Consensual Non-Monogamy and Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

While monogamy is often depicted as the “normal,” ideal relationship model in our society, consensually non-monogamous relationship forms, wherein participants openly and transparently agree to pursue sexual and/or emotional connections with individuals beyond the dyad, are increasing in prevalence. This paper investigates the existing evidence as to whether individuals in these relationships are happier than those engaged in conventional monogamy, analyzing past research and breaking down demographic and social factors that may both enhance and attenuate non-monogamous relationship satisfaction. There is evidence that non-monogamy increases relationship satisfaction for at least some individuals, but there is little compelling evidence that all monogamists would be happier exploring non-monogamy. Given the relatively recent emergence of research in this area, further research would be beneficial.
Introduction

In recent years, more and more people are turning to non-monogamous relationship forms, in contrast to the traditionally idealized monogamous relationship model we see throughout most of Western history. Non-monogamy characterizes only a small minority of relationships for the time being: in a nationally representative Canadian sample, 2.4% of all respondents and 4% of those currently in a relationship reported being in a non-monogamous relationship (Fairbrother et al., 2019, p. 698), while Træen and Thuen (2021) found that 3.1% of Norwegian men and 2.6% of Norwegian women surveyed had ever engaged in the practice (p. 7). Nevertheless, its growth in the recent past has been rapid, and in time it may come to represent a sufficiently large phenomenon as to be impossible to ignore. The question is, how happy are individuals in non-monogamous relationships and how strong and long lasting are these relationships?

Of course, while anybody can easily enter into non-monogamy by simply cheating without their partner’s knowledge (also referred to as non-consensual non-monogamy), this is not the type of non-monogamy I will be discussing. Ethical or consensual non-monogamy can be understood as the “engage[ment] in sexual interaction with someone outside the primary relationship with the partner’s consent” (Træen & Thuen, 2021, p. 2). Unless otherwise specified, I will always be referring to consensual forms of non-monogamy in this paper. As the above definition makes clear, sexuality is often considered the most salient feature of both monogamy and non-monogamy, but it is far from the only relevant factor at play. After all, emotional affairs can be just as damaging to monogamous relationships as sexual ones, and what is perhaps most damaging about sexual infidelity is not the physical act per se but the betrayal of intimate trust between the partners that it implies. Still, we cannot deny that sexuality looms large in discussions around non-monogamy, and moral outrage among traditionalists is often animated in no small part by disgust at the sexual freedom of those who practice non-monogamy.

Partly as a matter of pragmatism and partly as an acknowledgment of the imperfect nature of language, I will not be limiting myself to sources that use any particular terminology: whether the literature uses terms like polyamory, open relationships, swinging, open marriages, etc., what I am interested in interrogating is the impact that any and all forms of non-monogamy exert upon relationship stability and satisfaction. While there are more than likely important differences across these types of non-monogamy, and while some limited research has addressed this directly, doing a deep dive into the differential effects of particular forms of non-monogamy would be well beyond the scope of this paper. I will attempt to address this issue where it presents itself most saliently, but by and large I will try not to get bogged down in issues of terminology demarcating various subtypes of consensual non-monogamy.

While some terms conjure up a certain ideal type, there is sufficient overlap as to render the borders somewhat blurred. “Open relationship” or “open marriage” generally implies that the members of said relationship are free to pursue sexual liaisons outside the dyad but must refrain from emotional entanglement while doing so (Conley & Piemonte, 2021, p. 1273). Yet the exact parameters of relationships under any of these terms can vary considerably. One couple who considers themselves to be in an open marriage may allow each other far more emotional involve-
ment and long-term contact with extradyadic elements than another who agrees only to one-night stands with various partners. Similarly, while polyamory would generally imply a greater freedom to form deep and lasting emotional commitments to partners beyond the dyad (Conley & Piemonte, 2021, p. 1273), even this is not a hard and fast rule; the capacity for couples to define what is comfortable for themselves is essential to polyamory, with polyamorists highly valuing “fluidity, heterogeneity, and non-conformity” (Miccoli, 2021, p. 359), so there is naturally no one form that this takes. All of this would needlessly complicate any research that narrows itself down excessively, so I am content to utilize sources that use different terms (again, while clarifying matters where possible).

Broadly speaking, then, we can imagine non-monogamy as existing on something of a spectrum, with purely physical allowances on one end and complete integration of third or subsequent individuals as life partners on the other. Between these two theoretical poles, any number of formulations exist, and participants in these relationships may use innumerable terms to describe themselves and their relationships, even as the aforementioned trends can be observed (e.g., a couple who integrates a third individual as a life partner on equal footing with the first two members might be more likely to use a term like polyamory, whereas a couple who engages in “partner swapping” at a party with like-minded individuals might be more likely to call themselves swingers). Again, while these broad trends undeniably exist, they are far from universally agreed upon, and what terms the members of a given relationship use to define themselves should not be assumed as having final say over their practices and lifestyles. These are, after all, intimate interpersonal relationships we are talking about, not something where abstract taxonomy will ever perfectly suffice. I would also point out that while it can be helpful and clarifying to think in terms where sexual contact and emotional commitment are discrete, separable phenomena, we would do well to keep in mind that dominant societal conceptions of love and sex make attempts to fully extricate physicality from emotionality fraught, no matter the agreed-upon parameters of a relationship. Even individuals involved in non-monogamous lifestyles, as well as researchers studying the subject, will run the risk of inadvertent conflations here and there.

I will not limit myself to Canadian research. Again, this is partly a pragmatic approach, as there is a limited amount of research into non-monogamy from a Canadian perspective. Given the recently emergent nature of non-traditional ways of life like polyamory, relying on international research is all but necessary to paint as fulsome a picture as possible. More importantly, any highly developed Western country should have similar enough social dynamics to our own to allow for the ready transferability of conclusions.

My hypothesis is that consensual non-monogamous relationships are more satisfying than conventional monogamous relationships. Given the centrality of intimate relationships in most people’s lives, this greater relationship satisfaction would also lead to greater overall happiness, all else being equal. (This is not to say that non-monogamous relationships are for everyone, even if my hypothesis holds true. What is more interesting from my perspective is whether non-monogamy yields positive outcomes for those who are suited to it.) Now the most interesting questions arise after this has been formulated. If this hypothesis holds at all, I have many questions that I hope can be answered through research, either extant or future. If there is found to be a positive correlation between non-monogamous relationship forms and happiness, what mechanism
causes this? Do participants in non-monogamy stay together primarily because one traditional barrier to staying together (extradyadic sexual desire) has been eliminated as a cause of relationship failure, or is there something deeper than sex at play? Given the immense levels of maturity, openness, and honesty that a successful non-monogamous relationship requires, do individuals who succeed within this framework differ fundamentally from those who either fail or do not attempt it? Does success within this type of relationship depend more on the individuals in question than on the relationship structure itself? While it would likely be wildly optimistic to think that I can answer all of these questions within the context of this research paper, I certainly hope to achieve some level of insight into at least a few of them.

**Literature Review**

Three recent studies deal most directly with the question of whether participants in non-monogamous relationships are happier. Cox et al. (2021) analyzed the results of an international survey of consensually non-monogamous adults from 2012 and compared this to data from the General Social Surveys (GSS) undertaken in the U.S. between 2010 and 2014. The authors found that “the CNM [consensually non-monogamous] sample was in general significantly happier, healthier, and had more frequent sex with more partners than their counterparts in the general U.S. population sample” (p. 1301). While this would seem to provide very strong support for the hypothesis that non-monogamy is associated with greater relationship satisfaction (among many other positives), there are several complications worth noting. First, while respondents to the 2012 survey were indeed happier than the general U.S. adult population, married consensual non-monogamists were no happier than married members of the general population (p. 1300). On the surface, this might plausibly indicate the significant satisfaction that marriage confers upon monogamous individuals, negating any difference that otherwise exists between monogamous and non-monogamous populations. However, when this particular correlation is broken down by gender, even more interesting findings present themselves. In comparing the datasets, the researchers found that men who are in consensually non-monogamous marriages are actually significantly less happy than married men at large, while women who are in consensually non-monogamous marriages are significantly happier than married women at large (p. 1300). This may be indicative of the differential benefits and detriments enjoyed by men and women in the traditionally patriarchal institution of marriage. Simply put, men may have less to gain than do women by exploring non-monogamy (at least within the context of marriage), given that men are generally less constrained by marriage than are women. Aside from potential demographic issues in directly comparing the two samples against each other in general (see pp. 9-11 of this paper), there is also the fact that the GSS sample is composed only of American individuals while the sample of non-monogamists is international, potentially complicating any results. While Cox et al. reported that geography posed no issue in comparing the samples (p. 1292), this is difficult to credit with complete certainty. To wit, nearly 13% of the non-monogamous sample did not provide
their country of residence at all (p. 1291), making it all but impossible to fully analyze geographic differences one way or the other. Still, this study provides preliminary support for the fact that non-monogamy can, at least in certain cases, contribute to increased happiness.

Fairbrother et al. (2019), as part of their broader survey of the prevalence and attributes of non-monogamous relationships, measured respondents’ relationship satisfaction. Their sample, being a nationally representative one, was naturally overwhelmingly monogamous, allowing for comparisons between groups. The researchers found that, while non-consensual non-monogamists (i.e., cheaters) were less satisfied in their relationships, there was no statistically significant difference in this measure between consensual non-monogamists and monogamists (p. 702). Importantly, they note that what can have a stronger bearing on relationship satisfaction is a discrepancy between ideal relationship type and actual relationship type (p. 702). In other words, those who are in a monogamous relationship but would rather be in an open relationship are less happy than either non-monogamists or monogamists who are happy with their relationship structure. Fairbrother et al. conclude that “being in an open relationship may have no bearing on relationship satisfaction once the match between one’s preferred relationship configuration and actual relationship configuration have been taken into consideration” (p. 702). Interestingly, the authors also found that while 4% of individuals currently in a relationship were in a consensually non-monogamous one, 11.9% of respondents would like to be in one (p. 700). For these individuals who desire an open relationship but are not in one, then, their relationship satisfaction would likely increase if they entered into a non-monogamous relationship of some kind, providing further evidence that non-monogamy may indeed be associated with increased happiness in certain situations.

Conley and Piemonte (2021), on the other hand, sought specifically to compare different types of non-monogamous relationships against each other in terms of their outcomes, as opposed to comparing the happiness of monogamists with non-monogamists. They broadly grouped non-monogamous relationships into three types and defined them thusly:

Swingers, for example, typically comprise a primary couple who pursue extradyadic sexual relationships together. Couples in open relationships seek outside partners independently, with the expectation that they will not allow the outside relationship to interfere with, or encroach upon, the primary relationship, and will not fall in love with a partner outside the primary dyad. Those who are polyamorous take a more all-emcompassing approach to CNM [consensual non-monogamy]—the core difference between polyamory and other forms of CNM is the expectation that partners may engage in loving relationships with others outside of a primary dyad (Conley & Piemonte, 2021, p. 1273).

Conley and Piemonte found that, in general, those in open relationships were less well-adjusted in their relationships than were either swingers or polyamorists (p. 1283). Some studies identified swingers as performing better on certain measures than polyamorists, and other studies found the
opposite; the distinction between these two groups in terms of their relational happiness is not altogether clear, but their being happier than those in open relationships was unequivocal (p. 1283). By collapsing all of these relationship types together into a single category of consensual non-monogamy, then, we obscure essential differences. Importantly for my purposes, any such collapsing will necessarily reduce the reported average happiness of non-monogamists, relative to their happiest subset (in this case, polyamorists or swingers). Put another way, in any comparison of relationship satisfaction between monogamists and non-monogamists, polyamorists or swingers would fare better if we were to separate them from those in open relationships (as these groups are defined by Conley and Piemonte, in any event—again, differing definitions can be part of the issue when examining these matters). This raises interesting implications for future research.

Factors That May Increase Non-Monogamous Relationship Satisfaction

Of course, we must always be aware of potential confounding variables. In this case, even if we observe any manner of correlation between engagement in non-monogamy and relationship satisfaction, we cannot then assume that non-monogamy is necessarily what is directly driving this. Causality is notoriously difficult to determine in the social sciences, and that is certainly the case here. It may well be that any correlation is being mediated by different variables altogether. Most obviously, we must remain hypervigilant of any potential demographic factors that might, in the aggregate, set non-monogamous individuals apart and interfere with what might otherwise appear to be sound, generalizable conclusions. The Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family, in a survey of polyamorists in Canada, has found that polyamorists tend to be considerably better educated and higher earning than the general population (Boyd, 2017, pp. 33-38). While this survey makes no claims of having utilized a nationally representative sample, it nonetheless presents us with some interesting findings. If we apply these findings to polyamorists and other individuals engaging in consensual non-monogamy at large, it stands to reason that they would be happier even independent of their relationship choices, given that one of the single greatest impediments to happiness (economic precarity) is less likely to be an issue for them. It seems reasonable to assume that those who are happier with their lives in general would be, on average, happier with their relationships as well, making associations difficult to draw unless demographic variables are assiduously controlled for. The same survey also found that over 90% of respondents identified as white, far higher than the overall Canadian population (Boyd, 2017, p. 24). Both of these findings—the socioeconomic and racial characteristics of polyamorists—are corroborated in the American context by Sheff and Hammers (2011), who note that polyamorists are “mainly white people with relatively high socio-economic statuses” (p. 210). Of course, the overwhelming whiteness and privileged socioeconomic situation of those who engage in non-monogamy are difficult to separate from one another. After all, for all kinds of reasons related to colonization and our social institutions that reproduce white supremacy, the higher rungs of the socioeconomic ladder are disproportionately populated by white people. Insofar as they can be separated, whiteness itself is likely to confer greater happiness (or, perhaps more accurately, protection from factors that are likely to detract from happiness): white people, by virtue of their membership in the dominant group, do not have to contend with the psychic trauma and other difficulties faced
by members of visible minority groups, which in and of itself has consequences for happiness. (This is not to say that white women or white LGBT individuals, for instance, do not contend with sexism or homophobia, respectively. However, white privilege extends even to these individuals, and intersectionality teaches us that women of color and LGBT individuals of color are positioned far more precariously than their white counterparts.) In sum, if individuals in non-monogamous relationships are better educated, higher earning, and whiter than the general population, these factors would partly lead to greater satisfaction in all arenas of life, even without reference to the impact that these relationship forms themselves may exert on happiness. If non-monogamous relationships tend to make individuals happier, then the average non-monogamist would gain this advantage on top of the demographic factors already likely to endow them with higher satisfaction. Conversely, if non-monogamous relationships are a detriment to happiness, then this would be somewhat mitigated by these outside factors.

Factors That May Decrease Non-Monogamous Relationship Satisfaction

Moors et al. (2021), drawing on the concept of minority stress, direct our attention to a factor that may be depressing levels of satisfaction among those who form non-monogamous relationships. Because of society’s privileging of monogamy at the expense of alternative relationships forms (referred to as mononormativity), individuals practicing non-monogamy may find themselves on the receiving end of much social judgment and censure. The authors draw parallels between this mononormativity and the homonormativity that can negatively impact LGBT individuals (p. 1390). Interestingly, this parallel might be even more relevant than we would imagine, given the highly disproportionate number of LGBT people involved in non-monogamy (p. 1390). Importantly, even on top of the harm attributable to the mononormative views of society at large bearing down on those who engage in non-monogamy, Moors et al. argue that non-monogamous individuals can internalize these views, with predictably deleterious psychological impacts (p. 1390). The researchers surveyed a sample of non-monogamous individuals to ascertain a) to what degree they have internalized mononormativity and b) whether this internalization is negatively impacting their relationships. Evidence of correlation between some of the authors’ measurements of internalized mononormativity and respondents’ relationship happiness and stability was mixed; on the whole, however, there was ample evidence that internalized mononormativity can indeed impinge on non-monogamists’ relationship quality (p. 1397). However, as Moors et al. note, the impact of animosity towards non-monogamous individuals is likely attenuated by the general ease with which partaking in non-monogamy can be disguised (p. 1397). That is to say, non-monogamous individuals can generally control the disclosure of their relationship status to others (by, say, simply refraining from engaging in extradyadic displays of public affection), whereas members of many other minority groups do not have this luxury of blending in as readily. In terms of the impact of non-monogamy on happiness, then, Moors et al. provide us with something of a mixed bag. Ultimately, the erosion of social mononormativity would almost certainly have positive impacts on non-monogamists, allowing them to live their
lives more freely and removing internalized negative views they hold about themselves, even if the impacts of their currently internalized mononormativity may not be as profound as the effects of negativity directed at other minority groups.

In a small-scale survey of staff and students at the University of Waikato in New Zealand, Brown (2020) observed the difficulty associated with articulating one’s non-monogamous lifestyle to others, which tracks well with the work of Moors et al. Brown noted that “participants reported that being non-monogamous and/or polyamorous was the hardest identity label to discuss, due to the higher potential for negative repercussions from other staff and students” (p. 107). This has a few implications, pulling in somewhat contradictory directions. For one, the fact that this was the case even in a university setting, which should be among the safest and most welcoming of all social spaces for disclosures such as these, is somewhat disheartening. One can imagine that if it is difficult to divulge participation in non-monogamy in a university setting, it must be even more difficult in less welcoming environments. Brown also notes that “[m]any, but not all, participants had intersecting identities and used multiple labels to describe their genders and sexualities” (p. 107). While Brown does not elaborate on this point, we can assume that participants’ engagement in non-monogamy was not the only way in which they were marked as outside the norm vis-à-vis matters of gender and sexuality. Logically, if these individuals found that communicating their non-monogamy was the most difficult identity to discuss, we can conclude that these other labels (the exact nature of which we can only conjecture but would probably include things like being bisexual, homosexual, trans or otherwise gender non-conforming, etc.) were easier to discuss. Charitably, this could be interpreted as a sign of the success of campaigns for LGBT and gender/sexual minority rights. At the same time, it illustrates a need for greater awareness and acceptance of those who lead non-monogamous lives. While Brown did not endeavor to systematically compare respondents’ relationship satisfaction or stability, it seems reasonable to accept her results as being, at the very least, indicative of a hostile climate for non-monogamous individuals in society. As with the research of Moors et al., it would seem that this hostile climate could potentially erode the happiness and stability of non-monogamous relationships by directly harming the wellbeing of their members.

Another important institutional factor impacting the happiness of non-monogamous individuals is the law. While it is, of course, perfectly legal even for legally married individuals to explore sexual relations outside their marriage in most Western countries, there are many ways that polyamory and other forms of non-monogamy are systematically disadvantaged relative to traditional monogamy in the eyes of the law. Most obviously, it is considered bigamy to attempt to marry more than one partner at the same time. Once one is in a legally recognized partnership, be it a marriage or a common-law relationship, one cannot add additional legal partners beyond this. As Dryden (2015) writes, in the United States, “[w]ere a hypothetical polyamorous triad to seek domestic partnership benefits under any state’s law, they would be denied” (p. 185). The result would doubtless be the same in any Canadian province or territory. This has implications in such varying arenas as healthcare, where extending dental or prescription benefits to additional partners is sure to be denied by the insurance agency, and parenting, where members of a polyamorous relationship may find it difficult to get third or subsequent individuals legally recognized as parents of any children.
For these reasons, as opposed to extending the right to marry to same-sex couples, which was quite simple from an administrative standpoint, allowing people to marry multiple individuals at once would require “a rethinking of taxation, immigration laws and healthcare” (Miccoli, 2021, p. 374). Of course, it is worth mentioning that compared to the LGBT community, there appears to be less of a desire to pursue state-sanctioned unions among practitioners of non-monogamy. While the LGBT community was certainly home to debates over whether marriage marked a kind of domestic assimilation into heterosexual respectability, its members ultimately fought hard for the right to marry; on the other hand, there is broad consensus among non-monogamists—and particularly polyamorists—that marriage is not an institution worth entering into. As Miccoli (2021) writes, “polyamorists strongly oppose marriage as an oppressive, rigid and too formalized institution” (p. 373). For this reason, there is unlikely, at least in the short term, to be any kind of concerted political effort to dramatically alter marriage laws so as to allow for plural marriages. However, this same lack of regard for marriage on the part of many non-monogamists could also mean that they do not consider themselves particularly disadvantaged by their inability to get married. Still, it seems quite probable that the aforementioned difficulties arising from extending health insurance plans to multiple partners, or the thorny issue of declaring three or more people as parents of a child that is being reared by a polyamorous family, to name just two of many potential issues polyamorous individuals may face in their interactions with the state and other institutions, might negatively impact the happiness of non-monogamous families. Granted, these issues are only applicable to certain non-monogamous individuals and families, but they are surely important for those to whom they apply.

**Conclusion**

On the whole, the evidence is mixed as to whether non-monogamous relationships confer greater happiness upon their members than do monogamous ones. In many ways, there are too many complicating factors (demographically, psychologically, socially, etc.) to simply answer the question decisively one way or the other. There is certainly strong evidence that individuals in these non-traditional relationship structures are, in the aggregate, no less happy than monogamists are, and at least some studies support the idea that the former (or at least some subsets thereof) are indeed happier. As unexciting of an answer as it is, it is almost certainly the case that monogamy is right for some individuals and non-monogamy is right for others. At the same time, we must remember that non-monogamists, even as they are disproportionately likely to belong to fairly privileged demographic categories, are swimming against the stream of public opinion. Various social and institutional forces presently stand in the way of consensual non-monogamy being fully accepted: social mononormativity, as well as legal doctrines restricting state recognition of intimate relationships to two individuals, have important impacts upon those who seek multiple partners. This hostile social and legal climate cannot but negatively affect individuals’ emotional and mental wellbeing. Were all these factors removed, it is quite probable that practitioners of non-monogamy would report higher levels of satisfaction with their relationships. There is limited research comparing relationship satisfaction between monogamists and non-monogamists and
(severely) limited research comparing relationship satisfaction by style of non-monogamy. There is a clear need for more research in this area, particularly research that compares the relationship satisfaction of monogamous and non-monogamous individuals while also paying heed to the differences between various styles of non-monogamy. A comprehensive study that, taking up the work of Conley and Piemonte (2021), differentiates between modes of consensual non-monogamy, while also comparing the satisfaction of members of these groups to monogamists, would go a long way to filling gaps in the literature.
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