

# Polyamory as the new monogamy

*Tihana Poslon*

University of Zagreb,  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Department of Psychology  
ORCID: 0000-0002-1810-4305

## SAŽETAK

Ključne riječi: CNM, monogamija, hijerarhijska poliamorija, nehijerarhijska poliamorija

Spoznaje o intimnim odnosima prvenstveno proizlaze iz istraživanja monogamnih veza unatoč tome što alternativni oblici veza postaju sve popularniji izbor, osobito među mladima. Sporazumno nemonogamne veze (eng. consensually non-monogamous relationships, CNM) sve češće zamjenjuju monogamiju. CNM je krovni termin koji obuhvaća tri vrste odnosa (swinging, otvorene veze i poliamoriju) u kojima postoji eksplicitan dogovor između partnera o tome da mogu imati dodatne seksualne i/ili romantične partnere. Između različitih vrsta odnosa koji uključuju seksualnu otvorenost, ali ne nužno i romantičnu povezanost s drugim partnerima, poliamorija se izdvaja jer postoji istovremena emocionalna, romantična i intimna povezanost s više partnera. Iako neki poliamoriju doživljavaju korisnom i prihvatljivom, drugi je smatraju perverznom, amoralnom i neprivlačnom te će se u radu detaljnije razraditi najčešće zablude povezane s poliamornim odnosima. Nadalje, proučit će se karakteristike osoba sklonih upuštanju u poliamoriju, pri čemu su to češće muškarci u odnosu na žene te pripadnici seksualnih manjina u usporedbi s heteroseksualnim osobama. Osim toga, u poliamoriji može postojati hijerarhijski poredak partnera, stoga je korisno istražiti razlike između primarnih i sekundarnih partnera te usporediti različite konfiguracije veza. U konačnici, raspraviti će se prednosti i teškoće vezane uz poliamorne odnose.

## ABSTRACT

Keywords: CNM, monogamy, hierarchical polyamory, non-hierarchical polyamory

Knowledge about intimate relationships stems primarily from research on monogamous relationships, even though alternative forms of intimate relationships are becoming increasingly popular, especially among younger people. Consensual non-monogamous relationships (CNMs) are challenging traditional views of relationships based upon monogamy. CNM is an umbrella term for three types of relationships (swinging, open relationships, and polyamory) in which partners agree to have additional sexual and/or romantic partners. Between different types of relationships that include sexual openness, but not necessarily a romantic relationship with other partners, polyamory stands out because there is a simultaneous emotional, romantic, and loving bond with multiple partners. Although some perceive polyamory as valid, useful, and acceptable, others consider it perverse, immoral, and unattractive. Thus, this paper will consider the most common misconceptions about polyamorous relationships. Furthermore, the characteristics of people who are more prone to polyamory will be explored, with men being involved more often than women and sexual minorities more often than heterosexual people in polyamorous relationships. In addition, there may be a ranking of partners in polyamory, so it is useful to explore the differences between primary and secondary partners and compare different relationship configurations. Ultimately, the advantages and difficulties of polyamory will be discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Scientific research on intimate relationships and family relations is primarily based on monogamous relationships and the assumption that an individual will form a family with a single partner attached to them (Moors et al., 2021). Namely, serial monogamous relationships and sexual exclusivity are considered normative for most people (Brandon, 2016). Schuiling (2003) states that culture is one of the main determinants of choosing monogamy or polygamy. It acts on individuals so that it can support or suppress certain forms of behavior. So, in this sense, the religious system, as part of the culture that includes the metaphysical dimension of laws, commandments, and prohibitions that people tend to obey, is often crucial for choosing a mating strategy. The legal system of most Western nations does not recognize polygamous marriages, even though they are common among certain ethnic and religious groups, such as polygyny (men having multiple wives) in the Muslim community (Thobejane & Flora, 2014). In addition, in mononormative societies, the cultural ideal of love is based on the existence of “the one”, a single partner who fulfills every aspect of an individual’s life; romantic, sexual, and emotional (Bunning, 2018). Thus, most societies view monogamy as the most acceptable relationship form, believing it to be prevalent even in the animal kingdom (Atkins et al., 2011). One of the main benefits of a monogamic bond among animals, birds for example, is favoring biparental care. Thus, male investment in raising offspring is greater, while for most mammals this is usually not the case (except humans) (Schuiling, 2003). However, only 5% of all mammalian species, and 15% of all primates are monogamous (Atkins et al., 2011), which poses the question whether monogamy may be the exception rather than the rule.

Nowadays, there is a growing academic and public interest in the occurrence of consensual non-monogamy (CNM), although its exact prevalence remains unknown (Moors et al., 2021). CNM is an umbrella term for different types of relationships in which there is an open agreement that one or more people involved in a romantic relationship can have additional sexual and/or romantic partners. There are three subtypes of CNM relationships: swinging, open relationships, and polyamory (Conley et al., 2013).

Using large samples of single individuals from the USA ( $N = 3905$ ;  $N = 4813$ ), Hauptert et al. (2017) notes that the number of people who engage in CNM at some point in their lives is just over one in five participants (21.9 % in Study 1; 21.2 % in Study 2). Among them, men (as compared to women), and homosexual and bisexual individuals (as compared to heterosexual individuals) are more likely to declare previous involvement in CNM.

Fairbrother et al. (2019) collected data on Canadian adults ( $N = 2003$ ) which show that 2.4 % of all participants and 4.0 % of partnered participants were, at the time, in an open relationship. 20 % of those participants had previously been in an open relationship and as many as 12 % of them considered this to be their ideal form of a relationship. Media coverage reflects this interest, as can be seen through the emergence of various reality and fictional shows. For example, recent social experiment series called *Open House* explores open relationships, by offering an opportunity to adventurous committed couples to test whether having sexual

relations with other people strengthens their relationship or not.

Open relationships and swinging imply a consensus reached in terms of the possibility of sexual relations with other simultaneous partners (Hauptert et al., 2017). While open relationships refer to a special agreement among partners that one or both can have sexual relationships with other people, and sometimes even emotional ones, swinging is a form of social sex where singles or partners engage in sexual sharing or swapping amongst each other. Polyamory stands out because it includes not only sexual relationships, but also a simultaneous emotional, romantic, and loving bond with several partners who have agreed to participate in this type of relationship (Flicker et al., 2021). The term polyamory originated in the early 90s and comes from the Greek word *poly* (a lot) and the Latin word *amor* (love; Veaux et al., 2014). However, polyamory is a more complex concept than it may seem at first. Such a relationship may involve a different number of people (e.g., triads, quads, etc.), and the ranking of partners as primary (a person who is prioritized over others), secondary, tertiary, etc., can sometimes be recognized (Veaux et al., 2014). Some people in polyamorous relationships do not approve of a hierarchical structure. However, the ones that are in such a structure have made a conscious choice of being in one, for example, by prioritizing some partners over others, or have found themselves in such a situation due to circumstances (perhaps they have unwillingly developed greater dependence with the primary partner because they live and share finances with them) (Balzarini et al., 2017).

In the West, it is common to keep extra lovers hidden or to avoid them, which contributes to maintaining the normative status of monogamy (Wolfe, 2003). Thus, if a person decides that CNM is the appropriate form of relationship, then such relationships could be understood as a real rebellion against traditional Western marriage and typical monogamous notions of love (Wolfe, 2003). Consequently, there is a possibility of stigmatization of individuals involved in polyamory and other CNM relationships. Society often views such people through a mononormative prism which leads to judgment and stereotypes about them being unfaithful (Moors et al., 2021).

Hence, the goal of this paper is to examine a broader social perception of polyamorous relationships, including the most common misconceptions about them, as well as demographic and character traits of individuals who choose polyamory. Differences between primary and secondary partners in a self-identified relationship structure in hierarchical relationships will be discussed, and then they will be compared to non-hierarchical relationships. Ultimately, the emotional and practical advantages and disadvantages of consensual non-monogamy will be considered due to which, for some individuals, monogamy is not only a socially acceptable form of relationship but the only appropriate one.

## **PUBLIC (MIS)PERCEPTION OF POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIPS**

For some people it is probably unthinkable to experience true happiness if their partner is engaged in a romantic relationship with other people at the same time. Yet individuals in polyamorous relationships often describe how true love should be unconditional; freed from traditional monogamous propositions that do not guarantee that an individual will not fall in love with another person (McCullough & Hall, 2003). People in polyamorous relationships often describe the experience of compersion as a feeling of happiness and elation over successfully finding a new partner with whom one is happy, which occurs if someone truly loves another person (Art, 2019). Even though CNM relationships include people who have voluntarily consented to participate and are not unethical, psychologically harmful and immature, they are often described as such (Bunning, 2018).

This has led to the emergence of a negative connotation of the term and the general stigmatization of CNM, especially when it comes to children living with polyamorous parents (Moors et al., 2021). Contributing to this is the saturation of mainstream media with depictions of infidelity and jealousy of people in monogamous relationships which often leads to projections of those issues on polyamory (Séguin, 2019). However, CNM relationships are known as ethical non-monogamy due to an agreement between partners (Veaux et al., 2014). The main element of cheating is not the sexual act itself, but the betrayal of the partner - violation of trust in a relationship - and this is why polyamory differs significantly from infidelity or "cheating" on partners (Moors et al., 2021).

According to Bunning (2018), the most common misconceptions associated with polyamory are as follows. First, as a motive for engaging in polyamorous relationships, people think of a combination of commodification and greed. This view is based on the assumption that people involved in such relationships implicitly seek ways to ensure "goods" such as always having someone available for sexual intercourse and/or emotional support and having the possibility of substituting the partner they are bored with. This is not in accordance with traditional relationships since it is expected to cultivate traditional values of intimacy, love, and emotional receptivity. Greed in polyamorous relationships is explained in terms of challenging the imposed ideal of "the one" since the person wishes to have more than one partner.

The author disputes all the above, arguing that polyamory requires a lot of nurturing for multiple relationships to succeed. Also, greed is defined only through socially accepted conceptions which means that society considers having "the one" partner as the only appropriate option, thus dismissing other relationship configurations. Second, as stated before, polyamory is thought to attract immature individuals and expose people to a variety of unpleasant emotions such as jealousy. The author argues that this may not be true because in such a relationship people are indeed attached to each other and can overcome jealousy, which poses a risk in any relationship (including monogamous ones), through communication, teamwork, and understanding.

The final objection involves the lack of emotional and material resources necessary for a good polyamorous relationship. The roots of this

idea come from polygyny, since women usually depend on their husband's resources. However, people in polyamorous relationships reject the patriarchal assumption that a woman should be dependent on a man, allowing for efficient joint resource management. This includes the financial contribution of each partner in a CNM relationship, as opposed to traditional polygyny.

To thematically group attitudes that individuals have towards polyamory, Séguin (2019), as an uninvolved observer, analyzed 482 comments dealing with polyamory published in three articles in English intended for the general population. He identified five types of views on polyamory which are presented hierarchically from the most to the least prevalent ones: 1) valid and useful, 2) unsustainable, 3) perverse, amoral, and unattractive, 4) acceptable, and 5) flawed.

Commentators who found polyamory valid and useful often described polyamorous relationships as open and honest to defend it and felt no need to define the term because some individuals did not distinguish it from other types of non-monogamous relationships. Additionally, they emphasized the experience opposite of jealousy, so-called compersion, as well as an increase in the perceived sense of intimacy, personal growth, and proactive management of unpleasant emotions such as jealousy and insecurity. Considering the children of polyamorous parents, they emphasized more opportunities for support, guidance, and supervision in comparison with monogamous relationships in which one or two parents need to handle everything: finances, work, schooling, and taking care of a child. In addition, those who openly accepted polyamory believed that individuals should decide for themselves which type of relationship suits them best.

However, several commentators perceived polyamory negatively, which is attested to by the fact that three of the five articulated stances on polyamory indicate negative attitudes. Those who saw polyamory as unsustainable often felt that someone would be hurt because the nature of the relationship is supposedly such as to foster instability and a range of unpleasant emotions that cause a rift in the relationship. However, people in polyamorous relationships often self-report a lower level of jealousy and a higher level of compersion towards their partners (Balzarini et al., 2021; Brunning, 2018). Furthermore, those who perceive it as immoral, unattractive, and perverse often argue that the very occurrence of polyamory leads to the collapse of social values as it collides with social norms that those participants adhere to (Séguin, 2019). They also add that people have evolved to become monogamous, citing jealousy as an example which originates from evolutionary psychology (Séguin, 2019). However, as noted earlier, people can successfully manage their feelings of jealousy by observing their emotional states, working on self-esteem, communicating with their partners, and understanding the insecurity which could be the source of jealousy.

Although the frequency of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is not higher among individuals involved in polyamory compared to the general population, they are often viewed as sex-obsessed and spreaders of STIs (Séguin, 2019). Ultimately, those who considered polyamory to be deficient use the argument that it is not true love and devotion, but that individuals

are lying to themselves that they enjoy such a relationship. This argument is more prevalent among women, who rationalize more often than men (Séguin, 2019). However, polyamorous individuals claim the exact opposite – true love is possible only when a person realizes that one can love more people at the same time and when love towards one person does not compromise love toward another person (McCullough & Hall, 2003).

Conclusively, Séguin's (2009) findings based on thematic analysis cannot be widely generalized because it is qualitative research in which there was complete anonymity of individuals. This could encourage a more extreme expression of one's own views (primarily negative ones) and perhaps a better alternative would be to conduct interviews. Furthermore, the sample of participants was most probably not representative of the general population. Since the goal was to explore what is written about this topic, there is no information on socio-demographic and individual characteristics of commentators, although some of them might be inferred from writing style, attitude intensity, themes and so on. For example, this topic tends to attract people with extreme opinions who are thus more prone to commenting in comparison to those with neutral attitudes.

The prevalence of negative views could also have arisen due to commentators with negative views on polyamory taking the topic personally and having the urge to defend mononormativity more frequently. Individuals who did not have prior knowledge could also have given their opinions, which further led to the circulation of misinformation. Such a controversial issue could also attract so called "internet trolls" who are prevalent in online communities and often post insulting, digressive, and inflammatory comments. Thus, they might leave a negative comment on an article, even though they personally do not have a strong opinion. Additionally, content which he analyzed is often read by highly educated Westerners of average or above-average socio-economic status.

Moors et al. (2021) conducted research on a sample of English-speaking single adults (N = 3438) to approximate the occurrence of interest for, familiarity with and willingness to engage in polyamorous relationships through a questionnaire. Despite the prevailing negative assumptions about polyamory, the authors point out that there is still a small number of individuals (14.2 %) who are not personally interested in engaging in such a relationship but have positive attitudes towards people in polyamorous relationships. Therefore, the question arises as to the characteristics of people who are more inclined to positively perceive CNM, more specifically, polyamory.

Previous research finds younger people to be more positive towards polyamory in comparison to older people which is expected since they are more investigative and open to new trends (Johnson et al., 2015; Moors et al., 2021). Sexual minorities compared to heterosexuals are also more open (Moors et al., 2021), as well as Democrats as opposed to Republicans (Hutzler et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2015; Moors et al., 2021). The influence of traditional worldviews (e.g., conservatism, religiosity) is associated with the expression of more negative attitudes toward polyamory (Hutzler et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2015; Moors et al., 2021). Accordingly, it is noticeable how personally relevant institutions can shape an individual's view on a topic. The promotion of love between only one man

and one woman by the church can be crucial for the interpretation of the aversion felt by religious people towards CNM relationships. On the other hand, sexual minorities often question their own sexuality and sexual norms, which could be related to their positive attitudes. These are only assumptions that need to be further investigated.

To better understand the prejudices that prevail against CNM relationships, Burleigh et al. (2017) suggest zero-sum thinking about love associated with increased devaluation of non-monogamous relationships. It illustrates a black and white thinking that love towards one person automatically disqualifies the possibility of simultaneously loving another person. Zero-sum thinking is characterized by the view that resources within the relationship are scarce and that only one partner in a relationship is entitled to all these resources, with none of them being left for other people. Accordingly, although the reason behind such thinking has not been fully elucidated, the authors suggest that there is a possibility that individuals practicing monogamy have generalized everyday experiences with scarce material resources to abstract resources such as love.

Conversely, it is possible that individuals, through their experiences in monogamous relationships, have learned to apply the logic of zero-sum. This is evident in explaining their negative attitude towards CNM in terms of social justice; the belief that one person in such a relationship exploits others or gets less love than deserved, which in turn presents the other parties involved in the relationship as exploitative. To create a more realistic picture of a polyamorous relationship, it is not enough to just inform people, but to encourage them to evaluate the possible advantages and disadvantages of CNM relationships (Burleigh et al., 2017). According to the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), which states that prejudice and conflict between different groups could be reduced if group members interact with each other, it would be useful to have contact with individuals who practice such relationships so that insight is gained which may dispel the zero-sum perception.

## **REVIEW OF INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS**

### **— HOW LIKELY IS SOMEONE TO PARTAKE?**

Polyamory is a challenge for proponents of the traditional view of relationships because it promotes an alternative lifestyle that involves multiple partners (Veaux et al., 2014). However, sexual relations are not the only type of relations that partners in polyamory have; there is also love, understanding, intimacy, commitment, honesty, and communication between multiple partners (Ziegler et al., 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to study the characteristics of people who step out of the routine and normative view of a relationship and try something new, unknown, and widely stigmatized. Since there is more research on CNM in comparison to polyamory itself, caution is needed when generalizing data to polyamorous relationships.

A recent study by Moors et al. (2021) on a large sample of American participants (N = 3438) notes that 16.8 % of people have a desire to engage in polyamory, while 10.7 % ventured into it at some point in

their lives. Despite a significant proportion (30.4 %) declaring they would engage in a polyamorous relationship again, most of the participants (69.6 %) would not engage in such a relationship again. Interestingly, among the most common reasons for giving up such a relationship, participants have stated that they are too possessive to go through it again or are plagued by emotional aspects of polyamory that they could not adequately control, which is partly in line with jealousy stereotypes about non-monogamous relationships (Moors et al., 2021).

An important contribution to the study of polyamory is the finding that men are almost three times more likely to be interested in polyamory than women and twice as likely to be involved in such a relationship (Moors et al., 2021). From the evolutionary perspective, this is often associated with the fact that a pluralistic mating strategy is more favorable for men than a monogamous mating strategy (Mogilski et al., 2015). According to parental investment theory, this method of reproduction is more beneficial to men due to their lesser role in raising offspring compared to women, who invest much more in children during and after pregnancy (Trivers, 1972; according to Jonason et al., 2012). According to the evolutionary view, this means that men can follow the strategy of having sexual relations with many women because it increases the possibility of their reproductive success by having many children of whom some will survive. In contrast to men, women invest a lot more in their children. First, with pregnancy lasting nine months and second, providing primary care for a child. By having multiple partners, women cannot increase their reproductive success in a way that men can.

In addition, laymen assume that multiple relationships do more harm to women than to men. They believe that compersion is mainly experienced by women who rationalize the polyamorous relationship agreement and cover up dissatisfaction (Séguin, 2019). Sociocultural values are important because they require women, not men, to define their selfhood as depending on monogamy and, if a woman has multiple partners, it will diminish her social value more than that of a man (Ziegler et al., 2014). Monogamy is constructed in a way that emphasizes traditional attitudes towards gender roles with women investing more than men in such a relationship since society often evaluates women's success through their romantic relationships with men. That results in women prioritizing romance and love while limiting their personal educational, career and economic growth. Also, women are socialized to be caring and communal, while men are encouraged to pursue power and money (Ziegler et al., 2014).

However, this still does not explain why women would engage in polyamorous relationships if such a decision puts them at risk of being socially rejected. Sheff (2005) conducted qualitative research which consisted of observations, attending national polyamory conferences, support groups, workshops, and interviews with twenty women and twenty men from 1996 to 2003. Anonymous participants answered a series of initial questions concerning demographic characteristics, entry into polyamory, forms of relationships, and then went through important questions about polyamorous relationships (e.g., parenting, safe sex agreement). Sheff (2005) detected that women cite the possibility of expanding social roles beyond the traditional female gender role and



exploring their own sexuality with the support of a partner (e.g., bisexuality) as reasons for joining polyamorous relationships.

In addition to men being more prone to polyamory than women, research by Moors et al. (2021) suggest that there are also other relevant demographic differences. Despite the possible assumption that older people, compared to younger ones, would be more interested in trying polyamory to get out of the monotony of their own long-term relationships, younger people are more prone to join polyamorous relationships. That could be in accordance with young people having more progressive values such as freedom of choice and opportunity to openly be who they really are (Moors et al., 2021). Research is needed to focus on the difference in perception and engagement between younger and older people in polyamorous relationships, which would take confounders such as a religious value system, education, and conservatism into account. It is possible that the interest of young people has increased due to exposure to media, which is increasingly showing content closely related to CNM relationships, which is in turn probably related to more liberal attitudes (Moors et al., 2021).

Moreover, one could assume that highly educated people, for whom there is a greater possibility of exposure to information about polyamorous relationships and who have achieved greater financial stability, will be more inclined to engage in CNM relationships (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Higher education could also be correlated with higher financial stability, which polyamorous relationships additionally facilitate due to the sharing of living expenses. With that in mind, one cannot expect simple correlations; multiple factors need to be examined. Contrariwise, it has been found that people with a lower level of education are more likely to engage in polyamory than those with higher education (Moors et al., 2021). Perhaps people with less education are more inclined to experience as opposed to investigate about alternative forms of relationships. It is possible that people with a higher education question polyamorous relationships more and search for valuable information to realistically evaluate their personal compatibility with such relationships. However, people with a lower level of education might not have the need for arguments for and against polyamory but perhaps want to experience it first without knowledge about its complexity. These assumptions need to be further investigated.

In contrast to Moors et al. (2021), Hauptert et al. (2017) does not find any differences in engagement in a CNM relationship with respect to age, education level, income, religion, region, political affiliation, or race. Contradictory findings can be explained by different operationalizations of concepts and focusing on only one, and no other subtypes of CNM relationships such as polyamory in the case of Moors et al. (2021). CNM is a complex term that includes various kinds of non-monogamous relationships with some of them being strictly sexual as opposed to polyamory which is specific not only because of sexual, but also romantic involvement of partners.

Several studies have confirmed that homosexual or bisexual individuals are more likely than heterosexuals to engage in CNM relationships (Hauptert et al., 2017; Moors et al., 2021; Rubin et al., 2014). In this case, no difference has been found between men and women in terms of the desire to engage in polyamory or swinging (Moors et al., 2014).

The reason why homosexual and bisexual persons would be willing to engage in alternative types of relationships that are not in line with the mononormative pattern of intimacy may be related to their tendency to question heteronormative models of relationships (Klesse, 2016).

Finally, findings on the characteristics of people interested or engaged in polyamorous relationships are still unclear due to some contradictory results and lack of research focusing specifically on that subtype of CNM relationships, although it is repeatedly confirmed that men are more likely than women to engage in non-monogamous relationships, as are members of minority sexual groups (homosexual or bisexual individuals) compared to heterosexual individuals.

## **PARTNER RANKING AND COMMITMENT IN POLYAMORY**

### **— PRIMARY AND SECONDARY RELATIONSHIPS**

Polyamory comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. Namely, a person in a polyamorous relationship may be in a “Vee relationship“, in which one person has two partners who are not romantically involved with each other (Veaux et al., 2014). Relationships can take the form of a triad, in which three people are involved at the same time, or a quad, which involves relationships between four people, all of whom can, but do not have to be, romantically involved with each other (Veaux et al., 2014). Additionally, polyamorous individuals may be sexually exclusive within a group as part of an agreement or include partners outside the group (Lano & Parry, 1995, according to Klesse, 2006). People in polyamorous relationships can recognize hierarchical partner orders that imply a distinction between a primary and a secondary partner, and non-hierarchical partner orders with all partners being “equal“, although that is not always the case (Veaux et al., 2014). Primary partners are most often those who live in the same household, manage finances together, can be married and have children, or raise children together (Veux et al., 2014). Secondary or non-primary partners most often do not live together or share finances and are generally less involved in each other’s lives than primary partners (Veaux et al., 2014).

Balzarini et al. (2017) conducted research on participants (N = 1308) from the USA who reported having a primary and a secondary partner in a polyamorous relationship and assessed different aspects of the relationship. Findings show that secondary relationships predominate compared to primary ones only in the percentage of sexual intercourse frequency. Primary relationships are viewed as more socially acceptable than secondary ones, with higher levels of partner satisfaction, investment and commitment, more frequent communication between partners and as less secretive. Results of some research show that people involved in polyamory feel higher levels of friendly love and emotional jealousy toward primary rather than secondary partners, but also unexpectedly higher levels of passionate love and romantic attraction (e.g., Flicker et al., 2021; Jiang, 2017). These findings are important because they refute widespread stereotypes that people enter polyamorous rela-

tionships due to dissatisfaction and search for excitement outside the current relationship (Séguin, 2019).

Shortly afterwards, Balzarini et al. (2019) conducted the first study that dealt with partner perceptions and relationship quality in polyamorous configurations and compared them to monogamous relationships. In non-hierarchical relationships there are co-primary (participants indicated both partners as primary partners) and non-primary (participants did not identify primary partners) configurations. Interestingly, although those participants reject the existence of hierarchical relationships, most differences in relationship aspects examined in the 2017 study on hierarchically identified forms of polyamorous relationships are also confirmed in non-hierarchical ones, although somewhat weaker than in a hierarchical relationship.

To be more precise, differences similar to those in self-identified hierarchical relationships exist in non-hierarchical relationships despite partners assuming equality. This refers to the fact that all levels of previously mentioned assessments are lower for secondary and pseudo-secondary partners (partners in a non-hierarchical relationship who were not cohabiting nor in a long-term relationship as opposed to pseudo-primary) compared to primary ones, except when it comes to secrecy and the proportion of time spent having sex. However, the effect sizes in non-hierarchical structures are considerably smaller than in hierarchical ones when it comes to significant relationship quality indicators such as commitment and satisfaction. This could have happened due to the tendency towards equality in such configurations. It was expected and confirmed that so-called pseudo-primary (cohabiting and long-term partners in non-hierarchical relationships) and primary partners are more comparable to monogamous partners than they are to (pseudo)secondary partners. This is in accordance with the fact that although partners perceive non-existent hierarchy, some type of hierarchy still exists.

In order to better understand the more favorable evaluation of the (pseudo)primary partner over the (pseudo)secondary in (non-)hierarchical relationships, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1979) could be useful, regardless of the fact that adult attachment in the romantic sense is still primarily explained through monogamous relationships (Katz & Katz, 2021). Namely, the theory of attachment shows how the experiences of guardians' responsiveness to childhood needs shape different styles of attachment: secure, avoidant, and ambivalent/anxious (Bretherton, 1992). Achieved attachment extends to romantic relationships, so a secure style is most favorable in monogamous relationships (Levy & Davis, 1988). It is associated with greater interdependence, trust, and satisfaction, while avoidant and anxious/ambivalent styles are associated with negative characteristics of a romantic relationship, such as shallow emotionality and low levels of commitment (Levy and Davis, 1988). Nevertheless, for securely attached individuals, the ideal choice of relationship does not necessarily involve monogamy, given that individuals in polyamory need to be prepared for plenty of communication and self-awareness to improve relationships and manage unpleasant emotions such as jealousy (Katz & Katz, 2021).

Flicker et al. (2021) were the first to conduct a survey using two sam-

ples from the USA (N = 225; N = 360) to compare relationship satisfaction and attachment to partners of people engaged in a polyamorous relationship with a hierarchical and non-hierarchical organization. Results indicate that partners in non-hierarchical relationships have greater relationship satisfaction and attachment security than those in hierarchical relationships. Thus, it seems that polyamorous relationships could possibly be accomplished more successfully within non-hierarchical as opposed to hierarchical configurations. Namely, a person's existing attachment to a primary partner may undermine the potential creation of a new attachment to a person considered a secondary partner because most resources are directed to the primary partner (Flicker et al., 2021). However, if this relationship develops without explicitly prioritizing relationships, like in non-hierarchical relationships, attachment is not limited by the presence of other relationships nor can it be compromised by the development of new attachments (Flicker et al., 2021).

Polyamorous relationships come in different shapes and forms, therefore the individuals involved can explore the ideal type of relationship for them apart from traditional monogamy. Yet, it seems that hierarchy also exists in non-hierarchical relationships, although it is not explicitly reported by individuals. Perhaps individuals unconsciously drift towards a preference for one partner over the other. In polyamorous relationships, primary and pseudo-primary partners are perceived more positively in comparison to secondary and pseudo-secondary ones. The reason for that might be the greater amount of time spent with the (pseudo)primary partner and the interdependence, since (pseudo)primary partners often contribute more in terms of finances and other commitments than (pseudo)secondary ones who are preferred for sex. These explanations raise further questions and a need for more detailed research.

## **ADVANTAGES AND DIFFICULTIES OF ENGAGING IN A POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIP**

Polyamorous relationships are becoming more popular nowadays, which emphasizes the need for further clarification of the possible experiences that people in such relationships could have. In general, benefits for an individual involved in a polyamorous relationship could include personal growth, development, self-awareness, a sense of freedom and acceptance due to the unlimited ability to share love and happiness with multiple partners and in relation to that; the already mentioned feeling of compersion (Art, 2019). Also, there is the possibility of expanding knowledge beyond the zero-sum resource point of view, so that individuals in polyamory understand that their partner's infatuation with other people is not threatening and will not diminish their love towards other people (Art, 2019). Asexual individuals, who also participate in CNM relationships, most often cite the possibility of meeting the sexual needs of a partner by means of another person as an advantage since this has not been achieved in a relationship with them (Copulsky, 2016).

Regarding the practical advantages of a polyamorous relationship, the following are discussed: greater financial stability and security due to potential cohabitation and sharing of finances, or the general support of multiple partners who are available when needed (Veaux et al., 2014). Also, the enrichment of one's sex life and, if children are present, greater availability of adults, better parenting, and a reduced feeling of abandonment if someone leaves the relationship (Veaux et al., 2014). There is a growing body of research on homosexual and single parenting but impacts of polyamorous parenting on children remain significantly unexplored and perhaps one of the reasons for that is polyfamily structures being hidden in schools and society in general (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006).

Due to a lack of societal awareness of polyfamilies, many individuals still fear disclosure, misunderstanding, stigmatization, and demonization. The greatest anxiety for most polyamorous parents is related to harassment and stress that their children could suffer once others find out about their families (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2012). Since a polyamorous parenting style is innovative and vibrant, there is the possibility that a threat to children's mental health is posed by the society that condemns and stigmatizes polyfamilies, not the polyamorous family structure itself. In addition to the above, laws in most countries are not designed for polyamorous families. Questions arise concerning a child's birth certificate, like whose name should be listed and who should be registered as the legal guardian of the child.

A polyamorous relationship does not always have to reach its goal of emotional fulfillment (which can also happen in monogamous relationships), but it takes a lot of effort from all parties involved to be successful (Bunning, 2018). Polyamory is often mistakenly equated to a person sleeping with whomever they want, being with whomever they want and whenever they want (Séguin, 2019). However, much more active listening, discussion, respect, trust, and self-analysis are needed (Bunning, 2018). Thus, working on oneself and relationships with multiple partners is primarily an inevitable component of CNM relationships (Veaux et al., 2014). The best way to approach this is the same as in monogamous relationships; through non-confrontational engagement, which includes the ability to listen to the partner without interrupting or reacting defensively, instead of avoiding or denying needs to embrace one's own emotions (Bunning, 2018).

Despite possible advantages, polyamory is not an appropriate choice for every person because it does not automatically imply that they will be less jealous and possessive or more successful in communication and willing to deal with the challenges encountered in this type of relationship (Moors et al., 2021). Therefore, for certain individuals, monogamy is the only appropriate choice, not just a social normative one (Veaux et al., 2014). Even if polyamory were more socially acceptable, the experience of navigating multi-person relationships can be frustrating because one's desires and needs may be limited by or contrary to the desires and needs of other partners (Bunning, 2018). Therefore, polyamory in practice might be frustrating for some individuals given the possible ideal scenarios that they create in their heads before embarking on such a relationship. This is precisely the reason for the need to think about realistic scenarios that

individuals might encounter and what they are prepared to deal with, because that is the best way to assess someone's readiness for polyamory.

## CONCLUSION

Non-monogamous forms of romantic and sexual relationships are becoming an increasingly common alternative to traditional monogamous relationships. The growing interest in CNM relationships should be accompanied by greater research about such phenomena to advance scientific insights into newer forms of intimate and familial relationships. Among the subtypes of CNM relationships, polyamory stands out due to the existence of romantic relationships with multiple partners as opposed to open relationships and swinging, which are characterized primarily by sexual openness. Although people's opinions towards polyamory differ, negative social attitudes still prevail, leading to the social stigmatization of individuals in CNM relationships. That is especially problematic when it comes to polyamorous parents because they often hide their family structure from society in general due to stigmatization.

Polyamory is often mistaken for cheating even though it does not involve betrayal of a partner's trust. This opinion could be facilitated by media depictions of intimate relationships with multiple partners as betrayal in the context of monogamous relationships. Another common belief is that only immature individuals and thrill seekers engage in multiple relationships, even though those involved in polyamory believe that true love is unconditional and involves accepting a partner's new love, resulting in a sense of compersion. Also, individuals in CNM relationships are seen as perverse and immoral, spreaders of STIs. However, it has not been proven that the prevalence of STIs in such groups is higher than among the general population. In addition, people involved in CNM relationships are perceived as threatening to socially accepted Western marriages in which sincere love is only possible with "the one" person.

Regarding the characteristics of people who are more inclined to engage in such relationships, it was found that they are more often sexual minorities (homosexual and bisexual people) compared to heterosexuals and men compared to women. This may be related to questioning one's own sexuality in sexual minorities and the evolutionary advantages and greater social acceptance of such relationships in men as opposed to women. Furthermore, given the different configurations of polyamorous relationships, it is possible to uncover a hierarchical order of partners in which primary and secondary partners are recognized. Relationships with primary partners are characterized by greater social acceptance, greater investment in the relationship, higher levels of commitment and communication, while relationships with secondary partners are often estimated lower on the mentioned aspects, with the frequency of sexual intercourse being higher than with primary partners. However, CNM relationships are not necessarily the right choice for every individual, especially if they are prone to possessiveness in the relationship and are unable to cope with unpleasant emotions.

Additional explanations can be viewed through attachment theory,

which requires further research to assess whether the known principles of monogamous relationships can be generalized to non-monogamous ones. Ultimately, a polyamorous relationship requires a lot of effort from an individual in terms of communication with partners, working on oneself, introspection, and actively listening to partners. Such a relationship extends beyond zero-sum thinking, which dictates that only one individual is entitled to all resources from their partner, such as love and respect. Polyamory may be appropriate for asexual individuals who can further explore their own sexuality, but also for the possibility for their partner to meet their sexual needs outside the relationship.

Children could potentially benefit from polyamorous relationships, but further research on the effects of polyfamily configurations on children is needed. More parents involved could result in greater attention and care provided for the child. Also, there is the possibility of impairing children's psychological well-being related to societal rejection and stigmatization of polyamorous parents rather than the problem being the actual involvement in such a family structure. Counseling centers for polyamorous parents should be readily available to support them and their children. School systems should take on the role of educating children from a young age about acceptance of other people's lifestyles, including polyamory.

In general, many aspects of polyamory remain under-researched. Descriptive and correlational data are most often available due to the use of questionnaires or interviews, which does not allow research to reach a conclusion concerning causality. There is also a lack of longitudinal studies which could be useful in revealing stability of polyamorous relationships and changes happening in such relationships, especially regarding primary and non-primary partners. Instead of keeping polyamorous relationships a secret, there should be more individuals who are coming out to society so that such relationships could be present among people and thus more easily considered normal. In this case, it would be helpful to launch actions that provide more information about this alternative way of life. Hence, documentaries that vividly illustrate polyamorous relationships should be promoted. Furthermore, it would be useful to start campaigns which normalize alternative forms of relationships and inform the public. It is also important to fight for the rights of polyamorous people through political actions, so that they could gain greater rights, especially when it comes to the legalization of polyamorous marriage and raising children together.

## REFERENCES

- Allport, G. W. (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice*. Perseus Books.
- Art, B. (2019). Pros and Cons of Polyamory. *Communities*, 183, 41-43. <https://www.ic.org/pros-and-cons-of-polyamory/>
- Atkins, N., & Bullock, J. (2011, November). Not Monogamous? Not a Problem: A Quantitative Analysis of the Prevalence of Polyamory. Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality [Poster]. Portland State University, Texas. [https://www.academia.edu/1057620/Not\\_Monogamous\\_Not\\_a\\_Problem\\_A\\_Quantitative\\_Analysis\\_of\\_the\\_Prevalence\\_of\\_Polyamory](https://www.academia.edu/1057620/Not_Monogamous_Not_a_Problem_A_Quantitative_Analysis_of_the_Prevalence_of_Polyamory)
- Balzarini, R. N., Campbell, L., Kohut, T., Holmes, B. M., Lehmilller, J. J., Harman, J. J., & Atkins, N. (2017). Perceptions of Primary and Secondary Relationships in Polyamory. *PloS One*, 12(5), e0177841. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0177841><https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0177841>
- Balzarini, R. N., Dharma, C., Kohut, T., Campbell, L., Lehmilller, J. J., Harman, J. J., & Holmes, B. M. (2019). Comparing Relationship Quality Across Different Types of Romantic Partners in Polyamorous and Monogamous Relationships. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 48(6), 1749-1767. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-1416-7>
- Balzarini, R. N., McDonald, J. N., Kohut, T., Lehmilller, J. J., Holmes, B. M., & Harman, J. J. (2021). Compersion: When Jealousy-Inducing Situations Don't (Just) Induce Jealousy. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 50, 1311-1324. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01853-1>
- Bowlby, J. (1979). The Bowlby-Ainsworth attachment theory. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 2(4), 637-638.
- Brandon, M. (2016). Monogamy and Nonmonogamy: Evolutionary Considerations and Treatment Challenges. *Sexual Medicine Reviews*, 4(4), 343-352. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sxmr.2016.05.005>
- Bretherton, I. (1992). The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. *Developmental Psychology*, 28(5), 759-775. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.28.5.759>
- Brunning, L. (2018). The Distinctiveness of Polyamory. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 35(3), 513-531. <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12240>
- Burleigh, T. J., Rubel, A. N., & Meegan, D. V. (2017). Wanting 'The Whole Loaf': Zero-Sum Thinking About Love Is Associated with Prejudice Against Consensual Non-Monogamists. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 8(1-2), 24-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2016.1269020>
- Conley, T. D., Moors, A. C., Matsick, J. L., & Ziegler, A. (2013). The Fewer The Merrier?: Assessing Stigma Surrounding Consensually Non Monogamous Romantic Relationships. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy (ASAP)*, 13(1), 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1530-2415.2012.01286.x>
- Copulsky, D. (2016). Asexual Polyamory: Potential Challenges and Benefits. *Journal of Positive Sexuality*, 2(1), 11-15. <http://journalofpositivesexuality.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Asexual-Polyamory-Potential-Challenges-and-Benefits-Copulsky.pdf>
- Fairbrother, N., Hart, T. A., & Fairbrother, M. (2019). Open Relationship Prevalence, Characteristics, and Correlates in a Nationally Representative Sample of Canadian Adults. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 56(6), 695-704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1580667>
- Flicker, S. M., Sancier-Barbosa, F., Moors, A. C., & Browne, L. (2021). A Closer Look at Relationship Structures: Relationship Satisfaction and Attachment Among People Who Practice Hierarchical and Non-Hierarchical Polyamory. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 50, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01875-9>
- Haritaworn, J., Lin, C. J., & Klesse, C. (2006). Polylogue: A Critical Introduction to Polyamory. *Sexualities*, 9(5), 515-529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460706069963>
- Hauptert, M. L., Gesselman, A. N., Moors, A. C., Fisher, H. E., & Garcia, J. R. (2017). Prevalence of Experiences with Consensual Nonmonogamous Relationships: Findings from Two National Samples of Single Americans. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 43(5), 424-440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2016.1178675>
- Hutzler, K. T., Giuliano, T. A., Herselman, J. R., & Johnson, S. M. (2016). Three's a Crowd: Public Awareness and (Mis)Perceptions of Polyamory. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 7(2), 69-87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2015.1004102>
- Jiang, H. (2017). Different Types of Love in Polyamory: Between Primary and Secondary [Undergraduate Honors Thesis, Western University]. Western Libraries. [https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/psychd\\_uht/40/](https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/psychd_uht/40/)
- Johnson, S. M., Giuliano, T. A., Herselman, J. R., & Hutzler, K. T. (2015). Development of a Brief Measure of Attitudes Towards Polyamory. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 6(4), 325-339. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2014.1001774>
- Jonason, P. K., Valentine, K. A., & Li, N. P. (2012). Human Mating. In V. S. Ramachandran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior (2nd Edition)* (pp. 371-377). <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-375000-6.00195-6>



- Katz, M., & Katz, E. (2021, August 23). Reconceptualizing Attachment Theory Through the Lens of Polyamory. *Sexuality & Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-021-09902-0>
- Klesse, C. (2006). Polyamory and its 'Others': Contesting the Terms of Non-Monogamy. *Sexualities*, 9(5), 565-583. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460706069986>
- Klesse, C. (2016). Contesting the Culture of Monogamy. In N. L. Fischer, L. Westbrook, & S. Seidman (Eds.), *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies (3rd Edition)* (pp. 325-613). Routledge.
- Levy, M. B., & Davis, K. E. (1988). Lovestyles and Attachment Styles Compared: Their Relations to Each Other and to Various Relationship Characteristics. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 5(4), 439-471. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407588054004>
- McCullough, D., & Hall, D. S. (2003, February 7). Polyamory: What It Is and What It Isn't. *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, 6. <http://www.ejhs.org/volume6/polyamory.htm>
- Mogilski, J. K., Memering, S. L., Welling, L. L., & Shackelford, T. K. (2017). Monogamy Versus Consensual Non-Monogamy: Alternative Approaches to Pursuing a Strategically Pluralistic Mating Strategy. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 46(2), 407-417. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-015-0658-2>
- Moors, A. C., Rubin, J. D., Matsick, J. L., Ziegler, A., & Conley, T. D. (2014). It's Not Just a Gay Male Thing: Sexual Minority Women and Men Are Equally Attracted to Consensual Non-Monogamy. *Journal für Psychologie*, 22(1), 38-51. [https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/psychology\\_articles/132/](https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/psychology_articles/132/)
- Moors, A. C., Gesselman, A. N., & Garcia, J. R. (2021). Desire, Familiarity, and Engagement in Polyamory: Results from a National Sample of Single Adults in the United States. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 619640. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.619640>
- Pallotta-Chiarolli, M. (2006). Polyparents Having Children, Raising Children, Schooling Children. *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review*, 7(1), 48-53.
- Pallotta-Chiarolli, M., Haydon, P., & Hunter, A. (2012). "These Are Our Children": Polyamorous Parenting. In A. E. Goldberg, & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *LGBT-Parent Families* (pp. 117-131). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-4556-2\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-4556-2_8)
- Rubin, J. D., Moors, A. C., Matsick, J. L., Ziegler, A., & Conley, T. D. (2014). On the Margins: Considering Diversity among Consensually Non-Monogamous Relationships. *Journal für Psychologie*, 22(1), 19-37. [https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/psychology\\_articles/133/](https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/psychology_articles/133/)
- Schuiling, G. A. (2003). The Benefit and the Doubt: Why Monogamy?. *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 24(1), 55-61. <https://doi.org/10.3109/01674820309042802>
- Sheff, E. (2005). Polyamorous Women, Sexual Subjectivity and Power. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 34(3), 251-283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241604274263>
- Sheff, E., & Hammers, C. (2011). The Privilege of Perversities: Race, Class and Education among Polyamorists and Kinksters. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 2(3), 198-223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2010.537674>
- Séguin, L. J. (2019). The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Lay Attitudes and Perceptions of Polyamory. *Sexualities*, 22(4), 669-690. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717713382>
- Thobejane, T. D., & Flora, T. (2014). An exploration of polygamous marriages: A worldview. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(27, Pt. 2), 1058-1058. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n27p1058>
- Veaux, F., Hardy, J., & Gill, T. (2014). *More Than Two: A Practical Guide to Ethical Polyamory*. Thorntree Press.
- Wolfe, L. (2003). *Jealousy and Transformation in Polyamorous Relationships* [Doctoral Dissertation, Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, San Francisco, CA]. <http://www.drleannawolfe.com/Dissertation.pdf>
- Ziegler, A., Matsick, J. L., Moors, A. C., Rubin, J. D., & Conley, T. D. (2014). Does Monogamy Harm Women? Deconstructing Monogamy with a Feminist Lens. *Journal für Psychologie*, 22(1), 1-18. [https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/psychology\\_articles/134/](https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/psychology_articles/134/)