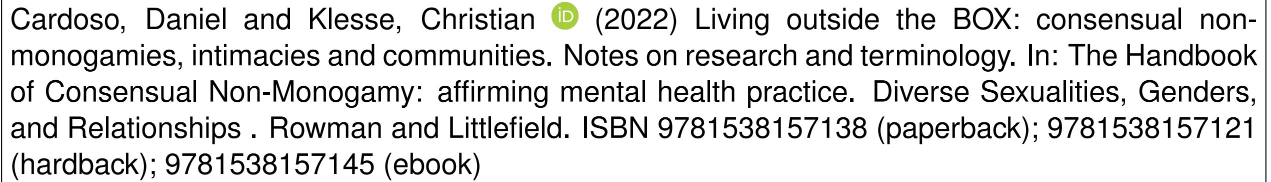

Please cite the Published Version

Cardoso, Daniel and Klesse, Christian (2022) Living outside the BOX: consensual non-monogamies, intimacies and communities. Notes on research and terminology. In: The Handbook of Consensual Non-Monogamy: affirming mental health practice. Diverse Sexualities, Genders, and Relationships . Rowman and Littlefield. ISBN 9781538157138 (paperback); 9781538157121 (hardback); 9781538157145 (ebook)

Publisher: Rowman and Littlefield

Version: Accepted Version

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‘Living outside the Box – Consensual Non-Monogamies, Intimacies and Communities. Notes on Research and Terminology’

Daniel Cardoso and Christian Klesse

Introduction

‘Consensual Non-monogamy is an umbrella term for any relationship type in which people are not monogamous’, explains the sociologist Elisabeth Sheff (Sheff, 2016). As we will show in the course of this chapter, Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM) comes in many different shapes, which is why we also use the term in plural. In many contemporary societies, Consensual Non-Monogamies (CNMs) present a paradoxical phenomenon: they have become more visible and many are intrigued by alternatives to the dominant ideal of emotionally and/or sexually- exclusive couple bonding. At the same time, (most) CNMs are frowned upon, seen to lack respectability and are socially rebuffed and legally discouraged, if not criminalized.

In this chapter, we will provide an overview of key terms, concepts and current debates on CNMs through an engagement with relevant research in the field. Our goal is to provide a grounding for the more specific and focused chapters that follow by describing and evaluating major social, cultural, and political trends that impact on CNM lives. We hope this will contribute to an appreciation of the complexity and diversity of CNM lives, and the various conditions under which they exist. One of the key arguments of this chapter is that different forms of CNM are framed and positioned differently within the public sphere. Different CNM practitioners, too, experience different forms of marginalisation and misrepresentation and may have different access to tools of creating counter-discourses or forms of pushing back against mainstream ideas about relationships. A nuanced

understanding of the values and concepts that shape contemporary debates on CNM is key to dispelling the stereotypical myths by which CNM practitioners – and the various gender, sexual, cultural and religious communities many of them are part of – are represented in the mainstream media and culture. A critical interrogation of mainstream perceptions of CNM lives is a key precondition for successful affirmative therapy with CNM clients.

While this chapter draws primarily on an evaluation of the international, interdisciplinary CNM research literature, it has also been shaped by our own experience as both CNM practitioners and as professional researchers of CNM intimacies. Professionally, we have done independent research in the UK (Christian) and in Portugal (Daniel), and currently we co-operate on a European Union-funded comparative research into CNM activism and media representations in Portugal and the UK (CNM-MOVES, conducted by Daniel as a Marie Sklodowska-Curie Action research fellow, with Christian acting as a mentor/supervisor. We will draw on some insights derived from this latter project in some parts of the article).

The chapter is structured as follows: In the first part, we address some of the common myths about CNM relationships which stem from the deeply ingrained belief that only monogamous and couple-based intimacies are healthy, natural and ethically defensible. After having addressed questions of power and marginalisation, we will continue to show up the vast diversity of ways of life and styles of intimacy under the umbrella of CNM. The third part of the chapter synthesizes research into how CNMs have been (mis)represented within the media sphere. We consider stereotypical media presentations as a significant problem for CNM communities and key factors in the marginalisation of CNM lives. In the fourth section, we review important existing work within psychology that gives advice on how therapists can work effectively, responsibly and respectfully with CNM clients. In the conclusion, we summarise our key arguments and explain why we believe that an understanding of the

cultural and political dynamics around CNM – and of the concepts, languages and voices of CNM practitioners – are of high relevance for the therapeutic process.

CNM – Stigma and De-legitimation

CNM identities and ways of life are poorly understood and often approached with judgemental attitudes. In many social contexts, the experience of both personal and legal discrimination demands that people who practice CNM navigate marginalisation and hostilities, which in turn create manifold social problems in their everyday life. We suggest that the normative validation of monogamy, couple-based intimacy and the core family based on biologically defined reproductive roles runs deep in the fabric of most societies. As a result of this, CNMs are usually cast as deviations from the norm. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that *different forms of CNM are perceived differentially* (with some being deemed to be more acceptable than others) (Rambukkana, 2015a). Moreover, reactions towards those who identify with or practice CNM further depend on other aspects of their social background, cultural affiliations and (multiple) identifications. We therefore argue that an intersectional understanding of power is important for understanding the complexity challenges that people in CNM relationships have to work through. Intersectionality is a concept that emerged in the debates of Black feminists and has sustained decolonial and queer critiques of BIPOC scholars and activists of contemporary intimacies, as they are inflicted by racism, sexism, heterosexism, class subordination and geo-political domination (Crenshaw, 1991; Eng, 2010; Ferguson, 2007; Wekker, 2016) . The Boston-based anti-imperialist Black feminist Combahee River Collective (The Combahee River Collective, 2017) *(* defined intersectionality famously as *the simultaneity of multiple oppressions,* which shape the lives of Black women in white supremacy in multiple and complex ways (see Taylor, 2017). Patricia Hill Collins (2000)talks of *matrices of domination.* A nuanced understanding of the complex power relations around CNM are important for therapists for a

variety of reasons. Research tends to indicate a common lack of training and the prevalence of bias and judgemental attitudes towards CNM ways of life within the psychological professions (Grunt-Mejer & Chańska, 2020; Klesse, 2010; Klesse, 2011; Weitzman, 2007).

In the following section, we will first present a social theory of power around non/monogamy that is attentive to the intersectional dynamics of its articulation. This will allow for a more nuanced understanding about the contexts in which identities, practices and communities focused on CNM are formed. In our discussion, we will emphasise the *duality* of the effects of discrimination and oppression, which unfolds into damaging effects both on the psychological level and in terms of social standing, and participation and access to spaces and resources, among others through an engagement with the politics of recognition ((Dahl et al., 2004; Fraser, 2000).

Mono-normativity/ Anti-promiscuity and the Conditionality of Power

Critical sexuality scholars and CNM activists have dubbed social, legal and economic pressures that create a normative horizon of expectations to enter couple-based intimate bonds as *mononormativity.* 'Mono-normativity is based on the taken for granted allegation that monogamy and couple-shaped arranged relationships are the principle of social relations per se, an essential foundation of human existence and the elementary, almost natural pattern of living together', suggests Bauer (Bauer, 2010, p. 145). Mononormativity has profoundly shaped our social understanding of love, intimacy, partnership, marriage, family, parenting, the life course, eroticism and sexuality (M. Barker & Langdridge, 2010a, 2010b; Klesse, 2019). Beyond its more narrow and specific personal and relational meanings, mononormativity further plays a significant role in the discourses shaping the understanding of more abstract concepts such as culture, civilisation, faith, nation, race and community (Klesse, 2016; Rambukkana, 2015a; Sanchez, 2019; Schippers, 2016)., and recent research has highlighted the specific intersecting difficulties of racialized minorities in the USA, when

it comes to their CNM experiences (St. Vil, Bay-Cheng, et al., 2020; St. Vil, Leblanc, et al., 2020).

Monogamy is a central representative of added value in many cultural and religious interpretations of ethics and or morality, which sustains practices of de/validation, judgement, surveillance, governance and policing. From the mononormative point of view, "every relationship which does not correspond to this pattern, is being ascribed the status of the other, of deviation, of pathology, in need of explanation or is being ignored, hidden, avoided and marginalized", Bauer points out (2010, p. 145). As a result of this, there is a profound lack of visibility of alternative models (whether in terms of real-life CNM relationships that are out in public or media images of CNM intimacies or cultures). Beyond this, mainstream culture even lacks the linguistic tools to make CNM intimacies intelligible and communicable (Ritchie, n.d.; Ritchie & Barker, 2006). Moreover, Gillian Deri (2015) has shown that mononormativity is also sustained by practices of cultural regulation through microaggressions (for example, in the form of gossip, teasing or erasure through ignorance or silencing). Some examples of this include the myriad journalistic pieces that talk about CNM as "consensual cheating" (an evident oxymoron), the way CNM people are told that they "do not know what love is", or the looks of disgust and contempt that a CNM family deals with when doing something as risqué as being on the subway while holding hands.

Microaggressions may also go hand in hand with a culture of public scorn and hostility, which aims to undermine the dignity of CNM-identified people.[1] As a regime of power, mono-normativity has potentially damaging effects on the well-being of those who practice CNM. In brief, in everyday life, those who publicly identify with or practice CNM are likely to experience stigmatisation, marginalisation and exclusion. In the following

[1] It is widely acknowledged that microaggressions are part of wider patterns of structural or systemic forms of oppression, as it is also the case with racism (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019).

sections, we will show that people are affected differentially by these forms of exclusion depending on how their subjectivity is framed within intersectional power relations. We will later expand upon this argument in the literature review section, when we show that also different types of CNM are subjected to different modes of validation and de-validation.

Couple-normativity and Anti-promiscuity, Difference and Differentialist Regimes of Marginalisation

Mononormative culture privileges couple relations at the expense of other relationship models and also singleness (Budgeon, 2008, 2016; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004).. At the heart of mononormativity, it is possible to identify the distinctive expectations and injunctions related to what Roseneil et al., (2020) call *couple normativity*. Couple normativity manifests itself differently, depending on the wider social, cultural and legal context. It is intermeshed with and works alongside distinctive norms and values regarding gender performativity, heterosexual partner choice, and an investment into procreative familiality and futurity (Butler, 2004; Edelman, 2004), which places the 'family' as a project for the world of tomorrow, a project for the continuation of the world of today through child-rearing and generational handing down of traditions and norms. Couple norms are further structured by the ideologies regarding religion, nation, ethnicity and race (around expectations that people of the same background will only partner with others of that background), class divisions, ageism, and practices of racism (Cohen, 2001; Haritaworn, 2016; Patton-Imani, 2020).. While mononormativity often intersects with heteronormativity, it cannot be equated with the privileging of heterosexual bonds (Schippers, 2016); many commenters have emphasised that people in same-gender relationships, too, can benefit from the structural privilege that flows from performing or displaying ostensibly monogamous primary relationship or family ties. Mononormativity thus plays in close tandem with heteronormativity and homonormativity (Duggan, 2014).

This intersection occurs even within CNM, as with the existence of hierarchical relationships – that is, a relationship system where different partners have *a priori* superior decision powers that impact other people and other relationships of which they are not a part of. This is also sometimes called, especially on online discussion groups, *prescriptive hierarchy*, to contrast with *descriptive hierarchy*. However, such usage is a misnomer that, in itself, that already reveals a normalization of power imbalances through the acceptance of 'hierarchy' as a descriptor. In fact, the word hierarchy comes from the Greek 'hierarkhēs', which literally translates to 'sacred ruler' or 'divine power' – a power that cannot be questioned, that intrinsically sits over, and rules over, all others. Taking this into consideration, hierarchy can only be applied when there are non-negotiable, non-appealable, power dynamics and imbalances in place. So-called 'descriptive hierarchy' is, then, the result of people allocating or being allocated different personal resources (time, affection, money, energy, and the like) to different people in their lives, not out of a preordained 'divine' mandate, but out of structural, situational or personal reasons. This allocation, even when it does not arise out of a structural or deterministic relational hierarchy, can just as much uphold and reinforce mononormativity.

Apart from regulating the emotional nuances and the make-up of primary intimate bonds, mononormativity is also concerned with questions of sexual desire and behaviours. Within hegemonic western intimate cultures, intimate couple relations are usually expected to be based on love and beyond that on mutual sexual attraction, involving a sexual connectivity, thus problematizing the (erotic) subjectivities of those who are aromantic, asexual or prefer to be solo[2] within a couple relationship, and rendering dysfunctional or flawed, intimate partnerships that are not sexual at all (Barker & Gabb, 2016). At the same

[2] 'Recently the word "solo" has emerged in some communities to reflect a choice to be your own primary relationship. This may involve a decision to retain independence, to live alone, to spend some time in solitude, and/or to avoid the relationship escalator model of increasing closeness in relationships,' Meg-John Barker explains (2019, p. 46).

time, mononormativity implies that proper loving partnerships are sexually exclusive, stigmatising all CNM relationships that include an option of sexuality with multiple people. [3] On this level, mononormativity often goes hand in hand with what Klesse (Klesse, 2005, 2007a) has referred to as anti-promiscuity.

The term *promiscuity* is usually used in a negative way to refer to the behaviour of having sex with many people. Charging a person with being 'promiscuous' tends to imply negative value judgements, implying over-sexualisation, indiscriminate partner choice, selfishness, irresponsibility, lack of care for self and others, animality, debasedness, low moral standing, lack of cultivation or civilisation, etc. Anti-promiscuity discourses have been part of the oppressive repertoires of sexism, racism, antisemitism, class subordination, colonialism, etc. providing justification for the subordination of groups and individuals labelled this way (Klesse, 2007a; LeMoncheck, 1997). Sexist, racist and classist variants of anti-promiscuity allegations have also legitimised gross forms of violence against those deemed to transgress norms of propriety and respectability (Collins, 2006; Pheterson, 1986; Tanenbaum, 1999; Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989). Anti-promiscuity orientations are also deeply ingrained in legal practice. [4] It is further evident that CNMs within LGBTQI+ cultures and communities are subjected to particularly rigid rejections (Gove, 2000; Hakim, 2019; Klesse, 2007a) , especially in spaces where mainstream LGBT politics and groups have adapted a more assimilationist or integrationist approach (Aviram & Leachman, 2015; Cardoso, 2014).

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[3] Monogamy is not always defined primarily with regard to sexual exclusivity. The term may also be used to underscore the primacy of an emotional band. Reversely, consensual non-monogamy may also be used by some people to denote a relational context that refers to multiple emotional (rather than sexual) bonds.

[4] Adultery laws have been one of the many ways in which the state and juridical systems have implemented mononormativity. Other examples, mentioned by Elizabeth Emens (2004) who suggests that monogamy is a 'core institution' of US law, are bigamy laws, marriage laws, custody cases, workplace discrimination, and zoning laws (Delman, 2015; Sweeney, JoAnne, 2014). While the legal discrimination of CNM intimacies and sexualities is complex and pervasive within legal practice. A singular focus on the discrimination of CNM relationships in their exclusion from civil marriage that has been common in recent debates on marriage equality dies not do justice to this complexity.

Intersectionality and Mis/Recognition

The fact that anti-promiscuity discourses operate in a differentialist manner targeting subjects depending on their specific location or positionality within the wider field of power indicates that we need an intersectional perspective to fully grasp the complexity of power relations around CNM intimacies (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2005). Intersectionality has provided a rich repertoire of critical theories that helps to understand how different axes of power and discrimination may play out in complex and contradictory the intimate and sexual lives of people, depend on their specific location within the matrices of domination (see, Collins, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2016). While intersectionality has been used to serve as a critical and analytical tool for power and oppression, it has also served as a strategy of survival for those exposed to multiple forms of othering and oppression. Suryia Nayak (2015) traces this legacy of the term intersectionality in the work of Audre Lorde (see, Lorde, 2007, 2020).

The processes in which personal (subjective) and group-based (collective) traits of difference have fed into harm and injustice can also be understood through (post-Hegelian) critical theories of recognition. In his discussion of difference and multiculturalism, Charles Taylor (1994) argues that withholding recognition can amount to an act of epistemological violence. ‘Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being’ (1994, p. 25). The interpretation that recognition needs to be understood as a vital human need is even more strongly developed in the work of Axel Honneth (2005) who renders recognition on the intersubjective level (that is to say, at the level of processes that occur between people) key for the creation of identities, self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Since mutual recognition of each other as equal subjects is a precondition for fully being human, Honneth’s

struggle for justice implies a critique and transformation of the institutions and structure that reproduce inequality.

Feminist approaches to intersubjective psychology, such as Jessica Benjamin's (1988) psychoanalytic account of domination in intimate and loving relationships, too, deploys the lens of a Hegelian theory of recognition. While the theme of mis/recognition has been used to explore harm, damage and injustice on the level of psychology and intersubjective relationality, some theorists in the (post-)Hegelian tradition have emphasized that a systematic withholding of recognition and wilful acts of misrecognition tend to have profoundly material effects in the lives of marginalised groups, too (see Butler, 1997; Fraser, 1997; Fraser 2000; Richardson, 2018). In particular, Fraser has shown that politics of mis/recognition are bound up with questions of redistribution and political representation (see also, Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Hayden & Schick, 2016).

With regard to the question of how power relations affect people who practice CNM, Fraser's theory of social justice (focusing on the three dimensions of recognition, redistribution and political representation) allows us to see that discrimination and oppression stretches across the private/public from the personal to the social and political realms. This may create social problems on the level of identification, emotional well-being, intimate and sexual relations, and access to vital resources (housing, financial services, legal protections, spaces for participation, basic entitlements bound up with full citizenship, etc., see Klesse (2014a). As stated above, problems in all of these areas may create social problems that clients may want to present in a therapeutic context.

In the following section, we look at key literature and research on CNM, providing an overview on key terminology. Our major aim with this section is to highlight the diversity of forms of CNM as distinctive ways of life or intimate and erotic practices and to show how these different from of CNMs are themselves shaped by intersectionality in the sense that

different forms of CNMs appear to be profoundly gendered, racialized and classed in the public perception and read through a heteronormative lens, depending on the context in which they have manifested themselves, culturally and historically.

Overview of the Research Literature on Consensual Non-monogamies

As suggested in the beginning of this chapter, CNM has emerged as an umbrella term relating to a vast array of relationship constellations, cultural practices, relational and/or familial ideologies and value orientations, as well as socio-sexual or socio-political identifications. Before we explore the multiplicity of CNMs and to present a brief and cursory introduction to the academic knowledge available about them, it is worthwhile to reflect upon the key assumptions that underpin the usage terminology of CNMs.

The term "consensual non-monogamies" exists alongside other terminology, such as "ethical non-monogamies", "responsible non-monogamy", or "designer relationships"[5] (Michaels & Johnson, 2015) to encapsulate a host of different relationship configurations and identities, with wildly varied backgrounds and socio-historical traditions. This is, as noted in literature, is a way to distinguish, not from monogamy, but from forms of non-monogamy which are considered unethical, irresponsible or non-consensual. These forms are often, but not always, "conducted in secret without the other partner's consent", and usually termed *infidelity*, *cheating* or *adultery* (Sheff, 2020, p. 882).

In fact, as mentioned by several writers, there is no consistent hard line between monogamy and consensual forms of non-monogamy (Ferrer, 2017), although it can be argued that there is an irresolvable tension between the socio-political system that can be called mononormativity (Pieper & Bauer, 2005), compulsory monogamy (Emens, 2004; Rothschild, 2018) or monogamous thinking (Vasallo, 2018), and all forms of relating that are based on

[5] It should be noted, however, that "designer relationships" can in fact include forms of what would technically be considered monogamy, albeit founded in a critical, anti-normative praxis.

the critical appraisal and redressing of structural and situational power inequalities in intimate relationships. This, however, does not mean that some structures of relating are superior or inferior to others, but that specific or concrete processes of relating within a particular relationship configuration either align and/or are at odds with the normative power relations that govern the respective context in which they are enacted.

Such a perspective enables us to consider that putative descriptors of relationship configurations – such as monogamy – do not actually describe an objective and atemporal given set of behaviours and beliefs, but rather serve as ways to articulate processes of belongingness, cultural or moral superiority; one such example is how the millennia-spanning definition of monogamy (at least in Europe) has changed drastically (Foucault, 2017, 2019), or how concepts like *marriage* or *sexuality* need to be historically contextualized to be meaningful (Phillips & Reay, 2011).

It also means that deploying *ethical*, *consensual* or similar monikers is less so about objective behaviours, and more so about defining a group against other groups. While this separation, as noted above, has mostly to do with practices deemed unethical, the subset of groups and identities that fall outside layperson considerations of what is ethical or unethical is still often aligned with white-centric approaches to family building (by, for example, routinely excluding or discriminating against religious-connected polygamy (Johnson et al., 2015; Rambukkana, 2015b; Vasallo, 2015), or an ironically sex-negative approach that redeploys the concept of *promiscuity* (in spirit, if not in letter) (Klesse, 2005, 2007). It is also important to keep in mind that within so-called self-defined forms of ‘consensual’ of non-monogamy, consent often remains a fraught subject within specific relationship-internal dynamics (see Klesse et al., this volume)

Over the past few decades, and specifically in the Global North or Western(ized) parts of the globe, there has been some expansion in the area of terms meant to address different

types of consensual non-monogamies, in the context of wider historical processes of sexualization, individualization and psychologization (Cardoso, 2017). While concepts and identities like 'open marriage' (O'Neil & O'Neil, 1972)[6] and 'swinging' (Gould, 1999) often are dated to the USA and to the 1950-70's, new terms coined since come from people's experiences of feeling like there are no good descriptors for what they feel and/or do, relationship-wise (Ritchie & Barker, 2006).

It should be noted, again, that there are no definitive definitions for any of these identities or practices – the definitions themselves are contested (Klesse, 2006). This is especially evident in the case of polyamory, considering the increasing visibility of this term in particular (Moors, 2017); even the history of how the term was created is unclear (Cardoso, 2011). In fact, recent research that compiled a host of definitions of polyamory from academic, activist and mainstream sources (Rubel & Burleigh, 2020) shows that they emphasize different aspects – wherein polyamory is considered a belief or preference, a relationship status, an agreement, and/or requiring (romantic) love or a long-term commitment; or any combination of any of these. Furthermore, laypeople's perceptions of how to define polyamory seemingly include even more elements than this (Cardoso et al., 2021), clearly demonstrating that this process is ongoing, transcultural and extremely complex.

A major point of contention, as several authors point out, is whether these concepts can be properly understood as identities (as opposed to practices; Klesse, 2014b; Rubel & Burleigh, 2020; Tweedy, 2011), although recent theoretical models seek to overcome this dichotomy (Barker, 2017, 2018; van Anders, 2015). In the light of these conceptual challenges, it is important to note that the descriptions provided below should not be treated

[6] Please note that while the expression "[to be in] open marriage" was already in usage in the 19th century, it was meant to describe a marriage that was not conducted in secrecy and had nothing to do with non-monogamies.

as definitive. Our aim is more modest: we seek to capture some of the most prevalent traits of the affiliated practices as they are commonly understood. This does not mean that all clients will subscribe or agree with the descriptions and definitions proposed, and we emphasize the importance of exploring with clients what their relationship(s) mean to them and how they conceptualize and organize them. In the following, we will briefly discuss some of the key modalities of relational practices that have been discussed under the heading of *consensual non-monogamies* (CNMs) in the research literature.

The term *open relationships* is a common denominator for dyadic relationships, in which partners have agreed upon the potentially non-monogamous character of the bond; almost always this only encompasses sexual activity, and in much rarer cases non-dyadic romantic bonds. Open relationships thus may be sexually and in certain cases sexually and emotionally open to involvement with others. Depending on the definition applied there may thus be different degrees of acceptance regarding certain types of connections or different intensities of bonds outside the open couple relation (Schott, 2014). While partners in open relationships may insist on sharing (romantic) love only with each other, they may allow for temporary affairs or also longer lasting erotic bonds with friends, self-described *fuck buddies* or BDSM play-partners (see Seitensprung Fibel, n.d., Oliver Schott on friendship). People that practice open relationships often take great care to protect the security and stability of the primary bond through the agreement on relationship rules (Weeks, et al., 2001; Wosick-Correa, 2007, 2010). There is a growing market of guidebooks that promises to instruct people in the key skills of making open relationships work (e.g., Matik, 2002; Neustädter, 2016; Taormino, 2008, see also (Klesse, 2007b).

Sociological research since the 1980s, has repeatedly confirmed how deeply engrained the practice of open relationships is in particular within gay male relational cultures (Adam, 2010; Coelho, 2011; Heaphy et al., 2014; Seidman, 1992; Weeks et al.,

1997). While the topic of gay male open relationships (as well of other gay male CNMs) is widely written about in the social sciences (and is also frequently commented upon in the media, see e.g. (Baume, 2021), lesbian, bisexual and queer women's involvement in open relationships (or other modalities of CNM), tend to be less frequently studied (Deri, 2015; McLean, 2011; Munson & Stelboum, 1999; Wandrei, 2018).

The idea of open relationships has a long history and has been bound up with discussions about intimacy and sexuality in many counter-cultural currents and social movements that have also focused on the politics of personal life (Klesse, 2018, , 2021; Pieper & Bauer, 2005; Red Collective, 1978) . A historical genealogy can also be drawn to the practices and debates around free love that was pervasive in certain spectra of socialist or anarchist movements in the 19th and 20th centuries (Goldman, 2005; Gornick, 2011; Greenway, 2014; Lowe, 2014; Rafanelli, 2014).`. Debates about free love as a framework and ethical principle for open relationships did also resonate with a growing emphasis on mutuality and equality within novel conceptualisations of marriage under the idiom of conjugal or companionate heterosexual partnership (Collins 2003, Finch and Summerfield 1999). Free love has been a historical precursor also for the reconceptualization of open marriages as a distinctive form of CNM (O'Neil & O'Neil, 1972).

People that practice open relationships emphasise their commitment to their primary partner with an emphasis on the freedom of individual partners to engage in outside sexual encounters and/or affairs and loving relationships that are expected to remain limited in depth and commitment. In case of the latter, it is usually as part of an open relationship arrangement (such as in certain polyamorous constellations), where the distinction between primary and secondary relations is common (Balzarini et al., 2017; Willis, 2018).

Open relationships may also provide a good basis for partners to explore joint sexual encounters with other people, whether this is in a threesome or group-sex context (Frank,

2013; Harviainen & Frank, 2018; Schippers, 2016).. Swinging, too, is usually a form of non-monogamy that is engaged in by couples, often also by married (cisgender man-woman) partners (deVisser & McDonald, 2007; Frank, 2008; McDonald, 2010). Both group sex and swinger cultures have blossomed in Western countries as a result of a liberalisation of sexual mores since the 1960s, which evolved in tandem with a liberalisation of laws regarding marriage and divorce, sexual offences legislation, the improved and more equitable access to contraception, and the commodification of sexuality (Evans, 2004; Segal, 1994; Weeks, 1986, 2000) ., partially also driven by sexual liberationism as a political ideology (Poland & Sloan, 2006).

While we have indicated in the discussion so far that open relationships may be welcoming of partners' outside engagements of a certain level of emotional depth and intimacy, there tends to be a strong emphasis on the couple bond, an expected limitation in terms of emotional depth with regard to other relationships and frequently a stronger emphasis on sexual experience/exploration. While we see an affinity between and potential overlap of open relationships with polyamory[7], a strong and principled distinction is frequently made by advocates of either one of the other modality of CNM (Schott, 2014). The Minneapolis-based sex and relationships therapist, Renee Divine, L.M.F.T., explains the difference between the concepts in the online edition of *Women's Health Magazine:* 'An open relationship is one where one or both partners have a desire for sexual relationships outside of each other, and polyamory is about having intimate, loving relationships with multiple people.' (Canning, 2018). The emphasis on a commitment to being open to multiple loving relationships is a constant feature of most definitions of polyamory (Deri, 2015; Emens, 2004; Klesse, 2007a; Rambukkana, 2015a; Schroedter & Vetter, 2010). The term

[7]For example, Sheff (Sheff, 2014) indicates the majority of the polyamory relationships she studied in her longitudinal US-based research involved a primary relationship as a key structure.

polyfidelity is used by some to indicate a closed and committed multi-adult unit of partners that do not wish to expand (West 1996).

While some definitions of polyamory also consider casual sex to be a possible feature within polyamorous ways of life (Klesse, 2006; Lano & Parry, 1995), many authors, advocates and practitioners emphasis the absolute centrality of the concept of love. For example, Deborah Anapol, author of many popular and influential publications on polyamory defines the term as follows: 'I use the term polyamory to describe the whole range of lovestyles that arise from an understanding that love cannot be forced to flow or be prevented from flowing in any particular direction. Love, which is allowed to expand, often grows to include a number of people" (Anapol, 2010, p. 1, see also Anapol, 1997). Similarly, Lano and Parry consider polyamory to be a synonym for "more loves than one" that "helps to emphasise that there is more than just sex at the issue in non-monogamy" (both quotes, Lano & Parry, 1995, p.v). As noted above, however, there is also a risk of turning this emphasis on love into an anti-promiscuity narrative that would see some forms of CNM ranked higher than others, socially and/or morally.

There has been an intense debate on the question how the understanding of love in polyamorous relationships differs from love in more conventional romantic couple relations, with authors highlighting both ruptures and continuities (M. Barker et al., 2013; Klesse, 2011a; Szachowicz Sempruch, 2018; Wilkinson, 2010). The Usenet newsgroup alt.polyamory suggests that the love shared with more than one person may manifest itself either sexually, emotionally or spiritually, or in combination of different layers of such sentiments and or motivation, depending on the desires and interpretations of the people involved in a relational dynamic (*Alt.Polyamory Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)*, 1997). Emens (2004) sees polyamory as a practice or disposition entailing a set of value orientations, including care for the other and care or the self with a key emphasis on honesty and consent,

self-knowledge, self-possession, and personal integrity (see also Wosick-Correa, 2010). Gusmano (2019) foregrounds the centrality of an ethics of care within the building of polyamorous relationships. Polyamorous relationships do not fit any ready-made moulds and may change their shape as constellations evolve throughout time. This notwithstanding, polyamorous cultures have generated novel terms and iconic representations as short-cuts to communicate about certain relationship constellations. Because of this, we may think about the relational landscape of polyamory as a kind of 'patterned multiplicity.' (Klesse, 2019). This is clearly articulated in how laypeople (polyamorous and not) understand polyamory to be defined at the intersection of emotions, behaviours and potentials (Cardoso et al., 2021). This three-sided definition encapsulates complex dynamics that deal with intrapersonal, interpersonal and sociocultural dynamics and assumptions, and shows that both *doing* and *feeling* operate within an opening up of potential forms of redefining what are *valid* modes of relating.

As mentioned above, it is quite common in polyamorous contexts to differentiate between primary, secondary or tertiary relationships to denote differences in terms of depth, precedence, or degrees of commitment (Sheff, 2014). While some polyamory practitioners are comfortable with this way of creating structure and stability within their relational lives by the usage of such terminology, others are uncomfortable with the implied hierarchization (Balzarini et al., 2017). There exists also a catalogue of symbols (such as geometrical signs or letters) that are used as a shorthand in communicating the make-up, structure or current state of polyamorous relationships. Terms such as 'triangle' or 'quad' (but also 'pentacle, 'sextet', etc.) signal the number of people involved in a multi-adult relationship constellation. Similarly, the usage of letters, such as V, Y, Z, W or X (in upper case) can help to explain what kind of connections exist between different partners in a more complex polyamory constellation (which is also often referred to as a 'polycule') (Schroedter & Vetter, 2010).

People in polyamorous relationships (like those in other CNM contexts) may or may not be involved in child-rearing or parenting practices (see Abbott & Boyles, this volume).
The creation of the term polyamory is frequently credited to Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart (1990), although variations of it can be identified already for the 1950s and 1960s (*Polyamory in the News*, 2010), and even so this origin point has been in dispute (Cascais & Cardoso, 2013). The concept has gained popularity throughout the 1990s and has spread from an original confinement to mostly spiritualistic counter-cultural circles (Anapol, 1997; Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004; Aviram, 2010). in the USA to different constituencies, being nowadays discussed in a global public media sphere. Polyamory has a strong mooring in different counter-cultural milieus and communities in many countries (including queer, queer-feminist, trans-feminist, environmental activist, anarchist and other left-wing, BDSM, and neo-pagan settings), the make-up of which differs depending on the local context (Kaldera, 2005; Klesse, 2007a; Shannon & Willis, 2010; Sheff & Hammers, 2011; Song, 2012). In some of these contexts, polyamory may be an integral part of a politicised worldview or of a holistic political practice, bound up with (among others) the ambition to transform heteronormative gender orders or to develop more sustainable forms of intimacy (Cardoso, 2019, see also Klesse et al., on queer politicisation,this volume).

It is difficult to speak generically about the composition of local polyamory communities and we encourage therapists and counsellors to familiarise themselves with the debates about polyamory and CNM in their region. This means taking into consideration issues around ethnicity and race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation, and others – all of this interact and intersect with peoples' lived experiences and frameworks around CNMs. As outlined above, we would also like to emphasise diversity within the practice of CNM and the importance of looking at CNM and poly phenomena through an intersectional lens. With

regard to discussions and the literature, we find the following observations and developments noteworthy:

People of all genders and sexual identities, orientations, dispositions or preferences may feel drawn to polyamory (Emens, 2004; Klesse, 2014a)

. Research in the USA suggests that many polyamory communities are predominantly shaped by heterosexual practice (Sheff, 2014), but there is also ample research that documents polyamorous practices and conversations about polyamory in LGBTQIA+ communities (Deri, 2015; Klesse, 2007a, 2007b; Munson & Stelboum, 1999; Pain, 2020; Richards, 2010; Sanger, 2010; Shernoff, 2006). There is in particular an extensive literature that explores the intersections between bisexuality and polyamory (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2003; Baumgartner, 2021; Braida, 2021; Daly, 2021; Klesse, 2021; Monro, 2015). There is further research that indicates the strong involvements of people who practice BDSM (or kink) in polyamory and vice versa (Bauer, 2010, 2014; Kaldera, 2010; Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

While the early wave of research into polyamory in Western countries tended to produce research samples that were predominantly white and middle class (Klesse, 2012, 2014b; Sheff & Hammers, 2011),

, more recent research attests to the prevalence of the practice of polyamory among Black people, People of Colour of Indigenous people (Haupert et al., 2016; A. Moors et al., 2021; Patterson, 2018; Smith, 2016; St. Vil et al., 2021; TallBear, n.d.).. Likewise, the common assumption that polyamory was primarily a middle-class phenomenon has been challenged in journalism and research (Krohn, 2019; Moors et al., 2021). Against the backdrop of the inherent diversity of polyamorous practices and of the communities engaged in them, it is important for therapists to refrain from ready-made views of polyamory, and to take the respective cultural setting of clients as starting point for critical investigation.

The approach of *relationship anarchy* has also been influential in discussions about CNM within different communities of practitioners. Relationship anarchy shares some of the tenets of polyamory, but differs through its assertive refusal to make any value-loaded distinctions between romantic, sexual or so-called 'platonic' relationships. Andie Nordgren (2012), who popularized the term with a pamphlet published first in 2006 in Swedish, argues that love is a non-exhaustive emotion or resource and contests the common practice ranking relationships, with romantic-sexual relations being on top, taking precedence over friendships, other form of kin and non-romantic erotic bonds. Contesting hierarchization links relationship anarchy to a profound critique of 'amatonormativity' (Brake, 2012, 2013, 2017), i.e. the mystification or romance and its stylization to one of the most cherished experiences, which a person necessarily should have in their life. The Blog 'The Thinking ARO' defines relationship anarchy as follows:

> A relationship anarchist believes that love is abundant and infinite, that all forms of love are equal, that relationships can and should develop organically with no adherence to rules or expectations from outside sources, that two people in any kind of emotionally salient relationship should have the freedom to do whatever they naturally desire both inside their relationship and outside of it with other people (The Thinking Asexual, 2013).

In contradistinction to most interpretations of polyamory, relationship anarchy is more explicitly opposed to hierarchization, less inclined to manage relational life through rule-based behaviours, and has a somewhat stronger emphasis on individual freedom or a more expansive notion of consent (depending on how the emphasis is set). The Thinking Asexual (2013) suggests that relationship anarchy is particularly well equipped to accommodate

asexuality, aromanticism, and mixed orientation sexuality.[8] Roma De las Heras Gómez (2018) presents an interpretation of relationship anarchy that goes far beyond an individualistic way of life or intimate style, describing it as a political philosophy that contributes important insights for queer-feminist politics. While there is a significant amount of conceptual, theoretical and personal reflection on relationship anarchy available (often in the form of blogs and other online publications), empirical research into this modality of consensual non-monogamy has so far been rare (for exceptions, see Bennion, 2020; Manley & Goldberg, 2021).

While polyamory refers to having multiple intimate relationships with multiple people, the terms polygamy refers to being married to multiple people. Polygamy is a customized practice in many societies, often within legal frameworks. Yet even within societies in which monogamy is enshrined in law, for example, through anti-bigamy legislation (Emens, 2004), polygamy may be practiced in informal ways within certain communities, leading to *de facto* marriages involving multiple married partners (Bano, 2008). Polygamy is not frequently included in discussions of polyamory, or even the larger umbrella of CNM. There are few exceptions (Emens, 2004; Rambukkana, 2015a; Schroedter & Vetter, 2010; West, 1996)..

This is primarily because of differing positions regarding the gender politics implied in conventional forms of polygamy. While both polyamory and polygamy are gender-neutral terms, most forms of polygamy are often strongly conventionalised and rule-bound and may allow multiple marriage only within certain gendered constellations. Polyandry refers to the customized practice of women marrying multiple men, whereas polygyny is the much more common practice of men marrying multiple women (Therborn, 2004).. For Stacey and Meadow (2009), the emphasis of formalisation alone is already a major distinguishing factor

[8]Yet there is, as we have shown earlier, a strong confluence between bisexuality or plurisexuality (by The Thinking Asexual 2013 referred to as 'mixed orientation sexuality'). Authors have also emphasised the relevance of polyamory for asexual communities (Scherrer, 2010). The point regarding amatonormativity holds without any further qualification being necessary.

that sets polyamory apart from polygamy: ‘Polyamory, literally many loves, *not* many spouses, moreover, is less an alternative form of marriage than an alternative to marriage at all’ (2009, p. 193). Furthermore, with polyamory activists now seeking the legal recognition of CNM unions as a next major political goal (Rosengren-Hovee, 2021), one of the fundamental distinctions between polygamy and polyamory may soon become moot and seeking to ground such a distinction upon a state-sanctioned formalisation of the relationships (or lack thereof) might end up turning out to be more of a red herring rather than an analytically valid observation.

Emens (2004) considers the point of view that practices of polygamy that are based on the principles of feminist solidarity could potentially be included in polyamory, even if people involved may not use the term, but stresses that gender-based hierarchy in conventionalised forms of polygamy render polygamy incompatible with the gender-egalitarian politics advocated by polyamory movements and communities. When compared with the majority of polygamous (and here in particular polygynous practices), ‘[o]ne of the most distinguishing characteristics of polyamory is that it allows women multiple partners’ argues also Elisabeth Sheff (2014,p. 28). The different gender practices within polyamory and conventional polygamy are the main distinguishing element between polyamory and polygamy in most discussions of the subject.

In the course of the many years of intense controversy in the face of marriage equality campaigns in the USA and Canada, the opponents of reform proposals to include same-gender partners in the institution of civil marriage frequently deployed slippery slope arguments that suggested that same-gender marriage would lead to widespread *promiscuity* (a word that is clearly used by such groups in order to deploy the aforementioned negative stigma associated with sexualities) and the legitimisation of marriage rights for polyamorous and polygamous partners (Aviram & Leachman, 2015; Klesse, 2016, 2018a).

This led many LGB activists and their allies in the marriage equality movement to distance themselves from both polyamory and polygamy, casting the former as immoral and the latter as patriarchal and backward. In the course of these debates, racist framings of both Mormon and Muslim polygamy were reactivated and reformulated in a new discursive context (Denike, 2010a, 2010b; Klesse, 2018a; Lenon, 2016; Park & Philosophy Documentation Center, 2017; Rambukkana, 2015a). Although we take the stance that the right to choose multiple partners should always be an option for everybody within any relational context, we think that the categorical exclusion of polygamy (including polygyny) from the term 'consensual non-monogamy' assumes that polygamy *can never be consensual* or that it is *non-consensual by default.* This in turn implies the framing of women in such relationships as generically and universally victimised, irrespective of any consideration of their voices. As we stated at the beginning of this section, we consider it important to remain alert to forms of violence, abuse and oppression within all relations, irrespective of their labelling and self-identification. Therapists who work with clients who are in (faith-related) polygamous marriages (or have been at any point in their lives) are well advised to equip themselves with the cultural knowledge that may help them to understand their client's interpretation of their experiences (if this is not something they do not draw upon already) – in the same way that those who work with clients in (faith-related) monogamous marriages. In this section, we have clarified some key terminology and provided an overview on current research and debates on CNM. In the following section, we will explore the significance of media presentations for the cultural framing of alternative relationships.

Overview of Research into Consensual Non-monogamies and Media Representations

Media representations help shape the way we understand the world around us, and also help us to become acquainted with realities that are socially or physically distant from the ones where we find ourselves situated. In this regard, the role between media

representations and stereotypes and discrimination is strongly connected, as several authors (e.g. van Dijk, 2012) have noted. And while new media and social networks have made it possible for more people to produce and disseminate content – and thus for a greater plurality of self-representation from different individuals and communities, often helping to shape those same communities (Cardoso, 2019) – it is nevertheless also true that diversity of production does not mean freedom from constraints. In this regard, complex interactions are established between what are often called 'opinion bubbles' on social media, but also access to a wider gamut of, for instance, news outlets with views that differ from one's own (Flaxman et al., 2016).

Furthermore, and given that the overwhelming majority of both mainstream media and social media are privately-owned, it is often the case that the representations that have the most visibility, credibility and potential for amplification are the ones that align with, and reinforce or naturalize, the current hegemonic ideology vis-à-vis a certain topic or intersection of topics (van Dijk, 2012). The ensuing result is often that minoritized communities are expelled, driven out or silenced from entire platforms on a corporate whim (Ashley, 2019), and that matters dealing with sexuality (e.g., digital sex work) are often particularly targeted through these practices (Jones, 2015). As noted above, the hegemonic ideology in contemporary Western(ized) societies is that of mononormativity (Pieper & Bauer, 2005), which means that monogamous relationships are often seen as the only ones that are valid or even 'real' and considered socially acceptable or desirable. Compulsory monogamy (Rothschild, 2018) must therefore be understood within the wider context of cis-heteronormativity and of other hegemonic elements that pertain to normative sexuality, and which Rubin (2007) described as belonging to the 'Charmed Circle'. This complexity and conditionality is evident when, for instance, Hollywood celebrities are – as it frequently happens – portrayed in (assumed) CNM relationships in a way that is invasive and

fetishizing, but does not result in them becoming social outcasts or losing their class-based privileges.

It is important for therapists to keep these power dimensions in mind for two main reasons: first, both therapists and their clients have been systematically exposed to the ideology of mononormativity, which has the potential to impact their respective biases and stereotypes about all relationship configurations, or to consider that CNM is a topic to broach only with regards to those already practicing or interested in CNM. Secondly, the various types of CNM and the ways they are represented might create expectations on both clients and therapists that privilege some forms of CNM over others, or who essentialize and narrow down the different ways in which it is possible and valid to be CNM, thus replicating structures of inequality within the area of CNM itself. In fact, this second point has been termed "polynormativity" (Zanin, 2013). Polynormativity not only impacts the perceptions and understandings of relationship structures as such, it also reinforces, as previously mentioned, the way in which only certain social groups (white, middle-class, educated, normatively attractive and able-bodied) are able to access being represented and having their voices heard.

Although there is still much research to be carried out on this, and longitudinal data is still hard to come by, there is increasing evidence that, at least in some countries, not all forms of CNM have the same visibility. For instance, and according to data from the CNM-MOVES research project, in the span of a decade, "polyamory" was referenced in the Portuguese written press in about 74% of the articles featuring CNM, as compared to "open marriages" (25%) or "relationship anarchy" (2%) (Cardoso, 2020a), while data scraped from the MediaCloud service from the UK and USA (from January 2010 to December 2020) shows that swinging and open marriages are still referenced more often than polyamory, but also that overall there has been a noticeable growth in media attention to CNMs. The data

from MediaCloud are corroborated by a more in-depth look at written news coverage from the UK over a span of five years (2010-2014), where the term "open relationship(s)" shows up 89% of the times, compared to 16% of the times for "polyamory" (Cardoso, 2020b)[9].

Older qualitative research (Ritchie, 2010) which focused on 19 articles on polyamory published between 2004-2008 notes that there has been a focus on everyday life stories of polyamorous people, and that its ideological construction hinges on separating polyamory from infidelity and also, crucially, from other forms of CNM like swinging and so-called casual sex. This further reinforces the point that different modes of CNM are represented differently. These representations might not be isomorphic with how communities approach such issues, but there is evidence to support that communities themselves engage in multiple forms of hierarchy-reaffirming discourses (Klesse, 2006). It also points at the complex relationship between sexuality and relationship orientation – where both a de-emphasizing of sex and an over-emphasis on sex occur, depending on whether the analysis is driven by a critique of the normativity of allosexuality (i.e. assumption that human beings are necessarily sexually attracted to other human beings) (in the latter) (Scherrer, 2010) or a critique of "respectability politics" (in the former).

These results can be read alongside recent research that looked at USA Google searches (Moors, 2017) to understand if public interest in CNM has been growing, and which types of CNM are garnering the most attention. In that study, searches for both polyamory and open relationships were consistently increasing over time, but the same was not true of swinging. It can be hypothesized that the greater presence of swinging in the media has nurtured the feeling among members of the public that they are sufficiently informed (and thus looking for information on it less frequently), although dedicated research is necessary to

[9] Part of the work on this chapter, and specifically these results, were made possible due to funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 845889, given to the CNM-MOVES project.

confirm whether that is indeed the case, and whether the uptake of terms like polyamory has in fact unwittingly produced more stigma against swingers.

Outside of the realm of journalism, however, monogamy and non-monogamies take a different relevance, and are presented in specific – if increasingly diverse – ways. As Esther Saxey (2010, p. 32) notes “literary plots of monogamy contribute to a wider cultural plot through which individual relationships gain their meaning”. In fact, "[...] monogamy and plot have a particularly striking relationship [...] [since] they have developed in tandem with one another - the monogamous plot, and the narrativized understanding of monogamy" (2010, p. 24). Saxey’s argument puts into relief how the stories that circulate within social spaces help define and frame the narratives available for individuals to make sense of their own lives, and to create and challenge expectations around relating. It also shows that monogamy and non-monogamy are enmeshed in a mutually-definitional relationship, not just at the superficial, linguistic level (where ‘CNM’ is in itself a form of definition that hinges on a hegemonic practice that is then denied), but also in the ways that compulsory monogamy works by foreclosing the possibility of CNM.

It is important to grasp this framework to understand how analyses of fictional representations of CNM are fundamental to see how popular culture articulates and connects discourses about relationships with discourses about gender, sexuality, class and race. Mimi Schippers’ (2016, 2019) seminal works demonstrate – through the analysis of selected media texts in different formats – how certain representations of CNM can help us problematize hegemonic masculinities, whiteness and heteronormativity. They also clearly show that polynormativity continues to be one of the main aspects of CNM representation, and that a different way to look at relating, and kinship overall, is where resistance can be found; “finding paths of transformation rather than assimilation is especially imperative within the contemporary context of the material deterioration of family security under the pressures of

austerity […] and the rise of neo-fascism in the United States and Europe" (2019, p. 14). Again, such a connection shows how modes of representation can open up or close down different ways for people to imagine themselves and their lives to be. These results are in line with explorations of other oeuvres – such as Jacob Engelberg's (2018) analysis of monosexism and bisexuality in Gregg Araki's work, and its connection with representations of CNM; Angelica Town's (2020) thesis working on *Shameless* and *American Horror Story: Hotel* to show how pop culture both normalizes and stigmatizes CNMs; Apryl A. Alexander's (2019) analysis of *Insecure* shows clearly how the Black CNM community in the USA is underrepresented in mainstream media, and how shows might help with "providing better information to researchers, clinicians, media, and the public" (2019, p. 11).

To sum up, media representations are an important part of the wider cultural perception and productions of CNMs as a way of life and are implicated in practices of inclusion and exclusion. We therefore suggest that a reflexive awareness of media representations (both with regard to political journalism and popular culture) is a significant element of the background information for therapists who work with CNM populations.

CNM and Therapy-focused Psychological Research

Throughout the chapter, we have attempted to relate considerations regarding how the research findings and media practices discussed might be relevant to those seeking professional health support, be it mental or physical, and for therapists themselves. In this section, we synthesise our suggestions, elaborating them through a review of the findings about discrimination and stereotyping against CNM people in health services, with the aim of producing a more robust and comprehensive set of guidelines for therapists on how to work with CNM clients. We then bring to the fore what existing research, professional bodies, and activist groups have shown to be relevant to change and implement in the therapy room.

The role of what Rose (1998) termed the ”psy sciences” has steadily grown in power and influence within Western(ized) culture, not only in a professional sense, but especially in a sociocultural one. As Rose (1998) maps out, technical terms from psychology have infiltrated everyday parlance, and psychology-connoted perspectives are a fundamental part of how people perceive themselves, and how they understand their place(s) in the world, in confluence with processes of individualization.

This connection is particularly evident in issues that relate to sexuality and intimacy, where the introduction and development of a *scientia sexualis* (a ‘science of sexuality’) (Foucault, 1994) has historically resulted in the pathologization, persecution and social excision of experiences and peoples who are seen as deviant or abnormal, and in their objectification as a means to produce science, rather than beings with personhood (Foucault, 2006). This, in turn, allows for the constitution of a *normal* or *healthy* sexual subject, with the *prope*r psychological dispositions – ones that conflate with gender, race and class privileges: ‘proper’ sexuality is white, masculine and affluent. As Gayle Rubin (2007) points out, the definition of ‘good sexuality’ is never static, but rather a process of tension between different social actors. Thus, we can see that the influence of the ‘psy sciences’ can both be turned into nefarious ends (as, e.g., in conversion ‘therapy’) or might assist in undoing some of its own harms (e.g., the role of expert witnesses in court cases that seek to discriminate against sexually minoritized individuals).

Both of these examples demonstrate the power of psychology, the positive and negative roles it can play, and its historical responsibility in producing harm for those who live non-hegemonic lives. This is important for clinicians to keep in mind, as it means that there are systemic hurdles that need to be considered both by those who deliver therapy, and by those who might want to seek it out. Often, the expressions of these systemic issues can be heavily normalized and thus harder to acknowledge. One such example is the frequency with

which therapy aimed at people in intimate relationships is often dubbed *couples'* therapy, thereby potentially alienating many people in CNM relationships who might not conceptualize their connections as aligning with the term “couple”, within the area of family therapy (Jordan, 2018).

Presence of medical and therapy bias has been reported in literature consistently. As Lorien Jordan and colleagues (2017) note, there are several levels at which power imbalances and processes can present themselves: in terms of social discourses about monogamy and CNMs, within the way clients process and co-create their relationships, and in the relationship between clients and therapists. In this latter point, they note how “many therapists are trained to take the view that extradyadic engagement is necessarily harmful” and that “few family therapists challenge the monogamy narrative” (Jordan et al., 2017, p. 7).

In a study using vignettes of different types of CNMs and different mental health issues, with 324 participants (Grunt-Mejer & Łyś, 2019), researchers noted that people in CNM relationships were evaluated by therapists and trainees as inferior to people in monogamous relationships on a host of different aspects. Further the clients' issues in the vignettes were more commonly associated with the relationship structure in the case of CNM scenarios, with further qualitative inquiry showing that there was a “tendency of psychotherapists [in the study] to pathologize clients who consciously and openly decide to have a nonnormative relationship” (Grunt-Mejer & Łyś, 2019, p. 17). A personal and professional experience-based reflection (Brown, 2015) on therapeutic practices with gay men who are or might thinking of being in sexually open relationships notes how heteronormative and mono-normative assumptions held by therapists about the importance of sexual exclusivity might impact this specific minority.

Another study, conducted in Poland, drawing on media-published psychology and sexology experts' opinion pieces about CNM relationships reinforces these findings, by

noting how those pieces are often negative and deeply moralizing and mononormative (Grunt-Mejer & Chańska, 2020). Similar results were found in a much bigger sample (5 years) of news media in the UK who publish opinion pieces and 'sex advice' type columns (Cardoso, 2020b).

There are potential connections between therapists' characteristics and their being more or less accepting of CNMs – in one non-representative US study involving therapists, being younger, more socially liberal, more willing to enter into a CNM relationship, and being LGBTQ+ were positively correlated with holding more positive views on CNM relationships (Stavinoha, 2017, pp. 115–118).

While the above studies and sources focused mostly on the discourse by therapists themselves, and self-reported attitudes, several other studies focused on reported situations of positive and negative engagements between people in CNM relationships and therapists or doctors. As we will show, these studies demonstrate differing levels of reported discrimination by health professionals, but overall still very high levels.

A recent publication that dealt with this topic was Pallotta-Chiarolli's (2020) literature review focusing on gender and sexual minorities' needs in this area. As the author noted, there are four non-CNM specific issues that are often faced by sexual and gender minority persons, and which also apply to CNM individuals: "erasure, exclusion by inclusion, absence of intersectionality, and pathologization" (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020, p. 370). Broadly, these refer to how the existence of CNM lives is ignored or purposefully excluded from theoretical and empirical considerations, subsumed into the lives and experiences of monogamous lives, that the existing information on the topic is mostly based on white, middle-class, and Anglo-centric samples, and that CNM lives are often framed as an expression of a pathology or psychological deformation. As the author notes, these issues become the more relevant as many CNM people exist at the intersection of multiple axes of discrimination and

disadvantage. McCrosky (2015) conducted qualitative interviews and analysis with non-monogamous women who reported several challenges when accessing sexual health resources (as covered elsewhere on this volume).

The prevalence of discrimination against CNM people from therapists and clinicians varies by study and, according to our knowledge, there are no nationally statistically representative numbers available for that phenomenon. Witherspoon (2018) found 16% of respondents saying that they had been discriminated against by a mental health professional, from a sample of 1,246 participants recruited online in the USA. Schechinger and colleagues (2018) note that, in their study, around 35% of respondents noted that clinicians had incorrect knowledge about CNM, and that almost 21% noted that their therapist had assumed that their clients are monogamous by default, among other negative attitudes and behaviours. Karin Wandrei (2019) notes that online platforms meant to help the public find therapists who specialize in the issues relevant to clients still have not caught up with CNM as a field, which might prevent people from finding adequate care, or over-estimating the competence of their caregiver in a specific field or topic. At the same time, it needs to be noted that people who practice CNM and belong to other minoritized identities within the LGBTQI+ and Kink spectrums, meet an additional set of challenges (Moon 2007, 2010, Klesse 2010, 2011, Clarke et al. 2010, Peel 2014).

There are several sources that aim to provide lists of best practices and guidelines for how to work with consensually non-monogamous clients. As of late, there have been relevant documents by official bodies, the most exemplary of them being the one from the American Psychological Association (2021), where CNM is listed as one element among others, in the area of sexual and relationship diversity, where stigma and harmful attitudes from society at large and from therapists leave this group in a more vulnerable position.

Adrienne Bairstow (2017, p.343) summarizes their own recommendations as: "(a) educating oneself about nonmonogamy; (b) identifying one's own values and beliefs related to nonmonogamy; (c) working with the couple's definition of nonmonogamy; (d) being aware that partners may have varying concerns about nonmonogamy; (e) addressing infidelity if present; (f) avoiding assumptions about the ways nonmonogamy will impact the relationship; and (g) recognizing that opening a relationship is an ongoing process". While some of these recommendations do come across as couple-centric and more geared towards typically cisgender heterosexually-read couples who are delving into CNM, there are several points here that bear emphasizing. There is the issue about how meanings given to practices and identities vary across different people, different communities and social situations: not everyone will mean the same by "nonmonogamy" or "polyamory", and even "infidelity" might still be an operative concept in certain CNM contexts (e.g., understanding it as a breach of a relationship agreement). Therefore, stopping to think about therapists' own definitions and their clients' ones is fundamental to the process – and then intersect that with how race, class, gender, and other markers, may imply further distinctions.

Marianne Brandon (2011) notes on the importance of addressing monogamy as an often implicit assumption within therapeutic relationships and how that can result in problems both for monogamous and non-monogamous clients, especially considering how common cheating (i.e., extra-dyadic sexual and/or emotional involvement, in the context of a monogamous relationship) is; as Meg-John Barker (2011, p.285) said in response, it is fundamental to bring up "these ideas quite early on in therapy, to make explicit what the relationship rules are that each person is following".

Berry and Barker (2014) note how, in existential therapy, it is fundamental to "bracket off biases and presumptions, and to control any temptation to overemphasize single aspects, a technique of particular importance when dealing with openly non-monogamous clients".

Henrich and Trawinski (2016, p.386-387) note that therapist bias can affect clients, and that it can come from three main sources: "cultural conditioning that favors monogamy; lack of exposure to CNM; and issues with infidelity in therapists' private lives", and that "therapists serving poly clients can develop and use *metaskills* [to] enhance the therapist's ability to relate authentically to clinical situations that may be novel or disarming". *Metaskills* refers to skills that are both generic and foundational and allow for the acquisition of other, more applied and contextual skills. In the context of the therapy with CNM clients this includes, for example, the ability of active listening, a non-judgemental attitude, the preparedness and ability to do research into specific questions related to CNM, and intercultural competence that may enable to ask questions in a sensitive manner or to reach out to those who have expertise or inside knowledge regarding the communities one wishes to understand better.

The previously mentioned study by Schechinger and colleagues (2018) also notes that respondents considered positive that their therapists address their relationship orientation when it is relevant to the issues at hand, or that they behave in an affirming way towards their relationship orientation, and act in ways that show they are knowledgeable about CNM and that they were not judgmental about it. The authors' conclusion is that it is fundamental for therapists to hold "affirming, non-judgmental attitudes toward CNM as well as the need for additional education and training for therapists".

A similar message was conveyed by participants in Kisler and Lock's (2019) study, whose best practices list encompass seeking education about CNM, challenge one's assumptions and prejudices, and to not pathologize polyamory, especially considering that polyamorous people (and those in other forms of CNM) face particular difficulties in a mononormative society.

Overall, it is also important to note that, even though this volume is focused on mental health, similar results have been reported in the literature in regard to medical assistance as

well (Arseneau et al., 2019; Landry et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2019; for a detailed discussion, see Moors & Ramos, Chapter 3 in this volume). This further supports the perspective that considers stigma against CNM to be a systemic issue – rather than a case of bad health professionals and caregivers. This takes us full circle to the start of this article, where we highlighted the structural dimension of couple normativity and compulsive monogamy. In the concluding section, we will now sum up the main arguments presented throughout this article.

Conclusion

Through the preceding pages, we have sought to raise awareness to several different challenges that therapists are faced with, in particular when considering CNM lives. In the concluding paragraphs, we aim to synthesise these insights by proposing three major 'tasks', which – if taken on and addressed successfully – will help to provide practitioners with a firm ground for engaging with CNM phenomena and with CNM clients in a sensitive manner. We suggest these tasks also provide a helpful compass for those who wish to conduct research in the field.

The first of these tasks is to *de-centre the couple norm*. As explained above, mononormativity is a social system: it cannot simply be willed away, fully or volitionally bracketed-off at-will, or refused. This is not to say that, as mentioned above, bracketing is not possible or desirable, but rather that it is not fully possible for any practitioner to ensure they are doing it to the utmost degree possible. Instead, therapists need to account for it – that is, to develop an explicit awareness of what it does, and how their (and their clients') subjectivities are done through them. This involves considering its historical, cultural, mediatic, economic, political, and personal dimensions in articulation with each other. What are the major social, cultural and economic factors that sustain the tenacity of the couple norm? (see Roseneil et al., 2021). What are the psychological effects of investment,

compliance or divergence? What is the price particular groups or individuals (depending on their standing in the social landscape and their personal networks) may have to pay if they find themselves outside of the 'charmed circle'? What resources and skills have been developed by the communities and movements that have carved out a space for alternative – CNM ways of being? What are our own histories, affinities, hopes and disappointments? If the couple norm is prevented from (invisibly) taking centre-stage, then it will arguably be easier to understand how to help clients, regardless of their (desired or actual) relationship configuration or orientation, engaging critically with their own emotional experiences, boundaries and traumas.

The second task is to *contextualize CNMs*. The experience of consensual non-monogamy is not unitary: not only does it depend greatly on the type of CNM, but it also depends on the intersections with other social axes at which CNM participants are located. Issues around sexual orientation, gender, race, economic class, and many other forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2010) impact and transform the experience of CNM, and mediate peoples' relationship with societal structures that can be, for some, much more relevant than their CNM experiences. What are the main challenges, threats, insecurities, worries, anxieties in clients' lives? The source for the things that may unsettle a person – and trouble their relationships – may be rooted outside this intimate and interpersonal context. How do they impact upon the relationships that matter to the client in question? What are the values clients are addressing and negotiating CNM lives and realities? Which cultural settings and cultural dynamics do they stem from? Where is harmony? Where is friction? Where is certainty? Where is struggle? Which language (words, concepts, images, stories, historical frames and memories) do clients use when they are talking about their intimate relations, erotic connections, bodies and sexual desires? Are they familiar to me? If not, how do I learn about them?

The third task is to *centre (sex-)criticality*. Although we have emphasised repeatedly in this article that non-monogamy is frequently stigmatised because it is framed as an unrestrained or excessive sexuality or (if it frequently cast in a derogatory language) *promiscuity*, we suggest that sexual liberationist approaches lack the nuance to conceive of the complexity of power around non/monogamy. Considering the potential that sexual expression has to be used as both a way of normalizing and challenging normative systems of control, there is a risk that a potentially naïve *sex-positive* approach places a burden on certain minoritized groups (like people in the asexuality spectrum) by conflating more sex or more diverse sexual experiences as intrinsically better, just as *sex-negativity* is equally problematic. In this sense, it is important to resist the urge to draw upon ideas of any form of *liberated* sexuality or intimacy, and to consider both the importance of the "freedom to" and the "freedom from" (Fahs, 2014) – to be sex critical, rather than sex positive or negative (Barker, 2012, 2018; Downing, 2012). This also means approaching therapy while being mindful of its historical (and ongoing) role in gender and sexuality related oppression, and striving towards a more queer-friendly therapy culture – *queer* as in committed to deconstructing essentialist narratives of identities, genders and sexualities and the power relationships they are enmeshed in.

Funding:

This work was supported by the European Commission through a grant within the MSCA-IF-EF-ST Funding Scheme (grant number 845889).

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