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"Monogamy? In this Economy?": Stigma and Resilience in Consensual Non-Monogamous Relationships

Doris Füllgrabe[1] · David S. Smith[1]

Abstract

Monogamous marriage, sometimes called "the bedrock of society," still carries an apparent "halo" of moral superiority as a relationship structure. In contrast, consensual non-monogamous (CNM) configurations are stigmatized. Research indicates a connection between stigma, stress, and negative health outcomes, despite CNM comparing favorably with monogamy. The present study uses interviews to explore minority stress and resilience among individuals in CNM relationships. Participants experienced structural stigma as erasure, and interpersonal stigma as erasure and educational/emotional work. They also describe complex enmeshment between their relationship minority status and other aspects of their sexual and gender identities. Strategic disclosure and concealment were important management tools. Furthermore, managing individual (internalized) stigma was described as unlearning mononormative bias and surrounding oneself with supportive peers/ allies. The strongest motivator for perseverance was the steadfast conviction that the advantages of CNM outweighed the challenges.

Keywords Monogamy · Non-monogamy · Polyamory · Stigma · Minority stress · Resilience · Visibility

Introduction

At the time of writing, monogamous marriage is the only relationship structure to be granted legal protections at the federal level in the United States of America. These apply, but are not limited to, immigration, property, inheritance, family, and tax laws (Emens, 2004). Yet a growing number of North Americans, approximately 4–5%,

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✉ David S. Smith
D.smith47@rgu.ac.uk

1   School of Applied Social Studies, Robert Gordon University, Garthdee Road, Aberdeen, Scotland AB10 7QB, United Kingdom

currently engage in consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships. 21.9% report being in one at some point, and 12% cite a form of CNM as their relationship ideal (Haupert et al., 2017). CNM encompasses a variety of arrangements in which partners form agreements to eschew sexual and/or emotional exclusivity to enter extra-dyadic relationships. For example, polyamory, maybe the most visible form of CNM relationship, centers around emotional connection (Kean, 2018), whereas other types, like open relationships or swinging, focus more on sexual freedom (Cardoso et al., 2021; Klesse, 2006). A further recently labeled variation is relationship anarchy, which deconstructs all aspects of relationships, including exclusivity, a hierarchical approach to intimate partners, and other rules (Moen & Sørlie, 2022). Regardless of the relationship type, parties engage in them with the understanding and consent of all involved, making communication and self-responsibility central tenets (Klesse, 2006).

One explanation for the ongoing structural discrimination against CNM relationships in the USA and other Western societies is that the latter are mononormative, i.e., monogamous arrangements represent a social cornerstone (Wolkomir, 2020). Monogamy is thus considered the default and inherently morally superior relationship model (Hutzler et al., 2016). For example, an analysis of user comments on articles relating to polyamory on websites with ideologically/culturally diverse readerships showed that the public still considers alternatives perverse and fundamentally amoral (Séguin, 2019). Perceptions like these may disempower people who are non-monogamous from disclosing their identity. Brown (2020) found this to be true about staff and student experiences at university; each was concerned with professional and/or personal repercussions. Fear of disclosure has prompted many non-monogamous individuals to keep their relational orientation a secret (Kisler & Lock, 2019).

Stigma and CNM

Stigma is a layered phenomenon occurring on personal, interpersonal and structural levels. They intersect, with individual perception and sociocultural development sharing a reciprocal relationship. That is to say, individuals internalize and replicate the values they are exposed to. Hence changes in attitudes toward marginalized identities tend to be incremental (Hatzenbuehler, 2016). In their exploration of monogamy as a social institution, Rothschild (2018) examined how mononormativity often extends into a gendered binary of sex-negativity. Essentially, mononormative societies view sex as acceptable if it happens inside a heterosexual relationship structure to procreate. Consequently, non-heterosexual sex or sex for pleasure, which is common in CNM relationships, was deemed unethical and in need of change on an individual level. Similarly, several researchers have highlighted the pathologizing of CNM relationships among mental health professionals. This tendency implies an assumption that CNM relationships will be dysfunctional by their very nature (Graham, 2014; Grunt-Mejer & Łyś, 2022; Jordan, 2018; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020).

Such findings echo Foucault's (1981) understanding of power dynamics, i.e., a medicalization of social transgression, and the social construction of acceptable sexuality. As with how the diagnosis of sex addiction represents a sociopsychological discourse centered around collective sociosexual anxieties (Reay et al., 2013), the

stigmatization of CNM could be seen as indicative of sociosexual conservatism. In this case, the stigma attached to non-monogamous relationships arguably elevates and protects the ubiquity of the nuclear family (Sheff, 2020). This is not dissimilar to how other sexual minority groups have been seen as threatening "traditional" relationships (van der Toorn et al., 2020), hence the crossover in the narratives used to stigmatize them. For example, debates surrounding gay marriage often revolve around similar language and themes to concerns about plural marriages, e.g., hypersexualization, undermining the institution of marriage, and whether they could provide adequate parental care (Brumbaugh et al., 2008; Kleese, 2019; Pascar 2018).

Furthering this analysis, Rodrigues et al. (2021) suggest monogamists see people practicing CNM as less committed to their partners, associating extra-dyad relationships with a lack of attachment and care. Closely linked to this narrative is the widely spread conflation of CNM relationships and infidelity. Hutzler et al. (2016) examined 100 American respondents' awareness, perceptions, and attitudes toward polyamory. As anticipated, CNM individuals were perceived as more promiscuous, less trustworthy, and lower in morality - especially by politically conservative and religious participants. Elsewhere, they have been perceived as harboring less distinctly human characteristics, e.g., compassion, as well as being scored lower for completely arbitrary characteristics, such as oral hygiene (Conley et al., 2013). Combined, these findings show a tendency for monogamists to see people in CNM relationships as corrupt or flawed.

The severity of these judgments appears to vary with the type of relationship, though, with monogamous participants seeing those with a focus on an emotional connection (polyamory) more favorably than those prioritizing sex for pleasure (swinging and open; Balzarini et al., 2018; Matsick et al., 2014). This hierarchical approach is supported by data from Grunt-Mejer and Campbell, (2016), who suggested that the perception of emotional connectivity meant people rated polyamory more positively than other types of CNM relationships. Crucially, however, cheating was consistently rated below the mean scores. Social norms of sexual/emotional monogamy may still condition people to form negative judgments of other relationship structures. Yet it appears that consenting to extra-dyadic sex was a more important consideration than the sexual activity itself.

Recent research continues to challenge monogamy's "halo" (Balzarini et al., 2018, p. 1). Moors et al. (2017a, b) found the relationship benefits of family, sex, love, trust, communication, and commitment are experienced in both monogamous and non-monogamous structures alike. Similarly, in a meta-analysis comparing psychological well-being and relationship quality levels between CNM and monogamous individuals, Rubel and Bogaert (2015) did not support monogamy being necessarily healthier or leading to greater connection. However, the authors highlighted the importance of differentiating between different kinds of CNM relationships rather than treating them homogenously. Conley and Piemonte (2021) further the need for nuance. They surveyed 617 CNM participants and found those in polyamorous relationships reported significantly higher relationship satisfaction, including commitment, passionate love, and trust, than open or swinging participants. However, these positive experiences of their relationship do not mean that CNM individuals do not also experience stresses with their minority status in a mononormative society.

CNM & Minority Stress

Meyer (2003) developed a conceptual framework for understanding adverse health outcomes in sexual minority communities through the lens of minority stress. The model considers effects along a distal to proximal continuum, where stressors range from external structures to subjective, internalized processes. It enables examination of the differences between anticipated and actual prejudice, the impact of hiding and concealing that stigmatized part of one's identity, internalized negativity, and beneficial coping processes. Although they were primarily focused on LGB individuals, arguably, aspects could be generalized to understanding CNM individuals. Particularly since these identities can intersect; people who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual are more likely to depart from monogamy than people who identify as heterosexual (Moors et al., 2017).

Borgogna et al. (2021) explored a student mental health data set from 2017 to 2018, identifying 91 participants in five self-selected relationship structures: single, dating, married/partnered, divorced/separated, CNM/long-term open. CNM individuals were more likely to identify as non-cisgender and non-heteronormative. They also experienced a significantly higher history of emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual assault. Compared to the married/partnered group, CNM individuals reported 9.47 times more sexual assaults in the past 12 months and 3.25 times more incidences of depression. The variance between mental health outcomes was notable even when controlling for demographic factors like race. Findings were consistent with the minority stress model, supporting its additive effects: the more minorities participants identified with, the more stress they were likely to experience. This stress may be internalized, in some cases predicting lower relationship satisfaction (Moors et al., 2021).

People will respond to this stress differently, with variations in their resilience and coping. As one example, Rubinsky (2019) explored the effects of prosocial (e.g., positivity, openness, social networks) and antisocial (e.g., jealousy induction, avoidance, spying) relationship behaviors on resilience in 157 polyamorous relationships. While none of the prosocial behaviors had moderating effects, antisocial behaviors contributed lower levels of resilience. Witherspoon and Theodore (2021) further explored personal factors and resilience. They found CNM-related minority stress significantly increased psychological distress, like depression, whereas mindfulness significantly decreased it. Diverging from previous findings in LGB samples, higher cognitive flexibility resulted in increased distress. The authors hypothesized this was a result of the greater complexity within polyamorous relationships leading to excessive ruminating and potentially compounding stigma for sexual minorities.

Strategic concealing and disclosing of minority identity are important stigma management methods. While concealing one's minority identity may protect from stigma, it adds a cognitive and emotional burden in the form of intrusive thoughts, ruminations, and constant fear of being found out (Meyer, 2003). Studies with LGB populations show that concealment can lead to increased depression and lower life satisfaction while thinking about concealing predicts higher self-stigma and lower positive identity (Jackson & Mohr, 2016). Disclosing can help to minimize the burden and is associated with an integrated, positive identity (Witherspoon & Theodore,

2021). However, disclosure can be complicated in other ways: individuals who do so can feel stigmatized, embarrassed, awkward, and uncomfortable, unless they consider the recipient accepting (Valadez et al., 2020).

This detail about acceptance is significant since people's experience with stigma will vary as a function of the extent to which they feel stigmatized. As Meyer (2003) explains, the more we identify with a particular characteristic, the greater the potential emotional impact will be if someone challenges it. Self and group identities are, therefore, essential constructs to consider in stigma management and resilience, as those identifying with a minority group may draw strength and resilience from belonging to it. In a rare longitudinal exploration of resilience in polyamorous families, Sheff (2016) found that open and honest communication, flexibility in changing relationship structures, and creating "families of choice" were shown to support participant resilience.

The Present Study

The present study aims to build upon this background and adds qualitative insights to predominantly survey-based results. In-depth interviews were conducted with participants in a range of CNM configurations. These were geared toward better understanding how non-monogamous individuals experience, confront and cope with external and internal stigma in their own words. Topics included their personal experiences with stigma, their coping strategies, and protective factors that helped them persevere.

Method

Participants

Recruitment from a convenience sample of the researcher's network resulted in two volunteers. After consulting with a local polyamory coach who reposted the invitation to their social media account, there were 17 requests for further information. From these, nine agreed, so interviews were scheduled for 11 participants. This sample is limited, but it meets the recommended interview-based research parameters (Braun et al., 2016). Most high-frequency codes should be observable within a set of 12 interviews, allowing for the development of meaningful themes and interpretations without saturation (Guest et al., 2006). The sample was intended to be geographically homogenous to situate identified themes within comparable levels of structural stigma. However, because of the limited access to volunteers, participants from around the United States and Scotland are included. Ages ranged from 26 to 47. Gender and sexual orientation representation were diverse; an overview of demographics is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant information. NYC = New York City and NYS = New York State.

Participant (pronouns)	Age	Gender	Location	Sexual Orientation	CNM
1 (he, him)	35	Cis male	NYS	Heterosexual	Polyamorous Family of four, open
2 (she, her)	29	Cis female	NYC	Bisexual	Partnered, ENM
3 (she, her)	47	Cis female	NYS	Bisexual	Open marriage
4 (he, him)	35	Non-binary	NYC	Pansexual	Married, partnered, polyamorous
5 (she, her)	28	Cis female	Boston	Queer	Partnered, polyamorous
6 (they, them / he, him)	45	Non-binary	Dallas	Trixic / gray-sexual	Partnered, polyamorous
7 (she, her)	26	Quest-ioning	Edinburgh	Androsexual	Married, polyamorous
8 (she, her)	34	Cis female	NYC	Heterosexual	Dating, poly-curious
9 (she, her)	30	Cis female	NYS	Lesbian	Partnered, relationship anarchist
10 (he, him)	40	Cis male	Portland	Gay	Dating, polyamorous
11 (they, them)	31	Trans, non-binary	Palms Springs	Queer	Married, polyamorous

Materials & Procedure

Interested participants reviewed the interview guide in advance so they had the option to discuss any questions they felt uncomfortable with. Interviews were held via Zoom and lasted between 40 and 80 min. Transcribed files were imported into NVivo and analyzed in a way that was consistent with the suggested phases for Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke 2019).

In Phase 1, the primary researcher familiarized herself with the data by manually editing transcripts for anonymity, accuracy, and legibility. Transcripts were checked against recordings before those were deleted, and reflexive notes were kept in a private journal throughout.

In Phase 2, data were coded inductively at the semantic level, then refined and condensed into categories over several iterations. Since research questions were formulated to elicit responses regarding specific experiences of stigma and resilience, the primary researcher's orientation to the data was somewhat theoretically informed by the structural stigma and minority stress models. Loosely holding these in the background enabled them to better grasp the complexity of participants' experiences and the close enmeshment between action and reaction of stigma and coping mechanisms. RTA is a flexible method of analysis that allows for both inductive and deductive aspects to coexist.

Phase 3: After reviewing the codes and being immersed in the data, headings were created, capturing broad themes with subheadings to note concepts that illustrate the depth and nuance of the theme. Transcripts were re-uploaded and re-coded to the new headings, creating a cleaner, more focused dataset. In addition, the primary researcher captured the inductive/deductive codes on colored post-it notes; arranging them on flip chart paper enabled her to gain insights into where codes overlapped.

In Phase 4, the primary researcher constructed latent themes, conceptualized as patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organizing concept (Braun &

Clarke, 2019). While the research questions were intended to capture the different aspects of stigma and resilience, initial realizations from Phase 2 were confirmed since the content was highly enmeshed. Data also offered other focal points, which easily could have led a different researcher to interpret themes in other ways, referencing other models. Phase 5 was an iterative process of the naming themes. To stay close to the data, quotes from participants were chosen to represent them. Findings were written up in Phase 6. During these last 2 phases, a secondary researcher was consulted.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the data led to the generation of three main themes, each containing two notable concepts (Fig. 1). These indicated how participants' experiences were informed by their sense of identity, their desire to balance living a safe but authentic life, and their having examined mononormativity and finding it lacking. Each is defined and discussed below.
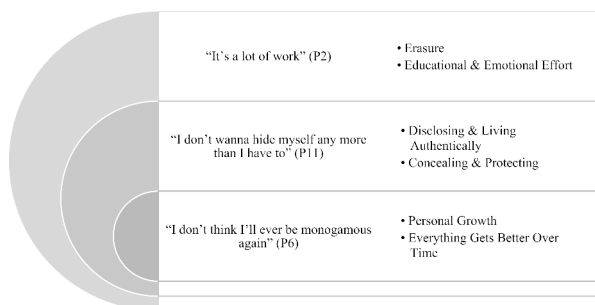
1. "It's a Lot of Work"

Ten participants reported intersectionality with other minority identities, including sexual orientation, gender, race, and neurodiversity. All participants commented on the mental and emotional toll they experienced when confronting stigma. There were two subthemes: Erasure and Educational & Emotional Efforts.

i) Erasure

Direct CNM-specific discrimination appears to be rare; only one participant reported two cases of differential treatment at their workplace. In comparison, Witherspoon and Theodore (2021) found that 61.6% of their participants had experienced at least one form of discrimination, with 44.5% reporting two or more. This discrepancy may be due to connotations, as their survey included "prejudice" under the term discrimination. Whereas the present participants generally rejected the term "discrimination" and resonated more with "negative judgment." Many described a lack of representation and recognition from mononormative policies and attitudes. For example, P1

Fig. 1 A thematic map including themes and subthemes

"It's a lot of work" (P2)	• Erasure • Educational & Emotional Effort
"I don't wanna hide myself any more than I have to" (P11)	• Disclosing & Living Authentically • Concealing & Protecting
"I don't think I'll ever be monogamous again" (P6)	• Personal Growth • Everything Gets Better Over Time

is in a committed relationship with two women in a family of four. He shared how non-inclusive policies limit his quad's access to services and privileges traditionally afforded to monogamous marriages and nuclear families.

> *"We are trying to get our whole family insured. It's difficult. (...) You can't have more than one spouse on an insurance. For tax filing it's also more complicated. You can only list one spouse. For being on a mortgage, I think you could actually have more than two people on a mortgage, but for children, we're talking about having children and biologically speaking, only two people can make that child, and legally speaking, only a third person can co-parent. That leaves out the fourth person."*

Ten participants shared examples of CNM-negating comments ranging from treating the relationship like a phase (P9: *"when are you gonna choose a person (...) to settle down with?"*) to questioning their commitment (P2: "I felt from them, 'she's not sticking around for long,' a little bit, or 'this isn't serious.'"). The most common misconception was that multiple relationships equated to infidelity (P6: "I've had co-workers that just don't understand it, that they're like, 'so you're cheating?'" P4: "there's always that cultural stuff of being like 'you can't have more than one romantic love or that's cheating'"). These experiences support the public halo for monogamous relationships and comparative ignorance of other configurations (Conley et al., 2013; Rodrigues et al., 2021).

Several participants also described how their CNM status interacted with their sexuality. Previous research into the experiences of bisexual polyamorists found they often feel "doubly stigmatized" (Weitzman, 2006, p. 147). Echoing this point, P3 described her experiences as a bisexual woman throughout her 25+years of open marriage to a bisexual man:

> *"I think in the same way that bi-erasure is a common thing (...) just people going, "oh, you're married to a man, so thereby you're not bi", (...) I think the same thing happens in terms of poly. (...) if you're married and if you're already in one relationship and you're not in a poly group setting, then people just presume that you're a monogamous couple. It's just I think the same sort of erasure in that way."*

The extent to which stigma intersected with other minority identities was noteworthy and warrants further exploration. Nine of eleven participants identified as not heteronormative, and four were not gender-normative. Most described their gender and sexual orientation as "more political" than their relationship type. Hence the threat of discrimination, harassment, or violence (DHV) was experienced as more critical than that for CNM. Illustrating this, P9 said "I feel less danger walking around in the streets as a non-monogamous person than I do as a queer person." This aligns with findings by Stults et al. (2022), who reported higher enacted and anticipated stigma for sexual minorities than heterosexual CNM individuals.

LGB and CNM visibility appears to be a factor. After decades of LGB activism, increasing amounts of people are out. Yet while public attitudes in Western countries

have become more liberalized, and the general acceptance of same-sex relationships has grown, (Gallup, 2022), LGB individuals are still twice as likely to be victims of violent crimes than heterosexuals (Truman & Morgan, 2022). In the absence of such data for CNM individuals, social disapproval still appears negatively linked to outness, indicating that many choose to conceal their CNM identity and thereby avoid stigma and DHV (Witherspoon & Theodore, 2016). The next main theme will discuss participant experiences with concealment in more detail.

ii) Educational & Emotional Efforts

All participants shared examples of the stigma they have received upon disclosing their relationship style. Comments aligned with previous descriptions of microaggressions, including micro-insults and -invalidations, although micro-assaults (overt insults) appeared to be rare (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020).

> P1: *"We have never been truly assaulted or bullied - most of what we receive is in this sort of more passive way, right? You explain what you're doing, and all you receive back is, "oh, I could never do that."*

Participants described how they took the opportunity to educate others if that person was deemed important enough and/or showed curiosity. However, non-monogamous relationships were generally perceived as less committed. Dealing with this kind of judgment left P7 feeling tired and defensive:

> *"You always have to not just explain yourself but defend yourself and defend your relationship. (…) And it sucks that I have to implicitly feel like I have to prove that my relationship is stable and that it's okay. And that we're not doing this because we don't actually like each other or because we're on the rocks and this is our last-ditch effort to save the relationship or that we have no sex life between the two of us or anything like that."*

Another familiar sentiment among participants was how subsequent engagement with those who were unsupportive was curtailed and the emotional toll this compartmentalizing took. P2 shared:

> *"When my partner and I are struggling, I don't talk to my friends who are monogamous about it anymore. (…) because sometimes it's so hard for them to get beyond the fact that he's seeing someone else, to see the nuance of that, and it often ends in "you should end it" or something like that. And it's "no, this is what I signed up for, but I'm trying to navigate this thing." Yeah. So that can be hard sometimes; it does make me feel distant from people who have been a really important part of my life."*

Participant accounts support experiences of "polyamorous work" taken from ethnographic observations of Dutch polyamorists. Using a critical feminist approach, Roodsaz (2022) found educational and emotional labor was experienced across

dimensions like resisting stigmatization and improving relational functioning. Contrary to existing literature, judgments were mostly brushed off and did not significantly affect participants' self-esteem or relationships. Potential resilience mechanisms will be discussed in more detail in the third main theme, but in this one's context, the received stigma was reflected back onto the source. Participants' general attitude in the face of biased individuals was "their problem, their loss." This allowed them to avoid further exposure to stigma, reduced their educational workload, and protected their relationships

> P5: "I think it's disappointing in the sense of what it tells us about the person. And it has affected our relationships with them going forward because it illuminates some really deep philosophical differences. But it's not so much that I take that judgment to heart and then think 'oh, maybe I am doing something wrong,' because I don't really take that judgment very seriously. I know where it's coming from."

Overall, stigma was experienced at structural and personal levels and aligned with the minority stress model. It was based on stable mononormative and sex-negative biases. It added unique burdens for participants on top of existing sexual or gender minority-related stress (Meyer, 2003). As reviewed above, Hatzenbuehler and McLaughlin's (2014) index measures LGB stigma based on census data regarding suicide attempts, state-level anti-discriminatory legislation, hate crime statistics and resources available at local high school, among others. To our knowledge, no such data exists for the non-monogamous population - yet.

Though CNM has received legal recognition in the form of domestic partnership ordinances in a handful of counties in Massachusetts (Massachusetts Law about Unmarried Couples and Domestic Partnerships, 2021), and private agencies have begun asking large national samples about attitudes to nonmonogamy (YouGovRealTime, 2020), its inclusion in public awareness and policy lags decades behind that of LGBT issues. As awareness rises, more inclusive and nuanced census and government forms would curb erasure and enable more effective measuring of CNM structural stigma and subsequent anti-discriminatory policy.

The CNM-specific educational workload and emotional toll were examples of the "physical, mental, or emotional pressure, strain, or tension" described in the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003, p. 675). Stigma was experienced as unique, chronic, and expressed from a stable monogamy-centric worldview. However, contrary to previous research, neither structural nor interpersonal stigma appeared to affect internalized CNM negativity or relationship satisfaction. This may be due to several factors.

Given the self-selecting nature of volunteers following an invitation from a trusted online educator, a sampling bias may have occurred, favoring those open to engaging about the subject. In addition, a majority of participants were polyamorous, which is a common and relatively accepted CNM style (Balzarini et al., 2019; Conley & Piemonte, 2021). Many have been for years and may therefore be more secure in their identity and relationships. Perhaps this may be different for newer relationships or those in a CNM arrangement that is deemed less publicly acceptable due to the

perception of lower emotional commitment to sexual partners, e.g., swingers (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016).

2. "I Don't Wanna Hide Myself Any More than I Have To"

For gender, sexuality and relationship minorities, questions like "Who are you dating? When are you getting married? When are you having children?" are rarely straightforward. The second theme is characterized by the intentional choices participants made having stepped off the "relationship escalator". Overall, it relates to the effects of disclosing or concealing one's minority identity on stigma management and resilience factors like social support, and psychological and relational well-being. All participants were out to some degree within chosen groups, though not everyone was out to their entire family or at work. There are two subthemes: Disclosing & Living Authentically and Concealing & Protecting.

i) Disclosing & Living Authentically

CNM relationships are private until they are verbally communicated or observed. Participants are thus able - and obliged - to continually choose between disclosure, authenticity, and potentially increased stigma vs. concealment, safety, and the additional cognitive and emotional burden of keeping a secret (Meyer, 2003; Valadez et al., 2020). Disclosing personal information helps people to establish trust, deepen relationships and achieve other social and/or personal goals (Omarzu, 2000). It can be a transactional process where the discloser has self-focused reasons like self-clarification (Greene et al., 2006). For example, to P5 disclosing was a vital part of living authentically, and she was empowered by it:

> "I want all of my identity to be on the outside. (…) It doesn't feel right to not be honest about something that's this important to me. (…) whereas at work it's a matter of I don't totally know if I have enough information to know how it might affect my career. (…) I have learned to be a little bit more careful about when and how I share, and I think that's been validated a few times, I've also really been startled by how rewarding disclosure can be (…). managing the cost of not sharing versus the cost of sharing and making that a purposeful choice kind of gives you some of the power back"

Similarly, P6 was a monogamous husband and father of two for many years before embracing polyamory and coming out as non-binary. After experiencing discrimination at work, they are committed to living their truth and setting a positive example for their trans and polyamorous children.

> "I'm pretty open about it. Like I said, with employment, that's one thing. But with friends, family, and my partners' family, I don't care, they can be as judgmental as they want. This is my reality, and you have to deal with that. I'm not gonna wall away part of myself just to help you feel less uncomfortable, I'm sorry."

Other-focused reasons for disclosure can include a desire to educate (Greene et al., 2006). In this context, disclosing to educate differs from the educational burden mentioned above because it is self-initiated rather than an imposed defense. P4 described several examples where his disclosure prompted rich conversations, most notably with his mother:

> "I think when I started talking to her about it and about how thoughtful it was and how much it was about doing the work of communication, (…) she had a whole different kind of thought process about it for herself. And even came back to me at one point and said, 'I wish I had known about this kind of thing when I was younger cause I think it would've served me too.' And then her and my dad decided to try opening up their relationship and to try being polyamorous for a minute (…) And so it was this really cool moment of them trying."

Gender and privilege intersect with their decisions to disclose or not. Echoing Valadez et al.'s (2020) findings, female-identifying participants were more likely to disclose when they anticipated a positive response. In the current study, white, male-identifying participants were more likely to disclose without fear of repercussions, mentioning their privilege as a protective factor. The sample was too small to make generalizations, but this somewhat contradicts previous research indicating that men are less likely to disclose personal information (Omarzu, 2000). However, it aligns with findings in the Dutch study, where gendered and racial power dynamics moderated the work related to maintaining polyamorous relationships and managing stigma (Roodsaz, 2022). Perhaps the participants' motivation was to keep enjoying the same rights and protections they were accustomed to before finding themselves in a sexual or relationship minority, but this would need further study.

ii) Concealing & Protecting

Concealment and non-disclosure were used to avoid anticipated stigma, take advantage of the ability to hide, and help manage overlapping minority identities. Concealing behaviors did not imply underlying or increasing internalized negativity. For example, P8 left her evangelical Christian community two years ago and had only been dating her queer, polyamorous partner for three months. To her family, her partner is a "friend"; other participants also mentioned examples of "code-switching," like adopting neutral terms to conceal the true nature of the relationship. Born and raised in Uganda, she hid the details of their romance due to potentially severe consequences. For others, concealing their relationship style protected them from anticipated CNM-related judgments and from disclosing their sexual orientation. For example, P3 had been dating men and women all her adult life. Still, she said:

> "I'm usually pretty careful when I come out to people. I usually know that it's somebody that's not gonna be like 'what, that's so terrible' or whatever. Both for bi and for poly. So, I don't know that I've necessarily had a lot of people react badly, but that's because I don't come out to a lot of people."

As reviewed above, substantial evidence suggests that concealing one's minority status is a coping strategy that manages and diminishes stigma exposure, yet adds a significant cognitive burden (Greene et al., 2006; Meyer, 2003; Jackson & Mohr, 2016) differentiated between non-disclosure and concealment, though both anticipated secrecy processes, including potentially intrusive thoughts, constant monitoring of behavior, and the fear of being found out. Although they found no link between non-disclosure and psychological health, they concluded that both disclosure and non-disclosure could optimize well-being, depending on one's specific life context.

In addition to concealment, internalized negativity may be a moderator of detrimental health outcomes (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020). However, current participants did not indicate that concealment might be a function of internalized negativity. This may be due to the aforementioned factors of sampling, experience, and empowerment in making intentional choices, as well as social support from their peers: As discussed above, participants use strategic disclosure and concealment to purposefully create their "chosen family", excluding those who were unsupportive (Sheff, 2016). P8's account after three months already echoes that of others further along in their CNM journey:

> "I've balanced out the folks who I can't tell with a lot of the folks who I can tell. I have a space where I can be fully honest and open with some people in my life, and then there's a space where we can't."

While P10 described a "heaviness" around concealing, he also said it was worth it overall:

> "I definitely feel okay in those big areas and the important friendships that I have (…) so I would say for now the benefits of concealing it where I do, outweigh those feelings that I have in those few conversations that might present themselves where I might wanna say something, but have to filter it out."

His comment aligned with Pachankis and Bränström's (2018) study into structural, individual, and interpersonal stigma among Europeans. They found that concealment mediated the effect between stigma and life satisfaction. Those in high-stigma countries who concealed their sexual minority status reported lower life satisfaction, although not as low as those who disclosed it and experienced even greater everyday discrimination. More detailed studies into the connection between concealment and internal stigma for different CNM communities would be warranted. For now, the need to conceal was also reflected back onto society:

> P9: "I hide to stay safe and to avoid judgment, (…) but I think that's a twisted way of saying, I still feel like there's so much judgment in the world. And that is what negatively impacts me at this point. It's not that I'm not directly telling people, it's that I feel unsafe to tell people."

3. "I Don't Think I'll Ever be Monogamous Again"

The final theme describes the participants' journey from growing up in a mononormative society to learning about CNM, trying it out, and embracing it. They suggested that the agency involved in questioning and deconstructing societal mandates strengthened their sense of identity, relationships, and resilience against stigma. The two subthemes are Personal Growth and Everything Gets Better Over Time.

i) Personal Growth

As reviewed above, integrating a minority identity and accepting it as part of their identity can strengthen individual resilience. Weitzman (2006) described the milestones of CNM identity development, and current participants echoed experiencing non-linear phases of recognizing their interest in nonmonogamy, accepting it, and communicating their preferences to others. For example, P5 used to be her roller derby's "token straight" until she allowed herself to question her attraction to multiple people:

> "(…) once you've started acknowledging that you can do things differently (…) there's your permission for queerness first. And then when you're living life as a queer person, it also makes sense to question the other structures. It's like chicken or egg. (…) And then once you have deconstructed that, there's a lot of other things that seem available."

It is debateable whether CNM is more akin to identity (e.g., sexual orientation) or a choice of relational practice (Klesse, 2006). However, present findings suggest that the two are intertwined:

> P7: "I do see it as an identity in the way that someone either is or they aren't, like you can't force somebody who isn't to be."
> P2: "It's hard to say 'no, I was born monogamous.' I was trained to be monogamous and now I'm unlearning and relearning."

This entanglement may be because awareness of sexual orientation often surfaced during childhood and therefore felt more natural. In contrast, participants consciously came to CNM as adults, likely influencing their interpretation of it as an intentional choice. Therefore, until CNM is as mainstream as monogamy, it may be challenging to attribute it as an identity. Moreover, calling CNM a choice does not imply their transition to CNM was easy; all shared examples of "unlearning" they had to do. Beyond descriptions of how they built communication skills and emotional intelligence, participants mentioned the ongoing work to question mononormative schemas. For example, P7 realized:

> "That we are not a hundred percent responsible for each other, that we're responsible for ourselves and what we can bring to each other."

And P8 and P9 learned that love can be expansive and that letting go of old scripts takes practice:

> P8: *"Being in a relationship where I have to recognize that this person cares for me, even if they might also care for another, in a different way, and holding those two things that feel like they should be counteracting each other, but they're not."*
>
> P9: *"What I've really struggled to let go of is this idea that you meet this person and you choose them and they're like 'special,' (…) So even though I can intellectually talk with you and be like, 'that's not really what I want,'" I have this still attachment to what I think the media trained me marriage is supposed to look like."*

Learned schemas include "your partner is supposed to make you happy" or "if you love them, you will not be interested in anyone else". They are remnants of mononormative acculturation and may lead to internalized negativity in CNM individuals. However, participants' motivation to live an examined, sex-positive life was clear. Their ongoing questioning of societal norms also enabled them to create fulfilling relationships. Dominguez and colleagues (2017) described how moving out of an established structure like monogamy entailed periods of uncertainty until new roles and emotions were recontextualized in a non-monogamous frame. Similarly, P4 and his partner had talked about CNM before getting married, but in the absence of positive role models, they did not act on it until their marriage structure fell apart. At this point, he started educating himself:

> *"Everything that was holding me back in monogamy, that made me feel stagnant, was suddenly put under this big microscope and I had to examine every tiny piece of it and pull it apart. And now I am free of so many of those or in progress of working on so many of those things and able to make decisions for myself. (…) I think the primary benefit that I got was the refocusing on my own growth as a way to have better relationships (…)."*

As personal and group identity factors can influence resilience (Meyer, 2003, 2015), participants were asked about their group memberships. Except for P1, a member of several groups, most participants described seeking out polyamorous or queer groups only for initial support. They then moved on to constructing their social circles with like-minded people, for example, around parenting. Participants' reluctance to join CNM groups may be due to its splintered nature between styles and locations: P3 loved her bi-poly group in Atlanta but did not find a permanent one in New York. She also cited her introversion preferences, indicating that individual personality differences may be a factor. P7 and P11, on the other hand, described their Edinburgh and Palo Alto communities as relatively tight-knit. Additionally, CNM groups do not yet have the same visibility as LGB groups.

ii) Everything Gets Better Over Time

Participants' experience with CNM ranged from three months (P8) to 25+years (P3). Aligned with the structural stigma model, experience with stigma depended on their location; e.g., P6 in Texas, a traditionally conservative State, had more examples than peers in the more liberal New York and California. Nonetheless, there was agreement that managing stigma got easier over time:

> P10: "I would definitely say it's easier. (…) I don't think relationships get any easier necessarily in general, but I think easier (…) to think outside of the heteronormative monogamous couple marriage model of relationships, for sure."

Interestingly, participants also noted improvements in the attitudes of friends and family over time. This reduction in interpersonal stigma may be a function of the "contact effect." Chaudoir et al. (2017) reviewed 44 interventions to reduce minority stress in the LGB community. They outlined empirical support for how getting to know minority individuals increased empathy in public and decreased rejecting behaviors against them.

> P2: "With a lot of those friends, it's just taken time and taking seeing my partner and I together and just seeing that we're in love."
> P6: "My mom was very positive on it, but my dad, when I told him he was a little skeptical, (…) Since then, he's been a lot more accepting, like over the holidays, he'll say, 'bring whomever you want.' So (…) We all three came to Thanksgiving dinner. So that was nice."

Last but not least, participants also reported improvements in their relationship functioning:

> P9: "I would say in my first non-monogamous relationships, I didn't deal with them well. (…) then there's some general skills that I have that I get better with over time (…) So I would say I've gotten better at dealing with the emotions, but I wouldn't say the emotions have decreased, if that makes sense."

All participants described how they received no discriminating or discouraging messages against CNM arrangements when they were growing up because the ubiquity of monogamy was so prevalent that it seemed like the only available option (Emens, 2004). Many had previously had monogamous relationships, which they described as restrictive or ultimately unfulfilling. Participants did not just see CNM as a "viable alternative" to monogamy (Fleckenstein & Cox, 2015; Wood et al., 2021); they enthusiastically embraced it, reframing monogamy from being compulsory to no longer an option. Whether they came to CNM by accident, by choice, or through a polyamorous partner, ten participants could no longer imagine being monogamous, while the eleventh was enjoying her early exploration phase.

P7: *"I find that world very hard to imagine. Even if we were fully monogamous in action, I don't think we ever would be in philosophy."*

Concluding Remarks

This study adds to existing research, finding that CNM individuals experienced stigma on structural, interpersonal, and, to a lesser extent, internalized levels. The primary coping strategy employed by CNM individuals was strategic concealment and disclosure of their relationship style, followed by the intentional creation of a supportive community. Finally, their active questioning of norms, integration of CNM identity, and determination to live authentically outweighed the challenges.

This study is limited by its exploratory, cross-sectional nature and convenience sample. The majority were drawn from "WEIRD" societies, i.e., Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (Henrich et al., 2010). They were also mostly polyamorous, which meant that they may be relatively less likely to experience the same types or severity of stigma as people in other types of CNM relationships (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016). Thus, sampling factors limited generalizations to the broader community, as well as a more nuanced differentiation between experiences within different CNM structures (Conley & Piemonte, 2021).

This study is further limited by not addressing participant health outcomes in more detail. Though they appeared to moderate the negative internalizing of stigma, the impact of personal resilience factors like identity integration and concealment on mental health remains vague. Nonetheless, current findings highlight opportunities for practical changes.

More data is required to gauge a structural stigma index for relational minorities. To determine the actual rate of crime and health statistics, forms in the private and public sectors could begin by acknowledging that CNM relationships exist, allowing for relationship structures beyond "single," "married," "divorced," or "widowed." Additionally, sex-positive education initiatives for the public may help to reduce interpersonal stigma by addressing unfounded moral concerns and myths. This could include education on STI transmission, safe sex, use of barrier methods, positive depictions of CNM in the media, and stressing the consensual nature of agreements in CNM relationships.

Participants' demographic heterogeneity and the complex subject matter invite several future lines of inquiry. Further analyses of relational functioning in queer CNM individuals and those raising families may be insightful. In addition to race, sexual, and gender variability, two participants reported being autistic and described how polyamory helped them better understand themselves and others, effectively improving their relationships. Studies focusing on neurodiversity within CNM could potentially expand therapeutic horizons by empowering those with ASD to co-create the relationships that work for them. Furthermore, current findings on the implications of concealment and non-disclosure on identity could be expanded into a deeper exploration of different CNM styles and relational functioning. For example, solo polyamory, relationship anarchy, or the "don't ask, don't tell" agreement.

In closing, the interviews contain diverse stories of expansive love for self and others. They describe a move away from the pressures of finding (or being) "the one, forever". Instead, participants become self-aware and self-responsible, embracing the complexities of meeting different needs with different people for as long as all consent. Relationships are considered fluid, organic, and expected to change and evolve like those in them. If monogamy has a halo, perhaps CNM has a mirror: one that reflects and makes visible society's persistent misconceptions and, at the same time, invites people to take a closer look at who they are, what they need, and to embrace what they see. Undeterred by the stigma they received, the participants did not aim to convince anyone to become non-monogamous. They only continue to wish, and work, for equal treatment and more inclusive protections under the law:

> P8: "you know, that would be nice to be able to live in a society where I didn't have to couch who I was and how I'm choosing to love someone."

Declarations

Conflicts of interests None.

Competing Interests The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethical approval and consent to participate This study was granted ethical approval by the School of Applied Social Studies at Robert Gordon University. All participants provided their informed consent before being interviewed. They each received a participant information sheet and a separate anonymized consent form.

Human and Animal Ethics This research involved human participants. All gave their informed consent to participate and for the authors to pursue publication. Each had a two-week window during which to withdraw their participation retrospectively. No non-human animals were involved at any stage of this research.

Consent for publication All authors give their consent for publication. All participants provided informed consent for publication.

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