

Attached to monogamy? Avoidance predicts willingness to engage (but not actual engagement) in consensual non-monogamy

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Abstract

People view monogamy as the optimal form of partnering and stigmatize consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships. Likewise, attachment researchers often equate romantic love (and security) with sexual exclusivity. Interestingly, a sizeable minority of people engage in CNM and report high levels of satisfaction. Across two studies, we examined how individual differences in attachment were associated with attitudes toward CNM, willingness to engage in CNM, and current involvement in CNM. Among individuals who had never engaged in CNM, avoidance was robustly linked to more positive attitudes and greater willingness to engage in CNM. However, avoidant individuals were less likely to engage in CNM than in monogamous relationships. Understanding attachment in multiple partner relationships can provide new avenues for exploring the complexities of relationships.

Keywords

Adult attachment theory, consensual non-monogamy, polyamory, romantic relationships, sexuality, swinging

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In our marriage vows, we didn't say 'forsaking all others.' The vow that we made was that you will never hear that I did something after the fact . . . one spouse can say to the other, 'Look, I need to have sex with somebody. I'm not going to if you don't approve of it, but please approve of it.'

Will Smith (as quoted in Simpson, 2005)

In this quote, Will Smith, well-known actor, clearly explains that he has an agreement with his wife (of 15 years) Jada Pinkett to have outside sexual relationships—a situation distinct from infidelity or unfaithfulness. This Hollywood couple is not alone in their departures from monogamy; other well-known figures who have (allegedly) engaged in consensual nonmonogamy (CNM) include Demi Moore (and Ashton Kutcher), Tilda Swinton, Simone deBeauvoir, and Pablo Picasso. Such open relationships are not limited to the famous; approximately 4–5% of individuals identify themselves as part of a CNM relationship, an arrangement in which all partners involved agree to have extradyadic romantic and/or sexual relationships (e.g., polyamory or swinging; Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2011, 2013; Rubin, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, & Conley, in press).

Although a sizable number of individuals engage in CNM, these relationships are highly stigmatized. Compared to monogamous relationships, CNM relationships are perceived by the public as less satisfying and lower in relationship quality; those involved in CNM are perceived as fundamentally flawed (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Rubin, & Conley, 2013). Moreover, contemporary psychological frameworks and measures assume *dyadic* (i.e., monogamous) partnering is universal (see Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2012, for further discussion). For instance, adult attachment researchers focus almost exclusively on monogamous relationships and often interchange the terms “adult attachment” and “love” with “pair bond” (see Hazan, Campa, & Gur-Yaish, 2006, for an example). The use of these terms as synonyms reflects a broader conceptualization of attachment that equates sexual and romantic exclusivity with love, suggesting that dyadic relationships are the most natural and healthiest romantic partnerships. Researchers have thus neglected to examine attachment processes among a group that may be particularly skilled at simultaneously managing multiple emotional bonds; indeed, CNM people's ability to implement “secure” attachment behaviors may predict relationship functioning in CNM relationships.

CNM and attachment

CNM differs from monogamy in that all partners in the relationship agree that it is acceptable to have more than one concurrent romantic partner. In the present study, we focus on two popular types of CNM: *polyamory* (partners involved agree on loving sexual and romantic relationships with others) and *swinging* (partners agree on sexual relationships with others, typically engaged in as a couple and often at parties; see Matsick, Ziegler, Moors, & Conley, 2013). All partners involved in these types of relationships typically engage in sexual and/or romantic relationships with others. However, in some cases it is mutually agreed upon for one partner, but not another

partner(s), to engage in other relationships or for more than two people agree to sexual and romantic exclusivity with each other (e.g., Klesse, 2006; Pines & Aronson, 1981).

Despite differences in definitions among types of CNM relationships and types of configurations (see Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2012, for a further discussion on types of CNM), they share common themes of communication, honesty, negotiation, and consensus about the terms of the relationships (Barker, 2005; Jenks, 1998; Klesse, 2006). Research suggests that individuals in CNM relationships report relatively high levels of trust, honesty, intimacy, friendship, and satisfaction as well as relatively low levels of jealousy within their relationships (Barker, 2005; Bonello & Cross, 2010; Cole & Spaniard, 1974; de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Jenks, 1985; Kurdek, 1988; Ritchie & Barker, 2006). For instance, in qualitative studies, the majority of individuals engaged in CNM reported that their marriage improved (Dixon, 1985) and that they felt increased warmth, closeness, and love toward their partner as a result of their CNM lifestyle (Varni, 1974). Moreover, individuals engaged in CNM reported less jealousy than those not engaged in CNM (Jenks, 1985) and often described feeling positive about their partner's relationship(s) with others (Ritchie & Barker, 2006).

Despite the negative connotations associated with CNM relationships, positive relationship qualities reported by those in such relationships are notably similar to those of secure attachment relationships. At its core, attachment theory suggests that close bonds with others are important sources of support, emotional stability, and safety. Moreover, these bonds emerge out of early parent-child interactions and are considered evolved behavioral strategies that promote infant protection (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991; Simpson & Belsky, 2008). Researchers suggest that the attachment process developed in infancy continues to guide relationship behavior through the remainder of the human life span, including how individuals approach sex and reproduction (e.g., Del Giudice, 2009). Although (Western) attachment theorists typically assume that adult attachment is equivalent to monogamous bonding, monogamy may not be strictly necessary for the development of attachment security. In fact, multiple caregivers are common in other cultures, and such arrangements do not appear to interfere with parent-child attachment relationships (van Ijzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). Of course, it is not yet clear whether and how CNM relationships influence (and are influenced by) adult romantic attachment orientations. However, the parallels between parent-child and adult romantic bonds, and the existence of multiple attachment relationships throughout the life span (Howes & Spieker, 2008) point to the possibility that CNM adult attachment relationships would also reflect secure attachment bonds.

Attachment orientations are thought to differ along two dimensions: *anxiety* (insecurity about partner's availability) and *avoidance* (discomfort with closeness to a partner, see Cassidy, 2000, for a review). Secure individuals score low on both dimensions, being confident of their partner's responsiveness and comfortable with the intimacy of an interdependent relationship. Attachment security is linked with stable relationships characterized by high trust, commitment, satisfaction, and intimacy as well as low jealousy (Feeney, 2008). Secure individuals are less likely to be unfaithful and more likely to enjoy sexual activity within a committed relationship than insecure individuals (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; DeWall et al., 2011). Taken together, these findings suggest that attachment security is beneficial for establishing happy, healthy,

and sexually satisfying long-term romantic relationships (e.g., Birnbaum, 2007; Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Davis et al., 2006).

Yet attachment theory presumes that healthy, satisfying relationships are, by definition, dyadic. Although attachment orientations have not been studied in the context of CNM relationships, the similarities between CNM relationships and those of secure individuals appear to present a paradox: On the one hand, CNM relationships are widely perceived as less satisfying, lower in quality, and generally morally reprehensible (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013); on the other hand, a growing body of literature suggests that individuals engaged in these alternative romantic partnerings are happy, well adjusted, and satisfied (e.g., de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Jenks, 1985; Ritchie & Barker, 2006). That is, research suggests that both monogamous and CNM relationships can have positive relationship qualities.

Components of sexuality

Sexuality is a multifaceted construct, which includes behaviors, attitudinal dispositions, and desire (cf. Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). Over the course of one's life, sexual behaviors reflect patterns of short-term versus long-term mating strategies. Typically, short-term mating strategies are conceptualized as (uncommitted) sexual activity with a variety of partners, whereas long-term mating strategies are conceptualized as investment in a single committed relationship and potential offspring (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Simpson & Gangestad, 1992). According to an evolutionary model of human mating, the behavioral component of sexuality is key, as it determines reproductive outcomes (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). However, individuals' attitudes and desires are influenced by past sexual experiences. Evaluative dispositions toward sex are also influenced by social norms and personal moral values (e.g., Conley, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, & Valentine, 2011; Haidt, 2001). These sociocultural influences may not necessarily reflect desire or determine behavior; thus, attitudes reflect both personal and cultural values. Unlike attitudinal dispositions, desire is a motivational state to engage in sex, which is accompanied by sexual arousal and fantasies.

Previous research has established that these three components of sexuality are distinguishable and may even have different biological profiles (Edelstein, Chopik, & Kean, 2011), but that they operate together (e.g., Penke & Asendorpf, 2008; Rempel & Baumgartner, 2003). Specifically, sexual behavior is a result of both an individual's degree of desire and attitude toward sex that is based on socialization and culture (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). In the current studies, we apply this framework to a specific type of romantic and sexual relationship, CNM, to better understand how these distinct components operate in nonmonogamous relationships. In the next section, we discuss how individual differences in attachment orientation may be differentially related to attitudes toward CNM, desire to engage in CNM, and engagement in CNM.

Aims and hypotheses: Are attachment insecurity and gender linked to CNM?

There are reasons to believe that attachment insecurity might be differentially related to attitudes about CNM versus actual engagement. For individuals who have not engaged in

CNM, attachment insecurity may play a role in attitudes and desire in relation to CNM. Specifically, attachment anxiety is characterized by fixation on the availability of one's romantic partner and extreme romantic jealousy (Collins, 1996; Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). Anxious individuals tend to have obsessive concerns with love and concerns that their partners will be "poached" (taken) by someone else (Schachner & Shaver, 2002; Stephan & Bachman, 1999). In addition to worrying about partner poaching, other trust-related issues highly anxious people may be preoccupied with include concerns related to sexually transmitted infections and paternity. Although anxious individuals tend to rely on sex as a route for obtaining security and love needs, these individuals tend to inhibit their own sexual needs and default to their partner's preferences (see Birnbaum, 2010, for a review). Given that anxious individuals prioritize others' sexual and romantic needs above their own, it seems likely that CNM may not be a desirable route. Thus, thinking about CNM relationships may exacerbate *anxious* individuals' concerns about the availability of their partners and heighten the fear of losing their partner. Therefore, anxious individuals may be *less* likely to hold positive attitudes toward CNM and *less* willing to engage in these types of relationships.

Attachment-related avoidance is characterized by attempts to create psychological distance from one's romantic partner and suppress attachment-related distress (Edelstein & Shaver, 2004; Fraley & Shaver, 1997). Given that avoidant individuals tend to minimize expressions of intimacy (Fraley & Shaver, 1998), which is presumably very challenging in monogamous relationships, avoidant individuals may view CNM relationships positively. That is, *avoidant* individuals may prefer CNM relationships because these relationships allow them to dilute emotional closeness with one partner by investing less across multiple partners. Additionally, highly avoidant individuals hold more positive attitudes toward casual sex (Gentzler & Kerns, 2004) and, although casual sex is not a defining feature of CNM relationships, an agreement within a relationship to have sex with other people may be more attractive to avoidant individuals. Thus, avoidant individuals may hold *more* positive attitudes toward CNM and be *more* willing to engage in these relationships.

In addition to attachment orientation, we expected that gender would also be related to attitudes toward CNM and willingness to engage in these relationships. For instance, men tend to be higher in avoidance than women (Szielasko, Symons, & Price, 2013), although Chopik, Edelstein, and Fraley (2013) found different results. Moreover, compared to women, men report more lifetime sexual partners and sexual permissiveness (Del Giudice, 2009; Sprecher, 2013; Szielasko et al., 2013). Men also express greater preference for noncommittal relationships and greater desire for unrestricted sex than women (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001; Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010; Edelstein et al., 2011; Lambert, Kahn, & Apple, 2003; Yost & Zurbriggen, 2006). Some types of CNM relationships (e.g., swinging) involve noncommittal sexual relationships with others; thus, men may prefer CNM to a greater extent than women. However, some evidence suggests that women may prefer CNM more than men. Specifically, women, but not men, habituate to sexual stimuli over time (Both, Laan, & Everaerd, 2011). Moreover, among people in long-term relationships, sexual desire declines more strongly for women compared to men (Klusmann, 2002). Thus, women may be attracted to a relationship configuration that could allow them to engage in sex with multiple

partners. Additionally, women are more oriented than men toward friendship-based love, whereas men prefer game-playing love (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1995). Unlike swinging, polyamory places an emphasis on friendship and loving connections; therefore, women may prefer these types of CNM relationships more than men do.

Present studies

We aim to provide a differentiated perspective on attachment and CNM by separately examining three components of CNM: attitudinal dispositions, desire, and behavior (cf. Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). The objectives of the present studies were to examine (1) how attachment orientations are associated with *attitudes* toward CNM and *willingness* (desire) to engage in CNM relationships among individuals who have never engaged in CNM and (2) how attachment orientations are associated with *actual engagement* (behavior) in CNM versus monogamy.

Study 1

In Study 1, we focused on heterosexual individuals (currently single or in a monogamous relationship) who had never been in any type of CNM relationship and can thus be considered solely monogamous. To better understand the relationship between attachment and CNM relationships, we examined both *attitudes* and *desire* in relation to CNM.

Method

Participants and sample characteristics

A community sample of participants were recruited via social networking sites, including Craigslist.org (volunteer sections) and Facebook.com, to take part in a study about attitudes toward romantic relationships. Previous research has established that Internet-based samples are valid, that they can provide useful data for psychological research, and that responses are similar to in-person and other recruitment strategies (e.g., Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013; Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Additionally, our work has replicated in-person effects (Clark & Hatfield, 1989) using Internet samples from Craistlist.org (Conley, Ziegler, & Moors, 2013).

To minimize selection bias, we did not indicate that the questions in our survey were about CNM. Individuals who identified as nonheterosexual ($N = 107$) or were currently (or previously) engaged in a CNM relationship ($N = 80$) were excluded from analyses because we did not have enough participants for between-group comparisons; 305 participants were also excluded because they did not respond to questions regarding the study variables of interest (e.g., measure of attachment and gender). The final sample included 1,281 heterosexual, solely monogamous respondents. Of these participants, 71% were female and 57% were currently in a monogamous relationship. Our sample's racial/ethnic composition was 70% White, 9% African American, 9% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% Latino/Latina, and 4% multiracial; the remaining did report ethnicity. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 67 years ($M = 23.10$, $SD = 7.24$).¹

Material

Adult attachment. The Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory–Short version (ECR-S; 12 items; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007) assessed individual differences in adult attachment. The ECR-S Avoidance subscale ($\alpha = .82$) reflects discomfort with closeness. The Anxiety subscale ($\alpha = .76$) reflects concern about abandonment. Sample items include “I try to avoid getting too close to my partner” (Avoidance) and “I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them” (Anxiety). Participants rated agreement with each statement, using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). Previous research has shown that the ECR-S has demonstrated validity and reliability in nonclinical and clinical samples (e.g., Lo et al., 2009; Wei et al., 2007).

Attitudes toward CNM. We assessed attitudes toward CNM using a scale composed of the following 6 items ($\alpha = .79$): “Every couple should be monogamous (reverse scored),” “If people want to be in openly/consensually nonmonogamous relationship, they have every right to do so,” “I would like to be in a nonmonogamous relationship,” “Monogamy is very important to me (reverse scored),” “If my partner wanted to be nonmonogamous, I would be open to that,” and “I would consider being in an openly/consensually nonmonogamous relationship.” Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with each statement, using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated more positive attitudes toward CNM.

Willingness to engage in CNM. We assessed willingness to engage in various CNM scenarios, using a 6-item scale ($\alpha = .90$), in which participants rated the extent to which they were willing to engage in each type of CNM using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*very unwilling*) to 7 (*very willing*). All 6 items began with the stem “You and your partner”: “. . . may have sex with whomever they want, using condoms, no strings attached, no questions asked,” “. . . go together to swinger parties where partners are exchanged for the night,” “. . . may form outside romantic relationships, but they must always be less important than the relationship between the two of you,” “. . . may have sex with others, but never the same person more than once,” “. . . may have sex and romantic relationships with whomever they want, but there must be no secrets between you,” and “. . . take on a third partner to join you in your relationship on equal terms.”

Results and discussion

Avoidance correlated positively with attitudes toward CNM and willingness to engage in CNM; additionally, men reported higher levels of avoidance, more positive attitudes toward CNM, and greater willingness to engage in CNM than women (see Table 1). Building on attachment theory and prior research, we expected that anxiety would be negatively related to attitudes toward CNM and willingness to engage in CNM, and that avoidance would be positively related to both outcomes. To test these predictions, we conducted two hierarchical multiple regression analyses. Attitudes toward CNM and

Table 1. Study 1: Correlations, means, and standard deviations among individuals who have never engaged in CNM.

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	—	—				
2. Avoidance	2.65 (1.04)	.12***	—			
3. Anxiety	3.72 (1.08)	-.01	.12***	—		
4. Attitudes toward CNM	2.95 (1.09)	.16***	.29***	-.05†	—	
5. Willingness to engage in CNM	1.83 (1.16)	.27***	.27***	.01	.67***	—

Note. Gender (0 = female, 1 = male). CNM = consensual non-monogamous.

† $p = .07$; *** $p < .001$.

willingness to engage in CNM were the dependent variables. Anxiety and avoidance were centered prior to analyses; gender was coded as 0 = female and 1 = male. Initially, we included current relationship status (i.e., single or currently in a monogamous relationship) as a predictor in both hierarchical multiple regression analyses because people may feel differently toward CNM when engaged in a monogamous relationship (e.g., feel loyalty toward their partner and thus may not be inclined to endorse CNM). However, current relationship status was not a significant predictor of CNM attitudes or willingness, including in interaction with the other independent variables (gender, anxiety, and avoidance), all $ps > .25$. Thus, current relationship status was not included in subsequent analyses.

In the first step of the hierarchical regression, gender, anxiety, and avoidance accounted for 11% of the variance in attitudes toward CNM ($R^2 = .11$, $p < .001$). The inclusion of the three two-way interactions among the first-order variables did not significantly increase the amount of variance explained in the second step ($R^2 = .11$, $p = .35$), and none of the interaction terms were significant (all $ps > .13$); thus, the two-way interactions were not included in the final analysis. Consistent with our hypotheses, avoidance predicted positive attitudes toward CNM and anxiety predicted negative attitudes toward CNM (see Table 2). Additionally, men held more positive attitudes toward CNM than women.

A similar pattern emerged for willingness to engage in CNM (see Table 2). In the first step, the first-order effects accounted for 13% of the variance in willingness to engage in CNM ($R^2 = .13$, $p < .001$). The inclusion of the second-order interaction effects did not significantly increase the amount of variance explained in the second step ($R^2 = .13$, $p = .15$) and none of the interaction terms were significant (all $ps > .09$); thus, these terms were not included in the final analysis. Consistent with our hypotheses, avoidance predicted more willingness to engage in CNM; however, anxiety was not significantly associated with willingness to engage in CNM. Men were also more willing to engage in CNM compared to women.

In sum, avoidance was robustly linked with positive attitudes toward and desire to engage in CNM among individuals who had never engaged in CNM: Individuals higher in avoidance endorsed more positive attitudes toward alternatives to monogamy and were more willing to hypothetically engage in these types of relationships. Perhaps

Table 2. Study 1: Multiple regression analyses of attitudes toward CNM and willingness to engage in CNM predicted by gender, avoidance, and anxiety.

Predictors	Attitudes toward CNM ^a				Willingness to engage in CNM ^b			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Gender	.31	.06	.13	4.84***	.62	.07	.24	9.23***
Avoidance	.30	.03	.28	10.48***	.27	.03	.24	9.18***
Anxiety	-.08	.27	-.08	-3.08**	-.01	.03	-.01	-.44

Note. CNM = consensual non-monogamous.

^a $F(3, 1277) = 50.34, p < .001$.

^b $F(3, 1277) = 64.21, p < .001$.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

avoidant individuals view CNM relationships favorably and are more willing to engage in them because these relationships promote distance from their partners and support their accepting attitudes toward uncommitted and casual sex (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004). Attachment anxiety was related to more negative attitudes toward CNM but not desire to engage in these types of relationships, perhaps reflecting anxious individuals' generally ambivalent approach to intimacy and closeness (Allen & Baucom, 2004).

Study 2

Study 1 focused on associations between attachment orientations and endorsement of CNM among individuals who had never engaged in CNM. However, attachment orientations may differ for *actual* engagement in CNM. To fully understand how attachment relates to CNM, Study 2 examined whether attachment orientations predicted the likelihood of actual engagement in CNM versus monogamous relationships. Thus, we expanded on the third component of sexuality: behavior (cf. Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). Given that individuals in CNM relationships report several positive relationship qualities that resemble attachment security (e.g., Jenks, 1985; Ritchie & Barker, 2006), we expected that individuals *lower* in avoidance and anxiety would be *more likely* to currently be in a CNM relationship compared to a monogamous relationship.

Method

Participants and sample characteristics

Participants were recruited online via social networking sites (e.g., Craigslist.com volunteer section and Facebook.com) as well as listservs and websites devoted to CNM (e.g., Meetup.com/Santa-Cruz-Polyamory and "swing_cafe") to ensure that a substantial number of individuals in CNM relationships participated. We directly contacted directors and/or webmasters of the CNM-specific websites and listservs and asked them to post advertisements for our study. Given that only 4–5% of people engage in CNM relationships and that these relationships are highly stigmatized (e.g., Conley, Moors,

et al., 2013; Moors et al., 2013), this type of targeted recruitment was required to obtain a large enough sample for comparisons.

A total of 1,952 volunteer Internet respondents completed the questionnaire. Because we were interested in relationship configuration (i.e., monogamy and CNM) and attachment among heterosexual individuals, from our analyses we excluded 644 participants who identified as nonheterosexual, were not currently in a relationship, or did not respond to the present study's variables of interest. Thus, the final sample included 1,308 participants: 73% female, 85% currently in a monogamous relationship, and 15% currently in a swinging or polyamorous relationship (i.e., CNM relationship). Our sample's racial/ethnic composition was 77% Caucasian, 4% African American, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% Latino/Latina, and 4% multiracial; the remaining did not select a response. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 85 years ($M = 34.47$, $SD = 12.72$).² In terms of the gender breakdown in each type of relationship, of those currently in a monogamous relationship, 76% identified as female ($N = 848$) and 24% identified as male ($N = 264$). Of those in a CNM relationship, 53% identified as female ($N = 103$) and 47% identified as male ($N = 93$).

Measures

Participants were provided with detailed descriptions of several relationship types (e.g., monogamy, casually dating, swinging, and polyamory) and were asked to select the option that best represented their current relationship configuration.

Adult attachment. The ECR-S (Wei et al., 2007) was used to assess attachment *avoidance* ($\alpha = .76$) and *anxiety* ($\alpha = .74$); see Study 1 for information on the reliability and validity of this measure.

Results and discussion

See Table 3 for intercorrelations among variables. Given that individuals in CNM relationships and secure individuals report similar relationship qualities, including high levels of trust, honesty, intimacy, and relationship satisfaction as well as low levels of jealousy (e.g., de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Jenks, 1985; Ritchie & Barker, 2006), we expected that individuals *lower* in avoidance and anxiety would be *more likely* to be in a CNM relationship than a monogamous relationship.

Preliminary analyses assessed whether individuals in swinging and polyamorous relationships (two types of CNM relationships) differed on the present study's main variables of interest. Individuals in swinging and polyamorous relationships did not significantly differ from each other with respect to avoidance or anxiety, $t(194) = .78$, $p = .45$ and $t(194) = -1.37$, $p = .17$, respectively. Additionally, gender composition did not significantly differ between the two relationship configurations, $\chi^2(1) = .35$, $p = .56$. Because there were no significant differences between individuals in these two types of CNM, we dichotomized current relationship type (0 = *monogamy*; 1 = *CNM: swinging or polyamorous*). Avoidance and anxiety were centered prior to analyses and gender was coded as 0 = *female* and 1 = *male*.

Table 3. Study 2: Correlations, means, and standard deviations among monogamous and CNM individuals.

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4
1. Gender	–	–			
2. Avoidance	2.58 (1.11)	.10**	–		
3. Anxiety	3.73 (1.23)	–.14**	.09**	–	
4. Current relationship type	–	.19***	–.08**	–.02	–

Note. Gender (0 = female, 1 = male) and current relationship type (0 = monogamous, 1 = CNM). CNM = consensual non-monogamous.

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Study 2: Logistic regression analyses of current relationship type predicted by gender, avoidance, and anxiety.

Predictors	B	SE	Wald	Exp(B)
Gender	1.15	.16	49.34***	3.16
Avoidance	–.27	.08	12.50***	.76
Anxiety	.04	.07	.33	.12

Note: Gender (0 = female, 1 = male) and current relationship type (0 = monogamous, 1 = CNM). CNM = consensual non-monogamous.

*** $p < .001$.

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a hierarchical multiple logistic regression, with current relationship type (monogamy vs. CNM) as the outcome variable. In the first step, $\chi^2(3) = 56.58$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .074$, $p < .001$, the first-order variables gender, anxiety, and avoidance were significantly associated with whether one was in a monogamous or CNM relationship. The inclusion of the three two-way interactions among the first-order variables did not significantly increase the amount of variance explained in the second step, $\chi^2(3) = 3.48$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .079$, $p = .32$, and none of the interaction terms were significant (all $ps > .09$); thus, the two-way interactions were not included in the final analysis.

Consistent with our predictions, individuals lower in avoidance were more likely to be in a CNM relationship over a monogamous relationship (see Table 4 for results). However, inconsistent with our predictions, anxiety was unrelated to current relationship status. Additionally, there was a main effect of gender, such that there were more individuals involved in CNM relationships that identified as male compared to monogamous relationships.

In sum, these findings are consistent with research on CNM (Jenks, 1998; Ritchie & Barker, 2006), suggesting that those in CNM relationships exhibit characteristics of secure attachment. Individuals low (not high) in avoidance were more likely to be in CNM versus monogamous relationships. Additionally, a larger percentage of the CNM sample identified as male relative to the monogamous sample.

General discussion

Although monogamy is generally perceived as the most natural and optimal form of romantic partnering in Western cultures (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2012; Moors et al., 2013; Perel, 2006), truly monogamous practices are non-normative in the majority of the world's societies (Schmitt, 2005). By assuming that monogamy is optimal, researchers tend to overlook the diversity of intimate partnering. Consequently, the majority of our understanding of relational processes applies only to dyadic partnering (Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2012). Motivated by the striking parallels between characteristics reported by secure individuals and those engaged in CNM relationships, we examined individual differences in attachment and attitudes toward CNM, desire to engage in CNM, and actual engagement in these relationships. Despite theoretical connections between attachment and CNM, surprisingly, there had been no previous inquiry into empirical associations between these constructs.

The present studies were a first step toward understanding CNM within an attachment framework. For individuals who had never engaged in CNM, we expected that avoidance would predict more positive attitudes toward CNM and more willingness to engage in CNM, given highly avoidant individuals' tendency to keep psychological and physical distance from romantic partners (Edelstein & Shaver, 2004; Pistole, Roberts, & Chapman, 2010). In contrast, given that highly anxious individuals tend to experience extreme romantic jealousy (Mikulincer et al., 2002; Schachner & Shaver, 2002), we expected that anxious individuals would view CNM more negatively and be less willing to engage in CNM relationships.

Consistent with our hypotheses, Study 1 revealed that avoidant individuals hold positive attitudes toward CNM and report greater willingness to engage in various forms of CNM. Additionally, those higher in anxiety held negative attitudes toward CNM; however, anxiety was unrelated to willingness to engage in CNM. Perhaps anxiety was not related to willingness to engage in CNM because anxious people envision both the negative and positive implications of CNM relationships. For instance, highly anxious individuals might see CNM as an opportunity to gain affection from multiple partners but also as involving heightened threat of abandonment by those partners.

Importantly, the results of Study 2 illustrate that avoidance differently predicted *actual* engagement in CNM versus monogamy. Individuals in CNM relationships report that they are happy, satisfied, and in love (de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Jenks, 1985; Ritchie & Barker, 2006), paralleling the qualities reported by those low in avoidance and anxiety. Thus, we expected those currently involved in a CNM relationship to be lower in avoidance and anxiety than those in a monogamous relationship. In Study 2, we found that people in CNM relationships reported lower levels of avoidance compared to people in monogamous relationships. However, anxiety did not differ between people in CNM and monogamous relationships. That is, those who engage in multiple romantic partnerships report lower avoidance but not necessarily lower anxiety, suggesting that anxiety may not play as important a role in current relationship configuration. These results support previous work that has shown that people in CNM report relatively high levels of trust and intimacy as well as low levels of jealousy in their romantic relationship (e.g., Barker, 2005; Bonello & Cross, 2010; Jenks, 1985). Moreover, couples with

insecure orientations report more negative communication patterns (e.g., demand withdraw and mutual avoidance) than couples with secure orientations (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). CNM relationship may require more open and honest communication among partners and is also congruent with the finding that people engaged in CNM are lower in avoidance than individuals engaged in monogamy. In sum, our findings provide important new evidence that people can exhibit aspects of security (i.e., low levels of avoidance) without sexual exclusivity.

Additionally, these results suggest that avoidance may be more relevant to whether people abide to shared rules and practices in romantic relationships (be they monogamous or CNM) than to the specific content of those rules and practices. For instance, a defining characteristic of monogamy is sexual exclusivity; therefore, attachment security may be a by-product of adherence to the rules established within that particular relationship, rather than a result of monogamy per se. Unfortunately, research has not yet directly assessed whether individuals in CNM relationships are more likely than those in monogamous relationships to abide by their relationship rules and boundaries. However, when individuals in monogamous relationships engage in sex outside their relationship (i.e., violate a central tenet of monogamy), they are far less likely than individuals in CNM relationships to tell their romantic partner about the incident (Conley, Moors, Ziegler, & Karathanasis, 2012). Thus, individuals in CNM relationships may be better than individuals in monogamous relationships at abiding by their relationship agreements (i.e., sharing sexual history).

Implications and future directions

Most contemporary psychological theories of human development, and measures used in romantic relationship research, including attachment orientation, assume that a normal and healthy developmental transformation in one's life is monogamous dyadic partnering (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Erikson, 1982). Likewise, the vast majority of research on romantic relationships presumes that participants who report being in a romantic relationship are monogamous (or ostensibly monogamous). Given that a sizable number of people engage in CNM, future research should allow participants to self-describe their own relationship status. For instance, researchers should provide multiple options for relationship status and/or configuration (e.g., monogamous, casually dating, polyamorous, and swinging).

Additionally, future research should consider life stages, including older individuals who have or plan to have children, and attitudes toward parenting in relation to attitudes toward multiple partnered relationships and desire to engage in such unions. Previous research has shown that parents and coparents in polyamorous relationships report several benefits for the children they are raising (e.g., less time spent in day care and wider range of hobbies; Sheff, 2010). However, no research has examined the association between life stage or parental status and attitudes toward CNM or desire to engage in such relationships. Related, future work should consider the role of marital status or length of relationship on the link between attachment and attitudes toward CNM. We believe that these are fruitful future research directions that could shed light on predictors of engagement in multiple partnered relationships.

Two other interesting avenues for future research include examining how people enter into CNM relationships and whether attachment orientations change during this transition. For instance, at what point do people realize they want to pursue sexual and/or romantic relationships with more than one person? It seems plausible that this realization could occur while people are in a monogamous relationship (presumably later in life). Or, potentially, people understand earlier in life that they are inclined to engage in CNM. Related, future research should consider how attachment is linked to entering into a CNM relationship. Not captured in the present studies are people who have engaged in CNM in the past but no longer continue with this lifestyle. This group of individuals would be particularly interesting for examining if CNM exacerbates highly anxious individuals' concerns.

Finally, researchers should also examine how individuals in CNM relationships are different from (or similar to) those who engage in monogamy. For example, inherent in the definition of monogamy is the presumption of remaining faithful and committed to one's partner; thus, if the "general rule" of monogamy is upheld, then it seems logical that those who report not cheating on their partner have more secure relationships (a prediction made and supported by previous research; e.g., DeWall et al., 2011). Instead of focusing on sexual exclusivity in attachment research, the specific "rules" within a given relationship should be explored vis-à-vis relationship security. Insofar as future research supports this idea, there may ultimately be empirical support for the old saying, "the more the merrier," at least for those who desire this lifestyle.

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Notes

1. To examine how age affected the results of Study 1, we conducted two additional hierarchical linear regression analyses with attitudes toward CNM and willingness to engage CNM serving as the dependent variables. For each analysis, we included gender, age, anxiety, and avoidance in the first step and all possible two-way interactions in the second step. In the first step, gender, anxiety, and avoidance remained significant predictors of attitudes toward CNM (all $ps < .01$); only gender and avoidance remained significant predictors of willingness to engage in CNM (all $ps < .01$, consistent with analyses without age). Age significantly initially predicted more negative attitudes toward CNM ($\beta = -.02, p = .01$) and less desire to engage in CNM ($\beta = -.08, p = .04$). However, in the second step, age did not significantly predict attitudes toward CNM ($\beta = -.06, p = .25$) or willingness to engage in CNM ($\beta = -.04, p = .45$). Additionally, in the second step, none of the two interactions that included age were significant for attitudes toward CNM ($\beta_{\text{range}} = -.04$ to $-.07, ps > .13$) or willingness to engage in CNM ($\beta_{\text{range}} = -.04$ to $-.05$,

$ps > .25$). Additionally, we decided to exclude age from our analyses because a sizable number of participants ($N = 533$) in Study 1 did not report their age. We believe this was a result of the age item being an open-ended and optional item toward the end of our survey. Thus, given that including age did not affect our results, we excluded this variable from our analyses to retain a larger sample size.

2. To examine how age affected the results of Study 2, we conducted an additional logistic regression analysis with current relationship type (0 = *monogamous*; 1 = *CNM*) serving as the dependent variable. We included gender, age, anxiety, and avoidance in the first step and all possible two-way interactions in the second step. In the first step, gender and avoidance remained significant (all $ps < .01$); age significantly predicted relationship status ($\beta = .03$, $p = .001$), such that older individuals were more likely to be currently involved in a CNM relationship than a monogamous relationship. In the second step, age remained a significant predictor of relationship status ($\beta = .06$, $p = .001$); however, none of the two interactions that included age were significant ($\beta_{\text{range}} = -.02$ to $-.01$, $ps > .07$).

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