding features of CNM.

Need Fulfillment

People in CNM relationships see their relationship structure as allowing them to meet a wide variety of their needs—a benefit that was one of the most commonly mentioned. Thus, people engaged in CNM see multiple romantic and/or sexual partners as a way to help displace needs that would typically be met (or not met) by one person in a monogamous relationship; often, directly relating this benefit to increased relationship satisfaction. The importance of the fulfillment of interpersonal needs from close relationships is central to numerous psychological frameworks, including attachment theory, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory, and interdependence theory. These frameworks identify a diverse set of human needs (many are overlapping), such as belonging, security,
self-worth, autonomy, intimacy, and competence—and fulfillment of these needs is linked with well-being and relationship quality (e.g., Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000). Despite the centrality of need fulfillment in interpersonal psychological theories, few studies have applied these frameworks to people who reject the cultural ideal of having one romantic partner meet their needs. Hence, understanding relationship processes among people engaged in CNM is an interesting and underexplored theoretical endeavor.

Need fulfillment may be particularly salient for people engaged in CNM because Western cultural norms perpetuate the lofty expectation that one romantic partner should meet most of an individual’s needs (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014). Drawing on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Finkel and colleagues (2014) argue that people in contemporary American (monogamous) marriages are asking too much of their partners—to fulfill physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs—and, in turn, metaphorically suffocating them. Finkel and colleagues make a compelling argument that there has been a shift away from helping partners meet lower level needs (physiological and safety) to an emphasis on higher altitude needs (esteem and self-actualization). However, Americans appear to be investing less time and effort in their relationships than in previous eras, thus are not able to meet these higher level needs (Finkel et al., 2014). Finkel and colleagues suggest that, while controversial, CNM may be one avenue to achieve need fulfillment and help alleviate this suffocation dilemma. Extending their proposal, Conley and Moors (2014) suggest ways in which adopting tenets of CNM could improve monogamous relationships over time, including increasing social capital, household organization, communication, and management of attraction to others. Overall, the dispersion of needs across various people in one’s life may help alleviate the suffocation that can occur in monogamous relationships.

But, how does having needs fulfilled by multiple partners impact relationship quality? Mitchell, Bartholomew, and Cobb (2014) proposed three ways in which having needs fulfilled by two partners could impact relational quality in relationships with multiple partners. First, having multiple partners can help people achieve greater need fulfillment and, in turn, enhance relationship quality in all relationships (an additive effect). Second, people could compare how well their partners are meeting their needs; thus, if one partner is meeting their needs and another is not to the same extent, then the higher need fulfillment in the one relationship could be linked with lower relational quality in the other relationship (a contrast effect). Finally, if needs are not being met by one partner then another partner can meet those needs, ultimately compensating for presumably low relationship satisfaction and commitment with the partner who is not meeting the desired needs (a compensation effect).

In a study of 1,093 people in polyamorous relationships, Mitchell and colleagues (2014) tested how having needs met by two concurrent partners affects relational quality. Drawing on interpersonal relationship frameworks, they investigated a multitude of needs—autonomy, closeness, emotional support, security, self-esteem, self-expansion, and sexual fulfillment—and how meeting these needs with a given partner impacts relationship satisfaction and commitment in both romantic relationships. Interestingly, there was no support for an additive or compensation effect of partners: the extent to which one partner met someone’s needs was unrelated to satisfaction or commitment with another partner (inconsistent with an additive effect) and need fulfillment across the seven needs assessed were consistently high with both partners of the participant (compensation was not taking place because people were fulfilled by both partners). Mitchell and colleagues found some evidence to support a contrast effect; specifically, need fulfillment in one partner was linked with lower relationship satisfaction (but unrelated to commitment) with the other partner (this only accounted for 1% of the variance; thus, this support for a contrast effect is not particularly meaningful). These findings suggest that a relationship with one partner tends to function relatively independently of a relationship with another partner, as both relationships were considered fulfilling as well as satisfying (essentially without influencing each other). That is, it does not appear that people engage in polyamory because of low need fulfillment with their primary partners, as a given relationship did not have a strong positive or negative effect on the other relationship.

Taken together, people engaged in CNM perceive their relationship arrangement as affording them the ability to have a variety of their needs met. Contrary to stereotypes about CNM, it does not appear that people engage in polyamory because of low need fulfillment with their primary partners (Mitchell et al., 2014). Although need fulfillment is central to many contemporary psychological theories, understanding how CNM operates within these frameworks is relatively unexplored. Another area for research is translating core principles of CNM (e.g., jealousy management, communication) to understand whether they help people in monogamous relationships experiencing relational issues reorganize how (and from who) people can meet their needs (see Conley & Moors, 2014).

**Variety of Non-Sexual Activities**

People who engage in CNM are often stereotyped as sexually promiscuous and hedonistic (e.g., Conley, Moors, Matsick, et al., 2013). However, these depictions run
contrary to the notion that CNM affords people a variety of nonsexual activities with their partners, a relationship benefit that was far more commonly mentioned than sexual-related benefits. Thus, people see CNM as providing ample opportunities for social interactions, new experiences, fun, and engagement in a wide variety of activities. Whether CNM provides greater opportunities for social bonding and enjoyment than monogamy remains an empirical question; however, recent research supports the idea that those engaged in CNM embrace the nonsexual activities that are involved in their relationships.

Perhaps, this benefit is particularly salient for people engaged in CNM because they may not be experiencing dyadic withdrawal. For instance, research on people in monogamous relationships has shown that as a couple progresses toward living together (and becoming more committed), they tend to withdraw from their social networks (M. P. Johnson & Leslie, 1982; Kalmijn, 2003). It is unclear whether this phenomenon also happens among people who engage in CNM (this remains an empirical question). However, given the priority placed on multiple sexual and/or romantic partners, those engaged in CNM may experience a greater variety of activities (as usually found in one’s social network), especially when one partner does not share a particular hobby or interest, but another partner does. While this can happen with friends in monogamous relationships, CNM relationships may experience greater flexibility regarding whom a partner can spend time with and the type of activities they can engage in. Having multiple partners also affords people with many opportunities to be physical with one another, even in nonsexual ways. For example, members of egalitarian communal living spaces (many of whom engage in CNM) report that they enjoy physical (but not explicitly sexual) touch and other displays of belongingness, such as hugging or signs of affection (Aguilar, 2013). In fact, Aguilar (2013) suggested that this physical closeness involved in nonsexual activities might be one of many reasons why people pursue polyamorous relationships over monogamous relationships.

Considering nonsexual elements of fun or satisfaction with life provides an interesting context to think about romantic relationships. We are unaware of research related to CNM that specifically addresses these benefits, although, previous research suggests that, at least for swingers, greater perceived excitement may be the case. When asked “is life exciting or dull?,” over three-quarters of people engaged in swinging indicated their life was “exciting” compared to fewer than half of people in a national survey sample (in the US) who were presumably monogamous (Bergstrand & Sinski, 2010). This finding coincides with how people generally perceive swingers (i.e., compared to other forms of CNM, swingers are perceived as more adventurous and more open to new experiences; Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, & Rubin, 2014), suggesting that people’s perceptions of CNM, or of swingers more specifically, acknowledge that these relationships provide fun for those involved.

The emergence of this unique benefit offers a new way of thinking about the advantages of CNM in nonsexual terms. As we will discuss in another section of this review, there are sexual benefits associated with CNM and monogamy; however, the emphasis on nonsexual activities and intimacy only emerged in perceptions of CNM. Future researchers should address this aspect of CNM relationship to understand how the nonsexual intimacy of these relationships may be linked to relationship quality. That is, does engaging in nonsexual touch with more than one partner provide psychological and/or relationship benefits? How does this benefit contribute to people’s preference for and well-being in CNM relationships?

**Individual Growth and Development**

Another relationship benefit unique to CNM that emerged was individual growth and development. This resonates with conceptual arguments made decades ago in the relationship literature (e.g., O’Neill & O’Neill, 1972; Peabody, 1982). Peabody (1982) posited that the building blocks of CNM relationships, including privacy, honest communication, equality of power, trust, and separate identities, promote both personal and interpersonal growth than possible in monogamous relationships. Early qualitative research on open marriages found that people perceive their relationship as affording them a feeling of freedom combined with security – a benefit that they could not achieve with monogamy (Knapp, 1976). In recent ethnographic research, individual growth and development continue to emerge as reasons people desire to engage in CNM as well as outcomes of this relationship arrangement (Aguilar, 2013; Sheff, 2015).

Similar to the concept of need fulfillment, personal growth and autonomy (also commonly mentioned as a benefit of CNM) are defining features of developmental as well as interpersonal psychological frameworks, including implicit theories of relationships, self-expansion theory, and self-determination theory. Together, these frameworks underscore the importance of personal growth and autonomy as motivators to expand, adopt coping strategies, and engage in honest communication within close relationships. However, research in theoretical application to CNM is scant. The psychological construct of autonomy in close relationship contexts is intertwined with need fulfillment (autonomy can be viewed as a need to be fulfilled). As mentioned previously, people who practice polyamory
reported high levels of autonomy with their primary partner and other significant partners (means of 8.27 and 8.26 on a 9-point scale, respectively; Mitchell et al., 2014). Thus, indicating that those who practice polyamory have partners who support and respect their independence and autonomy (and this is linked with relational quality). When asked to compare whether personal freedom is more important in marriage than companionship, relatively few people in swinging and monogamous relationships in the US strongly endorsed this sentiment (Bergstrand & Sinski, 2010). Thus, it does not appear that people in swinging relationships desire personal freedom over companionship any more than people in monogamous relationships.

But, how is personal growth, including freedom and autonomy, developed within a broader mononormative culture? Entering a CNM relationship does not simply absolve people of their beliefs about how to have a relationship. Instead, reconciling newly adopted beliefs of CNM with beliefs about monogamy takes a great deal of processing and ideological work. For instance, members of communal living spaces (that promote the practice of CNM) have regular support meetings to discuss overcoming possessiveness and jealousy (referred to as the “dominate culture hangover”; Aguilar, 2015). Members willingly engage in these discussions, believing that “personal growth” is rewarding (Aguilar, 2013). Related, scholars have mapped distinct stages of adjustment for people who practice swinging, indicating that personal growth and developing autonomy is an important component throughout this developmental trajectory (Bergstrand & Sinski, 2010; Butler, 1979). People who are new to swinging often go through a curiosity stage, where breaking the boundaries of monogamy elicits feelings of adventure as well as personal and sexual freedom. Moving into the individuation stage, people begin to view themselves and others as unique individuals and reevaluate for each other’s individuality. Moreover, in this stage, noticeable personal and interpersonal change happens, including deconstructing and resolving shame regarding sex and sex role stereotypes (Bergstrand & Sinski, 2010). Promoting freedom and autonomy is also evident from the ways in which people discuss their CNM agreements. When asked about their relationship negotiations, over one-third (39%) of people engaged in polyamorous relationships indicated resistance to terms, such as “allow,” “restrict,” or “rules,” that signified that they might have control over their partners (Wosick-Correa, 2010).

In a similar vein, research on CNM that draws feminist and queer scholarship unearths the importance of personal growth as well as a resistance to cultural ideals of (compulsory) heterosexual monogamous marriage (e.g., Barker, 2005; Cascais & Cardoso, 2012; Jackson & Scott, 2004; Klesse, 2006; Moors & Schechinger, 2014; Rosa, 1994; Wilkinson, 2010; Ziegler, Matsick, Moors, Rubin, & Conley, 2014). People who practice CNM are actively engaging with and resisting gender, sexuality, and relationship normative standards. In a critical review of how endorsement of monogamy may negatively impact women, Ziegler and colleagues (2014) argue that the broader culture entangles women’s selfhood with being part of a monogamous relationship, and this conflation justifies supporting jealous behaviors toward women as well as restricting women’s autonomy. That is, jealousy has been socially constructed to represent sexual ownership, which serves to maintain women’s emotional (and even financial) dependence on men (Rosa, 1994). Thus, the structure of monogamy may make it difficult for women to question normative scripts (reinforcing a patriarchal system), whereas the lack of traditional relationship scripts within CNM may be conducive to challenging of gender norms embedded within relationships (Rosa, 1994; Ziegler et al., 2014). Similarly, Robinson (1997) argues that the institution of monogamy has not served the best interests of women; specifically, “it privileges the interests of both men and capitalism, operating as it does through the mechanisms of exclusivity, possessiveness and jealousy, all filtered through the rose-tinted lens of romance” (p. 144; also see Ritchie & Barker, 2007). Cultural ideals of heterosexual monogamous marriage also influence the ways in which gay men form romantic relationships, as some men (especially younger men) conform to these ideals that may not best fit their or their partner’s preferences (van Eeden-Moorefield, Malloy, & Benson, 2016). Although CNM relationships can provide a space for resistance, Cascais and Cardoso (2012) found that during the initial stages of moving from monogamy to CNM (particularly polyamory), patriarchal reasoning (e.g., words marking ownership or power differentials) is often still present when people are describing their new relationship(s).

Finally, the notion that CNM provides people with the ability to explore emotional and/or sexual connection with same-gender/queer partners is an important benefit to highlight. CNM relationships appear to provide a space for some people to move beyond polarizing dichotomies of sexuality and gender through creating a relationship context that promotes fluid sexual expression (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995). This benefit is also reflected by the finding that sexual minorities are more likely to have engaged in CNM than heterosexuals (Haupert et al., 2016). In sum, there are relationship characteristics that uniquely emerged as benefits of CNM, including need fulfillment, variety of nonsexual activities, and personal growth. These benefits reflect recent findings and empirical pursuits in the literature on various aspects of CNM relationships (e.g., interrogating how needs are met and evaluated by individuals who have more than
one relationship partner). Next, we discuss two themes that uniquely emerge in research as perceived benefits of monogamy.

Are There Relationship Benefits That Uniquely Emerged for Monogamy?

Two themes, health and morality, emerged in previous research as benefits of monogamy (see Table 1 in Conley, Moors, Matsick, et al., 2013) that were not associated with CNM. In this section, we highlight misconceptions about how specific relationship styles relate to health—including the notion that monogamy is a safe haven for sexual health while CNM harms sexual health. Further, because monogamy is believed to afford morality, we review research that indicates that the absence of a monogamous agreement is deemed immoral. The research on morality is then used as a backdrop for reviewing research on stigma toward CNM, including the ways in which individuals may differ in their perceptions and desire to engage in CNM.

Are People in CNM or Monogamous Relationships Sexually “Healthier”?

On the one hand, people tend to view monogamy as a safe haven for sexual health, specifically 69% mention that monogamy affords protection from sexually transmitted infections (STIs; Conley, Moors, Matsick, et al., 2013). People also believe that those who practice CNM are more likely to spread STIs (compared to people in monogamous relationships; Conley, Moors, Matsick, et al., 2013; Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Rubin, & Conley, 2013). On the other hand, one-quarter (or more) of adults report having been sexually unfaithful to their monogamous partner (Lehmiller, 2015; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010; Swan & Thompson, 2016). Thus, it appears that the sexual fidelity ideals of monogamy are challenging for many people to live up to.

Monogamy can be conceptualized as a safer sex strategy; however, this approach is effective insofar as both partners test negative for STIs at the start of the relationship and remain sexually faithful. In fact, a content analysis of state-level public health websites found that the messages these websites convey overwhelming focus on sexual exclusivity (often second to abstinence) with one partner as an effective strategy to prevent the spread of HIV/STIs (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2015). In contrast to having sexual contact with only one person (when monogamy agreements are upheld), CNM could add an additional layer of sexual risk, given that people in these relationships often have multiple concurrent sexual partners. However, safer sex practices seem to be a priority for people in CNM relationships. Among people who practice polyamory, the overwhelming majority (91%) reported explicit rules regarding safer sex, including routine testing for all involved (especially prior to a new partner) and consistently using barrier methods (Wosick-Correa, 2010). Whereas the common trajectory for partners in monogamous relationships includes the eventual stopping of condom use as the relationship progresses, which is a signal of relationship commitment and intimacy (Corbett, Dickson-Gómez, Hilario, & Weeks, 2009; Manlove et al., 2011).

When looking at the safer sex practices among sexually unfaithful individuals in monogamous relationships and individuals in CNM relationships a clear pattern emerges: those who practice CNM engage in safer sex practices than people who are sexually unfaithful in monogamous relationships (Conley, Moors, Ziegler, & Karathanasis, 2012; Conley, Moors, Ziegler, Matsick, & Rubin, 2013; Swan & Thompson, 2016). Specifically, individuals engaged in CNM were more likely than sexually unfaithful individuals to use condoms (for anal and vaginal sex) and implement other barriers (e.g., cover sex toys) with their primary partner and with their most recent extra-dyadic partner (Conley et al., 2012). In sexual encounters with extra-dyadic partners, individuals in CNM relationships were also more likely than sexually unfaithful individuals to discuss STI testing history and tell their primary partner about the sexual encounter (Conley et al., 2012). Drawing on the Centers for Disease Control’s recommendations for correct condom use, research has also found that people engaged in CNM relationships were less likely to make condom use mistakes (e.g., putting the condom on the wrong way) than sexually unfaithful individuals in monogamous relationships (Conley, Moors, Ziegler, et al., 2013). Moreover, despite reporting a greater lifetime number of sexual partners, people in CNM relationships reported similar rates of STI diagnoses (e.g., chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, HIV) as people in monogamous relationships (Lehmiller, 2015).

Taken together, beliefs that monogamy minimizes sexual risk appear to jeopardize people’s sexual health. People who practice monogamy but are sexually unfaithful to their partners (and those who remain sexually faithful) use protection less often and less appropriately. People tend to label a relationship as monogamous—even when sexual infidelity is present—because they associate monogamy with emotional attachment rather than a sexual fidelity attachment (Swan & Thompson, 2016). That is, the way in which people perceive and practice monogamy is a protective fallacy, as this type of relationship does not shield the risk of STIs (Swan & Thompson, 2016).
Promoting monogamy as an effective safer sex strategy does not appear to curb the spread of STIs as intended by public health officials; instead, this strategy may be an irresponsible public health message (see Conley, Matsick, Moors, Ziegler, & Rubin, 2015; for further discussion). It is not to say that CNM relationships are the solution to halting the spread of STIs, but principles of explicit negotiation and transparent conversations about sexual health (key components of CNM) are avenues future researchers should further explore.

What Do People Think of Consensual Non-Monogamy?

Normative behaviors, especially in the context of sexuality, often reflect what people deem morally appropriate (and, intertwined with religious views). Morality in psychology is popularly thought of as five aspects that drive moral cognition, including care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity (Moral Foundations Theory; Graham et al., 2013). Perceptions of purity (religious notions of living in a noble way) are strongly associated with moral attitudes toward nonnormative sexual behaviors (e.g., same-sex sexuality; Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). Although this framework has not been applied to understand moral reasoning that drives stigma toward CNM, people’s responses regarding morality as a benefit of monogamy seem to illustrate this point (e.g., “maintaining a higher moral standard...” and “fulfilling God’s design for the world”; Conley, Moors, Matsick, et al., 2013, p. 10). Moreover, recent experimental research uncovered that the cultural priority placed on monogamy is part of an ideology structure – the committed relationship ideology – in which many are motivated to defend (Day, 2016; Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier, 2011; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). This ideology consists of beliefs that monogamous relationships are enduring, most people wish to couple, and that the committed relationship is the most important relationship (also see Rich, 1980; G. Rubin, 1984, for feminist and queer theoretical advances). Endorsement of monogamy reinforces the committed relationship ideology and serves to promote order and stability within a larger sociopolitical system. Taken together, it seems reasonable that people’s perceptions of monogamy as providing a moral way of having a relationship will simultaneously deem departures from monogamy as immoral.

In the first series of experimental studies to understand whether people perceive a specific type of relationship as optimal, Conley, Moors, Matsick, and colleagues (2013) asked people to rate their perceptions of (hypothetical) people engaged in a monogamous or CNM relationship. A halo effect was captured: people in monogamous relationships were perceived as better (with notably large effect sizes) on over 20 traits related to relationship quality, interpersonal skills, health, morality, and arbitrary dimensions (i.e., characteristics unrelated to romantic relationships) than people in CNM relationships. In other words, monogamy and the people who practice it are perceived positively (as if a halo was surrounding them) and the reverse occurred for CNM and its practitioners (known as the devil effect). This cognitive bias was even found among people engaged in CNM, illustrating an effect of system justification (i.e., people hold favorable attitudes toward large social systems, such as monogamy, even when they do not directly benefit from the system; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

Even in circumstances when people in CNM were portrayed as happy and satisfied with their relationship, they were still stigmatized (Moors et al., 2013). This stigma was also unilaterally placed upon people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender (Moors et al., 2015), indicating that people believe CNM is a less acceptable practice than monogamy. People also have an implicit hierarchy for which type of CNM is “the best.” Relationships where the focus is on love (polyamory) were perceived as more moral and family-oriented than relationships where the focus tends to be on sex (swinging and open relationships; Matsick et al., 2014). Specifically, people engaged in swinging received the brunt of the stigma (as compared to people in polyamorous and open relationships), suggesting that sex should not occur in the absence of any emotional attachment (as in the case of swinging).

Subsequent research on perceptions of relationship arrangements paints a similarly grim profile of people who practice CNM. People in monogamous relationships are perceived as possessing greater relationship satisfaction, morality, and cognitive abilities (akin to arbitrary traits) than those in polyamorous, open, and swinging relationships (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016). However, when people are asked to compare practitioners of polyamory in relation to those of monogamy, some positive findings emerged (Hutzler, Giuliano, Herselman, & Johnson, 2016). People engaged in polyamory were perceived as better communicators, more extraverted, and higher in physical attractiveness (when the scale was anchored in comparison to people engaged in monogamy; Hutzler et al., 2016). Despite the few positive perceptions that emerged, stigma toward people engaged in polyamory on dimensions of relationship quality, morality, trustworthiness, and unsafe sexual practices was replicated (Hutzler et al., 2016).

In addition to comparing perceptions of CNM to monogamy, some research has examined how CNM relationships compare to sexually unfaithful relationships. When examining how people perceive someone in a
monogamous relationship who wants to pursue a polyamorous relationship, love affair, or casual sexual fling with another person—all three scenarios were met with stigma (Burris, 2014). However, when people were asked to take the perspective of the person trying to make sense of their feelings for someone else, people viewed the target who wanted to pursue a pure sexual fling (compared to a polyamorous relationship or love affair) more leniently (Burris, 2014). This finding suggests that people may be more able to relate to those thinking about brief sexual infidelity than those thinking about pursuing polyamory. In contrast, Grunt-Mejer and Campbell (2016) found that sexually unfaithful individuals (a cheating couple) were rated the lowest on relationship quality and arbitrary dimensions (cognition and morality) than those in monogamous and CNM relationships. Thus, in this case, the consensual aspect of CNM relationships (as opposed to nonconsensual non-monogamy) appears to buffer some stigma.

How Do Individual Differences Affect Attitudes and Behavior?

If someone endorses monogamy as the “natural” or “moral” way to have a relationship (mononormativity) or if someone is politically conservative, are these beliefs linked with prejudice toward CNM? Researchers recently developed a scale, Attitudes Towards Polyamory, to examine the extent to which people endorsed popular misconceptions of polyamory (e.g., “polyamory is harmful to children” and “people use polyamorous relationships as a way to cheat on their partners without consequence”; S. M. Johnson, Giuliano, Herselman, & Hutzler, 2016, p. 329). People who endorsed traditional values (mononormativity, religious fundamentalism, political conservatism, and right-wing authoritarianism) and those with greater jealousy held more negative attitudes toward polyamory. Conversely, people who endorsed sensation-seeking and sex positivity (adventure seeking and erotophilia) as well as those with a greater desire for sex held positive attitudes toward polyamory (S. M. Johnson et al., 2015). Related, personal interest in pursuing polyamory (agreeing with statements like “I would consider initiating a discussion of polyamory with my relationship partner”) is linked with positive attitudes toward polyamory (Hutzler et al., 2016). Thus, traditional values and jealousy may be underlying mechanisms that motivate individuals to stigmatize CNM relationships.

In terms of popular constructs of personality (i.e., the “Big Five”), research has found links between two of the dimensions and attitudes toward, as well as willingness to engage in, CNM among sexual minorities (a group that, regardless of a specific identity, expresses positive attitudes toward CNM; Moors, Rubin, Matsick, Ziegler, & Conley, 2014). Among sexual minorities, those who have active imaginations, a preference for variety, and proclivity for new experiences (high in openness), tended to hold positive attitudes toward and greater desire to engage in CNM (Moors, Selterman, & Conley, 2016). Moreover, those who tended to be highly organized, careful, and success-driven (high in conscientiousness) perceived CNM negatively and expressed less willingness to engage in CNM (Moors et al., 2016). Given that openness to experience is associated with enjoying abstractions and ambiguities (McCrae & Costa, 2008), people who possess this trait may be intrigued by “rewriting” traditional relationships rules. Highly conscientiousness individuals tend to deliberate and are less inclined for sensation-seeking (Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Joireman, Teta, & Kraft, 1993); thus, these individuals may have carefully considered what these relationships embody before expressing their attitudes and desire. Interestingly, extraversion was inversely related to sexual minorities’ attitudes toward CNM (and unrelated to desire), a trait which people tend to ascribe to practitioners of CNM (Hutzler et al., 2016).

Drawing on another popular theory of personality, researchers have gained a better understanding of attachment in the context of CNM (Moors, Conley, Edelstein, & Chopik, 2015). Attachment theory posits that close bonds with other people, especially romantic partners, are important sources of support, stability, and safety (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Perhaps, some people are better equipped to manage multiple partners’ sources of support and stability than others. For instance, someone who tends to experience discomfort with closeness to a partner (attachment-related avoidance) or someone who tends to experience insecurity about a partner’s availability and jealousy (anxious attachment) may not have orientations that are best suited for having their needs fulfilled by their partner (e.g., Cassidy, 2000). Looking at attachment across a range of close relationships (with a mother, romantic partner, best friend), fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and belonging needs were linked with secure attachment (i.e., low levels of avoidance and anxiety; La Guardia et al., 2000). Secure attachment is perceived as the optimal orientation, as it reflects comfort with intimacy and is linked with a host of positive outcomes (Feeney, 2008). Adult-attachment researchers often conceptualize romantic love and security as intertwined with sexual exclusivity, suggesting that monogamous relationships are the most natural and healthiest partnerships. However, Moors and colleagues

---

3 The term mononormativity was coined by researchers Robin Bauer and Marianne Pieper (and organizers of) at the first International Conference on Polyamory and Mononormativity at the University of Hamburg (November 4th–6th, 2005).
Moors and colleagues (2015) examined how attachment orientations relate to three facets of sexuality pertaining to CNM: attitudes, desire, and behavior. In one study, people (who had never engaged in CNM) were asked to report their avoidance and anxiety in romantic relationships, attitudes toward CNM (e.g., “If people want to be in an open/consensually non-monogamous relationship, they have every right to do so”), and willingness to engage in different types of CNM (e.g., “You and your partner may form outside romantic relationships, but they must always be less important than the relationship between the two of you”; Moors et al., 2015, p. 228). Highly avoidant individuals endorsed more positive attitudes and greater willingness to engage in CNM. Highly anxious people, on the other hand, tended to hold negative attitudes toward CNM (anxiety was unrelated to desire). Thus, highly avoidant individuals may see CNM relationships as a way to remain psychologically and physically distant from romantic partners, whereas anxious individuals may see these relationships as exacerbating their jealousy (also see Deri, 2015).

Given that people in CNM relationships express similar relationship qualities possessed by securely attached individuals (e.g., high satisfaction, emotional closeness, and low jealousy; Conley, Matsick, Moors, & Ziegler, in press; Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Visser & McDonald, 2007), it seems that avoidance may not be related to actual engagement in CNM. In a second study, Moors and colleagues (2015) found that people engaged in CNM reported lower levels of avoidance compared to people in monogamous relationships (anxiety levels were similar in both groups). Thus, avoidant individuals desire CNM in the abstract, but ultimately, people in CNM relationships exhibit aspects of attachment security.

In sum, people believe that those who practice monogamy have higher quality relationships, more desired personality characteristics, greater intelligence, and a better quality of life compared to those engaged in CNM. Even those in CNM relationships tend to endorse the status quo and perceive monogamy as affording greater relationship benefits (Conley, Moors, Matsick, et al., 2013). This halo extends to traits and skills unrelated to romantic relationships, as people engaged in monogamy are perceived as being more skilled at paying taxes on time, flossing teeth daily, and taking care of pets (compared to those in CNM relationships; Moors et al., 2013). There is compelling evidence that people in CNM relationships are met with great stigma – and perceived as morally inferior. Some individual difference factors, such as sensation-seeking, sex positivity, and openness to new experiences, buffer stigma toward people engaged in CNM and predict personal desire to engage in these types of relationships. Moreover, contrary to stereotypes about CNM (Conley, Moors, Matsick, et al., 2013; Moors et al., 2013), recent work has shown that those involved in CNM relationships exhibit aspects of attachment security without sexual exclusivity (Moors et al., 2015). Arguably, this influences how people manage having needs met by multiple partners without extreme jealousy (also see Deri, 2015).

What Relationship Benefits Are Shared Between Monogamy and CNM?

Before we conclude, it is important to highlight that while a few relationship benefits were uniquely attributed to CNM or monogamy, the majority of themes that emerged were shared across both types of relationships. That is, regardless of relationship structure, people perceived their romantic relationship(s) to provide benefits regarding family, sex, trust, love, communication (meaningfulness), and commitment (also see Table 1 in Conley, Moors, Matsick, et al., 2013). There is a growing body of research that investigates whether these benefits are differentially experienced by people in CNM and monogamous relationships. Given monogamy is commonly practiced and believed to be the golden standard of relationships, research has examined whether these glowing perceptions hold up under empirical scrutiny. Here, we identify conclusions about relationship functioning across both relationship styles.

In their examinations of relationship quality outcomes, Conley, Ziegler, and colleagues (2013) found that, in many cases, monogamy does not afford people a greater degree of these benefits than CNM. For example, when looking at relational quality across both types of relationships, people engaged in CNM experience greater trust and lower jealousy as well as similar levels of satisfaction, commitment, and passionate love compared to people engaged in monogamy (Conley et al., in press). Related, Rubel and Bogaert (2015) found that relationship style was not a particularly powerful predictor of psychological (e.g., depression, happiness) and relational well-being (e.g., satisfaction, longevity, jealousy).

Research regarding family benefits is sparse with the notable exception of Sheff and colleagues’ work (e.g., Goldfelder & Sheff, 2013; Sheff, 2011, 2015). Spanning years of ethnographic work, Sheff finds that polyamorous families benefit in terms of shared financial and household responsibilities. Drawing on open-ended responses regarding benefits of both relationships, it is clear that people tend
to talk about family benefits in different ways (despite this benefit being characteristic of both monogamy and CNM). People in CNM relationships discussed how CNM promotes close-knit communities of friends and partners as well as shared household responsibilities, whereas responses about monogamy focused on being an ideal structure for raising children (also see Table 1 in Conley, Moors, Matsick, et al., 2013). However, the notion that monogamy better serves children is inconsistent with research showing that children enjoy having multiple role models (e.g., for help with homework and variety of hobbies) and do not necessarily experience stigma for their parents’ CNM relationships (see Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013; Sheff, 2015, for further discussion).

The public as well as relationship researchers may attribute benefits of family, sex, trust, love, communication, and commitment as foundational to monogamous relationships (Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013; Moors & Schechinger, 2014), but, here we illustrate that these benefits are not exclusive to one relationship style. Instead, people engaged in monogamy and CNM experience these six benefits, though, perhaps, in different ways. In the future, researchers should consider why people engage in a certain type of romantic relationship and continue to examine how these shared benefits are experienced. Moreover, understanding that one can receive these benefits in either type of relationship can influence one’s awareness of options for romance (e.g., engagement in CNM can cater to having a family and monogamy can provide social inclusion).

**Where Do We Go From Here?**

**Moving Forward With CNM Research**

Despite the increased scientific pursuit of CNM relationships, there remains new empirical territory to cover to understand the complexity of CNM as well as how these relationships can broaden the fields of relationship and sexuality psychology. Within the previous sections we recommended ways in which future research could be helpful; in this section, we cover additional challenges that researchers may face as well as future directions regarding CNM in the legal context.

**Challenges and Strategies**

Embarking on CNM research presents new and exciting directions, yet posing many challenges. CNM relationships are a context in which researchers can understand how people ensure commitment between multiple partners while concurrently integrating emotional and sexual needs within a monogamy-focused culture. However, research and statistical designs that prove helpful in studying monogamous relationships may not be the best fit for people with multiple partners. Thus, we should strive to redevelop existing frameworks and measures and to create inclusive models for thinking about relationships.

For instance, our conceptualizations of relationship concepts and frameworks may need to be expanded as we gain a better understanding of CNM. Feelings of jealousy appear to be easy for people in monogamous relationships to identify (e.g., Hart & Legerstee, 2010). However, people in CNM relationships often avoid such loaded terminology because they may not experience jealousy to the same extent. Instead, people engaged in CNM commonly use different terms (e.g., wobble, shaky, jelly moments) to articulate feeling uncomfortable or anxious – lesser degrees of jealousy (Easton & Liszt, 1997; Ritchie & Barker, 2006). Conversely, terms like “compersion” or “frubble” reflect feeling positively about seeing one’s partner with another partner (conceptualized by some as the opposite of jealousy; Ritchie & Barker, 2006). In cases of not meeting relationship expectations, understanding the extent to which people remain loyal to the process of establishing agreements and rules (i.e., agentic fidelity; Wosick-Correa, 2010) may be a useful direction for research – whether that research be focused on people in monogamous or CNM relationships.

Moving forward, we suggest being mindful of (accidentally) prioritizing one type of CNM and carefully considering whether comparing relational functioning between monogamy and CNM is appropriate. Barker, Heckert, and Wilkinson (2013) explain how polyamory in popular press is regularly presented as superior to monogamy (and to other types of CNM). This prioritizing of polyamory – where the focus is on multiple loving relationships – lends itself to a “polynormativity” perspective, which positions polyamory as the “right way” to engage in CNM and, importantly, leaves the practice of prioritizing romantic relationships over other relationships unchallenged (Barker et al., 2013; Wilkinson, 2010). People who practice polyamory may be easier to identify for research, as numerous online communities are visible (unlike communities for open relationships). However, accessibility should not dictate research questions, as this would also perpetuate “polynormativity” rhetoric in empirical work. Related, research does not necessarily need to compare the relationship quality

---

4 The term polynormativity was coined by writer Andrea Zanin in a 2013 article “The Problem with Polynormativity” on her blog, sex geek; see: https://sexeek.wordpress.com/2013/01/24/theproblemwithpolynormativity/
between people who engage in monogamy and CNM to deem CNM an acceptable relationship practice. Our goal as researchers should not be to strive for the answer to an unobtainable question: which type of relationship is superior? Instead, we should employ methods and theory to understand the uniqueness of CNM relationships, for what they are, without an arbitrary baseline (i.e., using monogamy as a “control” group). When it comes to people’s personal lives, choosing any type of consenting adult arrangement should be a viable option.

**CNM and the Law**

Given many nationwide rulings regarding same-sex marriages (e.g., the US, Portugal, Ireland, South Africa, England), it is plausible that public discussions surrounding multiple-person marriages and unions are on the horizon. Polyamorist activists in the US have tended to abstain from pursuing legal avenues, fearing potential harm to same-sex marriage equality efforts (Aviram, 2008). While some polyamory activists have deliberately refrained from legal efforts, others have been purposely excluded from larger LGBT movements (e.g., Portugal’s Pride parade) due to organizers’ fear of being publically associated with polyamory (Cardoso, 2014). Aside from these tensions, the implications of campaigns for same-sex marriage equality can produce a legal “spillover” for people engaged in CNM. On one hand, same-sex marriage rulings may have opened the door for multi-person marriages. For instance, the Netherlands and Brazil have set precedent by legally recognizing multi-person unions (BBC News, 2012; Belien, 2005; Martin, 2015). In response to backlash regarding Brazil’s first multi-person union, public notary Claudia do Nascimento Domingues stated, “We are only recognizing what has always existed. We have not invent[ed] anything…what we considered a family before isn’t necessarily what we would consider a family today” (BBC News, 2012). These cases suggest changes in same-sex marital legalization may create momentum for further expanding the institution of marriage. On the other hand, the strategic plans of many same-sex marriage advocates have clearly differentiated the agenda from multi-person marriage. A differentiation strategy has, in part, been made to address “slippery slope” arguments—claims that expanding marriage to include same-sex couples would spawn further expansions for bigamy, incest, and polygamy (see Aviram & Leachman, 2015; Cardoso, 2014; Sheff, 2011, for further discussion). For example, in the US, Ted Olson (the attorney who represented same-sex couples in Hollingsworth v. Perry) reassured the court that same-sex marriage would not lead to multi-person marriage (Aviram & Leachman, 2015). Thus, a potential consequence of this rhetoric is that it can undercut future legal case for multi-person marriages.

In moving psychological research on CNM forward, we encourage researchers to consider how research questions are relevant to social justice and legal contexts. For instance, Aviram and Leachman (2015) provide a legal “road map” for how multi-person marriages may be presented in US courts (e.g., discrimination based on sex not sexual orientation) as well as potential legal counterarguments (e.g., impact of multi-person marriages on children, regulative challenges regarding taxation). At the same time, it is important to consider that political action for multi-person marriage is not unified or desired by everyone who practices CNM, as some approach CNM with a “relationship anarchy” or non-assimilation political perspectives (e.g., Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Portwood-Stacer, 2010). Moreover, psychological work on prejudice and discrimination in employment and educational contexts regarding CNM is also an important endeavor, as ample research has shown the deleterious effects that bullying, harassment, and discrimination can have on physical and mental health (Gruber & Fineran, 2008; Meyer, 2003; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). Drawing on international comparisons and legal efforts of LGBT movements may prove to be a useful method for understanding the similarities (and differences) that people in CNM relationship may face in achieving equity (see Aviram & Leachman, 2015; Emens, 2004; Gates, 2015; McReynolds, 2005; Powell, Quadlin, & Pizmony-Levy, 2015). Given the extent to which research has documented stigma against CNM relationships, we believe it is only a matter of time until these issues are involved in calls for marriage reform and discrimination protection.

**Concluding Remarks**

Our goal of this review was not only to synthesize research in light of unique and shared benefits of CNM, but also to identify avenues for future research. We encourage scientists and clinicians to recognize that consensually engaging in sex or intimacy with multiple people does not need to be viewed as controversial—it is merely another way of having a relationship. For some, CNM affords wider possibilities for relationships than exists within conventions of monogamy. However, for others, monogamy fits their ideals, desires, and goals perfectly. Both relationship styles have their “pros” and “cons”; thus, it will be helpful to better understand how adopting principles and strategies of one type of relationship could benefit the other.


Rosa, B. (1994). Anti-monogamy: A radical challenge to compul-


Portwood-Stacer, L. (2010). Constructing anarchist sexuality: 


Sexualities, 13, 479–493. 


Ritchie, A., & Barker, M. (2006). “There aren’t words for what we do or how we feel so we have to make them up”: Constructing polyamorous languages in a culture of compulsory monogamy. 

Sexualities, 9, 584–601. 


Rosa, B. (1994). Anti-monogamy: A radical challenge to compul-

sory heterosexuality. In G. Griffin, M. Hester, S. Rai, & S. 

Roseneil (Eds.), Stirring it: Challenges for feminism (pp. 107–120). London, UK: Taylor & Francis. 


Stewart, A. J. (1998). Doing personality research: How can fem-


Received February 28, 2016
Revision received July 31, 2016
Accepted October 16, 2016
Published online March 23, 2017

Amy C. Moors
Social Science Research and Evaluation
Armstrong Hall of Engineering
Purdue University
701 West Stadium Avenue
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2045
USA
amoors@purdue.edu

Amy C. Moors, PhD, is the Director of Social Science Research and Evaluation at Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN. Her research focuses on the ways in which social-contextual processes (bias, stigma, societal ideals) impact people’s intimate and professional lives.

© 2017 Hogrefe Publishing
Jes L. Matsick, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies at The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA. Her research focuses on how people with stigmatized sexual and gender identities experience intergroup relations, relationships, and health.

Heath A. Schechinger, PhD, is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California, Berkeley’s Counseling and Psychological Services, Berkeley, CA. His research interests primarily revolve around the clinical treatment of relational, sexual, and gender minorities.