



Those who Identify as Consensual Non-monogamous: How has therapy been treating you?

Lowrie Mollison

2212647

Supervisor: Dr Beverly Cole

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Abstract

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Introduction

What defines a healthy relationship? Is it the ability to discuss topics without judgment and with effortless comfort? Is it having the chance to love wholeheartedly? Or perhaps the ability to share in each other's happiness with no unwanted restrictions, but with transparency? When discussing romantic relationships in Western society, there is the assumption that it is two people following a definitive structure. Despite this, there has been an ever-growing change in social dynamics and relational attachments.

This is why this study aims to explore the experiences of therapy among those in CNM. Although therapy aims to help guide and support the client, on occasion, some therapists will allow their own personal beliefs to seep into the therapeutic relationship. Therefore, this research will focus on the therapeutic relationships and how they have been perceived by those who identify themselves in a CNM relationship. This research aims to improve practitioners' self-awareness and perhaps their ignorance of these relational attachments.

Consensual non-monogamy, also known as ethical non-monogamy, is when a relationship has more than two individuals. CNM is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of relationship structures unique to each individual's experience. There are many different types of non-monogamy, however the most common ones are: a triad or 'throuple' being in a relationship with the three individuals, the misconception of this relationship style is that this is specifically 'polyamory'; however, this is when there are more than two people in a romantic relationship that holds deep emotional bonds, it is not just three people in a polyamorous relationship. There is a 'closed – V', this is one person romantically involved with two people, both individuals are fully aware and consenting to this relationship style. Open relationships are a couple with emotional attachment; however, they commonly open the relationship to sexual experiences with others. An open relationship is similar to 'Swinging' / 'Swingers' as both usually involve a couple who venture outside their dyad for sexual exploration; however, they do this on their own or with their significant other, attending parties or double dates.

Every relationship has its own reasoning behind entering into these lifestyle changes; respecting each choice is highly important for a counsellor to fully comprehend them before providing support.

Literature Review

Brief History of Non-monogamy

Throughout history, in many areas of the world, the concept of non-monogamy was not uncommon. Ancient Egyptian pharaohs would practice non-monogamy; this was a tactic used to demonstrate the royal position and to ensure an heir (Ali, 2020). In addition to this, ancient Romans did practice legal monogamy, as this ensured assets were kept within family lines. It was socially acceptable for males to have multiple partners. This was emphasised with the clarification that adulteration performed by a man was when he had intercourse with a married woman; however, an affair conducted by a woman was when she was unfaithful to her husband (Betzig, 1992).

Following this many religions practice polygyny, which is when males can have multiple wives. Islam is a religion that still practices this form of relationship style. Salahuddin & Usman's (2021) research found that social justifications of this relationship style is linked to arranged marriages alongside infidelity. Demonstrating that some Islamic men will be more likely to have multiple female partners to ensure pregnancy. Within the Islamic community's polygynous relations, a man should not have more than four wives and they must be able to provide for

each of those women equally. On the other hand, Judaism is primarily assumed to be a monogamous religion due to the origin story of 'Adam & Eve'. However, the Torah does not specify any objections to the act of polygyny, resulting in some cases of polygyny (Ruff, 2022).

Due to the history surrounding the topics of CNM, it is demonstrated that polygyny was used as a tool of repression of women throughout history and is still used in certain countries to this day, which could be impacting the perception of the CNM community. Counteracting this was one of the most influential times for CNM within Western society: The 'free love movement'. Sheff (2022) highlighted that between 1960 and 1970, there was a spike in communes of CNM individuals with the changes presented by the 'sexual revolution'. During this time, there were many discussions regarding sexuality and female autonomy. Opening these doors promoted free speech and discussions regarding relationship dynamics (Sheff, 2022). Although there has still been a slow level of progress over the course of 5 decades, there has still been developments in the understanding of CNM and the LGBT+ communities. Therefore, ensuring that the therapeutic spaces are also keeping up with the times is essential for mental health practitioners.

Perceptions of CNM in Society

Non-monogamy is not a new concept and has been influential throughout history; however, within today's society, it is received with mixed responses. The 21st century has brought about a lot of social change and an increased conversation regarding sexuality and sexual lifestyles. This has been enforced by television programs such as 'Open House', 'Sex Education' and 'Love Island'. Although not all of these programs follow CNM, the open conversations about relationships, boundaries and loyalty could be mirroring or influencing the increase in CNM relationships. Although there has been an increased understanding of individuals within the CNM community, there is still a perceived stigma.

A popular and misinformed stigma of CNM is that those in this lifestyle are inherently 'selfish' and 'childish', unable to move past youthful rebellion and settle (Ciaffoni, Koc & Moscatelli, 2026). Infidelity is the exploitation of trust within a romantic relationship, but a stigma that still circles CNM is that within these relationships, there is still one individual instigating and urging this lifestyle change. This emphasizes the concept that the act of CNM is inherently selfish and using the trust and devotion of the other person to obtain this relational change (Conley et al.,

2013; Ciaffoni, Koc & Moscatelli, 2026). This opinion of CNM, has been shared with Selo (2023), a blog that discusses their disagreement with CNM and how it highlights that individuals are choosing not to control their behaviour.

In addition, another pre-conceived notion regarding CNM is that there is a high chance of relationship breakdown. 92% of CNM marriages end in divorce is a statistic that reinforces the stigma of CNM potentially 'ruining' relationships (Salmansohn, 2010; Finman, 2024). This statistic has been used within many influential sites and blogs spanning a number of years; for instance, CNN, an American news site, used this when asking 'do open marriages work?' Alongside CNN, a blog that was presented on Oprah.com references this statistic. Both of these sites are significant due to the population of people who use it, however, the statistic of 92%, has no peer-reviewed primary data source that supports it. Another area in which this statistic has been used within relationship counselling websites and divorce attorneys (Finman, 2024; Miss Date Doctor, 2024). The use of this statistic is propagating for its own agenda, following this, whilst on a program for relational counselling, this has the potential to shame the client before they even enter a therapeutic space.

Benefits of CNM

There are many opposing views of CNM; these are presented by a large majority of people who have not experienced being in a relationship style that belongs within the CNM umbrella. Nonetheless, CNM relationships have many benefits not only for the relationships themselves, but also individually. Male swingers have been found to experience higher self-esteem compared to males who do not partake in swinging. Women did not demonstrate an increase in self-esteem; however, it did not negatively impact them (Harrison & Ruzansky, 2017). CNM has the potential to heighten an individual's self-esteem, provided it is handled appropriately within a relationship. Sexual confidence and relationship satisfaction within CNM has been demonstrated to increase self-esteem, as they would be approached due to their desirable qualities, such as attractiveness, sexual technique, sociable personality (Oattes & Offman, 2009; Pugliese, 2019).

Self-confidence radiates; when someone is self-assured and knows what they want, it ripples through other areas of their life (Orth & Robins, 2022). CNM provides individuals with the confidence that allows them to be open to criticism as well as admiration without deflecting.

It encourages people to step outside of their comfort zone, providing them with new experiences.

Demonstrating that CNM can influence the way an individual lives outside of their relational preference, as the benefits can transfer over into their public lifestyle (Pugliese, 2019).

CNM holds space for joy, satisfaction and love but this is not without complications and challenges that are unique to CNM. Compersion is when an individual will feel positive emotions regarding their partners happiness and satisfaction, whether this be emotionally, sexually, specifically by another person (Flicker et al., 2021). This is more common within CNM relationships; however, this does not stop individuals from feeling some form of neglect or jealousy. Therefore, there is an active effort to initiate uncomfortable conversations (Tatum et al., 2026). These conversations cover individual and relational needs, clarifying if there are needs that must be met to ensure that CNM is still benefiting all people. Pro-active communication is emphasised to be most effective with this lifestyle, to ensure that any issue is dealt with efficiently.

In addition to open communication, self-awareness and managing emotions are also skills that are necessary and practiced by those within CNM. Jealousy, insecurity and anxiety are some of the more common emotions within CNM relationships. Some research suggested that clarifying and seeking reassurance from a partner will help manage these emotions (Codrington & du Plooy, 2024). Vaynman & Harviainen (2023) qualitative research demonstrated that couples that take part in swinging and attend parties have rules before going further. These rules can be altered and discussed going forward in this lifestyle, ensuring that the other individual is being considered (Vaynman & Harviainen, 2023). These rules can help reassure as well as improve the communication of the individuals involved in these dynamics. On the other hand, others have suggested that an active effort to manage one's emotional responses through the use of techniques is beneficial, and also has advantages for relationships outside of the CNM dynamic (Tatum et al., 2026).

Therapy and CNM

A 2022 study highlighted its findings, stating that those in a CNM relationship 'must be sick' (Grunt-Mejer & Lys, 2022). Findings of this research emphasised that men and women have an equal satisfaction rate for monogamous relationship styles, highlighting the preferred

relational dynamic for monogamy's 'superiority' (Grunt-Mejer & Lys, 2022). Moreover, research found a correlation to heightened levels of depression for women in CNM relationships compared to women in monogamous relationships. Men were found to have a higher rate of alcoholism and erectile dysfunction due to CNM compared to monogamy. The findings of men and women, showed that the lack of exclusivity and the pressure to perform for others, caused a negative effect. On the other hand, these findings did counteract the stereotype that men are more likely to desire CNM relationships, therefore pressuring their possible female counterparts (Grunt-Mejer & Lys, 2022; Moors et al., 2015). Although the information provided by Grunt-Mejer & Lys (2022) highlights some of the longer-lasting effects of CNM; therapeutic practitioners must not try to enforce their personal opinions on CNM clients, as each individual and relationship is unique to its own experience.

The belief that CNM relationship styles is not the ideal romantic dynamic is not limited to the research conducted by Grunt-Mejer & Lys (2022) but has also been suggested by Schechinger (2018). Schechinger et al's (2018) research found that CNM clients had an unsupportive experience within therapy. Not only was the therapist unsupportive, but they were also suggesting to end the CNM relationship and leaning more towards a monogamous relationship

style (Schechinger et al., 2018; Moors et al., 2024). Following this the lack of knowledge and training provided to mental health and clinical professionals do have a negative impact on the treatment and wellbeing of CNM individuals. For instance, a lack of understanding of CNM dynamics or sexuality types cause some unprofessional practitioners to give unsolicited advice that can cause a client to feel shamed and judged. As highlighted by Vaughan et al (2019) some individuals are sexually shamed for their lifestyle choice.

Vaughan et al's (2019) research was not solely based on the therapeutic relationship; their research demonstrated harsh responses and judgments that are given by professionals in healthcare, person-centred job roles, such as doctors, nurses, and therapists. These judgements are not only verbally insulting and ignorant, but they have also leaned towards neglect; some have reported that rather than exploring a genuine health issue, a doctor pushed for an STI test after finding out a client was polyamorous. This response demonstrated that practitioners need to reevaluate their 'bedside manner' and how they approach certain topics without assuming the worst of those within this society. On the other hand, a large majority of therapists with CNM clients have provided the appropriate therapeutic relationship for the individual (Moors et al, 2024). When having therapy with a client from a minority group, it is the therapist's

responsibility to obtain background knowledge, which limits the chance of unintentionally insulting the client or being ignorant of some of the current stigma they may be facing.

Regarding a specific therapeutic approach for a CNM client, emotion-focused therapy has been seen to be beneficial (Edwards et al., 2023). The initial idea behind applying EMT to CNM relationships was due to the success it has had with monogamous couples. Edwards et al (2023) built upon the work previously done by Morrison et al (2011), which presented the finding that polyamorous individuals exhibited secure attachment styles by 52%. This was used when adapting EFT approaches to benefit relationship counselling with CNM individuals (Edwards et al, 2023). The tool that was designed was the 'EFT tango' (Edwards et al, 2023), which includes reflection, the effects of the emotional experience and then leads to the enactment. Adjusting therapeutic tools to benefit certain relational dynamics, is inherently person-centered, ensuring that the client is being seen and actively supported by the therapy (Edwards et al., 2023; Moors et al., 2025)

Therapy is a tool that is used by individuals, a place that should represent inclusivity, understanding and safety. As demonstrated by previously mentioned research, there is still loads that need to be done to ensure that individuals identifying in minority groups are still provided with this. Hence, the need for this current research is to build on the currently existing information as well as explore what CNM individuals would like to see changed within their therapeutic experiences.

Methodology

Methodological Approach

Interpretive phenomenological analysis will be used when conducting this research. IPA is a qualitative research approach that focuses on a specific participant experience, exploring each aspect of that experience. CNM presents sensitive and complex discussion points, IPA will be one of the more efficient methodological approaches as it allows space for an in-depth exploration (Lanzon, 2023). An essential point of IPA is ensuring that when collecting data, there is a clear balance between empathy and critical interpretation. IPA has been used on numerous

research topics that handle sensitive topics; Lanzon (2023) found that IPA was the most effective method, as the results demonstrated that IPA provided the researcher with the tools to take an empathetic approach and handle the topic with situational and self-awareness.

Although this research is guided by the understanding of CNM, the research being conducted is an inductive approach through IPA as it is data-driven by qualitative data collection (Liu, L., 2016). This provides the field of with an honest account of what some individuals are experiencing whilst in therapy. Following this as an analytic tool, Groza (2023) demonstrated that IPA heightened the focus on each participants results. This enriched the results further as it demonstrated the key sociocultural differences within the study as well as identifying the patterns.

Participants

This research aims to have 5 participants who will be from a volunteering sampling, in order to obtain relevant participants in the CNM community. An information sheet (Appendix A) will be posted on multiple social media platforms: Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The

information sheet will hold key information, covering the reason for the study and how it would benefit the counselling field. The age boundary of 21 and over will be stated on the sheet alongside the requirement that the participants would have needed to identify themselves as part of the CNM community for a year or more whilst also undertaking/undertook therapy. There has been no specification of the gender or sexuality of the participant as a requirement. However, as the focus of the study is on the treatment of individuals in a CNM relationship during therapy sessions, the topic of sexuality may still be brought to light.

Following this, the information sheet will also obtain the contact details of the researcher. Once contact has been made the participant will be provided with a debrief (Appendix B) giving more information on the most relevant articles that have supported this research and a deeper understanding on how this research could influence the field of counselling. Once this information has been provided and it is ensured that the participants would still like to continue with this study, they will then be provided with a consent form (Appendix C).

Design

The chosen method of data collection was a one-to-one semi-structured interview. The other option that was considered for this research was focus groups, as this would have provided the chance for the researcher to explore the social dynamic that could take place whilst discussing the CNM community. This approach would have been beneficial when discussing what constitutes CNM within its own community; however, as this research focuses on the individual experience of therapy for those in the CNM community, focus groups do not provide a confidential and safe space. Following this, focus groups run more efficiently when the researcher is trained or has prior experience with focus group work, which would have been a drawback for the success of the focus group. In addition to this, a one-to-one interview will allow the participant to discuss their experiences within an environment that is comfortable for them.

Semi-structured interviews present the participant with the chance to set the pace of their answers as well as the level of depth that is explored by the individual (Segal et al., 2006). This interviewing approach provides the interviewer with a tool to ensure the interview stays on topic, whilst granting the participant the chance to disclose their honest account of their therapy. In addition to this, it also enhances the genuineness of the participant's account, as all questions

that have been prepared will not be leading questions. Following this, it will also limit the participant, giving the researcher a 'desired response'.

Each participant will be provided with an hour for the interview, which is to ensure that each participant has the chance to explore their experiences and feelings regarding their therapeutic relationship without the pressure of rushing. As pressure could cause them to share something they did not want to intentionally disclose to the researcher, but it could also have the opposite effect. The interviews will be conducted via ZOOM once the consent form has been signed. The interview will be scheduled to take place within that week. ZOOM is the chosen meeting app being used as it has the ability to record the audio of the interview and download it instantly onto the computer. This ensures there is no transfer of data from multiple devices. The raw data will then be saved with a pseudonym, along with the transcriptions for analysis.

Analytical Approach

IPA is a systematic process which provides 7-steps of analysis to ensure the data is thoroughly examined. The first step of IPA is becoming acquainted with the data, which will also be a part

of the transcription process, as the researcher will be listening and writing the interview up (Leonidis, 2025). Once the raw data has been transcribed and reviewed by the researcher, the second step starts: the initial note-taking of the interview and noticeable points that could be relevant. Identifying key points and recurring aspects in the transcript allows for key themes to come to light. Once themes have come to light in a participant's transcription, it is time for the researcher to start the process again with another transcription. This allows for cross-case analysis. A pattern of emerging themes will demonstrate that there is a consistent area that requires discussion.

Data-Protection

The raw data that is collected during the research process could hold identifiable information about the participant. When the data is being saved onto the computer, it will be kept separate from the consent form and participant information, it will be kept alongside the transcriptions and analysed transcripts with a pseudonym on the file. Using a pseudonym on the raw data file ensures the raw data and transcriptions can be easily identified; however, it ensures anonymity of the participant as well as ensuring another layer of participant data protection that their

names are not linked to the raw data files. Each participant and pseudonym file will be password-protected, along with the computer being password-protected. There will be emails used during this process as this will be how the researcher and participant will communicate and plan the time of the interview.

Ethical Considerations

This research has been approved by the ethics committee of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. All information sheets provided by the researcher have been approved by a second party within the university staff before being given to a participant.

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