

Alternatives to Monogamy

**Self-Labeling,
Actual Practice,
and**

**What Happens in the
Interstices**

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Abstract

Among life's milestones include one's high school prom, engagement, wedding, and having children. Each of these would be vastly different in a world where monogamy was not a pervasive norm. Not only is monogamy deeply woven into the fabric of our society, it is tied closely to personal identity. This thesis explores the experiences of individuals who depart from the monogamous norm.

Two overarching questions guide this exploration:

- 1) How do college students talk about their non-monogamous relationships?
- 2) What factors contribute to a college student's decision to pursue such a relationship?

For the first question, I focus on how non-monogamous individuals approach labelling their relationship, as well as if they describe their non-monogamy to be an innate characteristic or a personal choice.

In answering the second question, I describe the impacts of the social pressure to be monogamous, as well as pressures produced by gendered social scripts, on college students' decisions to be in non-monogamous relationships.

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Introduction

Since sexologists began to develop sexual categories, people have been preoccupied with categorizing sexual desire. Ever since we established the existence of homosexuality, and hence of heterosexuality, our society has been fascinated not only with sexual practice, but also with sexual identity. In this thesis, I expand upon these overarching concepts—identity, practice, and (self-) labeling of stigmatized sexual categories — as they relate to non-monogamy.

Sociological research has shown that there exist plenty of examples of disconnects between identity and actual practice. LGBT spheres contain numerous examples of this phenomenon and studying the reasons for these disconnects reveals important truths about the society in which these disconnects are found. Sexual labels are of particular interest, as these labels are quite often incorporated in an individual's self-construction. Labels for sexual behavior contrast against terms and identities imposed on individuals, as they are taken up by choice for the purpose of self-expression, as well as to signify where an individual positions themselves socially.

In the spirit of self-labeling and the study of how individuals talk about themselves, I have two questions that guide the overarching content of this paper:

- 1) How do college students talk about their non-monogamous relationships?
- 2) What factors contribute to college students' decisions to pursue such a relationship?

Given the broad nature of the questions, the following pages address only a select set of answers to these questions. This thesis contains two sections – one for each question. In the first section, I look broadly about how college students talk about non-monogamy. First, I discuss what words my participants use, don't use, and for what reasons. Next, I look at the answers my participants gave to the question "Which statement is more appropriate: "I *practice* non-monogamy" or "I *am* non-monogamous." I use these answers as the baseline for a discussion on whether non-monogamy is more akin to a sexual orientation, or a relationship configuration. In the second section, I explore reasons my participants gave for engaging in non-monogamous relationships. First, I discuss the strong pressure to adhere to monogamous norms and how non-monogamy relieves some of this pressure. Next, I discuss gender differences in choosing to be non-monogamous. Finally, I contextualize the practice of non-monogamy within the larger context of hook-up culture.

Before delving into my findings, I will first give an overview of the many definitions that fall under the non-monogamous umbrella. This is to give a better sense of the behaviors and identities that my use of the term "non-monogamous" encompasses. I will then address the existing literature on monogamy, non-monogamy, and self-labeling, as they relate to my findings. I then use the groundwork laid out by previous scholars to contextualize and inform my own findings. Finally, I must note that the purpose of this paper is *not* to prove the superiority of one relationship style over another. It is simply to explore a relationship style and the experiences of individuals who choose to participate in it.

Defining Non-Monogamy

The adjective “non-monogamy” typically takes one of three nouns - behavior, identity, or relationship. Non-monogamous behavior is the practice of having sexual or romantic relationships with more than one person at a time. The other partners involved may or may not know about the non-monogamous behavior. Without the knowledge and consent of all parties involved, such behavior is often considered to be “cheating.” Non-monogamous identity describes the state, rather than practice, of being willing to behave non-monogamously under some, though not necessarily all, circumstances. A non-monogamous relationship is an agreement between two or more people to be committed to each other while also agreeing that sexual and/or romantic contact with other individuals in some, though not necessarily all cases, does not constitute cheating.

These terms describe a broad range of people and situations and, depending on the individual using the term, can take a variety of more specific definitions. One individual may define non-monogamous behavior as flirting with or even fantasizing about anyone other than the primary romantic partner while another individual believes kissing, but not fantasizing about kissing, to constitute non-monogamous behavior. Other couples may agree that sexual feelings outside of the dyad do not pose a threat to the relationship. Such couples may agree to be in a non-monogamous

relationship, though the limits of the relationship may also differ from couple to couple. Some couples may decide that acting on sexual feelings does not constitute cheating, but acting on romantic feelings does. Other couples may agree that having romantic feelings for multiple people is fine. And still others may agree that having penetrative sex with another person constitutes cheating, but any other sexual contact is fine.

It is important to note that individuals must “opt-in” for these terms to apply. One must identify their own relationship as non-monogamous in order for it to be a “non-monogamous relationship.” Accordingly, one should be wary applying the term to individuals other than themselves and relationships other than their own. That being said, a study done by Conley et al found that 4-5% of Americans are in consensually non-monogamous relationships (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2012).

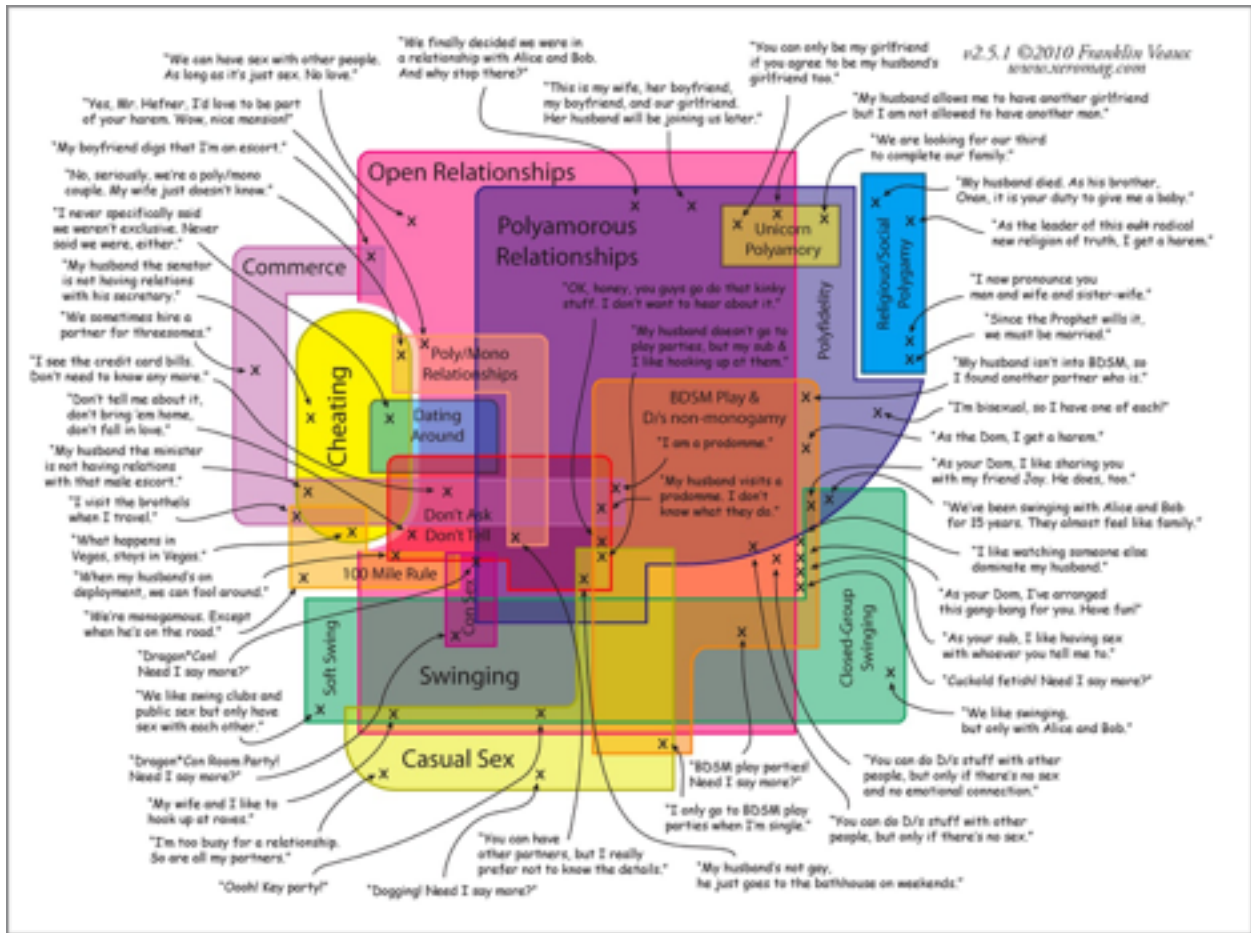
Terms Describing Non-Monogamy

There are a number of terms developed by individuals and by researchers of the subject to describe sets and subsets of non-monogamous behavior, identity, and relationships. In the table below titled “Terms Related to Non-Monogamy” are some of the terms I found most useful or that came up most frequently in my research. There are also a number of terms developed by individuals and by researchers to describe social phenomena that are closely related to non-monogamous relationships. The

terms I found most relevant to my research are also listed below in the table titled “Terms Describing Social Phenomena Related to Non-Monogamy.”

Terms Similar to Non-Monogamy	
Consensual Non-Monogamy	“Any relationship arrangement in which the partners agree to have extradyadic sexual or romantic relationships (Conley et al, 2013, 2). The three CNM relationship types are swinging, polyamorous relationships, and open relationships (Matsick et al, 2013).
Non-Monogamous Relationship	An ongoing relationship between two or more people who have all agreed that extra-dyadic sexual contact does not constitute cheating
Open Relationship	Two people who consider themselves to be in a relationship and have agreed that sexual contact with other people does not constitute cheating
Polyamory	“The philosophy or state of being in love or romantically involved with more than one person at a time.” - Google Dictionary

Terms Describing Social Phenomena Related to Non-Monogamy	
Desirous Monogamy	“...reflects participants' somatic desires, or how many sexual partners they fantasize about having (or would desire to have if there were no social controls on their monogamous relationships)” (Anderson, 2010, 854).
Monogamy	“Mutual monogamy means that you agree to be sexually active with only one person, and that person has agreed to be sexually active only with you.” (CDC, 2009)
Physical Monogamy	“...reflects participants' bodily behaviors, or how many extradyadic sexual experiences the participant has had” (Anderson, 2010, 854).
Social Monogamy	“...reflects participants' desire to be thought of as monogamous by their peers and society more broadly - even if they are not practicing it” (Anderson, 2010, 854).
Serial Monogamy	The practice of going from one long-term monogamous relationship to another with little to no casual sex in-between



Finally, the image below by Franklin Veaux details an even broader set of terms, each of which could fall under the definition of non-monogamy. Both of the tables, as well as a larger version of the below image can be found under Appendix 1.

Given that there are so many words to describe non-monogamous behavior, identity, and relationships, it was difficult to find an all-inclusive word to use in my research. I chose to use the term “non-monogamous” because, by definition, it provides the broadest possible scope. I recognize the issue with defining a non-normative practice or identity in terms of its privileged counterpart; representation of the dominant behavior - monogamy - as the norm is built into the word “non-

monogamy”. While I honor this critique, I chose the term because it best reflects my intentions – to use a term that describes, as broadly as possible, behaviors and identities that deviate from the monogamous norm.

Literature Review

In this paper, I take for granted that sex, sexuality, and the way people participate in sex is political. This paper comes from the understanding that sexuality is a product of our culture, not exclusively the product of human biology (Rubin 1984). I begin this literature review by first laying a theoretical groundwork of monogamy, explaining concepts such as compulsory monogamy and describing how the privileging of monogamy operates. Next, I discuss research on non-monogamy - the stigmatization of non-monogamy, the relationship between gender and non-monogamy, and the concept of a strategic identity. Finally, I turn to self-labeling. After discussing the significance of studying the labels individuals assign themselves, I give two examples of the disconnect between self-labeling and identity

Monogamy: Current Research

In this section of the literature review, I will discuss the privileged status of monogamy, as well as the social phenomenon of *Compulsory Monogamy*, which stems from the former. In doing so, I do not wish to portray monogamy as inherently worse than non-monogamy or to suggest that people are monogamous simply because they have been raised to think in this manner. Instead, I simply hope to shed light on the

difference in how monogamous relationships, as compared to non-monogamous relationships, are perceived.

1. The Privileged Status of Monogamy

Monogamy is a privileged social practice. Participation in monogamy or, at the very least, the appearance of participation, gives the individual benefits that unfairly position the person over those who do not appear to be monogamous. Although there is minimal evidence to support that monogamy is better than non-monogamy in terms of relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, or sexual health (Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, and Valentine, 2013), monogamy is still viewed as the only viable form of relationship in American culture (Conley, Moors, Matsick, and Ziegler, 2013; Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Rubin, and Conley, 2013). A manifestation of monogamy's privileged status is the compulsory nature of monogamy; another manifestation is the stigmatization of non-monogamy. In tandem, these two phenomena serve to push people towards monogamy and away from non-monogamy.

Conley et al conducted a study about the perceived benefits of monogamous relationships. They found that individuals perceive monogamy as improving the quality of sexual relationships, decreasing prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), improving the quality of the relationship, and improving the quality of family relationships (such as providing a better experience for children raised by the individuals in the monogamous relationship). Conley et al also find that monogamy is

perceived to be more moral and acceptable when compared with its alternatives. After looking at these things that people assume are benefits of monogamy, Conley et al investigated whether or not these truly exist in higher levels in monogamous relationships. They found that there is no evidence to support the claim that monogamous relationships are superior to non-monogamous one along the vectors of these criteria. Non-monogamous relationships scored as highly, if not higher, for all the benefits that study participants listed. This was true for all benefits, with the exception of stigma – non-monogamous relationships attach more stigma to individuals. In another study, Conley et. al. found that there are high amounts of bias against people in consensually non-monogamous relationships (Conley, T. D., Moors, A. C., Matsick, J. L., & Ziegler, A, 2012). The lack of legal protections for people in non-monogamous relationships is a manifestation of this bias. An individual can be fired and denied custody of children solely based on relationship type.

2. Compulsory Monogamy

In her article “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Adrienne Rich (1980) describes how a heteronormative society shapes and constrains women’s sexuality, leaving little space for lesbian desire to be explored. Similarly, monogamy is often described as compulsory because of the way social norms constrain romantic sexual attraction into a monogamous framework (Emens 2004). Within the context of compulsory monogamy, alternatives to monogamy are presented as less valid, serious,

or legitimate. This leaves little space for individuals to explore them, effectively making monogamy the only viable form of commitment in western culture (Anderson 2010, Conley 2013, Emens 2004).

An incentive to participate in monogamy is the halo effect surrounding the practice. A halo effect is the positive effect a socially desired trait has on the overall perception of a person, even in ways unrelated to the trait. (Conley, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler 2013). A study done by Conley et al found that, all else equal, monogamous relationships are assumed to be far healthier, more satisfying, and more loving than their non-monogamous counterparts. People in consensually non-monogamous relationships were also seen as lesser than people in monogamous relationships; participants rated monogamous individuals higher on relationship-irrelevant traits such as “invested in taking care of others,” “law abiding,” and “consistent about recycling,” (Conley, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler 2013). This indicates that not participating in monogamy is not perceived to be morally neutral; individuals in such relationships are seen as lesser.

The institution of compulsory monogamy produces considerable social pressure to conform to monogamy. This pressure is twofold: it comes from the social benefits that come along with being perceived as monogamous, as well as the sanctions against those who choose not to participate. An example of the compulsory nature of monogamy comes from a study by Eric Anderson focused on college-age heterosexual men and their attitudes towards monogamy (Anderson 2010). Despite

identifying as monogamous, more than half of the men admitted to cheating on their partners. When asked why, *none* of them expressed dissatisfaction with their relationships or a lack of love for their partners as the reasons for cheating. Instead, all men who cheated and many of those who had not cheated described tension between two desires they held – the love for their partners (and the ensuing desire not to hurt them by cheating) and the desire for extradyadic sex. Many subscribed to the belief that monogamy (at least in name) is a necessary condition for a relationship; to deal with this, they sought out casual sex behind their partners' backs.

Another study was conducted on gay men in monogamous relationships that yielded similar results (Bonello and Cross, 2010). Similar to the straight men interviewed by Anderson, not a single participant in Bonello and Cross's study cited dissatisfaction in his current relationship as the reason for engaging in casual sex. Moreover, no participants had plans to end his relationship or his cheating. Men interviewed said they engaged in casual sex because it improved their primary relationship, helped satisfy the individual's sex drive, and allowed individuals to explore sexual preferences that their partners did not share. Like in Anderson's study, participants also felt shame and guilt because they were cheating on their partners, though these feelings came from lying to their partners, not directly from the extradyadic sex.

Non-Monogamy: Current Research

While monogamy is privileged, non-monogamy is stigmatized. This section discusses this stigma, as well as the ways in which it might impact experience in non-monogamous relationships, especially when looking at this experience through the critical lens of gender. Though non-monogamy is stigmatized, it could also provide benefits to a person that are not directly related to the relationship itself. In this way, non-monogamy can be understood as a strategic identity.

1. The Stigmatization of Non-Monogamy

When I first started researching the subject of non-monogamy, I was not prepared for the reactions from friends and family upon hearing the topic. The most common question was regarding the extent to which I planned on studying cheating. The answer was always “none.” The further I dove into the research, though, the more my experience was contextualized and explained by academic literature. I started to see the truth in the idea that “The only widely available language that can account for non-monogamous relationships is that of infidelity” (Ritchie and Barker, 2006). Compulsory monogamy makes it difficult to envision a form of loving that is not monogamous. It is so totalizing that when imagining a relationship that deviates from this norm, the first association is with cheating, and not with loving.

A product of the privileging of monogamy is the stigmatization of non-monogamy; in the same way that monogamy’s halo-effect presents it in a positive light,

non-participation in monogamy casts a shadow. A manifestation of this stigma lies in the way non-monogamy is described in popular discourse. To start, any mention of relationship styles other than monogamy is rare. Alternatives to monogamy are typically associated with immaturity, selfishness, low moral standards, and poor mental health (Conley, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, 2013). When deviations from the monogamous norm are discussed in mainstream media, the characterizations are largely negative and center on the narrative of cheating:

Elsewhere, I have argued that polyamory is generally invisible in our society, but that when it is present it is constructed as evil or, at best, strange. Mainstream media representations are one place where dominant cultural discourses are reflected and perpetuated, and certainly here any kind of non-monogamy is labelled 'infidelity', shown as wicked, and punished severely (e.g. in films like 'Fatal Attraction' and 'Unfaithful'). There is rarely any mention of open non-monogamy. In the few examples there are, it is punished (e.g. wife-swapping in the film 'The Ice Storm') or presented as weird and 'New Age' (Barker, 2005)

As exemplified by my experiences with friends and family, one of the primary associations with non-monogamy is cheating. In the case where non-monogamy is portrayed as largely benign, it is still "othered" - made to seem strange, not something in which "normal" people would participate

Despite the fact that non-monogamy is rarely portrayed as a viable alternative to non-monogamy, Conley et al find that there is no indication that non-monogamous relationships are any less viable than monogamous ones (Conley, T. D., Moors, A. C., Matsick, J. L., & Ziegler, A, 2013). The study concludes that non-monogamous relationships can present an alternative to monogamous ones – that the drawbacks

associated with non-monogamous relationships are not inherent to them. These drawbacks - lower relationship satisfaction, higher STI transmission rates, less satisfaction, and more jealousy - are not inherent to the relationship style. Instead, the study found that these negative perceptions around non-monogamy exist because there is a bias against it in our culture. They even found that each of these four drawbacks is *less* prevalent in non-monogamous relationships, since the people involved acknowledge these difficulties and deal with them head-on.

2. Gender and Sexuality

Sexuality – how we practice it, how we identify it, how it is understood in our society – is linked to identity. How a person has sexual experiences often impacts how they understand themselves. The influence between sexuality and identity is not the same for all; the way that sexuality is linked to identity differs for people socialized as men and those socialized as women:

According to patriarchal conventions and norms, while both women and men define themselves partly in terms of their sexuality, they are expected to differ in how those selves are constructed. Masculine culture encourages men to see sexual activity as definitive of maleness. There is a phallic focus on performance...A man's self-concept may be shattered if he is "impotent" (a strikingly revealing term in itself) or if a woman in his life has sex with someone else, because he is not performing as a man should. (Overall, 1998, 8)

Men are encouraged to see their sexuality as something that supports or underscores identity as a man. Men are taught to view sexuality as defining their masculinity - sexual activity, particularly with a large number of people - is considered to make a man

more masculine. Likewise, threats to sexuality, such as erectile dysfunction or impotence, are considered to threaten a man's masculinity as a whole.

Women, on the other hand, are encouraged to develop their identities in relation to the *people* they have sex with, not directly in relation to the sexual activity in which they are involved. Overall uses this to explain why women may find non-monogamy to be more difficult to adjust to, as compared to their male partners. This bit of theory on sexuality, identity, and gender shed light on one reason why women might benefit more from non-monogamous relationships, as compared to men. This benefit lies in the way women are socialized to grow and expand their identity:

“...a woman who freely takes on a second sexual relationship in addition to one she already has is likely to feel a comparable expansion of her identity, or even a claiming or reclaiming of self. She has chosen to take into her self [sic] another person; she has chosen to expand the boundaries of her person...” (Overall, 1998, 9)

In short, women's identity is closely associated with the identities of their sexual partner(s). According to Overall, having multiple partners allows women to expand their identity, in addition to contributing to the “claiming and reclaiming of self.”

3. Non-Monogamy as a Strategic Identity

While many of the theorists referenced so far treat polyamory and non-monogamy as static identities, such an understanding of the concept may be inappropriate. In her article “Polyamory and Monogamy as Strategic Identities,” Margaret Robinson argues that “polyamory and monogamy are better viewed as

strategies of sexual expression, rather than as immutable orientations” (p. 21, 2013). She argues that choosing the style of relationship can “...serve a social, political, or psychological function for bisexual women” (p 25, 2013).

Robinson notes the benefits of polyamory for bisexual women include increased visibility as bisexual and polyamory being described as a more “natural” way to practice bisexuality by study participants. Downsides of polyamory include fulfilling the stereotype of the polyamorous, extremely sexually active bisexual, which may lead an individual to avoid a polyamorous relationship, even though they may have the desire to be in one.

Though Robinson limits the scope of her analysis to bisexual women, it seems that non-monogamy can benefit non-bisexual individuals in ways not directly related to the relationship type. Looking again at the Overall article mentioned above, non-monogamy can be read as a strategic identity for women who do not want their identities to become overly dependent on their partners. By choosing to have intimate relationships with multiple people, Overall argues that women can better develop their own identities. This seems to serve a social, political, *and* psychological function.

Similar to Overall, Barker (2005) argues that polyamorous relationships have the ability to allow individuals to better understand their own identities:

Polyamory has the potential for revealing...the constructed nature of identity. The conventional way of viewing the self, both in everyday life and in traditional psychology, is as one coherent, stable whole....It seems that polyamory has the capacity to help people to explore the different facets of themselves and perhaps come to a alternative understanding of self identity through the different ways they might see themselves reflected in the eyes of others they are closely involved with (Barker 2005, p.77).

Since social constructionist psychologists argue that the self is constructed through interactions with other people, then having intimate relationships with multiple people may help an individual better understand themselves.

Interpreting non-monogamy as a strategic identity may help explain why individuals choose to enter into and stay in non-monogamous relationships.

Self-Labeling: Significance and Practice

An individual chooses particular labels to apply to themselves in order to signal their identity and social group involvement to the rest of the world. The labels and individual chooses and avoids are a result of careful deliberation of the question “how do I want the world to see me?” In this section of the literature review, I first discuss why self-labeling is significant. Next I describe two examples of self-labeling in the LGBTQ community. These are examples that I draw upon in my own writing.

1. Significance of Self-Labeling as a Social Practice

The institution of compulsory monogamy leaves little space to envision alternatives to monogamy. This includes alternatives in terms of practice, as well as in terms of identity. In order to get a deeper understanding of non-monogamy, individuals must be explicit in their quest for knowledge and self-construction. This section is about this pursuit and the difficulties and complexities that come with it.

In her article “This is my partner and this is my...partner’s partner: Constructing a polyamorous identity in a monogamous world,” Meg Barker uses social constructionist and personal construct psychology to look at how polyamorous people construct their personal and group identities vis a vis monogamy. Barker found two main pairs of discourses in participants’ responses:

1. “Polyamory different and threatening to monogamy/ polyamory as normal and similar to monogamy” (p. 79)
2. “Polyamory as something I (naturally) am/polyamory as something I (choose to) do” (p. 79)

Interestingly, when participants spoke to each of these discourses, they would often times speak to both seemingly contradictory sides of it. Barker does not see this as problematic or as a logical inconsistency, instead, she understands this as a not entirely uncommon rhetorical tool: “We all use different rhetorical devices at different times when we are trying to create specific effects or achieve different ends.” Barker’s participants used different rhetorical tools at different times depending on what they were trying to clarify or emphasize.

With regard to the first discourse, Barker finds that participants define their non-monogamous identities through similarities to and differences between monogamy. Polyamory is represented as similar to monogamy partially because of the desire among the participants to seem normal in a society that says polyamorous people are not normal. On the other hand, participants also describe polyamory as different from monogamy because it challenges huge, institutional norms.

In describing why they are non-monogamous, participants used the second discourse - polyamory as a choice vs. polyamory as something with which they were born. Participants use the discourse of nature to represent their non-monogamy as a perfectly normal aspect of themselves, as well as to counter the idea that they can (and thus should) suppress these feelings in lieu of a monogamous relationship. The seemingly contradictory discourse of “polyamory as a choice” appeared frequently as well. Participants used this discourse in order to emphasize the fact that they have control over their actions and lives.

In another article, Ritchie and Barker (2006) write about polyamorous individuals constructing new words to describe their relationships and identities with the intention being “...to suggest that the act of rewriting the language of identity, relationships, and emotion can enable alternative ways of being.” (p. 596) The authors argue that because we live in a culture where monogamy is normative, the mainstream discourse does not create terms to describe non-monogamous experiences. Instead, the dominant culture’s normative language for concepts like “partnership,” “infidelity,” and “jealousy” hinder the potential of polyamory. Indeed, the primary media representations of “polyamory” are those of cheating, which serve as a caution away from it.

In polyamorous communities, people have started using creating their own terms that better describe their experience. In place of the term “jealous”, which implies a natural, inevitable emotion that cannot be dealt with, words like “just jea” and “wibbly,” have appeared. These decrease the negative connotation and emphasize

that the emotion will pass. Another word they found is “compersion,” which describes the opposite of jealousy. It is defined as “The feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloved are expressing their love for one another” (p. 595). Unfortunately, this word does not make much sense in culture that defines any sort of extra-dyadic sexual contact as “infidelity” or “cheating.” These new terms illustrate the immense power of language - by talking about jealousy in a different way, people in polyamorous communities can grow to work through it instead of resigning themselves to the fact that it is a feeling they will always experience.

2. Self Labeling in the LGBTQ Community

The LGBTQ community contains numerous examples of disconnects between self-labeling and actual practice. Studying the reasons for choosing certain terms over others with which to label oneself can reveal important truths about the social circumstances of the people making these choices. What follows are two examples — one about the label “on the down low” that black men who have sex with men often use, even though an outside perspective might argue that the label “gay” is more appropriate. The second is about the experiences of young college aged women who are sexually active with other women, but identify as straight.

Men on the Down Low

An article was published in the New York Times magazine about the Down Low (DL) subculture emerging in urban areas. The DL refers to a subculture comprised of black men who have sex with each other, but otherwise live their lives as straight men. While men on the DL act in ways that would make the term “gay” apply, the men interviewed are very clear that men on the DL do not consider themselves to be gay. One man states: “Gays are the faggots who dress, talk and act like girls. That's not me.” Instead, the majority of men on the Down Low consider their primary identity to be black. Blackness has deep ties with masculinity, and masculinity is considered to be incompatible with homosexuality. The DL is the solution to this incompatibility: “...the DL label is both an announcement of masculinity and a separation from white gay culture...it is the safest identity available — they don't risk losing their ties to family, friends and black culture” (Denizet-Lewis, 2008). What results is a culture that places huge value on masculinity in the context of homosexual sexual and often emotional relationships. Men are constantly asserting their masculinity, referring to themselves as “homo thugs”, “strictly tops” (that they are the penetrative partner during sex), or “masculine bottom brothas.”

While the men on the DL face strong pressure to fulfill the masculine norm, other social pressures impact their decisions to be on the DL as well. Racism and fetishization of black men in the mainstream gay community creates an often unwelcome, if not hostile, environment for black men. There are also social and

economic reasons as to why many men on the DL do not come out to their families: “[it is because] We need our families because of economic reasons, because of racism, because of a million reasons. It's the idea that black people have to stick together, and if there's the slightest possibility that coming out could disrupt that, guys won't do it.”

Straight Girls Kissing

Another example of a lack of alignment between sexual behavior, desire, and identity is termed “Straight Girls Kissing” in the article of the same name (Rupp and Taylor). The article explores the experiences of women who identify as straight but who enjoy kissing other women at parties and bars. The authors found three main reasons as to why straight-identified women make out with other women at frat parties:

1. To get male attention
2. To create a safe space for experimentation
3. Because they are truly attracted to women.

Simply making out with other women is not sufficient, in most cases, for onlookers to doubt the assumption that a given woman is straight. This is in part because women have an incentive to display same-sex desire that men do not — the desire to please men. The article brings up this point and contextualizes this disconnect between sexual identity and behavior. The article also argues that making out at parties creates a space for bisexual or gay women to express these desires while still being involved in the very heterosexual party scenes at universities. In this regard, as long as a woman does not

identify with a label on the LGBTQ spectrum, she can still participate in (and visibly enjoy) some same-sex sexual contact without individuals doubting that she identifies as straight.

In the same way that same-sex sexual desire or contact does not imply that an individual identifies with a label on the LGBTQ spectrum, there can also be disconnects between non-monogamous identity and practice. A classic one is cheating – when a person agrees to be monogamous but does not act in such a way. More generally, cheating can be understood as agreeing to avoid certain behaviors, possibly under certain circumstances, but then not honoring that agreement. Defining “cheating” in this way clears up a common misconception that it is impossible for people in non-monogamous relationships to cheat. On the flip side, there are also couples that identify as non-monogamous and have non-monogamy as an option, but for a variety of reasons do not take advantage of this option - they do not act “non-monogamously.”

Anderson (2010) found a disconnect between acting non-monogamously and identifying as being in a monogamous relationship. This allowed Anderson develop terms for concepts like emotional monogamy, physical monogamy, and social monogamy. Studying their self-labeling also helped better illustrate the halo effect surrounding monogamy and the compulsory nature of monogamy.

Methods and Demographics

I collected data for this thesis by interviewing people who were currently in or had previously been in a non-monogamous relationship. I had a set of interview questions (Appendix B). In addition to these questions, I would ask participants numerous follow-up questions. I had two primary types of questions: questions about personal experience and questions about some terms I found while doing the literature. I wanted to know about what my participants actually experienced and how scholarly research supplemented or contradicted their experiences. I recruited participants through people I knew, using snowball sampling to augment my pool. Interviews lasted 30 to 90 minutes and were conducted in private locations.

I interviewed 14 people — 8 men, 5 women, and 1 person who identifies as gender queer. Of those people, 5 people identified as queer, but only one was currently in a homosexual relationship. All other queer-identified individuals were in heterosexual relationships. In my group, all individuals either identify as white/caucasian or agree that they pass as white, despite being a mix of white and another race.

Given the small sample size and lack of diversity within it, I cannot make any large conclusions or generalizations. The patterns and insights gleaned from these interviews can, however, provide direction for further research that confirms or denies my findings.

Part 1

Talking the Talk

Describing One's Self to Others

In this section, I discuss how non-monogamous people talk about their non-monogamous status. I chose to investigate this question because I was curious about the complexity in creating one's identity as non-monogamous in a society where compulsory monogamy is such a strong force and deviations are stigmatized. As discussed in the literature review, the culture of compulsory monogamy makes it difficult to envision alternatives to monogamy, let alone to develop an identity incorporating such alternatives.

Two primary interview questions fueled the discussions in this first half of the thesis. Chapter 1 discusses the answers to the question "What term or terms do you use to describe your non-monogamous identity? How well does it or do they apply?" Chapter 2 discusses the answers to the question "Which phrase better applies - that you *are* non-monogamous or that you *practice* non-monogamy?"

Chapter 1

From the Well Known to the Unknown: Perception Management Through Terminology

In the introduction I discussed numerous terms to describe all kinds of non-monogamous relationships. Given the variety of terms, studying how an individual selects which term to use and how that person uses their arsenal of terms to describe themselves can yield telling information about their social reality. In the literature review, I alluded to the power of language and labeling when discussing how people in polyamorous communities have created new terms like “just jea,” “wibbly,” and “compersion” to describe their experiences, since terms like “jealousy” have too negative a connotation and no antonym (Ritchie and Barker, 2006). These terms allowed individuals to reframe their experiences in their polyamorous relationships in a way that centered polyamorous, rather than monogamous, experience.

As described in the literature review, acting in accordance with a particular sexual identity does not imply that an individual identifies with that label. I gave two examples: the men on the down low and the straight girls kissing. Both groups, in general, tend to have same-sexual contact but do not identify with a label that would suggest this. In a similar vein, identifying with a particular sexual label does not imply that an individual practices that identity. For example, it is completely valid for a

person to identify as heterosexual without ever having had sexual contact. I decided to bring this discussion around the disconnect between labels and practice to the realm of non-monogamy. Most participants who identified with a term under the non-monogamous umbrella were also open to sexual contact with people outside of the relationship. In this sense, the disconnect between labeling and practice was not very strong. I then began to look at the disconnect between the label and the intent - did participants feel that the label they use accurately reflects their desires, experiences, and relationships?

To answer this question, I asked each participant what terms they use to describe their non-monogamous relationships and how well each of these terms applies to them on a scale of 1 to 10. The trends were fairly stable — most individuals preferred the term “non-monogamous” and would rate it fairly high — between 7 and 10. Many also mentioned that they, at times, use the term “open relationship,” even though it does not fit very well. In this chapter, I describe the findings from this question; to summarize, it appears that the desire to manage perception is a primary reason fueling why individuals choose the terms they do.

When asked what terms they use to describe their relationships, participants noted difficulty in finding a term that conveyed the proper meaning. In this chapter, I discuss these challenges and how my interviewees dealt with them. In the following pages, I first discuss the trend among participants to avoid using the term “open relationship” because of the negative perception it garnered. Next, I discuss how no participants showed much enthusiasm for their chosen terms, even if they felt they

applied well. On the other hand, I discuss how and why individuals use terms they feel do not accurately describe them. Finally, I discuss how some participants preferred to use terms that were not as well known, or even ones they made up, in order to have maximum control over the meaning conveyed through their language.

For reference, I include a table that lists each participant’s name, the term(s) they use, and how they would rate it on a scale of one to ten - one meaning a poor fit and ten representing a good fit.

Participant, Terms Regularly Used, and Term Rating

Name	Term(s)	Rating	Name	Term(s)	Rating
Andre	open relationship	6 or 7	Ingrid	Non-monogamous Open Relationship	8 4
Annie	non-monogamous	7 or 8	Jakob	Non-monogamous	7
Ben	non-monogamous	10	Jeff	open relationship	7
Danny	open relationship sort of monogamous sort of non-monogamous usually monogamous understanding relationship	1 4 4 4 8.5	Thelma	open relationship sort of monogamous sort of non-monogamous usually monogamous understanding relationship	1 8 8 8 9
Diane	non-monogamous open relationship	8 4	Max	non-monogamous	7
Diesel	non-monogamous open relationship	10 10	Nate	polyamorous	7
Hannah	Open relationship	1	Maggie	polyamorous open relationship non-monogamous	7-8 4 10

Term ratings on a scale of one to 10, one meaning poor fit, 10 meaning great fit

Complexity Around the Term “Open Relationship”

“I think there is more of a stigma around it than [around] non-monogamous. I don't know why, but I feel more judged when I say open relationship.” — Ingrid

Labeling is crucial — the way a concept, practice, or identity is labeled can have huge impacts on the way others perceive it. For example, the dairy industry would likely be opposed to re-labeling milk as “cow juice” for fear of losing customers. “Milk” and “cow juice” describe the same drink; neither is inaccurate, yet they would be perceived differently. Similarly, nearly all study participants that have used the term “open relationship” have had similar experiences. They have found that using this particular label often causes others to make assumptions about the relationship, most of which are negative, inaccurate, or both.

The colloquial usage of “open relationship” has given it a bad reputation. People in non-monogamous relationship are hesitant to use it in conversation to describe their own relationships, even if they agree that their relationship falls within the definition of “open relationship.” According to Hannah, “I feel like when I tell someone I'm in an open relationship, they have a lot of associations with [the term] that don't necessarily align with what it is between me and [my partner].” Nate, who identifies as polyamorous, describes a similar experience:

‘Open relationship’ also has a bit more of a negative connotation than ‘polyamorous’ does. I think there is this general sense that open relationships will just crash and burn. I've also gotten the feeling that people think that open relationship are relationships that are more sexually based, as opposed to emotionally based. If you are going into it as an open relationship, I get this feeling that some people think it's not a “real” emotional

connection if you are willing to be in a open relationship. And that if you really were emotionally connected to them, you would want them to yourself.

Though all of these perceptions apply to non-monogamous relationships in general, as described by Conley et al (2013), Nate describes them as being a bit stronger for the term “open relationship.” His analysis is also in line with Matsick et al’s 2013 findings that polyamorous relationships are perceived more positively as compared to swinging and open relationships because polyamorous relationships place more emphasis on multiple loves, rather than on multiple strictly sexual or sexually based relationships. As Nate mentions, “open relationship” has the connotation of being more sexually based, which is partially why it might suffer from a more negative perception. Ingrid’s experience supports Nate’s perception; she experiences more judgement when using the term “open relationship” in place of “non-monogamous”: “I think people just tend to feel more comfortable judging the term ‘open relationship’ more than the term ‘non-monogamous relationship.’”

Since “open relationship” has been around longer, it likely has had time to accumulate a negative perception as a result of being used in a culture of compulsory monogamy. Diesel eloquently describes this accumulation of stigma

It’s really easy for a lot of these terms — especially when they stand for something that challenges a hegemonic understanding — to take on a bunch of stigma. So there is constantly a struggle to evolve past that stigma, to update your terms so you’re not using the language that’s being appropriated to the language of the oppressor.

Diesel’s explanation sheds light on why nearly all of my study participants had negative associations with “open relationship” - it has absorbed meaning from the monogamous

culture in which it is passed around. As an underscore Diesel's point, Ingrid describes learning about "open relationship" in middle school:

"Part of [my desire to avoid the term] is [also] that that term has been around for longer. I knew of the term "open relationship" since middle school but I hadn't heard of the term "non-monogamous relationship" until like three years ago. So growing up knowing the term "open relationship" and having people teach me that open relationships are associated with promiscuity and stigmatizing that."

Ingrid attributes part of her reason for preferring terms other than "open relationship" to the fact that it has been around longer and has had time to accumulate stigma.

Because Ingrid learned, from a young age, that "open relationships" are associated with negative things, she chose to avoid the term. "Non-monogamous," which she learned far later, had not yet accumulated this negative perception. It's interesting to think about whether terms that are commonly used to describe non-monogamous relationships today will accumulate stigma in the same way that "open-relationship" has, or if their meaning will evolve differently (and if so, why).

Max also found "open relationship" to have a negative connotation and expressed that he finds the term "friends with benefits" preferable: "I think I would be more apt to use 'friends with benefits' in place of 'open relationship'. It sounds less terse, it's a younger term, I guess." The reasons Max noted for preferring "friends with benefits" is that it is "less terse" or gentler, and that "it's a younger term." Like Max, a number of participants associated the term with age. Nate, Ingrid, Jakob, and Maggie all said that they would be more likely to use the term "open relationship" when talking with older people, such as their parents. It seems that participants consider the term to

be older, though not outdated, as the judgment they experienced from using it came mostly from people their own age.

Andre was the sole defender of “open relationship,” citing qualities like the popularity of the term — qualities that individuals listed as pushing them away from the term — as being why he likes it: “I don’t like getting caught up in the terminology of things...an open relationship seems to be a catch-all. It’s not something that seems foreign or isolated or strange. I like it precisely because it’s a mainstream term.” It seems that Andre prefers function over fit and, for this reason, “open relationship” can be a great fit. Because it has been around longer, more people are familiar with it. This prevents Andre from getting bogged down in the details. As I will discuss later in the chapter, a number of participants did not share this sentiment.

Not Great, But it Will Do: The Trend of “Good Enough”

In this section, I discuss a trend that is best described with one word - “fine.” Not bad, not great, just fine. First, I discuss how some participants would use words they feel do not accurately describe them. Instead of using these words because they represented a close fit to their identity, participants used them because these were some of their only options for self-labeling. The terms are not a great fit, but they are good enough. Second, I depart momentarily from discussing what interviewees *did* say to what they *did not* say. No participants were particularly excited about the terms they used; this was the case across the board, regardless of how well a participant thought a

given term applied. I close with speculation about what this “good enough” attitude might suggest.

Inaccurate, But Good Enough

As Barker and Ritchie (2006) discuss, there are few terms in a society of compulsory monogamy that accurately describe deviations from this norm. The dominant culture infuses language with normative meaning, making available terms take on inaccurate, and even negative connotations. The previous section describing participants’ attitudes towards “open relationship” is a prime example of the negative connotations embedded by a culture of compulsory monogamy.

Like many of the other participants, Thelma uses the term “open relationship” when referring to her romantic relationship, but agrees that the term has a negative connotation. When asked how well it applies to her on a scale of one to 10, she rates it as a “one”:

Open relationships have a negative connotation and I don't want our relationship status to have a negative connotation when it's something that I think is beautiful...I would rate it as a one but I would still use it because it's one of my only tools.

It’s important to note that even though she doesn’t believe the term to apply well at all to her and Danny’s relationship, she still uses the term, as it’s one of the few that she has to work with. When asked how well she would rate the term if it had no negative connotation, she answered that she would rate it at a four or a five. This in and of itself

is telling - a four or five is not a very high rating. Nevertheless, Thelma still uses it because there are few words to describe her relationship.

Maggie also agreed that she uses the term “open relationship” despite feeling that it does not fit well. “I use ‘open’ [relationship] now, though I don't really like it as much. I don't feel like it really describes my relationship style, but it's what I had to use with my current partner for him to understand what I'm talking about.” Instead of using a more appropriate word like “polyamorous” or “non-monogamous,” which are the words Maggie prefers, she says she has to describe her relationship style with a term with which her partner is more familiar. Though this knowledge of the term might be negatively biased, it's the best terms they have to use.

Missing Enthusiasm

As the extensive discussion of reservations surrounding “open relationship” might preface, I found that none of my participants were particularly enthusiastic about any of the terms they used. Though a number of participants rated their terms relatively high at an eight or a ten, these high ratings were not accompanied by a high levels of enthusiasm. Diane, who rated the term “non-monogamous” as an 8, sums up the attitude that many participants exhibited: “I can't think of any term that would work better so I guess it works the best that I can see.” Andre, who very much enjoys being in an open relationship and rated his term at a six or a seven explains this rating, saying: “I'm still experimenting. There's never a ‘right’ way to do it. I'm eager to learn

more about it, but I don't know what it's like to be like [enthusiastically] 'Yes! I am non-monogamous.'”

For a term like “non-monogamous,” it is easy to see why an individual would give it a rating of “10” but not feel too tied to it. It conveys that an individual is “not monogamous,” which is a criteria that is arguably satisfied by simple virtue of being in a relationship that is anything other than monogamous. Though the term “non-monogamous” may have meaning to individuals beyond it’s literal interpretation, it does not need to. As Annie eloquently puts it, “All I know is that I'm not monogamous.”

I found this lack of enthusiasm to be unexpected for two reasons:

- 1) There is a lot of pride in labels like “queer” or “woman”
- 2) We live in a society that cares deeply about labels

One explanation for the difference in enthusiasm between people who identify with the term “queer,” as compared to people who identify as “non-monogamous” could be the difference in how the identity is understood. Because sexual orientation is considered to be a core identity - one that deeply influences who an person is as an individual — finding an accurate label is a step to better understand and presenting one’s self to the world. Relationship status, on the other hand, is seen more as describing a person, rather than deeply impacting their identity.

Going almost hand in hand with enthusiasm for particular terms is the movement to reclaim terms. Examples of terms that individuals have moved to reclaim include “bitch,” “slut,” and certain racial slurs. Despite the negative meaning associated with the term “open relationship,” none of my interviewees brought up reclaiming it.

This could be because it is not quite an offensive term, so there is nothing to reclaim. It could also be because the individuals I interviewed were not particularly involved in any non-monogamous communities.

Given this attitude of “good enough” with regard to terminology, it could be possible that people in non-monogamous relationships care less, on average, about the terms they use to describe their identities, as compared to people who identify with other stigmatized sexualities. This apathy towards terminology could indicate that my participants do not consider their relationship style to be a core, defining characteristic of themselves. As long as the term more or less describes their relationship, it will work fine.

Terminology as a Tool for Perception Management

In this section, I discuss how participants use language as a strategy to minimize the stigma they experience when disclosing their non-monogamous status to others. Using carefully chosen language when discussing their relationships, allows participants more control over the assumptions their listeners make and perceptions that ensue. I first discuss how the use of lesser known terms gives the speaker more of a chance to explain what the term means. I then discuss how some participants created new terms to precisely capture their intended meaning.

(Lack Of) Knowledge is Power

In the same way that Barker and Ritchie (2006) found that polyamorous people created new terms to describe their experiences, a couple of participants noted that they prefer terms that are not as common, such as “non-monogamous,” when describing their relationship status. More common terms such as “open relationship” tend to bring with them baggage and monogamy-centric meaning. Using less frequently heard terms typically caused conversation partners to ask for a definition, which allowed the speaker to describe their relationship on their own terms.

Hannah used the term “open relationship” and, like many of the people I interviewed, felt that it did not apply perfectly. She described how, in lieu of identifying her relationship with a term, she preferred to simply explain the circumstances:

I guess if I have to I say we're in an open relationship, but generally when people ask I say I have a person that I'm in love with, but we understand we're not in the same place so we give each other the support we can and when we are in the same place, we are together but when we're not we understand that the other person is going to be sleeping with other people and not judge each other for it.

For Hannah, there is no word for her relationship with her partner, so she chooses to simply describe the relationship on her own terms, instead of trying to squeeze it into the parameters of a more popular term.

Though Maggie started out using the term “open relationship,” she noticed a different reaction when she used the term “non-monogamous.” When describing this difference, she notes: “I do like [non-monogamous] because people have heard of it less and they like ask more about it.” Using this more unknown term would often prompt

people to ask more questions about the relationship, which allowed Maggie to give her own explanation:

I also used non-monogamous. I really like that because it's not "polyamorous" and it's not "open" [relationship] so when you say it, people have to ask you what you mean. People ask "If you're not monogamous then what are you?" and I can say "I prefer a more open style of relationship."

Like Maggie, Ingrid also preferred "non-monogamous relationship" in lieu of "open relationship" to prevent her conversation partner from making negative assumptions about her and her relationship:

...when I say that I'm in a non-monogamous relationship, people have a bazillion questions — what does that mean? How does that work? But if I say I'm in an open relationship, they say "oooooh" and then they walk away. That's the end of the conversation.

In Ingrid's experience, using two very similar terms to describe the same thing yielded vastly different reactions. Using a less familiar term — "non-monogamous" — pushed her conversation partner to be curious and ask questions, while the other term quickly ended the conversation with a judgmental phrase.

Even so, this was not a foolproof solution to having conversation partners make stupid assumptions. Maggie says that she "...started off using 'polyamorous', and then noticed people's reactions to that as like 'ok sure,' judgmental, 'that sounds ridiculous', and 'you read it out of a textbook.'" Maggie says she gets the sense that her friends perceive "...[polyamorous] is sort of an academic justification for doing something that's not right." She describes a possible reaction to her saying she is polyamorous: "you just want to be different" or "you just want to have some kind of reason why it's OK to be the way you are."

Word Play: Tailored Terms for Custom Fit

As already mentioned, a number of participants felt dissatisfied by the way pre-existing terms did not seem to describe their relationship exactly. Maggie expressed this dissatisfaction, as well as her inability to find or make up a different term that works better for her: “I wish I could invent a new term. I’m always thinking about that... I wish I could say ‘relationship’ and that it wouldn’t be the assumption that it’s monogamous. But since that isn’t the way it is, I want a better word.” Ideally, Maggie would prefer that she not be assumed to be monogamous. Since this is not an option in the near future, she goes on to describe a term she heard that she liked:

Something that I really liked that I heard this summer [at a conference] was...people saying they’re “solo.” That is implying that they are autonomously themselves and have relationships with other people and aren’t defined by whether they are in a committed monogamous relationship with one person...but that sort of implies that you’re almost distant from everyone.

When she starts describing a term she *does* like — solo — she lists the upsides — that it affords an individual more autonomy — as well as the downsides — that it makes a person seem distant. Interpreted through the lens of compulsory monogamy, it could be that the term “solo” only has the connotation of distance because being “single” is closely linked with being lonely. This is similar to the negative perception attached to “jealous” (Ritchie and Barker 2006).

Danny and Thelma preferred to be interviewed together. The heterosexual couple has a collection of words that they use to refer to their non-monogamous

relationship. As Thelma puts it: “There’s really no words for it, what we use is kind of just in the moment what sort of mashup of words makes sense.” Over the course of their year-long relationship, they have created terms and phrases that describe the non-monogamous aspect of their relationship. These include the terms “open-ish,” “sort of monogamous,” “sort of non-monogamous,” “usually monogamous,” “case by case non-monogamy,” and “understanding relationship.” When asked if each term has the same meaning, Danny answered that the intention is the same behind all of these terms — to describe the relationship he and Thelma have. He agreed, however that each term could offer some nuance in its interpretation.

Since these terms are custom-made, Danny and Thelma have fine tuned some of them to better communicate the meaning and nature of their relationship. The meaning infused in some of their words isn’t present in more “one size fits all” terms like “open relationship” or “non-monogamous.” They felt this was particularly true of their term “case by case non-monogamy”:

Danny: “I like ‘case by case non-monogamy’ and that goes almost hand in hand with ‘understanding relationship’ because the one thing that is really important to us is always communicating so when a non-monogamous situation comes up, we talk about it.”

Thelma: “With the ‘case by case [non-monogamy],’ what I like about that is that implies that we’re both very involved in if someone is going to be with someone else. The other significant person gets to talk about it and hear about it. If it was someone I really didn’t want Danny to hook up with, I would express that and he might consider ‘is it really worth it if it’s gonna hurt my girlfriend’s feelings?’”

Danny and Thelma’s sentiments are echoed in the article “There are no words for what we do or how we feel so we have to make them up: Constructing polyamorous

languages in a culture of compulsory monogamy” (Ritchie and Barker, 2006). The title says it all — because monogamy is still an institution in our culture, language that goes against the norm is still infused with normative meaning. For this reason, making up new words instead of reclaiming old ones can be incredibly powerful and far more meaningful than using terms readily available. To this point, the article quotes: “...the act of rewriting the language of identity, relationships, and emotion can enable alternative ways of being” (Barker and Ritchie, 2006, p. 596).

But, in the end, Danny and Thelma feel that none of their terms perfectly describes their relationship. On a scale of one to 10, “understanding relationship” was ranked highest with a 9 from Thelma and an 8.5 from Danny. Even so, Thelma said she would have to give an explanation along with the term in order for it to describe them at the level of an 8 or 9 — the term itself just isn’t enough. The next highest were “sort of monogamous” and “usually monogamous,” scoring an 8 from Thelma and a 4 from Danny. Thelma noted, however, that “it just sounds like ‘if we were better, we would be monogamous.’” This negative connotation prevents her from regularly using it.

Chapter 2

Nature vs. Nurture: We 'Are', But I 'Choose'

In this section, I discuss how participants talked about being non-monogamous — was non-monogamy a choice they made or is it a preference inherent to who they are? My research was not from a biological perspective — I was not interested in whether non-monogamy truly is a characteristic innate to an individual. I was more interested in how people describe non-monogamy in relation to their own identity. Is it understood to be a choice that one makes or a manifestation of a deeper desire?

I expected the majority of individuals to answer that they “practice” non-monogamy, rather than consider themselves to “be” non-monogamous. In popular culture, cheating is understood to be a choice, as is the decision to be in an open relationship. Furthermore, it is not completely unheard of for a couple to go from a monogamous relationship to open relationship, back to monogamous. In comparison, it is far more surprising when an individual first identifies as heterosexual, then queer, then gay, then back to straight. Simply put, an open relationship is understood to be a mutable relationship status — a product of the relationship between two people, not the result of a core quality that one or more members of the relationship holds. I expected that my participants would relay similar opinions.

To test my hypothesis, I asked all participants whether they “practice” non-monogamy or consider themselves to “be” non-monogamous. In response, most study participants answered with the former — my results aligned with my hypothesis. Though there was a clear trend in the response, participants gave a range of reasons for this answer that complicated the responses they gave. These will be discussed at length in this chapter. For reference, and to include all participant responses, I put together a table with short quotes from their answers. Because the response were so varied, this seemed like the best way to properly represent everything my participants had to say.

“I Am” Non-Monogamous or “I Practice” Non-Monogamy

Name	Response
Andre	“Practice. I think where I am right now and the people I’m in relationships with - they are all very much temporal and they are affected by the situations now. It’s just so subjective, the entire realm of relationship. It might change.
Annie	"I practice non-monogamy" just because I hate defining myself as stuff
Ben	"I guess [when I was in a non-monogamous relationship] I really believed that I was non-monogamous. It had to do with having complex feelings about what love is..."
Danny	"Saying that you ‘are’ non-monogamous sounds more like an open relationship; saying that you ‘practice’ sounds more like a case by case situation.”
Diane	"I would definitely say practice non-monogamy...it’s something that I didn’t really consider before my partner wanted to be non-monogamous and so it was something that I’m still adjusting to a lot.”
Diesel	"You can be non-monogamous even if you haven’t had experiences in non-monogamy, but I think for practicing non-monogamy...you need to be out there, actively being non-monogamous.”
Hannah	“I think that I practice non-monogamy. I think if I have a choice I will want to be monogamous with somebody.”
Ingrid	I would say that I am non-monogamous if anyone asked me. I wouldn’t say "I practice non-monogamy" because it feels like someone could say "why?" ...[and] I would say "because I’m non-monogamous”
Jakob	“I would say that I am non-monogamous — it’s not really something you practice.”
Jeff	"I think they both apply equally. yeah, I mean they’re both describing the same thing.”
Maggie	"I think it’s “are [non-monogamous]“ because I feel like [non-monogamy] is more like an identity...I could be practicing monogamy or I could be practicing non-monogamy...[but] I don’t think I will ever depart from the feelings that I have”
Nate	"I don’t think I would say I <i>am</i> non-monogamous, but I would say I <i>am</i> polyamorous.”
Thelma	“... I would say we practice non-monogamy because it takes practice. It takes a lot of communication, it takes work. Non-monogamy is a practice, it’s a skill.”
Max	"I practice non-monogamy is a better expression for me. However...it’s complicated in that I’m pursuing a non-monogamous relationship without necessarily pursuing acts of non-monogamy in my personal choices.”

Doing vs. Being: Why Not Both?

In formulating my interview question addressing whether non-monogamy is something one does or if it is something one practices, I assumed that each individual would only have one answer. This assumption ended up being misplaced. Many study participants noted that, in some contexts, non-monogamy is more akin to a practice, while in other contexts, it is better characterized as an identity or innate orientation. A common trend was that an individual can *practice* non-monogamy by being in a non-monogamous relationship and seeking out extradyadic sex. But this desire to practice non-monogamy comes from *being* non-monogamous or having a certain innate desire for such a relationship.

In making this argument, Nate and Maggie both referenced how their relationship status - monogamous or non-monogamous - does not change their underlying desires. Regardless of what she is currently practicing, she will still have the same opinions: “I could be practicing monogamy or I could be practicing non-monogamy...I don't think I will ever depart from the feelings that I have on the philosophy of love and relationships.” Though Maggie describes non-monogamy as something that she “practices,” she argues that her practice of non-monogamy is a result of her deeper philosophical orientation. For this reason, both she and Nate would consider this desire to be something they *are*, not something they choose to practice.

For Nate, the “doing vs. being” distinction lies in the terms he uses. While “non-monogamy” or “open relationship” describes an active choice, as well as a parameter for a relationship, “polyamory” describes a quality or identity. So while he believes an individual can *practice* non-monogamy, it does not make sense to say that someone *practices* polyamory:

...[polyamory] is that you can be emotionally attached to multiple people — you have the ability to, but you aren't necessarily doing it. Whereas non-monogamy seems like you are actually not being monogamous...I would say I practice non-monogamy — not currently, but I have — but I wouldn't say I am non-monogamous...

Nate goes on to say that he is currently in a monogamous relationship because this is what his partner prefers. Nevertheless, he identifies as polyamorous and would be interested in transitioning into a non-monogamous relationship in the future. Nate is of the opinion that his identity as polyamorous persists even while he is in a monogamous relationship. His desire for polyamory and ability to be polyamorous is still present even though it is not reflected in his relationship status and current practices, thereby representing polyamory as closer to a sexual orientation. After all, a bisexual individual in a same-sex relationship is still bisexual, even if the relationship status may not reflect this.

In his interview, Nate gave further reasoning to underscore his opinion that polyamory is something he “is,” rather than something he simply practices. Nate describes how he went through a sort of “questioning” phase regarding whether or not he was polyamorous:

Since I was a bachelor for so long and went through college and high school without any major relationships, when I started thinking that maybe I was polyamorous, I had a hard time figuring out whether I actually was polyamorous or if I just hadn't found somebody that interested me enough... Until I met somebody that really stood out to me, it was hard to tell if I was really polyamorous or if I just hadn't met a partner.

Nate went through a phase when he was unsure of his sexual preferences. If polyamory were a choice for Nate, there probably wouldn't be any uncertainty as to whether or not he was really polyamorous. The term "non-monogamy," on the other hand, would not cause him to go through a questioning phase. As Nate describes it, non-monogamy is simply the act of not being monogamous, which is far less ambiguous than trying to figure out a sexual preference.

In their interview, Danny and Thelma drew a distinction between humans at an individual level and humans at the species level. At the species level, they agree that it is more appropriate to say humans *are* non-monogamous. As Danny puts it: "I just don't think it's really human to be monogamous for your entire life. I don't think [monogamy is] human nature. I think it's a projection of culture on human nature..."

When asked if they personally *practice* non-monogamy or *are* non-monogamous, they both answered that they, personally, *practice* it. When asked to explain, Danny answered "Saying that you *are* non-monogamous sounds more like an open relationship; saying that you *practice* sounds more like a case by case situation."

Danny's analysis is similar to that of Maggie and Nate: while an individual can *practice* non-monogamy, this desire exists because of a deeper drive for non-monogamous sexual contact. Thelma agrees with Danny, but for different reasons. She understands her personal decision to be non-monogamous with Danny as a *practice* "because [non-

monogamy] takes practice. It takes a lot of communication, it takes work. Non-monogamy is a practice, it's a skill." In this sense, non-monogamy is not simply a trait that an individual has from birth onward.

Ben's reasons for saying he *is* non-monogamous were a bit different than everyone else's. Though he is no longer looking to be in a non-monogamous relationship, Ben is of the opinion that non-monogamy once was a part of his identity, not just something he simply practiced. In his answer, Ben references the way love is understood in our society and how he didn't buy into this characterization. For this reason, he felt that he was non-monogamous:

I guess [when I was in a non-monogamous relationship] I really believed that I was non-monogamous. It had to do with having complex feelings about what love is and just sort of doubting it existed for everyone and that therefore I would never find one match and just kind of always be changing partners.

According to Ben, he was skeptical of the concept of love as it is presented in his society. This skepticism led him to understand his identity as non-monogamous. It is possible that his opinion of love evolved, as did his identity. The relationship Ben describes in this quote eventually turned into a monogamous relationship. From this account, one could hypothesize that identity as non-monogamous might be more fluid than a sexual orientation.

Construction as Natural to Manage Stigma

An individual can have an opinion on whether their non-monogamy is something inherent to them, or if it is a choice. The individual can also put this opinion

aside when talking about their non-monogamy to others, in order to present a picture of non-monogamy that will be more positively perceived by others. In my interviews, I noticed a few instances of disconnects between identity and how it is represented to others.

We live in a society that deeply values biological explanations for phenomena; an anomaly that can be explained via evolution, chromosomes, or chemicals is seen as far more believable than with an explanation of a different nature. If a difference is a result of nature, then it is accorded more respect — presumably the different individual did not choose to be this way. Characterization as natural and innate is a common topic brought up in gay rights activism. If an individual cannot choose to be heterosexual, they do not deserve to be treated worse for their deviance. Representing non-monogamy as inherent can be advantageous to the non-monogamous individual, regardless of whether or not they actually believe this to be the case.

Nate brought up this perception to explain one reason why the term “open relationship” may carry more stigma than other terms like “non-monogamous” or “polyamorous.” This is because “open relationship” describes a relationship — “open” is a quality of the interactions two people have, not a core, immutable identity that these two individuals hold. Compared to the negative perception surrounding “open relationship,” Nate says: “...polyamorous — at least for the people who understand the term — is seen more definitely as an identity; it's not seen as a weaker relationship type.” Because polyamorous is understood to be an identity, it is accorded more respect. Though a polyamorous person and a person in an open relationship can exhibit the

same exact behavior, Nate notes that the polyamorous individual will be taken more seriously. His behavior will be seen as a result of a personal, unchanging orientation, rather than as the product of an ostensibly unfulfilling relationship.

Like Nate, Ingrid believes that deviation from the monogamous norm is taken more seriously if it is described as an innate quality, rather than a parameter on a relationship. In order to manage how other perceive her non-monogamy, Ingrid is more inclined to say that she *is* non-monogamous or use language that implies it. This is despite the fact that she personally believes herself to *practice* non-monogamy. In discussing why she does this, she notes that framing non-monogamy as an identity leads to it being taken more seriously: "I think the more accurate term would be "I *practice* non-monogamy" but people take that less to heart. I think people perceive that as "you're doing that to be cool" or something like that [as compared to if you say] "I *am* non-monogamous." Ingrid purposefully talks about non-monogamy as a core identity, in order to avoid some of the negative perceptions that come when she describes it as a choice. In describing it as innate, rather than as a choice, Ingrid better avoids the assumption that her non-monogamy is a result of the desire to be hip, or anything else other than her own desire to be non-monogamous.

Nate and Ingrid discuss how describing non-monogamy as something they *are* leads to it being taken more seriously. Thelma, on the other hand, brought up a counterpoint. She said she prefers *practice* because "...just that connotation — saying 'I *am* non-monogamous' sounds so negative. It's like 'I am a failure.' Saying I practice non-monogamy is like a lighter way...it sounds more experimental." From Thelma's

perspective, characterizing non-monogamy as a choice — one that is possibly experimental — makes it seem more acceptable. Though Thelma believes that monogamy is a characteristic innate to humans on the species level, it seems as though describing non-monogamy as something innate to a person on the individual might represent the person as fundamentally flawed. To lessen the stigma, she chooses to describe it as a practice - one that may or may not be fleeting.

Closing Thoughts

Though the majority of my participants felt that they practice non-monogamy, this response was not as simple as the majority answer to a yes or no question. Many participants noted that the term “practice” applies in certain contexts like open relationships or when discussing the fact that non-monogamy takes hard work. Similarly, non-monogamy as identity was thought to be more appropriate among people who identify as polyamorous or when discussing the human race as a whole.

Some participants also noted that they describe their non-monogamy differently depending on social context. Ingrid and Nate feel that the relationship style is taken more seriously when described as innate to the individual. Thelma, on the other hand, felt that representing it as a choice, rather than a characteristic to which she is permanently tied, leads to a more positive impression.

Part 2

Under Pressure

Social Imperatives to Conform

In this section, I explore the impact of two social expectations on individuals' decision to choose non-monogamous relationships over monogamous ones. In Chapter 4, I look at the social pressure that monogamy exerts and the ensuing stress of fulfilling the monogamous norm. In Chapter 5, I turn my focus to gendered expectations and investigate to what extent these impact the decision to enter into a non-monogamous relationship.

I realize that there is a logical inconsistency between this section and the previous. While the second chapter of this thesis discusses whether my participants felt that non-monogamy was something they chose, or if it was a trait with which they were born, the following two chapters discuss non-monogamy as if it were a choice.

If we were to assume that non-monogamy is not a choice — that it is an innate orientation in the same way that to being gay or queer is often discussed — then the discussion of non-monogamy as choice would still be valid. A discussion about factors influencing the decision to pursue non-monogamous relationships would use the

notion of “choice” to mean the decision to “come out” as non-monogamous and pursue relationships that go against this social norm.

Before delving into the more salient pressures that influenced my study participants to pursue non-monogamous relationships, it is important to bring up the *lack* of certain social pressures which likely made it easier to lead a non-monogamous lifestyle. My sample was mostly heterosexual, white, and college-educated. The combination of these identities produce privileges that, if lacking, would have made non-monogamy a much more difficult, if not impossible choice. My participants benefitted from relative economic stability and the assumption of normative sexual practices. For the most part, participation in non-monogamy was not construed as perpetuating the perception of white people or heterosexuals as hypersexual. Most of my participants decisions to pursue this non-normative sexuality, in most cases, did not force them to speak for their entire social group.

Chapter 3

The Monogamous Social Script

As explained in the literature review, compulsory monogamy describes the way social norms constrain romantic sexual attraction into a monogamous framework. Alternatives to monogamy are presented as less valid, serious, or legitimate, leaving little space to explore them. In effect, this makes monogamy the only viable form of commitment in western culture.

Study participants shared personal experiences with compulsory monogamy that brought it out of the theoretical and into the personal realm. Jakob described how he was raised to understand certain terms related to relationships as implying monogamy: “I think the way I was raised and how society raised me led me to believe that monogamy was the way to go... I think the term girlfriend or boyfriend is a really loaded term — it has such a strong connotation of being monogamous, so...you assume monogamy...” As Jakob describes it, he was raised to believe that terms like girlfriend or boyfriend imply monogamy, when this is not necessarily the case.

Even when someone is simultaneously a girlfriend and not monogamous, this is assumed to be a passing phase - as if the two terms paired together produce an unstable compound. When Annie was discussing non-monogamy with her roommate, he told her “everyone ends up monogamous in the end.” Nate experienced a similar reaction -

when discussing how people react when he says he is in an open relationship, Nate said “I think there is this general sense that open relationship will just crash and burn.” According to Annie’s roommate and Nate’s friends, though an individual can have non-monogamous experiences, these will not last. Over time, the relationship will either end completely or stabilize and converge to monogamy.

The socialization to be monogamous and the perception that alternatives to monogamy are unstable produce a lot of pressure to be monogamous, even if an individual does not personally prefer a monogamous relationship. Maggie summarizes her experience with this pressure: “I feel all the time an intense pressure to be monogamous even though that's not really what I want...the pressure from society is so enormous that I can see why so many people go with monogamy even when [they know] it's not really what suits them.” Though an individual may not want to be monogamous, pursuing such relationships may be the path of least resistance. It is important to note that such a decision is completely personal; my intent is not to judge individuals for choosing monogamy for any reason, including the fact that it might be an easier path to take.

Defining the Monogamous Norm

Though the pressure to conform to the monogamous norm is immense, participants brought up certain instances where, paradoxically, deviating from the monogamous norm lessened the pressure that it exerts. In order to investigate why this

might be the case, it is necessary to get a better understanding of what the monogamous imperative entails. The most minimal, basic criteria that a relationship must satisfy in order to be considered monogamous within American society are the following:

1. It is composed of *two* individuals
2. These individuals are sexually active only with each other (for some, this could be sexually *interested* only in each other)
3. These individuals are romantically interested only in each other.

How exactly these expectations are defined comes down to the individual — some individuals might consider kissing someone outside of the relationship cheating, while others would consider fantasizing or watching pornography to be cheating. These differences in definition are relatively minimal, as they are guided by the same root principals.

In addition to these explicit expectations of monogamy, there are also implicit expectations of people in such relationships. It's because of this that it might seem strange for a woman who is in a relationship to sleep in the same bed as her male best friend or for a man in a relationship to be close friendships with women. It is important to note that these expectations have deep heterosexual undertones; it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate normative monogamy from heterosexuality.

Such implicit expectations are guided by the narrative of love and romance, as American society presents it. This narrative entails two people falling in love, getting married, and spending the rest of their lives completely enamored with each other. A

true soulmate within this framework completely fulfills you, both emotionally and physically. It is for this reason that talking about masturbation (or even the act itself) or watching porn with your partner might be off limits in some relationships — because these acts imply that your partner does not cater to your every need. Furthermore, while people are no longer expected to remain virgins until marriage, there is still an attitude of “love virginity,” so to speak. This is the idea that your connection with your current partner is the most intense of all romantic connections you have ever experienced. After all, couples often avoid discussing previous partners and even get jealous when hearing about a person their partner used to love.

Under Pressure

Across the board, participants described all kinds of manifestations of the pressure to conform to the monogamous norm. Given the literature on compulsory monogamy, this is not entirely surprising. What was surprising, however, was when study participants felt this pressure. In some cases, participants noted that they felt more pressure to conform to the norms of monogamy and romance while in *monogamous* relationships. When they were doing a better job of fulfilling these norms, they felt more pressure to even better fulfill them. Participants noted that, upon entering into a non-monogamous relationship, the pressure still persisted, though to a lesser extent.

What is most interesting across all of these cases (and similar to the empowerment that non-monogamy brought to its women participants discussed in the previous chapter) is the fact that the pressure to conform to the monogamous norm lessened because of a change in mindset, not necessarily because the people involved are having extra-dyadic sexual experiences. In this sense, these benefits are not peculiar to non-monogamous relationships; it seems that anyone who approaches the culture of monogamy with a critical eye can reap experience the benefits my participants did.

Jealousy

Jealousy is often perceived as the greatest obstacle to having a non-monogamous relationship. A common reaction my participants experienced when disclosing their non-monogamous status was along the lines of “I could never do that - I’d get too jealous.” Such a reaction is largely informed by media representations of non-monogamy. Such representations focus on jealousy, presenting it as a natural and inherent reaction to the prospect of a romantic partner having sexual contact with another individual. Jealousy is understood to be proof that you are truly in love; passion and jealousy are considered to be a package deal (Emens 2004).

Though popular media represents jealousy in this way, such a representation is not entirely accurate. Conley et al (2013) found that rates of jealousy are *lower* in non-monogamous relationships as compared to monogamous ones. Reframing and relearning socialization keeping in mind the lens of compulsory monogamy often leads

to a decrease in jealousy. Many of my participants, as well as literature on non-monogamy, describe jealousy as a learned characteristic and therefore one that could be overcome. Such a characterization alludes to the meaning behind terms such as “just jea” and “wibbly,” which describe a feeling similar to jealousy, though less intense and more manageable. Andre describes how he went from being a very jealous person to being more cognizant of this emotion:

After my first relationship, I became really interested in open-relationships, non-monogamy and I read this book...it talked about how we have a lot of ideas about what we are like as people. Going into that book, I viewed myself as kind of a possessive person - not as violently jealous, but overtly jealous. In my head, I do get jealous about certain things. This book was really insightful because [it said] you can work on those two things. You can deconstruct them, it's not an innate characteristic.

An understanding of romantic jealousy as malleable and temporary positions the emotion much more closely to other forms of jealousy that are common in our society. This includes jealousy towards a coworker that got a promotion or towards a friend who is talented at math. In these two examples, few would argue that jealousy towards a coworker or friend is permanent and unavoidable, nor would it be linked to deep love towards the individuals.

Aside from decreasing emotional distress - both in monogamous and non-monogamous relationships - turning a critical eye to the concept of romantic jealousy can lead to healthier relationships of all kinds - romantic, friendly, non-monogamous and monogamous. Jakob and Annie both described situations in former monogamous relationships where jealousy was assumed to be a normal part of the relationship. Reflecting upon these situations, they noted that the romantic jealousy served

primarily to distance them from friends. Jakob describes how his partner felt uncomfortable with him spending time with other women:

There was one time when I hung out with my friend Lily and my partner at the time was pretty mad about it because she thought that Lily was into me. One of my best friends - Johanna — who is a girl — any time I would talk to her, my previous partner would make me feel so uncomfortable because she would assume I have feelings for Johanna even though I didn't. It almost made me resent the friendship with [Johanna] because it was making my partner so stressed. During the time I was more on the side that I should be more monogamous and resenting the fact that I had friends who are girls because it was impacting my monogamous relationship.

In both of these situations — with Lily and Johanna, friendship between a man and a woman was interpreted as having sexual undertones, despite little to no evidence supporting this interpretation. Though at the time Jakob agreed with his partner — that these friendships pushed the bounds of his monogamous relationship — he now feels that such jealousy was misplaced.

Like Jakob, Annie experienced the somewhat alienating impact of jealousy in a monogamous relationship, though from a different perspective. Annie describes a situation wherein her ex-boyfriend's new girlfriend did not want the former couple spending time together:

...[my ex-boyfriend] started dating another girl and she didn't want us hanging out. And I wanted to respect her and his monogamous relationship and he felt the same way — "I don't want John to get mad that we're hanging out." But I hate how that's controlling our relationship...[my ex-boyfriend] and I have been friends since middle school and we had a lot of trust built up."

Though the former couple had no feelings for each other, any contact seemed to upset the expectation in monogamous relationships that each party is interested exclusively

in their partner. Similar to Jakob, Annie's ex boyfriend also felt that he should "be more monogamous," even citing that he did not want Annie's boyfriend, John, to feel upset.

Common to both Jakob and Annie's situations was that neither of them violated any explicit expectations of monogamy. Neither Jakob, nor Annie was romantically or sexually interested in anyone but their partner. Nevertheless, their close friendships with members of a different gender was seen through the lens of compulsory monogamy and heterosexuality and therefore construed as threatening. These cross gender friendships were understood to violate an unspoken expectation of monogamy. Both Jakob and Annie had to decrease, if not completely cut off contact, with individuals they had known for years. Reflecting back on this, Jakob compares how the two situations would have been handled differently based on relationship type: "...in a monogamous relationship, it's almost like you are walking on thin ice — 'like you are texting some boy a lot - what's up with that?' but in being in a non-monogamous relationship, it's not even a thing."

Allocation of Time and Energy

If you are deeply in love with an individual, it is expected that you spend quite a bit of time with that person. A happy couple weekends together, always attends social gatherings together, and always supports each other in times of need. Over time, this can add up to a hefty burden. Cultural symbols like sleeping in different beds, taking a long time to respond to text messages, and the phrase "I need some space" have

become synonymous with a relationship gone bad. If you are truly in love, you will be happy to devote your time and energy.

When asked about former monogamous relationships, Ben brought up the pressure to always be there for his partner, saying: “I felt kind of like I had to be available for this person all the time and if I wasn't then we would instantly cheat on each other or something. It felt kinda crazy. I don't know how much that is a statement on like larger culture if I'm just paranoid.” Ben speaks to the idea that being there for his partner at all times was a necessary condition for a successful relationship. From his perspective, if he was unable to fully satisfy his partner, the relationship would crumble and “we would instantly cheat on each other.”

Like Ben, Ingrid also felt pressured to spend a lot of time with her partner. “When I was in a monogamous relationship, I felt like I had to be there for that person all the time and give them so much of my energy. My experience with non-monogamous relationships...[is that] I would have had to give him significantly less energy.” Ingrid continues to say that she would have had to give her partner less energy because non-monogamy freed her from the pressure of being solely responsible for his emotional and sexual fulfillment. Because they are not monogamous, her partner would have the option to turn to someone else if Ingrid was not available or needed time to herself.

Annie describes how one of her partners, John, had an experience similar to Ben's and Ingrid's. Like Ben, he got caught up in the imperative to spend lots of time with his partner, without pausing to take some time for himself:

[non-monogamy has] been allowing [my boyfriend] more time to himself. I think he was getting really wrapped up in the idea of our relationship and "monogamy." Like the social norm that "we're in a relationship and we always need to be hanging out together".

In describing why non-monogamy lessened the pressure to spend time and energy on her partner, Ingrid describes the practical reality of her situation. She notes that non-monogamy allows her to spread out the responsibility of caring for her partner's emotional and sexual fulfillment across multiple people. For Ben and John, however, the simple expectation that two happy, monogamous people should spend time together are what produced the pressure, not the logistical arrangements in fulfilling each others' needs.

Non-monogamy is based on the understanding that it is ok for two romantically involved individuals to find sexual and emotional satisfaction with people other than their primary partner. In both Ingrid and John's situation, it's possible for only the label on the relationship to change and they would have still acted in the same manner. In changing only the label, Ingrid and John would have felt the same relief, if only because the weight of the expectation diminished. This is to say that, individuals in a monogamous relationship can also experience benefits similar to those that John and Ingrid felt. Internalizing the idea that you can get emotional satisfaction from anyone — a romantic partner, friends, and your self — is possible in any kind of relationship, as well as if you are single. Once again, simply being cognizant of the norms that monogamy promotes can lessen the pressures these norms exert.

Other Expectations: The Implicit Social Script

As seen in the above examples, the simple act of being in a relationship labeled as monogamous — one that fulfills all basic expectations listed above — does not imply that all expectations of monogamy are fully met. There are a number of additional social expectations that come with being in a monogamous relationship including the presence of jealousy and the expectations that partners in a relationship satisfy each others' every emotional and physical need. These expectations are only the tip of the iceberg and form what some participants referred to as the social script of monogamy.

An implicit expectation of monogamy that Ingrid mentions is the expectation that monogamous individuals prefer monogamy over all other forms of coupling. Ingrid's experience with these expectations is that, even though she fulfilled each explicit expectation, she still felt that something was amiss:

I was in a monogamous relationship with [a former boyfriend] in high school and it was weird because I always felt like I was cheating on him. I wasn't cheating on him but [in wanting] to be with other people I felt like I was. Everyone that I've ever been in a monogamous relationship with — I felt like we were all lying to each other. I knew he was attracted to other people and I was attracted to other people but I felt like we were trying to play this fake game.

Though Ingrid was totally monogamous with all of her partners, she felt like she was breaking a rule by feeling attracted to other people — she was fulfilling all the explicit expectations, but was not meeting an implicit expectation — to *want* to be in a monogamous relationship. The fact that she did not have this desire caused her distress.

Jakob mentions the expectation to regularly have sex with his partner as a pressure he felt while in a monogamous relationship. In his experience, the pressure lessened when he entered into a non-monogamous relationship:

I was in a monogamous relationship in my previous relationship. I think being in a non-monogamous relationship takes a lot of pressure off of having to have sex with your partner because in my monogamous relationship, it was like "we are a couple, a healthy couple would be having sex right now, why aren't we having sex?" but in a non-monogamous relationship, I think it's more like "I want to have sex with you so we will have sex" and less because "we have to have sex."

In the above quote, Jakob describes how defining a relationship as non-monogamous alleviates some of the pressures to adhere to the romantic social script. With this, Jakob expressed the sentiment that straying away from the implicit expectations of monogamy, if only in name (and not necessarily in practice), decreased some of the pressure imposed by these expectations.

A number of participants brought up this social script in general and how it made them feel. In Diane's case, she did not like that her relationship was assumed to progress and function a certain way:

...when people are in monogamous relationships, they assume that if you are monogamous, there is this social script that comes along with it and you're supposed to follow that. So people assume a lot of things in monogamous relationships and people assume based on what they have been told by social scripts that that's how your relationship is going to go...

In Diane's case, she did not like that her relationship was expected to adhere to certain norms. These expectations could be things like frequently talking about how great your partner is, bringing this partner to social events, spending lots of time with the partner, and being physically intimate with this partner. If her relationship does not align with

an expectation, the implication is that it is faulty in some way. This places pressure on individuals to adhere to these norms. Annie brings up the pressure to adhere to this script, saying: “I never can feel like I'm truly being myself if there are certain expectations in a monogamous relationship.”

Given the pervasive nature of the monogamous social script, it is unsurprising that Annie experienced certain monogamous expectations, even when in a monogamous relationship. Annie describes one such expectation that she experienced: “But sometimes things will be said [between me and either Chad or John] that sounds pretty monogamous. John will be like “I love you the most.” I almost feel obligated to say that, but I don't want to. I don't love anyone more or less.” Annie is in a polyamorous relationship with two different men. When one tells her he loves her the most, she feels the pressure to say that as well, even if it is not entirely true. Expectations like the one Annie described — to love your partner “the most” — likely carry over to non-monogamous relationships because the idea of a relationship is still very closely tied to the idea of a monogamous relationship.

Closing Thoughts

In discussing the pressures produced by the intersections of compulsory monogamy, heterosexuality, and the narrative of romance, my intent is not to vilify monogamous relationships or portray them as inherently stressful. Likewise, my aim is not to portray monogamous relationships as robotically following a social script. By the

same token, I surely do not intent to represent non-monogamous as inherently better and more beneficial to all participants.

Common across all examples brought up by participants is the presence of awareness — awareness of the monogamous norm and how it behaves. In all of these examples, it was this awareness that led to participants feeling more empowered , less stressed, and more free, not the actual acts of non-monogamy. This trend suggests that media literacy and a critical eye towards social norms is sufficient to produce relationships that are better attuned to partners' preferences. As my final example from Annie suggests, it seems that all relationships, even non-monogamous ones, could benefit from increased understanding of the subtle impact of compulsory monogamy, the assumptions it leads us to make, and the pressures it produces.

Chapter 4

Non-Monogamy as a Feminist Issue: Autonomy of Body and Mind

A notable trend in my interviews was that, of the participants that were in heterosexual relationships, most often it was the woman who first suggested non-monogamy and ultimately pushed to be non-monogamous. After some investigation, it became clear that it was the options and philosophy that the non-monogamous label brings, not necessarily the physical practice of non-monogamy, which drew these women to prefer such relationships. Based on this trend, as well as trends in academic literature on non-monogamy, I argue that non-monogamy can serve a political purpose for its women participants. By uniquely empowering women, non-monogamy is surely a feminist issue.

Because my study group was fairly homogenous in terms of race and sexual orientation, so these discussions largely focus on the intersections of gender with white racial identity and heterosexual sexual orientation.

Previous Scholarship on Non-Monogamy and Women's Empowerment

Previous literature on non-monogamy has already linked it to women's empowerment. In her overview of a portion of this literature, Emens discusses a trend of feminists involved in polyamory linking the practice with increased bodily autonomy:

A number of prominent poly writers describe their embrace of non-monogamy as fueled by their insights about power and possessiveness in monogamy and by their desire for autonomy within their relationships. This aspect of polyamory builds in part upon a feminist understanding of monogamy as a historical mechanism for the control of women's reproductive and other labor (Emens 2004, p. 326).

Emens references the history of monogamy — of male ownership of women, as formerly solidified by dowries and marriage contracts — to underscore an implicit belief that persists to this day. While there is no implicit understanding that men's bodies belong to anyone but themselves, this idea still persists for women. Present day examples of this notion are the plethora of anti-abortion restricts that exist ostensibly to increase safety during the abortion process, despite quite a bit of medical evidence that they are unnecessary (mandatory waiting periods, pre- and post-procedure counseling, requiring the physician to have admitting privileges at a nearby hospital). Another example is the difficulty of obtaining birth control, while similar restrictions on Viagra would be met with mass protests. The message behind the restrictions on abortion and birth control

access is that women do not know what is best for their bodies and that lawmakers (who are nearly all men) *do* know what is best for their uterus-owning constituents.

The idea that women do not have full ownership over their bodies bleeds through to heterosexual relationships as well. Though this is less explicit than it was a few decades ago, such ownership is still very much a facet of present day American culture. Indeed, up until 1993, marital rape was either legal or decriminalized in parts of the US. An a less serious and more theoretical note, as referenced in the literature review, Overall argues that women's identities stem from the men with whom they have sex, rather than from experiencing themselves as sexual beings, as is the case for me. Because women are taught to incorporate the identities of their sexual partners into their own identities, "...the result in women's romantic/sexual relationships is often an expansion of the sense of self to include those with whom they have sexual relationships," (Overall, 1998, 8).

In this context of male control over women via romantic relationships and decisions about what happens to women's bodies, non-monogamy can be seen as an opportunity to lessen male control over women and increase personal autonomy. Sheff (2005) reports precisely this finding, noting that women's participation in polyamorous relationships leads to shifts in power in their interpersonal relationships. "Some polyamorous women who felt constrained and disempowered by monogamy reported a sense of release upon embarking on polyamorous relationships," (2005, p. 259). Sheff (2005) describes the empowerment brought by non-monogamy as an increase in sexual subjectivity. Sheff quotes definition of sexual subjectivity as: "a person's experience of

herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being” (Tolman 2002, 5-6). She argues that sexual subjectivity is linked with agency and self-esteem, making it clear that an increase in the former would produce improvements in the latter.

Previous literature suggests that polyamory and non-monogamy have the potential to increase women’s sexual subjectivities, is even for women who do not identify as heterosexual. Emens describes Marny Hall’s research into lesbian non-monogamous relationships. Hall found that having multiple sexual and possibly romantic relationships allowed partners more space, autonomy, and prevented them from turning into one unit (Hall 1999, Emens 2004). Robinson (2013) describes non-monogamy as a strategic identity for sexual expression for bisexual women. For the women in Robinson’s study, non-monogamy allowed them to better express their identities as bisexual and increase the visibility of this commonly overlooked sexual orientation. While Robinson only discusses non-monogamy’s impact on bisexual women, other literature, as well as my findings, suggests that women of all sexual orientations can gain social and political benefits from non-monogamy.

Non-Monogamy as Independence

The responses of my participants largely support the perspectives in the literature - that non-monogamy was empowering, particularly to women. Though they

did not use terms like “sexual subjectivity,” the women in my sample linked non-monogamy with an increase in freedom, self-expression, and autonomy.

A number of the women I interviewed listed the desire for independence as a reason why they continue to prefer non-monogamous relationships. Annie puts it simply by saying “I don’t want to depend solely on one person.” Hannah gave a more elaborate explanation, noting that non-monogamy makes her feel more independent because she gets to develop as an individual, rather than as someone’s girlfriend:

[non-monogamy] allows us to individually develop as people, rather than developing as like his girlfriend or her boyfriend. I think being in a monogamous relationship creates boundaries because it’s an agreement to be with one person like emotionally, sexually, just like in all those ways and so when you’re in non-monogamous relationship you’re exposed to all those different things that otherwise would have been cut off from you...

Both Annie and Hannah bring up that non-monogamy allows them to be more independent from their partners, if only in the sense that they felt more independent and push themselves to act more independently. It seems that this benefit, at least from Hannah’s experience, is not limited to women. She brings up that non-monogamy allows both her *and* her boyfriend to develop independently.

In addition to changing how individuals in relationships perceive themselves and their role within the relationship, participants brought up that non-monogamy changes how they, as a couple, are perceived. Diane discussed how, in her previous monogamous relationships, she was perceived as being very closely tied to her boyfriend in the minds of others. Comparatively, non-monogamy loosens this association:

I'd always been oddly uncomfortable with the idea of being associated with someone publicly so much so it was kind of nice to be like "I'm with this person, but also I can be with other people." So maybe there was something weirdly constricting about monogamous relationships

In addition to making herself feel more independent, as Annie and Hannah discuss above, Diane also believes that non-monogamy makes others perceive her as more independent. This, in turn, makes her feel less constricted in her relationship.

Other participants discussed the feeling of increased control that non-monogamy imparted on them. Annie describes non-monogamy as placing her "in such a position where I have control over my life and my relationships with other people."

Thelma expressed a similar sentiment: "...I don't want to feel that I belong to someone or that I can't make that decision even if I think that's the right decision for me."

Maggie combined all of these trends – the idea that monogamy is restrictive and the freedom that non-monogamy gives her – in one quote:

I feel a huge sense of anxiety in monogamous relationships. I think it's probably coming from a lot of different places [including] I'm not being true to myself because I'm still attracted and interested in other people and also I don't feel fulfilled as a person unless I have every option open to me almost...I don't like feeling like every setting I go into, I'm not allowed to engage with people however I want to. I really believe that with every single person you meet, you'll have a entirely different relationship with...it gives me anxiety to feel like I can't really be myself in every single setting...I don't want to have to feel like I have to hold myself back because of a rule that I don't believe in.

Maggie felt constrained by monogamy — it gave her a huge sense of anxiety — because she felt that it did not allow her to be true to herself. She found the bounds of monogamy and the choices and opportunities it eliminates, restrictive. Like Maggie,

Thelma and Annie felt the same - they also viewed non-monogamy as giving them more control over their lives.

Maggie's quote brings up an important question that the literature does not answer— is some of this increased freedom and autonomy the result of simply being more true to your innate desires, rather than simply because of gendered social scripts? Maggie's response would suggest "yes." When I asked Maggie if non-monogamy is something that she "is" or something that she "does," Maggie answered with the former. Since she understands non-monogamy as being a trait innate to who she is, acting otherwise prevents her from expressing an important aspect of herself.

While I cannot make any large conclusions, given the limited sample size, I can compare what other participants said. Unlike Maggie, the rest of the women who described non-monogamy as empowering — Diane, Thelma, and Hannah, Annie — all consider non-monogamy to be something they practice, not something they innately "are". This pattern suggests that the empowerment coming from non-monogamy may or may not be only based on gender. That being said, individuals can consider non-monogamy a choice and still feel they are not being true to themselves if they do not have the opportunity to pursue this choice.

An important trend across all of these examples is that the simple label of non-monogamy — the option of being able to have sexual contact with someone other than her partner, as well as the philosophy of non-monogamy— is what made participants feel less limited. No one mentioned the actual act of having multiple sexual partners as

contributing them feeling more empowered. Instead, it is the ability to make the choice, rather than the choice itself, that produces the empowerment.

Coming Full Circle: Sexism in Non-Monogamous Relationships

An idea not present in the literature on non-monogamy is how the notion that men own women has bled over to non-monogamous relationships. Since such relationships take place in a sexist society, they cannot be devoid of sexism. A number of women interviewed noted ways in which they were regarded as lesser in their heterosexual relationships. The pressure to put men first — in front of your sexual needs, and even before your identity — that led many women to pursue non-monogamy also persisted in their non-monogamous experiences.

While non-monogamous relationships push individuals, especially women, to put themselves first, Maggie brought up tension between this goal and the reality that women are not taught to put themselves first, nor are men taught to encourage this. Take, for example, the pressure that women face to sexually please men. Maggie references this, saying, “...there are a lot of aspects of being conditioned as a women that make you more inclined to give in to pressures like that. I think it's harder for women to assert what they want.” This is in conflict with the philosophy, though not exclusive to non-monogamy, that an individual’s pleasure should come before their

partners'. Maggie references this as she discusses the tension between being a woman and being non-monogamous:

...women are supposed to be...more selfless, more loving, more nurturing, more committed, they are not the ones that [are supposed to] cheat, it's the men that [are supposed to] cheat on the women...it's almost like it's more acceptable for [men] to be sexually non-monogamous because of the double standard — slut and player.

In American society, a man is expected to have a high sexual appetite and a woman is expected to fulfill it. Being socialized as a woman makes it difficult to take advantage of all that non-monogamy has to offer, simply because you have been socialized in a manner directly opposite to it. This socialization is the reason why non-monogamy can be incredibly empowering to women, though it is can also hold women in such relationships back from reaping all the benefits.

While Maggie focused on her own perceptions and how her socialization caused her to hold *herself* back, socialization naturally also impacts individuals' interactions with each other. Annie described how non-monogamy was used as a tool by men in heterosexual relationships to get more sexual pleasure out of women, despite the fact that their partners did not enthusiastically consent to the relationship:

I don't know a lot of girls who are doing this in a similar sort of way. Usually I hear about guys — I've had a few friends that have had boyfriends that are like "come on, let's do [non-monogamy]" and the girls are like "I guess I'm ok with it." I'm so used to seeing one guy with multiple girls more so than one girl with multiple guys.

This pattern — of men suggesting a certain practice to women and women giving unenthusiastic consent — is unfortunately common in our society. In the cases that Annie describes, the male partner is the one to suggest the non-monogamous

relationship, to the hesitant consent of his primary partner exemplified by the phrase “I guess I’m ok with it.” Annie even experienced it first hand in one of her previous relationships: “...he was into polyamory for his own sake — he didn't want me seeing other people. Like when it would come down to it, he was just in it for himself.” In these situations, the male partner prioritized his ability to have sexual relationships with multiple women over his partner’s comfort with such relationships. Though non-monogamy is not inherently exploitative, it can certainly be a mechanism to take advantage of someone. This is primarily the case if the decision to be in such a relationship is not collaboratively made and agreed upon as a couple.

In her discussion of sexism in non-monogamous relationships, Annie also brings up her roommate’s non-monogamous relationship. “One of my roommates...is in an open relationship with his girlfriend in the way that she is seeing another girl and he's into it. But if she was seeing another guy, I don't know if he would be as into it.” She goes on to say that her male roommate is fine with his girlfriend having sexual contact with other women as long as he gets to participate as well. In this case, the roommate’s girlfriend is limited to having sexual experiences only with people that do not directly threaten his position as her boyfriend. Beyond that, her sexual pleasure is contingent on him also being able to participate in the experience. The presence of sexism in non-monogamous relationships is consistent with Sheff’s (2005) finding that, though polyamory lead to a non-traditional power distribution, the people she interviewed still experienced aspects of the patriarchal culture in which these relationships operated.

Pushing Past Gender Boundaries

Based on participant responses, as well as literature on non-monogamy, the relationship style can be read as lessening the grip of patriarchal gender roles. It encourages independence, self-awareness, and prioritization of one's own needs; none of these traits are encouraged in women. Furthermore, by avoiding monogamy's assumption that an individual is only attracted to one person at a time, non-monogamy positions itself as a great option for those who do not identify as gay or straight. In fact, Robinson (2013) finds that polyamory provides a number of benefits to bisexual people, including making an often-forgotten sexual orientation more obvious, as well as being a "more natural" way of being bisexual.

Sheff found that polyamory allowed women to expand their familial, cultural, gender, and sexual roles (2005). Most of her participants already had children, so polyamory led to a more even distribution of child-care responsibilities. Being in polyamorous relationship also caused the women to prioritize themselves more, while they had been prioritizing their partners in past monogamous relationships. Furthermore, polyamory's treatment of love and sexual attention as a plentiful, rather than limited resource, caused some women to start viewing other women less like competition and more like friends. This led them to appreciate other women's qualities more and feel more inspired by the women around them. This, in turn, facilitated more

connection between women, despite the fact that traditional socialization pits women against each other.

In the context of my and Sheff's findings, the non-monogamous relationship style may be interpreted as a vehicle for expanding our understanding of gender, sexual orientation, and possibly other identities. Non-monogamy may give individuals the increased opportunity for self-expression. By being able to form close relationships with multiple people, individuals can get a better understanding of themselves with respect to others.

It seems that polyamory has the capacity to help people to explore the different facets of themselves and perhaps come to an alternative understanding of self identity through the different ways they might see themselves reflected in the eyes of others they are closely involved with. (Barker 2005, 77)

This is reminiscent of Overall's theory that non-monogamy allows women to develop their identities. In the process of experiencing multiple physically and/or emotionally intimate relationships, an individual stands to experience many sides of themselves — sides that may be highlighted or minimized depending on who they are with.

This benefit of experiencing multiple versions of one's self is particularly salient for Ingrid, who identifies as gender queer. With multiple partners, she could explore and express different aspects of her gender with different people:

Gender does definitely play a role in me wanting to be non-monogamous and me feeling more comfortable [in such relationships]...When I'm with [my current boyfriend], I feel more feminine because he's such a masculine person that he makes me feel feminine. Also because he's a really large person and I'm really small so I think that emasculates me in a lot of ways. It's not a bad thing, it's just not what I want all the time... And this other person that I'm seeing, he's a super feminine person and it's really nice to be able

to interact with him that way and not feel particularly masculine, but also not feel particularly feminine either... So [non-monogamy] gives me the ability to express different parts of my gender and different aspects of myself and my sexuality.

Non-monogamy is better suited than monogamy to facilitates Ingrid's exploration of gender identity and sexual orientation. If Ingrid was only intimate with one other individual, she might have felt limited to only one mode of gender expression. By being able to have close relationships with multiple people, Ingrid got the chance to better explore the bounds of her gender identity and preferences for gender expression.

In addition to allowing individuals explore gender identity, non-monogamy may be better suited than monogamy for allowing people to explore their sexual orientation. This is backed up in the literature. People who are polyamorous are more likely to identify with a non-normative sexual orientation, as compared to people who are not polyamorous (Manley, Diamond, and Van Anders, 2015). In such a case, having more freedom to explore sexuality could be incredibly important, since the greater society imposes compulsory heterosexuality on individuals. It has also been found that polyamorous women's sexual orientation is more likely to change as compared to polyamorous men and monogamous men and women (Manley, Diamond, and Van Anders, 2015).

The finding that non-monogamy presents certain benefits to women that men do not experience leads me to wonder whether individuals who hold more non-hegemonic identities — people of color, queer people, people with disabilities — stand to gain more from the relationship style. Departing from hegemonic norms — norms that are produced to serve society's most powerful — can have unique benefits for those

who do not fit into the hegemony. That being said, departing from such norms will surely produce unique manifestations of stigma and is not possible for all individuals, depending on their socio-political positioning. Noel (2006) argues that polyamory is inaccessible to a huge contingent of people, citing economic reasons like health care, child care, and poverty as preventing individuals from pursuing such relationships. Furthermore, to say that one is non-monogamous may reinforce the stereotype of hyper-sexuality that some groups experience. Diesel even spoke to this point in his interview: "...a black man who is non-monogamous will likely be seen as an extension of the sexualized black man trope. Whereas a white man doing it is like 'he's so new age and open and progressive.'"

When non-monogamy is possible, however, having intimate relationships with multiple people facilitates exploration of personal identity. Since American society centers around the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, masculine, upper-middle class experience, people who do not hold all of these identities cannot so easily learn about what it means to hold such an identity. People who deviate from this hegemonic norm do not live in a society that readily socializes them into (a positive depiction of) their identity. In this sense, learning about one's self could be particularly powerful.

Conclusion

This thesis was divided into two parts, each of which covered one of my two overarching topics:

- 1) The terms college students in non-monogamous relationships use to describe these relationships, as well as how these terms are chosen
- 2) The impact of two normative pressures — monogamy and traditional gender roles — on the decision to pursue a non-monogamous relationship.

In part 1, I discussed the strategic uses of terminology — how my study participants used specific terms to manage assumptions made by conversation partners. Beyond that, I described a trend of “good enough” — of participants using terms that do not fit perfectly, but still get the job done. I suggested this apathy towards terminology could indicate that my participants do not consider their relationship style to be defining characteristic of themselves, though further investigating this phenomenon and conclusion is prime territory for further research.

In part 2, I started by discussing how the pervasive pressure to conform to the monogamous norm manifested itself for my participants. Next, I discussed how participation in a non-monogamous relationship lessened this pressure. In the following chapter, I described how women participants experienced non-monogamy as increasing their sense of sexual agency, as well as bodily and emotional autonomy.

I concluded by noting that the benefits participants experienced from being in non-monogamous relationships were primarily a result of a more critical approach to the monogamous norm; they were not directly linked to having sexual experiences with people other than their romantic partner. This suggests all individuals can experience these benefits, regardless of whether the person is single, monogamous, or non-monogamous.

Given the small sample size, I cannot make any large overarching conclusions with certainty. Nevertheless, these findings serve to ground previous literature and to inspire further research into the subject of non-monogamy. Further theoretical exploration could look into questions this thesis uncovered, but did not answer. A salient, recurring question was “what differentiates self-labeling as non-monogamous from other labels such as “queer” that also describe non-normative sexualities?”

Research from a feminist perspective could further explore how gender impacts the benefits of non-monogamy. A related and equally crucial study should seek to better understand the experiences of people who hold non-binary gender identities or those who were socialized as one gender but transition to another. Collecting the experiences of people who have lived as multiple gender identities would shed a great deal of light on how non-monogamy bends and destabilizes hegemonic norms and identities.

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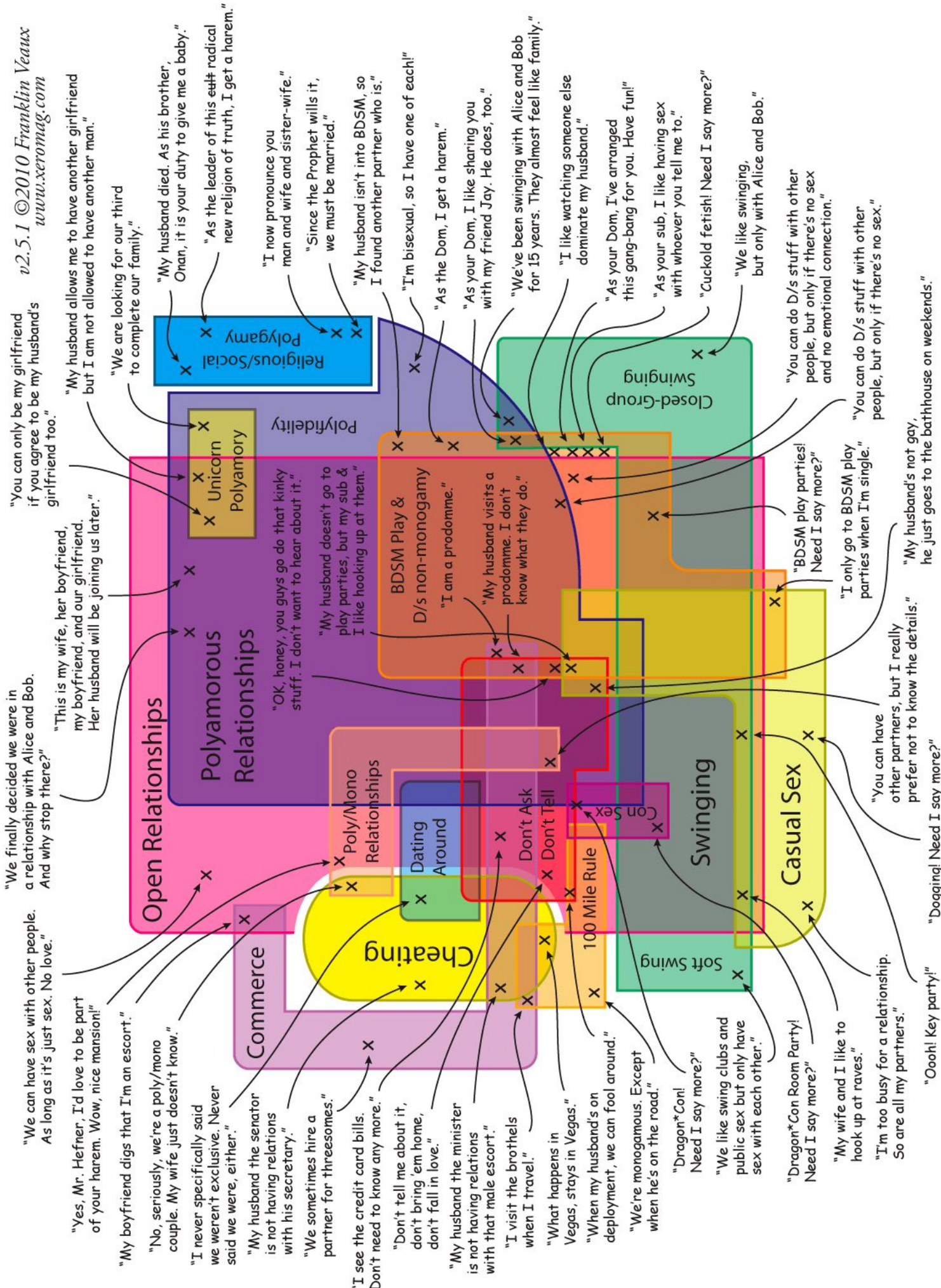
Appendices

Appendix 1: Charts with Non-Monogamous Terminology

Terms Similar to Non-Monogamy	
Consensual Non-Monogamy	“Any relationship arrangement in which the partners agree to have extradyadic sexual or romantic relationships (Conley et al, 2013, 2). The three CNM relationship types are swinging, polyamorous relationships, and open relationships (Matsick et al, 2013).
Non-Monogamous Relationship	An ongoing relationship between two or more people who have all agreed that extra-dyadic sexual contact does not constitute cheating
Open Relationship	Two people who consider themselves to be in a relationship and have agreed that sexual contact with other people does not constitute cheating
Polyamory	“The philosophy or state of being in love or romantically involved with more than one person at a time.” - Google Dictionary

Terms Describing Social Phenomena Related to Non-Monogamy	
Desirous Monogamy	“...reflects participants' somatic desires, or how many sexual partners they fantasize about having (or would desire to have if there were no social controls on their monogamous relationships)” (Anderson, 2010, 854).
Monogamy	The implicit or explicit expectation that two people are sexually and romantically involved with only each other.
Physical Monogamy	“...reflects participants' bodily behaviors, or how many extradyadic sexual experiences the participant has had” (Anderson, 2010, 854).
Social Monogamy	“...reflects participants' desire to be thought of as monogamous by their peers and society more broadly — even if they are not practicing it” (Anderson, 2010, 854).
Serial Monogamy	The practice of going from one long-term monogamous relationship to another with little to no casual sex in-between

**Appendix 2: Chart of More Non-Monogamous Terms by
Franklin Beaux
(on following page)**



"We finally decided we were in a relationship with Alice and Bob. And why stop there?"

"We can have sex with other people. As long as it's just sex. No love."

"Yes, Mr. Hefner, I'd love to be part of your harem. Wow, nice mansion!"

"This is my wife, her boyfriend, my boyfriend, and our girlfriend. Her husband will be joining us later."

"My boyfriend digs that I'm an escort."

"No, seriously, we're a poly/mono couple. My wife just doesn't know."

"I never specifically said we weren't exclusive. Never said we were, either."

"My husband the senator is not having relations with his secretary."

"We sometimes hire a partner for threesomes."

"I see the credit card bills. Don't need to know any more."

"Don't tell me about it, don't bring 'em home, don't fall in love."

"My husband the minister is not having relations with that male escort."

"I visit the brothels when I travel."

"What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas."

"When my husband's on deployment, we can fool around."

"We're monogamous. Except when he's on the road."

"Dragon*Con! Need I say more?"

"We like swing clubs and public sex but only have sex with each other."

"Dragon*Con Room Party! Need I say more?"

"My wife and I like to hook up at raves."

"You can only be my girlfriend if you agree to be my husband's girlfriend too."

"My husband allows me to have another girlfriend but I am not allowed to have another man."

"We are looking for our third to complete our family."

"My husband died. As his brother, Onan, it is your duty to give me a baby."

"As the leader of this euh radical new religion of truth, I get a harem."

"I now pronounce you man and wife and sister-wife."

"Since the Prophet wills it, we must be married."

"My husband isn't into BDSM, so I found another partner who is."

"I'm bisexual, so I have one of each!"

"As the Dom, I get a harem."

"As your Dom, I like sharing you with my friend Jay. He does, too."

"We've been swinging with Alice and Bob for 15 years. They almost feel like family."

"I like watching someone else dominate my husband."

"As your Dom, I've arranged this gang-bang for you. Have fun!"

"As your sub, I like having sex with whoever you tell me to."

"Cuckold fetish! Need I say more?"

"We like swinging, but only with Alice and Bob."

"OK, honey, you guys go do that kinky stuff. I don't want to hear about it."

"My husband doesn't go to play parties, but my sub & I like hooking up at them."

"I am a prodomme."

"My husband visits a prodomme. I don't know what they do."

"BDSM Play & D/s non-monogamy"

"BDSM play parties! Need I say more?"

"I only go to BDSM play parties when I'm single."

"My husband's not gay, he just goes to the bathhouse on weekends."

"You can have other partners, but I really prefer not to know the details."

"Dogging! Need I say more?"

"You can do D/s stuff with other people, but only if there's no sex and no emotional connection."

"You can do D/s stuff with other people, but only if there's no sex."

"We like swinging, but only with Alice and Bob."

"You can have other partners, but I really prefer not to know the details."

"Dogging! Need I say more?"

"You can do D/s stuff with other people, but only if there's no sex and no emotional connection."

"You can do D/s stuff with other people, but only if there's no sex."

Appendix 3: Participant, Term Used, Rating

Name	Term(s)	Rating	Name	Rating
Andre	open relationship	6 or 7	Ingrid	Non-monogamous Open Relationship 8 4
Annie	non-monogamous	7 or 8	Jakob	Non-monogamous 7
Ben	non-monogamous	10	Jeff	open relationship 7
Danny	open relationship sort of monogamous sort of non-monogamous usually monogamous understanding relationship	1 4 4 4 8.5	Thelma	open relationship sort of monogamous sort of non-monogamous usually monogamous understanding relationship 1 8 8 8 9
Diane	non-monogamous open relationship	8 4	Max	non-monogamous 7
Diesel	non-monogamous open relationship	10 10	Nate	polyamorous 7
Hannah	Open relationship	1	Maggie	polyamorous open relationship non-monogamous 7-8 4 10

Term ratings on a scale of one to 10, one meaning poor fit, 10 meaning great fit

Appendix 4: I“Am” vs. I“Practice” Non-Monogamy

Name	Response
Andre	“Practice. I think where I am right now and the people I’m in relationships with - they are all very much temporal and they are affected by the situations now. It’s just so subjective, the entire realm of relationship. It might change.”
Annie	“I practice non-monogamy” just because I hate defining myself as stuff
Ben	“I guess [when I was in a non-monogamous relationship] I really believed that I was non-monogamous. It had to do with having complex feelings about what love is...”
Danny	“Saying that you ‘are’ non-monogamous sounds more like an open relationship; saying that you ‘practice’ sounds more like a case by case situation.”
Diane	“I would definitely say practice non-monogamy...it’s something that I didn’t really consider before my partner wanted to be non-monogamous and so it was something that I’m still adjusting to a lot.”
Diesel	“You can be non-monogamous even if you haven’t had experiences in non-monogamy, but I think for practicing non-monogamy...you need to be out there, actively being non-monogamous.”
Hannah	“I think that I practice non-monogamy. I think if I have a choice I will want to be monogamous with somebody.”
Ingrid	I would say that I am non-monogamous if anyone asked me. I wouldn’t say “I practice non-monogamy” because it feels like someone could say “why?” ...[and] I would say “because I’m non-monogamous”
Jakob	“I would say that I am non-monogamous — it’s not really something you practice.”
Jeff	“I think they both apply equally. yeah, I mean they’re both describing the same thing.”
Maggie	“I think it’s “are [non-monogamous]“ because I feel like [non-monogamy] is more like an identity...I could be practicing monogamy or I could be practicing non-monogamy...[but] I don’t think I will ever depart from the feelings that I have”
Nate	“I don’t think I would say I <i>am</i> non-monogamous, but I would say I <i>am</i> polyamorous.”
Thelma	“... I would say we practice non-monogamy because it takes practice. It takes a lot of communication, it takes work. Non-monogamy is a practice, it’s a skill.”

Name	Response
Max	"I practice non-monogamy is a better expression for me. However...it's complicated in that I'm pursuing a non-monogamous relationship without necessarily pursuing acts of non-monogamy in my personal choices."