


A Critical Examination of Popular Assumptions About the Benefits and Outcomes of Monogamous Relationships

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Abstract

In this article, we critically examine the social institution of monogamy. First, we discuss the lack of an adequate and consistent definition of the construct of monogamy and consider how common monogamy is. Next, we address perceived benefits of monogamy and whether those ostensible benefits are supported by empirical evidence. We conclude that evidence for the benefits of monogamy relative to other relationship styles is currently lacking, suggesting that, for those who choose it, consensual non-monogamy may be a viable alternative to monogamy. Implications for theories of close relationships are discussed.

Keywords

monogamy, love, non-monogamous relationships, relationship quality

As a cultural institution, sexual monogamy is plagued by contradictions. Monogamy is perceived as perennial and natural in Western cultures (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2012a; Kipnis, 2004; Perel, 2006), yet, a cursory review of history indicates it is in fact a recent phenomenon. A quick glance at cultures around the world demonstrates that monogamous practices are actually non-normative rather than pervasive (e.g., the !Kung San of Botswana who “marry” several times before entering into a long-term relationship or the “marriage for pleasure” tradition among the Shia Muslim that allows simultaneous temporary marriages that last anywhere from a few minutes to several years; R. B. Lee, 1982; Ryan & Jethå, 2010; Tremayne, 2009). Departures from monogamy are often perceived to be sinful, yet the Bible clearly condones non-monogamy in multiple instances: Biblical patriarchs Abraham, Jacob, and David, for example, had multiple wives. Nevertheless, monogamy is perceived to be the ideal form of romantic relationships in our society (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a; Kipnis, 2004; Ley, 2009; Perel, 2006), even while the high rates of digression from monogamy (i.e., cheating, divorce) challenge assumptions about its universal desirability.

Few would disagree that monogamy is currently accepted in contemporary Western societies as not only normative but optimal (e.g., Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a). In fact, when President Obama recently advocated for gay marriage, he specifically referenced the monogamy of his partnered gay staff members as justification for his support (Stein, 2012).

Monogamy, we argue, is accepted by the dominant culture as the only truly “appropriate” way to have a long-term romantic relationship and is construed as a foundation of our social culture (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a; Ley, 2009). However, we know of no research that addresses the slightly different question of whether people in modern society are psychologically or relationally *advantaged* by monogamy relative to other relationship styles. We suggest that because the bias in favor of monogamy is pervasive, the assumption of monogamy’s superiority as a lifestyle is largely unexamined in empirical psychological literature.

In this article, we critically examine ostensible advantages of monogamy by considering varied definitions of the construct as well as the potential ramifications of monogamy for an individual’s health and social relationships. We will not address broader economic, societal, cultural, historical, evolutionary, or anthropological underpinnings or ramifications of monogamy. Rather, we consider individual and interpersonal sequelae of engagement in, and departures from, monogamy. Specifically, the current article addresses (a) contemporary meanings and definitions of monogamy; (b) presumed psychological, relational, and social benefits of

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monogamy, and whether those benefits are supported by empirical data; and (c) the social and psychological implications of reconsidering assumptions of monogamy. We hope that this article spurs productive debates about the benefits and outcomes of monogamy and fuels additional research on this relatively unexamined but prevalent cultural ideal.

Definitions of Monogamy

Despite widespread endorsement of monogamy as the ideal type of romantic relationship, the construct of monogamy lacks a consistent definition. Probably the most popular definition of the term *monogamy* in contemporary Western societies is the one used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2009): “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.” This definition became familiar in the United States as a result of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s, when public health officials actively advocated for changes in sexual behaviors to curb the spread of HIV (Koop, 1987). Unless otherwise stated, we will use this definition of monogamy, thus specifically addressing sexual monogamy—under the assumption that when most people discuss monogamy in our culture, they are referencing sexual commitments.

The Myth of the Monogamous Swan

We will focus mostly on human relationships. However, when biologists discuss sexual monogamy (referencing non-human animals), they are referring to the idea of having a single sexual partner for one’s entire life span (Gubernick & Teferi, 2000; Kleiman, 1977; Pinkerton & Abramson, 1993; Ryan & Jethå, 2010). For humans to be monogamous by this definition, it would be necessary for them to stay with their first sexual partner, without dalliance or departure, until the day they die. Considering the rarity of this trajectory, human beings are not a sexually monogamous species by such a biological definition (Barash & Lipton, 2002; Ryan & Jethå, 2010).

As it turns out, even among non-human animals, adherence to monogamy (by this strict definition) is rare. For example, prairie voles (small, mouse-like rodents) have a primary partner with whom they share parenting responsibilities (Getz & Carter, 1996), which has often been interpreted as a monogamous commitment (Williams, Catania, & Carter, 1992). However, their social devotion to a single partner does not include what most people would consider to be monogamy’s central tenet: sexual exclusivity. Although prairie voles appear very loyal to their parenting partner and to the responsibilities accompanying that relationship (i.e., social monogamy), voles in fact mate with many other partners across their lifetimes while maintaining the relationship with their social partner.

Likewise, swans and several other bird species have at times been classified as sexually monogamous (Beltran, Cézilly, & Boissier, 2009). Scientists reasoned that this ostensible monogamy was due to the need for two parents to contribute to the labor involved in incubating eggs and feeding nestlings. But this assumption of monogamy was faulty; DNA testing confirmed that 90% of presumed sexually monogamous species of birds, including swans, produce offspring with mates other than their primary partners (Barash & Lipton, 2002).

Thus, several assumptions about monogamous behavior within non-human animal species are demonstrably false. Furthermore, even humans’ closest ape relatives (orangutans, chimpanzees, bonobos, and gorillas) do not form reproductive pair bonds, making it likely that our most recent common ancestor (approximately 6 million years ago) did not either (Steiper & Young, 2009). We suggest that examining assumptions about strict biological monogamy among non-human animals may be instructive: Perhaps scientists are so enmeshed within a culture that lauds monogamy that their cultural lens influenced their interpretation of the animal behaviors they observed (see Barash & Lipton, 2002, for examples of the use of the term *divorce* when referring to the dissolution of monogamous relationships in non-human species). Thus, our task in the current review is to elucidate the benefits and drawbacks of human monogamy, with a focus on contemporary Western cultures.

How Common Is Monogamy Among Humans?

According to Schmitt (2005), neither women nor men have mating strategies that promote monogamy or hinder promiscuity, as evidenced by inconsistent cross-cultural enactment of monogamous behaviors. Using an evolutionary perspective, Schmitt performed a cross-cultural study (from “Argentina to Zimbabwe”) and concluded that women and men have not evolved solely for long-term mating. In fact, Schmitt found that non-monogamous mating patterns are common and may actually be humans’ preferred sexual strategy. Schmitt suggested that the dominant sexual strategy of a particular culture varies based on a number of ecological factors (e.g., sex ratios, mortality rates, and availability of resources), and as measured by the Sociosexuality Orientation Inventory (SOI; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), cultures tend to fall somewhere on the monogamy continuum between completely monogamous and completely non-monogamous, based on variations in these ecological factors. In other words, most cultures are not completely monogamous.

Schmitt’s research and related studies have addressed monogamy as opposed to other forms of non-monogamy (i.e., infidelity). However, we are finding that a surprising number of partnered individuals are not even striving to

maintain a monogamous relationship. Our recent studies with American samples have demonstrated that approximately 4% to 5% of people are currently involved in consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships—that is, relationships in which both partners have openly agreed that they and/or their partners will have other sexual or romantic partners (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2011, 2012a; Moors, Edelstein, & Conley, 2012).

Thus, it is not clear that humans are, by and large, monogamous; moreover, a greater number of people than might commonly be expected have rejected monogamy as a personal ideal for their own relationship.

“I’m Monogamous With Whomever I’m With”

The general public appears to struggle with the definition of monogamy, and indeed, monogamy may be understood and defined idiosyncratically (Britton et al., 1998; Calsyn, Campbell, Tross, & Hatch-Maillette, 2011; Stevens, 1994; Warren, Harvey, & Agnew, 2010). Definitions of monogamy have ranged from the traditional sense of a long-term exclusive commitment, to abstractly defining any type of personal relationship as monogamy. This latter practice is exemplified by such comments as, “I’m monogamous with whomever I’m with” (Stevens, 1993). In such cases, monogamy becomes an almost momentary arrangement with another person; thus, a person could self-define as monogamous while having limitless partners. Some people define monogamy such that relationships in quick succession or even concurrent relationships could still be defined as monogamous (Anderson, 2010). We conclude that definitions of monogamy are apparently confusing to at least some portion of society.

Pinkerton and Abramson (1993) were among the first to elucidate three different types of sexual activity patterns related to monogamy that appear in the literature: lifelong monogamy (one sexual partner across the life span), complete promiscuity (one sex act per partner), and serial monogamy (several mutually monogamous, non-concurrent partners across the life span). Although lifelong monogamy (i.e., having only one sexual partner in a lifetime) may be particularly desirable from a risk-reduction perspective (e.g., it would hinder the transmission of HIV), this form of monogamy is rare. A nationally representative study found that only about a quarter of Americans have been sexual with only one partner—and those participants may still acquire more partners in their lifetime (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 2000). In one recent nationally representative sample, researchers found that among 30- to 44-year-olds, men had a median number of six to eight female sexual partners in their lifetime, whereas women had about four (Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005)—a clear indication that most people are not monogamous in the strictest sense. That is, as it is currently practiced in contemporary Western cultures,

“monogamy” does not necessarily mean that a partner is and always will be one’s only sex partner. Moreover, monogamy is defined inconsistently in academic literature, and researchers do not consistently make distinctions between what people are *actually* practicing (e.g., serial monogamy, ostensible monogamy with infidelity) versus what is implied by the term *monogamy*, that is, a lifelong, or at least long-term, relationship with only one sexual partner (Calsyn et al., 2011).

In sum, lifelong monogamy is not especially common among animals and is relatively rarely practiced by humans. Even temporary (i.e., *not* lifelong) forms of monogamy are idiosyncratically defined and/or not reliably executed in human populations. We suggest that these examples demonstrate the need for a critical examination of societal constructions of monogamy. Moreover, acknowledging discrepancies in definitions of monogamy provides a context for our investigation of the benefits and costs of monogamy. Adopting the CDC’s definition of monogamy in lieu of others provides a consistent basis from which to consider potential advantages and disadvantages of monogamy.

Given that monogamy is a dominant cultural ideology, we suggest that one good way to address the costs and benefits of monogamy is to examine departures from it. Specifically, we discuss the experiences of CNM individuals—that is, people who have an explicit agreement within their relationship to have sexual and/or romantic relations with others.¹ Different approaches to consensual non-monogamy have emerged, including swinging (a situation in which a couple engages in extradyadic sex, usually in parties or other social settings where both partners are in attendance; Jenks, 1998), polyamory (having consensual loving and romantic relationships with more than one partner; Barker, 2005; Klesse, 2006), and open relationships (in which a couple pursues independent sexual relationships outside of their primary dyad; Hyde & DeLamater, 2000). We suggest that considering these alternative relationship configurations can shed light on the dynamics of monogamy.

To examine people’s perceptions of monogamous relationships, we first review responses to a survey question in which monogamous respondents listed what they believed to be the benefits of monogamy. These assumptions regarding monogamy provide a framework for exploring the benefits of monogamy and whether those perceived benefits are veridical. In the next section, we examine the dominant concept of monogamy by considering the presumed benefits of monogamy as well as data addressing CNM relationship styles.

Benefits of Monogamy Examined

Because of the dearth of research on the conceptualization of monogamous (and non-monogamous) relationships, we recently conducted a series of studies to determine the

perceived benefits of monogamy (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a). Studies drawing on both community and college samples and utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods indicate that people perceive monogamy to improve relationships and provide myriad benefits to individuals within monogamous relationships. Our research showed that monogamy is perceived to improve sexuality (e.g., by increasing the frequency, quality, and desirability of sex), prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), increase relationship quality (e.g., by reducing jealousy and increasing trust and satisfaction), and provide benefits to the family (especially with regard to child rearing). In the next section, we explore these potential practical benefits, using empirical evidence, where possible, to determine whether these assumptions are supported. Later, we will discuss two additional benefits of monogamy that participants frequently mentioned: the morality and acceptability of monogamous practices.² Thus, we address each of the themes that emerge in studies about perceived benefits of monogamous relationships.

Sex Benefits: A Life Full of Safe and Excellent Sex?

Participants in our research cited a wealth of benefits related to sex within a monogamous relationship, including high sexual frequency, more exciting sex, more meaningful sex, and sex without fear of STIs (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a). In this section, we consider in detail the empirical evidence for sexual benefits of monogamy.

Sexual frequency and desire. Do individuals in monogamous relationships have sex with each other more frequently than individuals in CNM relationships? We have no direct immediate evidence for this hypothesis because no one has compared the patterns of sexual behavior between monogamous versus CNM relationships. However, indirect evidence does not support the claim of monogamous couples' higher sexual activity. First, a robust finding is that sexual frequency, on average, decreases over the course of a (presumed monogamous) romantic relationship (Beck, 1999; Brewis & Meyer, 2005; Clement, 2002; Levine, 2003). The fact that sexual frequency decreases over time is consistent with basic perceptual processes of habituation; that is, familiar stimuli are less exciting than novel stimuli (see Rankin et al., 2009, for a review on habituation). In other words, the reduction of desire for one's partner is part of the typical progression of a relationship.

Yet, given the expectation that monogamy will produce a lifetime of desire for a monogamous partner (including frequent and exciting sex), this typical relationship progression is distressing to many people. In fact, lack of sexual arousal is one of the most common reasons for women in relationships to seek sex and marriage therapy (Frank, Anderson, & Kupfer, 1976; Hawton, 1982). Clinical psychologists recognize that discrepancies in monogamous partners' desire for sex are a routine problem in romantic relationships (Ley,

2009). But disorders of sexual desire also suggest potential sexual disadvantages of monogamy (Davies, Katz, & Jackson, 1999). For example, about 43% of American women suffer from sexual dysfunction (Laumann, Paik, & Rosen, 1999; Montgomery, 2008), with the most common disorders being those associated with perceived low sexual desire, often specifically toward their committed romantic partner. Hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD) is one such disorder: An HSDD diagnosis is often prompted by a discrepancy in sexual desire between partners within a couple (Zilbergeld & Ellison, 1980). Indeed, one subtype of HSDD is diagnosed when an individual does not have sexual desire for a *specific* partner, even if the individual desires partners outside of the relationship; that is, people can be diagnosed with a clinical disorder simply because they are not attracted to a single relationship partner. Thus, the assumption that monogamy should provide an endless supply of satisfying sex appears to be built into the very diagnostic criteria of this disorder. If one is not able to sustain desire for a single partner in a monogamous relationship, then she or he may be diagnosed with a psychological disorder.

Notably, the longer a person has been involved in a relationship, the more likely she or he is to be diagnosed with HSDD (Beck, 1999; Braunstein et al., 2005; Clement, 2002). Of course, suggesting that monogamy is a cause of sexual desire disorders goes beyond the available data, but being in a monogamous relationship does appear to be a risk factor for the diagnosis of this disorder (Brotto, 2010). Thus, current evidence does not support the idea that monogamous relationships promote higher levels of sexual activity or more exciting sex than CNM relationships.

In sum, research on basic perceptual processes, the trajectory of sexual desire and long-term relationships, and sexual desire disorders suggests that, if anything, monogamy is associated with lower levels of satisfying sexual activity.

Sexual health benefits: STI avoidance. Our research suggests that individuals overwhelmingly view monogamous relationships as "disease-free" and "safe from STDs" (sexually transmitted diseases), thus providing a safe haven from STIs (e.g., "avoids STDs," "no diseases"; Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a; Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2012b). For example, the majority of the participants in our sample (59%) spontaneously reported health benefits of monogamy, and of those, 69% specifically spontaneously mentioned that monogamy was a way to prevent STIs.

Undeniably, monogamy in its purest form would greatly curb the spread of STIs. That is, one has a very good chance of avoiding STIs if two partners (a) agree to become monogamous before engaging in any sexual activity that involves genital contact, (b) wait several months (without engaging in any sexual activity) for any diseases that the partners may have acquired in previous relationships to surface, (c) receive a full battery of STI tests, and (d) after STI tests are negative (and/or STIs are treated appropriately), engage in sexual activities only with one another. Definitive tests are not

available for all STIs (e.g., human papillomaviruses [HPV] and genital herpes); thus, a partner may still unknowingly have a STI. Even so, engaging in this type of monogamy can be considered reasonably safe.

However, postponing sexual activity in this way is not part of the typical relationship trajectory. In reality, couples often have sex before they commit to monogamy (Garcia & Reiber, 2008) and before they get tested for STIs (Glauser, 2011). That is, couples put condoms away, typically within the first couple months of dating, and switch to other forms of birth control when they feel comfortable with one another, rather than after objective testing for STIs (Bauman & Berman, 2005; Bolton, McKay, & Schneider, 2010; Catania, Stone, Binson, & Dolcini, 1995; Civic, 2000; Critelli & Suire, 1998). Perhaps even more surprisingly, people engaging in these patterns of behaviors believe that they are being safe (Bolton et al., 2010; Misovich, Fisher, & Fisher, 1997). Thus, putting the label of monogamy on a relationship appears to afford participants a perceived safe haven from STIs that is objectively unwarranted.

Furthermore, the majority of people in contemporary Western societies are not lifelong monogamists with only one sexual partner; rather, they are typically serial monogamists (Choi, Catania, & Dolcini, 1994; Corbin & Fromme, 2002). That is, the relationship trajectory described above (i.e., finding a partner, using condoms initially before switching to a non-barrier method of birth control) is usually repeated multiple times over the course of a person's life, further increasing a person's risk for STIs.

As an additional layer of complexity, many people who are in ostensibly monogamous relationships are not, in fact, monogamous; infidelity is common. In a sample of undergraduates currently involved in a romantic relationship, 40% of participants knew that a relationship partner had cheated on them, 41% reported that they have never had a relationship partner cheat on them, and 19% reported that they were unsure whether they have ever had a partner cheat on them (Emmers-Sommer, Warber, & Halford, 2010). Furthermore, 68% of undergraduate heterosexual men have cheated on a partner by kissing a person outside of the relationship and 49% have cheated on a partner by having intercourse with another person while in a "monogamous" relationship (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). In another study, 20% of college students in a committed relationship admitted to cheating on their partner within the last year (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010). Roughly half of a large sample of online respondents ($N > 70,000$), for the "Lust, Love and Loyalty" survey on MSNBC.com/iVillage, reported that they have been unfaithful in their relationships at least once (Weaver, 2007, as cited in Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010).

Perhaps surprisingly, rates of fidelity are no higher for married couples. According to a review of research on infidelity, approximately 55% of married men and 45% of married women have engaged in sexual infidelity (Scarf, 1988). More recent research estimates that rates of at least one affair

over the course of marriage are 30% to 50% for men and 20% to 40% for women (see Buss, 2000, for a review). However, that is the rate of infidelity for individuals; some suggest that the number of *marriages* that experience an affair may be as high as 76% (e.g., Thompson, 1983). Moreover, men are more likely than women to engage in sexual infidelity, regardless of their relationship status (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2010) and across cultures (Greeley, 1994). In addition, these estimates may underrepresent actual rates of cheating, given that infidelity is highly socially undesirable and participants may be reluctant to admit their indiscretions to researchers or may be motivated to forget or redefine past incidents of infidelity to be consistent with their image of themselves as monogamous (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). Furthermore, infidelity is often idiosyncratically defined such that even risky behaviors such as oral sex or non-coital genital contact with an extradyadic partner can be considered consistent with an individual's commitment to monogamy (Anderson, 2010). In sum, large numbers of people who are in ostensibly monogamous relationships have been cheated on at some point, and moreover, cheated on in ways that put them at risk for STIs. Therefore, instead of providing security surrounding STIs, an agreement of monogamy may actually add an extra layer of risk: People may presume that their partner is being faithful (and simultaneously pose little threat to their sexual health) and that no protection to prevent STIs is needed.

We recently conducted a study that compared the safer sex behaviors of ostensibly monogamous people (i.e., people who are committed to a monogamous relationship but reported cheating on their partners) and CNM people (i.e., people who have mutually agreed with their partners that they will have other sexual partners; Conley, Moors, Ziegler, & Karathanasis, 2012). Sexually unfaithful individuals were less likely to use barriers during their extradyadic encounter, less likely to tell their partner about the encounter, and less likely to be tested for STIs than individuals in CNM relationships (Conley, Moors, Ziegler, & Karathanasis, 2012). Moreover, sexually unfaithful individuals were less likely to use barrier methods in their primary relationship than CNM individuals. Further research indicated that people in ostensibly monogamous relationships were also more likely to make condom use mistakes, such as putting the condom on the wrong way or not pinching the tip of the condom, than CNM individuals (Conley, Moors, Ziegler, Matsick, & Rubin, 2012). Taken together, these findings suggest that consensual non-monogamy may provide a safer avenue for sexual expression than failed attempts at monogamy (i.e., infidelity).

Adding to the complicated relationship between monogamous relationships and safer sex, individuals often use condoms or other barrier methods more frequently with casual partners than with "regular" partners (Catania et al., 1995; Harrison, Wambach, Byers, & Imershein, 1991; Misovich et al., 1997; Myers et al., 1999; Pinkerton & Abramson, 1997). These findings are well established across a variety of populations, including heterosexuals (across ethnicities), gay and

bisexual men, high school and college students, incarcerated adolescents, injection drug users, and commercial sex workers (see Misovich et al., 1997, for a review). As a result, stable, committed, ostensibly monogamous partners may be at a higher risk for STIs than non-monogamous casual partners.

Pinkerton and Abramson (1993) considered the implications of the use of condoms with only casual sex partners for HIV risk through a series of mathematical models. They set out to determine the relative efficacy of condom use versus unprotected sex within a monogamous relationship (with partners of unknown HIV status, given that HIV status typically is unknown within romantic relationships). In this study, they demonstrated that protected sex (e.g., with use of condoms) with 100 different partners is actually safer than unprotected sex with a single partner of unknown HIV status. That is, because of the high efficacy of condoms in preventing HIV and the high likelihood of acquiring HIV from an infected partner over repeated unprotected exposures, the protection afforded by condoms is actually higher than that afforded by monogamy. In other words, “unprotected monogamy (with a partner of unknown HIV status) is actually riskier than condom-protected promiscuity” (Pinkerton & Abramson, 1997, p. 368).

Moreover, Catania and colleagues (1995) found that heterosexuals with multiple partners and some risk factors for HIV were more likely to use condoms than people who at one point had a higher risk of HIV transmission and then became involved in a monogamous relationship. By and large, people who became involved in monogamous relationships were not tested for HIV and did not use condoms; thus, they had a higher chance of spreading HIV relative to those who were not monogamous but consistently used condoms.

In summary, despite widespread beliefs about monogamy as the best strategy for preventing STIs among sexually active individuals, research suggests that consistent condom use is a more effective strategy for preventing STIs than monogamy in real-world contexts. However, additional prospective studies comparing the actual acquisition of STIs among monogamous and CNM individuals would be a welcome addition to this literature. That is, if one compared the failure rate of monogamy (i.e., cheating) and its associated greater risk of unprotected sex with the risks inherent in protected sex (taken on by those involved in CNM relationships), the results may indicate that, overall, even *imperfect* attempts at monogamy are still safer than consensual non-monogamy.

Relational Benefits: Are People in Monogamous Relationships More Satisfied and Less Jealous?

Many people assume that monogamy provides relational benefits such as preventing jealousy and engendering

relationship satisfaction (e.g., by increasing trust and commitment; Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a). We will consider these related constructs by examining the dynamics of satisfaction and jealousy within both monogamous and CNM relationships.

Relationship satisfaction. Generally, monogamous people assume that others enter a CNM relationship only if they are dissatisfied in their relationship with their primary partner. We know of no studies that have directly examined the link between satisfaction and relationship structure (e.g., comparing monogamous with various types of CNM arrangements) in heterosexual couples.³ However, a fair amount of research has been conducted on the topic of open relationships among gay men, which we will consider next.

Gay male couples represent an ideal group in which to investigate the link between satisfaction and CNM behavior, given the widespread acceptance of extradyadic sexual activity (i.e., sex outside of the relationship) within gay male communities (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Hickson et al., 1992; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). Consensual non-monogamy rates are significantly higher in gay male couples than in either lesbian or heterosexual partnerships (Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005).

Although CNM relationships may challenge commonly held conceptions of love and commitment, as it turns out, gay men in CNM relationships are quite comparable with gay men in monogamous partnerships in their levels of satisfaction. Blasband and Peplau (1985) provided some of the first research on gay men’s CNM relationships. They found that among gay men, those in exclusive sexual relationships did not differ from those in CNM relationships in satisfaction with their (primary) partner, closeness in their relationship, love they felt for their partner, or relationship duration, compared with those in consensually non-exclusive sexual relationships. Similarly, Kurdek (1988) found that gay men in CNM romantic relationships reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction relative to gay men in monogamous relationships. Moreover, Kurdek found that 53% of gay male couples and 4% of lesbian couples had consensual non-monogamy agreements in their current long-term relationship; their status as monogamous or CNM did not predict relationship satisfaction. Instead, individuals with open agreements to have sexual relationships outside of their primary relationship were just as satisfied as those who agreed to be monogamous.

In another study of gay men, Wagner, Remien, and Dieguez (2000) found that CNM couples maintained strong primary partnerships. Men reported that their open relationships accommodated their intimacy needs as well as their desires for sexual diversity. Moreover, the men in these partnerships often felt more intimate with their partner when they agreed to be non-monogamous. Just as monogamy can provide a sense of support and protection, consensual non-monogamy can provide the emotional support of a primary partnership while also allowing exploration of other sexual relationships.

In sum, we currently have no evidence that sexual exclusivity invariably leads to greater intimacy and relationship satisfaction than CNM. Instead, some evidence suggests that consensual non-monogamy can be satisfying and functional for couples. Although these findings primarily come from gay male samples, it is not unreasonable to expect similar results in heterosexual samples; this is an important avenue for further research.

Jealousy. Our four studies on perceptions of monogamy demonstrated that a major perceived benefit of monogamy is the avoidance of jealousy. That is, participants frequently mentioned that “no jealousy issues,” “prevents jealousy,” and “no jealousy/competition” were benefits of monogamy (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a, 2012b). Jealousy, in romantic settings, is defined as a (real or imagined) threat of losing a relationship to a rival and is typically examined within the context of monogamous relationships (Goetz, Shackelford, Romero, Kaighobadi, & Miner, 2008; Guerrero, Spitzberg, & Yoshimura, 2004; Holtzworth-Munroe, Stuart, & Hutchinson, 1997; Mullen, 1991). Moreover, research has indicated that jealousy within a romantic context is a highly distressing emotion (Pines & Friedman, 1998).

The baseline pervasiveness of jealousy in monogamous relationships reveals that monogamy does not entirely prevent the emotion of jealousy (as was commonly assumed by participants; Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a). But, is it possible that the emotion of jealousy could be even more acute and/or painful in CNM relationships? Although only a few studies have examined jealousy in CNM relationships, their results indicate that jealousy is more manageable in these relationships than in monogamous relationships (Bringle & Buunk, 1991; de Visser & McDonald, 2007) and is experienced less noxiously (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). Despite the common belief that monogamy is a way to prevent feelings of jealousy (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a), research has shown that levels of jealousy were actually *lower* for those in CNM relationships than in a monogamous sample (Jenks, 1985; Pines & Aronson, 1981, as cited in Pines & Aronson, 1983). Among swingers, experiences of jealousy typically occur early in a couple’s foray into swinging but diminish over time (de Visser & McDonald, 2007). Moreover, research by Ritchie and Barker (2006) found that polyamorous communities have developed new words to describe both the positive and negative aspects of potential (or actual) jealousy. For instance, those in polyamorous relationships sometimes derive pleasure from a partner having other partners (“compersion”). Feelings of discomfort or uncertainty about a partner’s sexual activity with others (being “wobbly” or “shaky”) are akin to what others may describe as jealousy but appear to be milder and less traumatic for the individual experiencing the emotion. Thus, although some people believe that monogamy inhibits jealousy (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a), jealousy may actually be less severe, more manageable, or even non-existent among individuals in CNM relationships.

Of course, jealousy is about the possibility of other disallowed relationships. To the extent that other relationships are explicitly *allowed*, experiences of jealousy should almost by definition be lower in CNM relationships. Still, the fact that jealousy was managed by individuals in CNM relationships, rather than overwhelming them, is inconsistent with presumptions about monogamy conveyed by participants in our research (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a). Notably, CNM also could be associated with less jealousy because CNM relationships are more appealing to people who are not predisposed to experiencing jealousy.

What About the Children?

Another concern surrounding consensual non-monogamy is that parents who engage in a CNM lifestyle could somehow psychologically damage their children. That is, some may argue that monogamy should be upheld, regardless of whether it is preferred by adults, because CNM could have negative consequences for the children involved in the adults’ lives.⁴ The theme that monogamy provides a safe environment for children emerged in our study of perceived benefits of monogamy; additional studies demonstrated that monogamous people are considered to be better parents than those who are CNM (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a).

To address the parenting issue, we consider different types of CNM relationships separately. The lifestyles of swingers (who typically pursue sexual encounters together at parties) and those in open relationships (who pursue external relationships for sex only, sometimes without revealing specific details of these relationships to their partner) would not seem to affect the adults’ relationships with their children directly, as the children are likely unaware of their parents’ sexual activities. Thus, these CNM relationships, which occur outside of the bounds of the family dynamic, would not likely influence children’s adjustment more than any other parental hobby or activity.⁵

In contrast, polyamory promotes multiple loving relationships and partnerships (as opposed to purely sexual relationships). Therefore, those engaging in this lifestyle may be more likely to have extradyadic partners involved in the children’s lives.

Some individuals in polyamorous relationships with children involve all or some of their partners in their children’s lives, either through co-parenting or with the partners taking on roles similar to those of aunts or uncles in American culture (i.e., non-obligatory bonds between the partner and the children).⁶ To the extent that a polyamorous lifestyle leads to children having involvement with a number of other adults, it could be argued that polyamory would be more impactful in children’s lives than, say, swinging, open relationships, or polyamorous relationships in which the parents keep their involvement with others separate from their children.

To our knowledge, sociologist Elisabeth Sheff is the only researcher to have investigated the well-being of children with polyamorous parents. She conducted a longitudinal

study of polyamorous parents who were in some way co-parenting with more than one partner and their children. Sheff (2010) addressed the dynamics of polyamorous families based on the perspective of the parents. She found that parents in polyamorous families reported a number of benefits to their children. The children had more individualized time with adults and could spend less time in day care because of the flexibility of having multiple parental figures involved in their lives. Likewise, the parents believed that the greater diversity of interests available from adult figures helped children foster a wider variety of hobbies and skills. Polyamorous parents also felt that their children were being raised in a sex-positive environment and that the parenting situation allowed children to see their parents as real people, thus promoting honesty between children and parents (Sheff, 2010).

However, the polyamorous parents did mention some drawbacks. Specifically, they mentioned the discomfort of having partnerships between adults dissolve and the resulting emotional trauma for children who may have been very attached to a departing partner. In sum, greater stability may emerge for children in monogamous relationships. But, by the same token, this stability could also be established in polyamorous relationships in which none of the parents' partners meet the children. Likewise, other parental relationship patterns that are considered more socially acceptable could cause some of these same problems; for example, when monogamous parents divorce, children must adjust to lesser contact with one or both parents. Similarly, single parents who engage in serial monogamy with a number of partners may also place children in situations in which they become attached to adults who may unexpectedly disappear from their lives. Thus, because children have to adjust to departures of important adults from their lives in the context of monogamous relationships, losing adults cannot be cited as a drawback of consensual non-monogamy *specifically* (Sheff, 2010).

As previously discussed, non-consensual non-monogamy (i.e., infidelity) occurs frequently in monogamous relationships. Infidelity does have demonstrably negative implications for children. For example, children whose parents' relationship dissolved as a result of infidelity tend to have insecure attachment styles (Platt, Nalbone, Casanova, & Wetchler, 2008; Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998), and children whose parents commit infidelity are more likely to grow up to cheat on partners themselves (Carnes, 1983). Thus, even in ostensibly monogamous relationships, children can be damaged by their parents' extradyadic behaviors.

To determine the benefits of monogamy (relative to other parental relationship styles) for children, we must assess whether the negative associations between extradyadic activity and psychosocial outcomes for children were the result of the *breach of trust* associated with the infidelity or of the extradyadic encounter itself. If engaging in consensual non-monogamy itself leads to negative psychosocial outcomes,

then children whose parents are in CNM relationships should have the same types of maladjustment as children whose parents have committed infidelities. However, if *breach of trust* is associated with negative psychosocial outcomes, then, assuming all else is equal; we would expect CNM families to fare better than families where infidelity has been committed. This is a pressing issue for future research on the benefits and liabilities of monogamy.

Recently, Sheff has conducted additional research that is not yet published.⁷ She interviewed children between the ages of 5 and 18 whose parents were actively engaged in polyamorous lifestyles. According to personal communication with E. Sheff (August 4, 2011), the children (who were typically White and middle class) were very well-adjusted. She describes them as articulate, thoughtful, intelligent, and secure in their relationships with their parents. The younger children in the group of interviewees were not especially aware of being in a different living environment than other children, but they did mention feeling loved, safe, and secure as a consequence of having multiple parental figures. Sheff noted that the utility of polyamorous parenting became more obvious when a child with special needs was involved. She observed that parents and parental figures in this situation rallied to support the child, making a potentially difficult situation more manageable.

Older children were more aware of being in an "unusual" family structure but did not find the situation particularly problematic. For example, they indicated that they were not questioned by school officials or other students about having multiple parental figures in their lives because so many of their peers from monogamous families have stepfamilies (or romantic partners of unmarried parents) in their lives. Thus, they reported "passing" as being from a monogamous family with ease. The older children also mentioned advantages of having a larger number of parental resources available to them. For example, they reported having multiple adults from which to draw on for help with math homework or to provide transportation.

Moreover, despite the parents' concerns about children becoming attached to partners who then leave in the event of dissolution of the parental relationship, this was not a major concern for the children (E. Sheff, personal communication, August 4, 2011). Many of the children reported that their parents' former partners stayed involved in their lives even after the sexual or romantic phase of the partners' relationships to the parents ended. The children did report experiencing some pain at losing the friendship of adults who were not involved in their lives any longer, but they felt this pain for both former romantic partners of parents and also for platonic friends of parents whom they no longer saw for a variety of reasons. Thus, their concerns about losing important adults in their lives were not unique to the non-monogamous nature of the parental relationships. Overall, the children were satisfied with their family arrangement, acknowledging that they may not choose it themselves but that it works

well for their parents (E. Sheff, personal communication, August 4, 2011).

In sum, the preponderance of evidence suggests some positive and some negative effects of incorporating extradyadic partners into children's lives. Both the positive effects (such as attention from a variety of adults) and negative effects (developing attachments to adults who may then disappear from their lives when the parents break up), however, can be encountered in both (ostensibly) monogamous and CNM parental relationships.⁸

For these reasons, we suggest that evidence is lacking for the hypothesis that monogamy is more beneficial for children than CNM. It appears that monogamy and consensual non-monogamy provide similar outcomes for children in these types of families. However, this is clearly an area that would benefit from more extensive empirical research.

Is Consensual Non-Monogamy Stigmatized?

Participants in our research frequently mentioned avoidance of societal stigma (e.g., fitting into society better) as a benefit of engaging in monogamy (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a). Is participation in consensual non-monogamy stigmatized? We addressed this issue in our prior research on the topic of monogamy (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a). In this research, participants rated either monogamous or CNM relationships on a variety of dimensions. The responses to CNM relationships (relative to monogamous relationships) were overwhelmingly negative, with large effect sizes. Across three experimental studies, we demonstrated that high degrees of bias were expressed toward CNM relationships and individuals within them. Moreover, no legal protections surround consensual non-monogamy, meaning that a person could be, for example, fired explicitly for engaging in this behavior. Individuals in CNM relationships who seek psychological help are often met with judgment and hostility by therapists (Ley, 2009; Weitzman, 2006). As mentioned previously, people often feel that non-monogamy may interfere with one's ability to be a good parent. In fact, recently the court system has removed children from homes based solely on the parent's CNM relationship configuration, even when the children were found to be well-adjusted according to mental health professionals (Cloud, 1999, as cited in Emens, 2004). Thus, stigmatization related to consensual non-monogamy could render monogamy notably more beneficial and could also be a central (and legitimate) motivation for adopting a monogamous lifestyle.

Morality and Consensual Non-Monogamy

One final theme that emerged in our research on perceptions of monogamy is that monogamy is the moral thing to do (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a); as one participant put it, "It's what God wants" (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a, 2012b). We generally do not believe that social scientists

should comment on the morality of any consensual practices that occur between adults. However, we clearly support the idea that people should behave within the constraints of their moral compass of choice, whether it is guided by a specific religion or sociocultural norms. Monogamy is espoused by most contemporary religions, and therefore, to the extent that one wants to be a devout member of one of these religions, monogamy might be the only viable lifestyle option. That is, for people who are members of these communities, monogamy may not be a choice but rather a moral obligation.

Summary of Evidence for the Benefits and Liabilities of Monogamy

Our research has demonstrated that people perceive that monogamy has a broad array of benefits, including sexual satisfaction, sexual health, relational adjustment, children's well-being, avoidance of stigma, and moral rectitude (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a). However, our review of research on these topics suggests that evidence for the superiority of monogamy in terms of relational adjustment, sexual benefits, sexual health, and benefits to children is lacking. This is not to say that monogamy may not prove to be more beneficial than CNM, but extant (and admittedly sometimes indirect) evidence does not currently support the favored status of monogamy in American culture. However, evidence does support the idea that monogamy is a means of avoiding the stigma of other relationship styles; reactions to consensual non-monogamy are quite pervasive and negative (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a).

Clearly, more research is needed to address the question of how monogamy and CNM relate to various outcomes, given that initial evidence does not support that claim. Therefore, our review of the literature leads us to conclude that monogamy may indeed be an ideal or best choice for many individuals but that consensual non-monogamy may be a viable alternative for those who choose it.

Theoretical Implications of Reconsidering Monogamy

The monogamy norm within the United States is pervasive and largely unchallenged (Ley, 2009; Sheff, 2010). The potential implications of considering the bases of people's implicit assumptions about monogamy may be far-reaching. Indeed, as we will show next, to make comparisons between the relationships of monogamous and CNM individuals may require rethinking how we measure standard psychological constructs such as attachment, love, trust, and satisfaction. In the next section, we consider popular theoretical frameworks and frequently used scales that have been used to examine romantic relationships.

Attachment Theory: A Monogamy-Based Framework?

The adult-attachment literature relies on the notion that secure attachment, characterized by high levels of trust, commitment, satisfaction, and interdependence, is at the core of healthy, long, stable, and satisfying relationships (Collins & Read, 1990; Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Levy & Davis, 1988; Simpson, 1990). Although attachment researchers rarely mark their work as focusing specifically on monogamy, they utilize terms such as *pair bonds* interchangeably with adult attachment (see the following for an example: Hazan, Campa, & Gur-Yaish, 2006). Using these terms as synonyms for one another reflects a conceptualization of attachment in which *dyadic* relationships (i.e., relationships involving two, and only two, people) are psychologically superior. By contrast, many CNM relationships are not dyadic in nature but instead involve attachments to more than one person at the same time (e.g., Barker, 2005).

Attachment *insecurity* (avoidance and anxiety) is linked with low levels of trust and satisfaction in romantic relationships and is often seen as an indicator of poorer psychological adjustment. Attachment anxiety is associated with worrying that a partner will not be available in times of need and constantly seeking the reassurance of the partner. In contrast, attachment-related avoidance is characterized by distrusting relationship partners' goodwill and desiring to maintain behavioral independence and emotional distance from partners (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). However, these associations have been studied exclusively within ostensibly monogamous long-term relationships (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994), marital relationships (e.g., Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Feeney, 2002; Ross, 1995), and relationships leading up to monogamy (e.g., Lopez et al., 1997; Shulman, Collins, & Knafo, 1997). Published research currently tells us nothing about the attachment orientations of CNM individuals.

According to an attachment framework, engaging in a CNM relationship may exacerbate *anxious* individuals' concerns about the availability of their partners. Thus, *anxious* individuals may be less likely to engage (or be happy) in CNM relationships. Alternatively, highly *anxious* individuals may favor CNM relationships for themselves, potentially because these types of relationships could allow them to receive affection from multiple partners but disfavor them with regard to their partners, as it might increase their (already high) concerns about the partner's level of responsiveness and availability. By contrast, engaging in a CNM relationship may allow *avoidant* individuals to dilute emotional closeness across multiple partners, providing them with the emotional distance that makes them comfortable. However, it would seem logical that the ability to manage multiple relationships would promote success in a CNM

lifestyle. If that be that case, we may find a slightly different pattern. That is, avoidant individuals may like the idea of CNM relationships in theory. However, they may be unhappy or dissatisfied in such relationships in practice because the management of multiple relationships is more challenging or time-consuming than they realized. Thus, rather than seeing attachment security as the most healthy relationship style, the addition of CNM relationships to the attachment framework may bring to light how individual differences in attachment may benefit certain people and relationships.

Research and theory on adult attachment would also benefit from the inclusion of people who are in CNM relationships. Examining those in CNM relationships could highlight how abiding by the negotiated rules in a relationship (whether they be sexual exclusivity or sexual openness) can affect important relational outcomes. When individual differences in attachment orientation are taken into consideration, it makes sense that including CNM relationships within this body of research could shed light on how an array of relationships may provide a more stable and satisfying relationship context than monogamy. Finally, research might show that people who are secure in their primary relationship (regardless of whatever attachment orientation the individual has globally) are more likely to explore consensual extradyadic relationships. That is, consistent with an attachment framework, people who are secure in their attachment to a primary partner may feel most comfortable using their primary relationship as a safe haven when engaging in relationships with others. It seems plausible that individuals in CNM relationships may depart from this relationship to explore other relationships and then retreat back to it in times of uncertainty or distress.

These questions await further empirical research. However, some preliminary empirical evidence suggests that those in CNM relationships actually exhibit *secure*—rather than *insecure*—attachment (Moors et al., 2012). Moreover, both qualitative and quantitative research have shown that participants in CNM relationships report high degrees of honesty, closeness, happiness, communication, and relationship satisfaction within their relationships (Barker, 2005; Bonello & Cross, 2010; Jenks, 1998; Klesse, 2006; LaSala, 2005). Although that research did not directly assess attachment, these findings present compelling initial evidence that should be subjected to further inquiry.

The Big Five: Do Certain Personality Traits Predict a Tendency to Engage in Consensual Non-Monogamy?

Because little research has been devoted to understanding consensual non-monogamy, we have little insight into whether people in these relationships differ from those who seek and prefer monogamy. One initial step in this inquiry would be to determine if those who engage in consensual

non-monogamy are different from those who engage in ostensible monogamy or non-consensual non-monogamy (i.e., people who agree to monogamy but then have extradyadic encounters without their partners' consent). Alternatively, are ostensibly monogamous people simply those who did not realize that consensual non-monogamy was an option or who could not find a partner who was willing to engage in consensual non-monogamy? Thus, does the ability to maintain multiple sexual or romantic relationships reflect a specific constellation of personality traits?

The Big Five personality traits have been a dominant force in the study of individual differences for many decades (Asendorpf & Van Aken, 2003; De Raad & Peabody, 2005). We suggest three dimensions of the Big Five that might yield differences between CNM and monogamous groups—extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience.

Given the practical aspects of CNM relationships, especially the desire to seek out and meet new partners, people who are more extraverted may practice CNM to a greater extent than those who score low on extraversion. That is, extraverts may simply be more comfortable with or successful at the aspects of relationships that are necessary to transition from more casual acquaintances to the emotional or sexual relationships that are characteristic of CNM.

Agreeableness is a tendency to be compassionate toward and concerned about others. Those who are successfully maintaining multiple romantic or emotional relationships may be higher in such relationship-stabilizing attributes. Moreover, those who desire multiple close emotional and romantic relationships—which would be characteristic of the CNM style polyamory—may have a special affinity for a polyamorous relationship style.

Given the current status of CNM relationships as highly unconventional and socially ostracized by contemporary society, people who choose to participate in them may be more curious and adventuresome (i.e., open to experience) than those who prefer the more conventional lifestyle of monogamy. Moreover, those who choose to participate in CNM lifestyles may have to be amenable to abstractions, ambiguities, and complexities. That is, because social scripts are lacking for the development, maintenance, and progression of CNM relationships, those who prefer conventionality, traditionalism, and predictability would likely find the untested waters of consensual non-monogamy aversive.

Other Individual Differences Potentially Associated With CNM

Although the Big Five framework remains a dominant force in personality research, we briefly consider three other individual differences that may distinguish between those who have an affinity for CNM and those who are monogamously inclined—Machiavellianism, tolerance for ambiguity, and sensation seeking.

First, common stereotypes of those who desire CNM relationships are that they are hurtful and desire to manipulate others for the personal gain of multiple sexual partners (Salmansohn, 2009). Are CNM individuals more manipulative? This is an empirical question, which might be aptly addressed by measures of Machiavellianism, or the tendency to manipulate others for personal gain (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

In addition, those who engage in consensual non-monogamy may find that they are in relationships that have no clear trajectory and whose beginning or end may not be easily identifiable—given that the traditional scripts of courtship and dating resulting in marriage are often not a part of these relationships. This situation would likely be uncomfortable for those who have a low tolerance for ambiguity (Budner, 1962), or the tendency to see the world in black-and-white terms.

Finally, people differ in their preference for sensation seeking (Zuckerman, 1994), the desire for a variety of thrill-seeking activities (which may include physical activities such as bungee jumping, social activities such as raucous parties, as well as illicit activities such as drug use). Those who prefer these activities may also feel drawn to the thrill of finding new partners again and again, which could be better accommodated in CNM rather than monogamous relationships.

Of course, we do not currently have empirical data to address the question of whether people in CNM relationships differ from those who are monogamous on any of these personality variables. However, clear, testable hypotheses can be generated from existing theories of individual difference.⁹

Monogamy Across the Life Course

Relationships do not exist in static environments. We suggest that, at various points in an individual's life, monogamy may be better choice than CNM. For example, the typical relational trajectory for young adults appears to be serial monogamy, in which an individual cycles through a number of temporarily monogamous partnerships. A consensual non-monogamy arrangement may be relatively more appropriate during this time period than later in life. Consensual non-monogamy in young adulthood would provide people the opportunity to explore a variety of partners at once. Such an approach may ultimately prove more efficacious for identifying a long-term partner than rapidly switching from one partner to another through serial monogamy. Allowing concurrent partnerships at once, for example, could allow for comparisons across partners without the pressure of immediate commitment. Thus, consensual non-monogamy could, for some, serve as a transitional stage before settling into monogamy. (Of course, CNM is not a transitional phase for everyone; some adults are very committed to a CNM lifestyle.)

By the same token, (temporary) monogamy may be the most effective means of establishing a relationship when both parties desire an eventual long-term partnership—regardless of whether those individuals involved ultimately prefer to be monogamous or CNM. That is, engaging in monogamy once one has decided that a particular partner is especially suitable for a long-term relationship may allow partners to focus on each other intensively and confirm whether their initial assessments of potential compatibility are valid. Moreover, in the initial exciting stage of relationships, desire for other partners may be limited; thus, in this relationship phase, monogamy may be desired even if the couple would eventually prefer CNM.

Once a long-term relationship is established, it may become routine and familiar—Partners may crave the excitement of new relationships. For couples who want to have a central, primary romantic relationship, the period after a relationship is established and on solid footing may be an especially good point to test the waters of consensual non-monogamy.

By the same token, the management of multiple sexual or emotional relationships is likely to be a time- and emotional resource-depleting activity. Therefore, during life stages in which members of a couple are very short on time (e.g., during major life transitions such as a geographical change, a change in careers, the birth of child, etc.), monogamy might be a better choice than CNM.¹⁰

Love and Relationships: Monogamous Bias in Popular Measures of Relationship Functioning?

An important issue that emerges when considering how to approach research on consensual non-monogamy is whether existing frameworks for addressing monogamy are suited to the study of CNM. Because monogamy is assumed in Western culture, it is commonly embedded in researchers' measures and procedures. Many scales designed to assess relationship functioning include items that CNM people would, by definition, respond to differently than monogamous individuals. For example, the Passionate Love Scale (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986) contains the item, "I'd get jealous if I thought _____ was falling in love with someone else." Polyamorous people would almost certainly score lower on this item than would monogamous individuals because polyamorous individuals accept that their partner(s) may fall in love with other people. In fact, some polyamorous individuals report *positive* reactions to their partner falling in love with another (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). Likewise, CNM and monogamous individuals would likely react differently to Rubin's (1970) Love Scale. Specifically, it seems likely that the items "I feel very possessive toward _____" and "If I were lonely, my first thought would be to seek _____ out" would trigger different responses

from participants depending on whether they preferred a monogamous or CNM relationship style. People in CNM pairings are almost by definition not possessive of their partners. Moreover, because they maintain multiple relationships, they may be less likely to seek any particular partner out in times of loneliness (e.g., perhaps, one partner provides solace in times of distress but not loneliness, and vice versa for another partner). Similarly, in the Love Attitudes Scale (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986), which measures the six basic styles of love (originally conceptualized by J. A. Lee, 1973, for example, "Eros" as passionate love, "Agape" as selfless love, "Mania" as possessive love), the scale items inquire about attitudes and beliefs about love by referring to the singular form of "partner" or "lover." Ultimately, this language misrepresents the responses of CNM people, as it does not acknowledge all of an individual's partners or capture the full range of their experiences. That is, a person may feel, think, and behave differently with different partners.

More specifically, some of the items in the scale are not suited to CNM couples. One of the items used to assess *ludus* (i.e., game-playing love) is "I believe that what my lover doesn't know about me won't hurt him/her." Those who score more highly on this and related questions would be said to have an immature, game-playing approach to love. However, people in CNM relationships can negotiate the rules and terms of their relationships in a variety of ways: Keeping information from one another could, in fact, be a part of an explicit agreement between partners (Easton & Hardy, 2009; Wosick-Correa, 2010). On that basis, the aforementioned item used to assess *ludus* may have different meanings and implications for people in various types of CNM relationships as compared with those who are monogamous.

As another example, the Multidimensional Jealousy Scale (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989) is intended to assess cognitive, emotional, and behavioral jealousy. The creation of this scale was partially prompted because jealousy is seen to be an inherent part of romantic relationships. Although this scale claims to measure romantic jealousy, its use may be limited to *monogamous* romantic relationships, although this qualification is not explicitly made. That is, the items in the scale are based on the assumption that jealousy arises when one knows or suspects that her or his partner has romantic relations outside of the dyad. Clearly, people in CNM relationships may experience jealousy differently (or not at all) in similar situations. For example, in the Multidimensional Jealousy Scale, the item "If ___ shows interest in someone else, I say something negative about that person" makes the assumption that one's partner should *not* be showing interest in anyone else. In sample of individuals involved in CNM relationships, this question might be confusing or even irrelevant, because CNM partnerships allow for involvement with people outside of the relationship. As discussed previously, jealousy appears to be more manageable in CNM relationships than in monogamous relationships (Bringle & Buunk, 1991; de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Ritchie & Barker, 2006).

Thus, effectively describing and assessing relationship quality in CNM relationships requires rethinking the markers of relationship functioning that have characterized the field of close relationships since its inception. These markers, we argue, have been based on assumptions of monogamy and will need to be revisited to address alternative relationship configurations such as consensual non-monogamy.

Summary and Analysis

The purpose of the article was not to promote the idea that either monogamy or consensual non-monogamy is superior to the other but rather to provide an evenhanded assessment of benefits and drawbacks of these two distinct relationship styles.

One goal of the current article has been to scrutinize supposed benefits of monogamy that lay people identified (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a). Thus far, empirical evidence does not support the hypothesis that monogamy is *superior* to consensual non-monogamy on these dimensions. Because monogamy is a central foundation of our culture, this is rather perplexing. It is curious that an institution that is so clearly accepted—even exalted (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004; Cherlin, 2005, 2010; Kipnis, 2004; Perel, 2006; Ryan & Jethå, 2010; Sheff, 2010)—cannot be easily empirically supported as more beneficial than alternatives.

Of course, little empirical evidence has been collected that directly addresses these issues. Therefore, a second goal of the current analysis was to encourage more research. Whatever moral implications may surround monogamy, the question of whether monogamy is the most psychologically, socially, and culturally advantageous relationship configuration is in fact an empirical one. It is a question that can be best tackled by social and behavioral scientists.

Questioning basic assumptions about our world can sometimes be a bootless endeavor. To the extent that the dominant cultural paradigm is simply supported and monogamy is indeed optimal, assessments of monogamy's cultural worth would be intuitive and fairly uninteresting. However, as our discussion has shown, we have ample reason to question the overall advantages of monogamy given persistent infidelity, complaints about lack of attraction for a monogamous partner, and divorce rates within the United States at nearly 50% (Amato, 2010). Thus, questioning the superiority of this ingrained social system would seem appropriate, even if the results of this investigation ultimately support monogamy as an institution.

We have reviewed evidence to address whether monogamy provides sexual benefits, protection from STIs, relational benefits, and family benefits. We found no definitive evidence that tips the scale strongly in favor of monogamy on any of these dimensions. On the whole we conclude that monogamy can and does provide certain benefits, but it is not clear that those benefits are absent from CNM relationships. We have also highlighted gaps in the current literature

on monogamy—that is, areas in which the findings concerning the benefits of monogamy are not entirely clear. We conclude that at this point in time, there is no definitive evidence to suggest that monogamy is the superior relational state for humans. Thus, it would seem prudent to reexamine cultural assumptions about monogamy using empirical methods. We hope the current review inspires research on monogamy (and departures from monogamy).

By the same token, research does not support the idea that consensual non-monogamy should be universally endorsed. One of the most obvious limitations of the current research review is that all the evidence is necessarily based on correlational evidence. (It would clearly be unethical, not to mention impractical, to assign people to a monogamous or CNM lifestyle.) As a result, observed differences between people in monogamous and CNM relationships may reflect either preexisting preferences of people who choose CNM versus monogamous relationships or the effects of being in these types of relationships (or, possibly even more likely, an interaction of the two). Therefore, it would be inappropriate to say that any given individual would be equally happy in a monogamous or CNM lifestyle. We would rather conceptualize our conclusions as raising the possibility that *for people who choose it*, consensual non-monogamy may be equally as beneficial as monogamy. We hope that future research will further address this question.

Likewise, we are in no way arguing that monogamy is *suboptimal*. Indeed, monogamy may well be optimal among couples who, for whatever reason, desire to have only one partner. We also suspect that even for individuals in CNM relationships, it may be useful to adopt monogamous practices at certain points in their relationship (such as during family transitions or in times of stress).

Moreover, a perceived benefit of monogamy for participants in our study was the moral benefit—that is, many participants saw monogamy as being consistent with their religion or value system (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012a). In this article, we have focused on the practical benefits of monogamy, but even if monogamy is not preferred by particular individuals, the overall benefits of monogamy in the context of their religion, or culture, or personal value system may outweigh monogamy's drawbacks. Thus, instead of presuming that monogamy is good or bad, we argue that the social benefits accorded to monogamy are not in step with current empirical evidence regarding its assumed superiority as a relational lifestyle.

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Notes

1. We are examining consensually non-monogamous relationships and not other alternatives, such as non-consensual non-monogamy (which would include staying in a marriage where a spouse cheats), singlehood, or long-term adultery. The exploration of these issues would be another means of discovering the benefits and drawbacks of monogamy, but is not the goal of the current article.
2. We will not be focusing on the morality or acceptability of monogamy, as we feel that this is beyond our scope of inquiry as social psychologists. Instead, we are addressing whether monogamy is optimal in contemporary Western society, considering psychological outcomes.
3. Of course, extensive amounts of research have been conducted on the topic of marriage and heterosexual relationships. But to our knowledge, no published studies have considered the presence or absence of a monogamy agreement as a factor in satisfaction, longevity, or other markers of dyadic adjustment. Because this research is silent on the issue of consensual non-monogamy, it cannot address whether consensually non-monogamous relationships fare more poorly relative to monogamous relationships and therefore will not be considered further.
4. Indeed, protection of children is often provided as a legitimate and definitive reason for society's restriction of adult behaviors (Clarke, 2001; Kipnis, 2004).
5. One might similarly argue that children of those who hunt animals or engage in target shooting or rock climbing could be similarly scrutinized because these hobbies are also dangerous. Little research on these areas has emerged, although, presumably because there is no logical direct link between those specific lifestyles and parenting. It appears that we as a society have decided that parents *can* participate in activities inappropriate for children, as long as children are not present. We presume that this assumption applies to any legal activity, whether it be violent (e.g., hunting), risky (e.g., rock climbing), or, as in the case of consensual non-monogamy, sexual.
6. Of course, some polyamorous parents may keep partners separate from their children. These types of polyamorous relationships would be similar to swingers or those in open relationships who pursue dyadic relationships in a similarly limited context.
7. Obviously, given that this research has not been peer reviewed, it must be interpreted with caution. We discuss this research because it is, to our knowledge, the only study investigating the adjustment of children of actively polyamorous parents.
8. Notably, these findings are consistent with other qualitative studies that have examined the well-being of families with other non-traditional parenting configurations (Bettinger, 2004; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Lubowitz, 2003).
9. We are not at this point inclined to believe that a drive toward monogamy is inherent, genetic, or biologically determined. We concur with Schmitt (2005) who indicated that monogamy is not a universal human drive. Likewise, we find the idea that there are discretely monogamous people and non-monogamous

people suspect; rather, it seems important to consider the possibility that preference for monogamy is a continuum and that people who fall on the non-monogamous end of the continuum may have the most difficulty upholding society's monogamy standards (resulting in either cheating behaviors or consensual non-monogamy). We also suggest that situational forces may dwarf individual differences in preference for (non-)monogamy. Thus, those who act on non-monogamous tendencies may be those for whom attractive non-monogamous alternatives arose (Orzeck & Lung, 2005; Pincus, 2002).

10. Of course, the trajectories we outlined are based on the assumption of a general model of consensual non-monogamy whereby one couple is primary and other relationships are of lesser status or are subsidiary. Not all consensually non-monogamous relationships follow this pattern.

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