



**Around consensual non-monogamies – assessing attitudes toward non-exclusive relationships**

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**Abstract**

Consensual non-monogamy is a term used to describe intimate romantic relationships which are sexually and/or emotionally non-exclusive. The present study examined the social norms which are violated by different forms of consensual non-monogamy, and the negative judgements that result. We asked 375 participants to rate hypothetical vignettes of people involved in one of five relationship types (monogamy, polyamory, an open relationship, swinging, and cheating) on items related to relationship satisfaction, morality, and cognitive abilities. The monogamous couple was perceived most favourably, followed by the polyamorous couple, then the open and swinging couples who were rated equally. Participants judged the cheating couple most negatively. Although social norms of sexual and emotional monogamy are important, we conclude that the aspect that has the most effect on judgments is whether the relationship structure has been agreed to by all parties.

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Consensual non-monogamy is a term used to describe intimate romantic relationships which are negotiated between more than two people and are therefore non-exclusive, either sexually or emotionally or in combination (Conley, Moors, Matsick & Ziegler, 2013). Societal interest in consensually non-monogamous relationships is growing (Barker & Langdridge, 2010), perhaps as a function of recent legal changes in the recognition of same sex partnerships which have brought an increased awareness of alternatives to the standard model of heterosexual monogamy (Rubel & Bogaert, 2014). The “slippery slope” argument, namely that if equal marriage were to be legalised then the next development would be multiple relationships becoming more prevalent, was often deployed during marriage equality debates (Scheff, 2011). When Rick Santorum was campaigning for the US Republican Party presidential nomination in 2012 and was speaking about his objection to marriage equality he said, “So, everybody has the right to be happy? So, if you’re not happy unless you’re married to five other people, is that OK?” (Corn, 2012). The use of consensual non-monogamy as an example of unacceptability indicates the substantial negative opinion directed towards these relationship structures.

It is hard to evaluate how far down the “slope” society has “slipped” because the prevalence of consensual non-monogamy is extremely hard to estimate, not least because people who practice these relationships are often closeted (Barker & Langdridge, 2010). Frequency estimates vary quite widely, often depending on the characteristics of the sample or the sampling technique. For example, 33% of Page’s (2004) bisexual participants reported being in a consensually non-monogamous relationship, whereas Conley, Moors, Matsick and Zeigler (2011) report that approximately 4-5% of their heterosexual online sample identified as consensually non-monogamous. Whatever the

prevalence of consensual non-monogamy, and whether it is on the rise or not, what is certain is that there is an increasing amount of academic research being conducted on these types of relationships (see Barker & Landgridge, 2010, for a review).

Rubel and Bogaert (2014) and Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, and Rubin (2013) delineate three types of consensual non-monogamy that are consistently discussed in the literature: swinging, open relationships, and polyamory. Definitions of these three styles are subject to debate (see Haritaworn, Lin & Kleese, 2006; Barker, 2005; Klesse, 2006 for discussions) but they are most commonly described as follows. Swinging is a relationship in which a couple engages in extra-dyadic sex, usually at parties or social situations where both partners are present. Open relationships are dyadic relationships in which partners can have extra-dyadic sex partners. Polyamorous relationships are those in which not only sexual but emotional relationships are conducted with multiple partners. The study of consensual non-monogamy is interesting for social scientists, both in terms of the implications for psychological theory and also in terms of the implications for the individuals who engage in these relationships. One serious implication of being consensually non-monogamous is that it apparently invites negative social judgements. Mitchell, Bartholomew, and Cobb (2014) report that the majority of polyamorous people believe there to be a prejudice towards polyamory; the nature and origin of the prejudice against consensual non-monogamy is the focus of the present study.

**Theoretical framework**

Two recent studies (i.e. Conley et al., 2013, Matsick et al., 2013) on perceptions of consensual non-monogamy used the theoretical concept of stigma, defined there as a negative attitude towards people displaying a norm-violating characteristic (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). This theoretical framework does not, however, include

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components that are incorporated in current concepts of stigma, such as experience of separation, status loss and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). For this reason we have chosen to describe the societal attitudes toward non-monogamous choices in terms of assigning negative or positive attributions to different types of relationships.

Such attributions can be formed as a result of linking one distinctive trait of people with an array of unrelated characteristics (Thorndike, 1920). If a single negative trait leads to negative judgments of person's other characteristics, it is called a "devil effect", the converse is the "halo effect", where an individual is assessed positively based on a single positive attribute (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). These two effects act as a form of a heuristic that allows for fast interpersonal judgments. Studies indicate that discerning immorality is one of the strongest causes of the "devil effect" (e.g. Martijn, Spears, Van der Pligt, & Jakobs, 1992); other undesirable traits (e.g. low intelligence) have a much lower impact on the overall evaluation of a person. Therefore, overall negative assessment of people engaged in consensual non-monogamy is not surprising as it violates many Western cultural norms about romantic relationships which encompass judgments about what is and is not moral (Anderson, 2010).

The social intuitionist model of moral judgment (Haidt, Koller & Dias, 1993; Haidt, 2001) is founded on the assumption that judgment happens first and rationalization follows after, if at all. Haidt based his theory on a series of studies of how people make moral judgments when they are presented with ethically contentious scenarios such as sibling incest where pregnancy was ruled out. Haidt characterized moral reasoning as "more like a lawyer defending a client than a judge or scientist seeking truth" (Haidt, 2001, p. 820). People confronted with a description of sibling incest judged the siblings' act as morally wrong but were unable to explain why or justify their decisions, simply

citing violations of social norms. Haidt’s theoretical account of moral judgments gives an explanation for the origin of the negativity surrounding consensual non-monogamy. Four relationship norms that invite moral judgments and are particularly relevant to consensually non-monogamous relationships are consensuality, interdependence of love and sex, sexual monogamy, and emotional monogamy. Monogamy satisfies all the norms, whereas polyamory violates the norms of sexual and emotional monogamy, and open and swinging relationships violate the norm of sexual monogamy and the norm that sex should only occur in a loving relationship. By breaking one or more of these norms a “devil effect” is conjured around consensual non-monogamy and the people who practice it, independent of any actual harm as a result of the relationship styles.

**Existing Research on Stigma Towards Consensual Non-Monogamy**

Two papers were recently published which reported research specifically aimed at examining the negative attitudes held towards consensual non-monogamy. The present study expands on these studies so they are discussed here in some detail. In their final study Conley et al. (2013) asked a convenience sample of 269 participants to rate general characteristics of a couple described in a vignette as “sexually non-monogamous”. Compared to a monogamous couple, participants rated the consensually non-monogamous couple as having a poorer quality relationship; they also rated them more harshly on arbitrary traits such as paying taxes on time. This was the first paper to explicitly investigate the negative attitudes associated with consensual non-monogamy using a vignette approach and it generated a number of supportive commentaries along with ideas to improve the methodology and theoretical frame of the research (Hegarty, 2013; Salvatore, 2013; Blaney & Sinclair 2013; Day, 2013).

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One criticism of Conley et al.'s methodology was the lack of distinction between different types of consensual non-monogamy. The label used in the study was "consensual non-monogamy" but the relationship described in the vignette was clearly an open relationship. Additionally, a confound was introduced because the monogamous couple were described as always having been monogamous; in contrast the "consensually non-monogamous" couple were described as having opened up their relationship only one year previously, thus implying that they were dissatisfied in some way. Matsick et al. (2013) addressed the first of these two critiques by delineating three types of consensually non-monogamous relationships: swinging, open, and polyamorous relationships. They addressed the second critique by asking their 126 participants, who were mostly undergraduates, to rate abstract descriptions of relationships rather than vignettes of specific people. They found that polyamory was perceived most positively of the three consensually non-monogamous relationships, followed by open relationships with swinging perceived most negatively. However, there was no comparison group of monogamy, so it is difficult to conclude from this study alone that consensually non-monogamous relationships are in fact assessed as worse than monogamy. Matsick et al. asked participants to rate the relationship styles on eighteen characteristics which were a mixture of relationship relevant and arbitrary traits, but another limitation is that they did not distinguish between the two categories in their analysis.

These two studies, taken together with other research (e.g. Burris, 2013; Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Rubin & Conley, 2013) suggest that people engaged in consensually non-monogamous relationships are not only judged to have poorer relationships but that the negative assessment spreads to unrelated traits, such as their intelligence. Moors et al. (2013) urge researchers to examine "the unique predictors of stigma associated with

consensually non-monogamous relationships” (p.63). In other words it is necessary to isolate the norms that are being broken by different relationship styles and examine their relative impact.

**Aims of the Current Study**

We had three aims in this study: we wanted to clarify which norm violations were driving the negative judgments around consensual non-monogamy; we also wanted to determine which type of characteristics would be most negatively assessed; finally we wanted to examine how the characteristics and experiences of the people making the judgments influenced their judgments.

Matsick et al. (2013), by comparing polyamory, swinging, and open relationships, were able to examine whether attitudinal negativity could be attributed to underlying beliefs that sex should only happen in relationships with an emotional aspect (Peplau, Rubin & Hill, 1977), or whether it could be a results of violating the maxim of there only being “one true love” (Medora, Larson, Hortaçsu & Dave, 2002). Matsick et al.’s data showed that polyamory was judged less harshly than open or swinging relationships, suggesting that the belief that sex should not occur without an emotional connection is more powerful than the idea that we can only love one person. However, this only addresses some of the relationship norms that are relevant, ignoring norms about consensuality and sexual monogamy. In the present study we included a relationship style that was sexually monogamous (i.e. monogamy) and a relationship style that was not consented to by all parties (i.e. cheating) in order to isolate the effects of violating four relevant norms. By comparing these five relationship styles we can determine whether the number of norms violated influences attitudes and also which of the norms are most influential. Monogamy satisfies all the norms. Polyamory violates the norms of sexual



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and emotional monogamy but satisfies the norm that love and sex are interdependent.

Open relationships and swinging both uphold the norm of emotional monogamy but

violate the norms of sexual monogamy and that love and sex are interdependent.

Cheating satisfies only the emotional monogamy norm. Therefore, we predicted that the

monogamous couple would be the most positively judged followed by polyamory, then

the open and swinging couples who would be equally assessed, and finally that the

cheating couple would be most negatively judged.

Our second hypothesis was directed towards investigating the nature of the traits which would be assessed differently. In Conley et al.'s (2013) fourth study they asked their participants to rate monogamous and consensually non-monogamous relationships on two categories of traits: relationship related characteristics and arbitrary traits, because they rightly hypothesized that the devil effect (i.e. spreading negative judgment onto those arbitrary traits) would occur. In the present study we asked our participants to rate the relationship styles on three categories. The first category dealt with the quality of relationships, the two other categories were analogue to the arbitrary traits scale used by Conley et al. (2013) but split into two groups: morality traits and cognitive ability traits. The differentiation between morality and cognitive abilities was based on Nucci's (1984) idea that morality traits are concerned with the impact on others and cognitive abilities are concerned with the impact on the self. Consensual non-monogamy was described in the study as morally neutral in its effect on others (in other words, the consensuality was emphasized). Nevertheless, according to Haidt's (2001) theory that judgment about wrongness of an act is a manifestation of deeply rooted social norms, we anticipated that the ratings of moral traits would be affected more than the cognitive traits because people see consensual non-monogamy as the performance of a morally relevant act. Therefore,

we hypothesized that the negativity displayed towards non-monogamy would be strong on relationship relevant characteristics, and for the non-relational characteristics it would be stronger for moral than for cognitive traits.

Finally, we were interested in exploring whether the individual characteristics of the people making the judgments about consensual non-monogamy might have an impact on their decisions. We focused on familiarity with consensual non-monogamy as the factor most likely to have an impact on attitudes towards people in those types of relationships. Our hypotheses were based on Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis which states that as familiarity with an out group increases, so prejudice decreases. This was demonstrated by Herek and Glunt (1993) who found that increased contact with gay men reduced prejudice in heterosexual participants, and that contact predicted attitudes towards this minority group better than any other demographic or psychological variable. We predicted that increased familiarity would lead to more positive judgments of people in consensually non-monogamous relationships. We identified two ways of testing this hypothesis, by specifically asking people about their knowledge of consensual non-monogamy and by asking if they were of a minority sexual orientation status, in other words, if they were non-heterosexual. Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks (2004) argue that because there is less recourse to culturally set models non-heterosexuals are free to invent new ways of relating to each other. Barker and Ritchie (2007) concur and say that non-heterosexuals are therefore more likely to have considered, and be familiar with, consensual non-monogamy. Reinforcing the theoretical argument is research showing that gay and bisexual individuals are more likely to be in consensually non-monogamous relationships than people who identify as heterosexual (Solomon, Rothblum & Balsam, 2005; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Thus we formulated our final hypotheses:

knowledge about consensual non-monogamy will mitigate negativity towards these relationship types, as will identifying as non-heterosexual.

## Method

### Participants

In total, 375 undergraduate participants took part, 247 from two Polish universities and 128 from a UK university. The sample consisted of 315 women and 60 men. The average age of participants was 21.61 ( $SD = 3.09$ ). The majority of participants identified as heterosexual, 23 identified as gay, 19 as bisexual, and two people identified as pansexual, one person did not respond to this item.

Additional characteristics which were recorded included nationality, race, and religion; they had no effect on the dependant variable and so are not discussed in the results section but are reported here for completeness. The sample recruited in Britain was more diverse than the Polish participants who all identified as Polish and white. In the British sample 98 gave their nationality as British or English with the remainder coming from a variety of European, Asian or African countries. Eighty seven participants from Britain identified as white, 17 as black, 12 as mixed race and the remainder as of Asian origin. The majority of participants ( $n = 237$ ) identified as Christian with the second largest group being atheist or no religion ( $n = 70$ ).

### Procedure and measures

The procedure was approved by the universities' ethics boards. The questionnaire was administered in either electronic or paper version, in Polish or English. Participants were asked to give their demographic information and then asked to give a short definition of three different types of consensual non-monogamy: polyamory, swinging, and open relationships with an option to check "I am not sure." These definitions were

scored by two independent raters, with 0 given for no response, 1 for an incorrect response, 2 for a response that was nearly correct, and 3 for a definition which encompassed the same ideas used in the present study and by Rubel and Bogaert (2014) and Matsick et al. (2013) . Any discrepancies in scoring were discussed and agreed. Scores were totalled across the three relationship styles to give a measure of the extent of each participant’s knowledge about consensual non-monogamy. Anyone scoring 0 to 4 was classified as “poor knowledge of consensual non-monogamy” ( $n = 144$ ), anyone scoring 5 or above was classified as “good knowledge of consensual non-monogamy” ( $n = 231$ ).

Five different hypothetical heterosexual couples were described in vignettes which consisted of two parts. The first two or three sentences of each vignette gave a brief introduction to the couple, for example: “Peter and Sarah have been together for 7 years. They met while studying and after 5 years they decided to get married. They like being together, talking about current affairs and watching films.” These general descriptions were combined with a few sentences which described the couple’s relationship style (see Table 1). The relationship styles were similar to Conley et al. (2013) but they were carefully designed so that the descriptions were comparable, a key aspect being that the consensually non-monogamous relationships were all described as taking that form since the start of the relationship. The combinations of introductions and relationship style descriptions were counter-balanced and the order of presentation of the vignettes was controlled, analyses revealed no order effects.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Participants were asked to rate each couple on 27 different characteristics, using a scale from one to six where one was “the partners do not possess the trait” and six was

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“the partners possess it to a large extent”. The 27 characteristics were grouped into three sub-scales consisting of fifteen relationship satisfaction items, six cognitive abilities items, and six morality items (see Table 2 for sample items). Three of the relationship satisfaction items were reverse scored and then mean scores for each of the three subscales were calculated.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

### Results

Ratings from 330 participants who identified as heterosexual ( $n = 330$ ) were contrasted with those from 44 participants who identified as a sexual minority (gay, bisexual or pansexual). A  $2 \times 2 \times 5$  MANOVA was performed with between subjects factors of knowledge of consensual non-monogamy (poor/good), and sexual orientation (heterosexual/minority), and a within subjects factor of relationship type (monogamous, polyamorous, open, swinging, cheating). The three rating sub-scales (relationship satisfaction, morality, cognitive abilities) were entered as dependent variables.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

There was a highly significant effect of relationship type on overall scores (see Table 3). Post hoc LSD tests revealed that on both the overall scores and on subscales, ratings of the monogamous couple were significantly higher than ratings of the polyamorous couple ( $p < .001$ ). Ratings of the polyamorous couple were significantly higher than ratings given to the couple in the open relationship and the swinging couple (both  $p < .001$ ), which were not significantly different from each other ( $p = .129$ ). The couple who cheated on each other was rated significantly lower than any other relationship style ( $p < .001$ ). As can be seen from Table 3, all three dependent variables contributed significantly to the overall effect of relationship type, the strongest effect

being seen on ratings of morality, closely followed by ratings of relationship satisfaction. Figure 1 shows the relative ratings of each relationship type, and also that ratings given to the cheating couple, unlike the other four relationships, were lower for morality than relationship satisfaction which was rated lower than cognitive abilities.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Sexual identity appears to exert a stronger effect on perceptions of relationship styles than knowledge of consensual non-monogamy. Knowledge about consensual non-monogamy did not significantly interact with relationship type on any subscale or overall but there was a highly significant interaction between sexual identity and relationship type: subscripts in Table 4 demonstrate that the pattern of results was identical for all three subscales and overall scores. Heterosexual participants rated people in monogamous relationships highest, followed by polyamory, then open and swinging couples who were rated equally, and cheating was rated lowest. In contrast, participants who identified as gay, bisexual or pansexual rated the cheating couple lowest on all category means but did not distinguish between the other four relationships. The difference between minority and majority sexual identity groups was not explained by differing knowledge about consensual non-monogamy as there was no significant difference in the accuracy of their definitions,  $t(372) = 0.57, p = .575, (M_{heterosexual} = 3.73, M_{minority\ sexuality} = 3.98)$ .

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

As to be expected, main effects of sexual identity group and consensual non-monogamy knowledge were non-significant, as was the interaction between sexual identity group and consensual non-monogamy knowledge, and the three way interaction

between relationship type, sexual identity group and consensual non-monogamy knowledge.

### Discussion

Our findings show that people who engage in monogamous relationships are perceived more favorably than people in consensually non-monogamous relationships and people who were described as having non-consensual sexual affairs. The negative perceptions applied to relationship relevant characteristics as well as morality characteristics and, to a lesser extent, descriptions of cognitive abilities. Even though participants in the consensually non-monogamous relationships were clearly consenting to the relationship structures, and were described as satisfied, people tended to judge non-normative relationships negatively.

Our findings are consistent with Haidt's (2001) theory about intuitive moral judgments being based on heuristics deduced from widespread social norms. Explaining why heterosexual monogamy is normative is beyond the scope of this article but there are numerous explanations from biological (e.g. Lovejoy, 1981; Jonason, Valentine & Li, 2012) to societal reasons (e.g. Low, 2003), including religious (e.g. Betzig, 1995) and economic grounds (e.g. Betzig, 1992). It is clear that there is an association between the norms that are violated by each relationship and the judgments made about each couple. The cheating couple was judged to more harshly than the couples in the other relationships and this is the relationship structure which violates the most norms. Monogamy violates none of the norms identified and it was judged most positively.

The pattern of results from the consensually non-monogamous relationships demonstrates that the norm of "no sex without love" is more influential than the norm "only love one person". People in the polyamorous relationship, where emotional

connections were a feature, were rated more positively than either swinging or open relationship, where it was clear that the non-monogamous element of the relationship was purely sexual. To some extent this mimics the findings of Matsick et al. (2013) who looked at the three types of consensual non-monogamy and reported that polyamory was perceived most favorably. In other words, our data is strongly supportive of their hypothesis that it is sexual relations in the absence of emotions which is the strongest cause of the devil effect. This finding is consistent with other research, for example Hartnett, Mahoney, and Bernstein (1977) who found that falling in love mitigates the negativity surrounding cheating. However, unlike our data, Matsick et al. found that swinging was viewed as significantly worse than open relationships. The element of swinging that they argue caused the negative judgments (i.e. that sex occurs without an emotional component) is equally true of open relationships. Our data, showing no difference between perceptions of people in swinging and open relationships, is more consistent with the theoretical predictions which follow from considering norm violations as the basis of prejudice, manifested by assigning negative attribution.

Matsick et al. (2013) did not include a cheating relationship style or a monogamous relationship style in their procedure; by including the two comparison groups our data points to some heartening information for people who practice consensual non-monogamy, namely that the norm violation that produces the most censure is not to do with emotional or sexual monogamy, but consensuality. It could be said that there is more similarity between perceptions of monogamy and consensual non-monogamy than there is difference. Inspection of mean values shows that participants generally rated the couples in the four consensual relationship styles (i.e. monogamy, polyamory, open relationships, and swinging) above or at the scale mid-point as opposed



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3 to the cheating couple who were consistently negatively judged, with all their scores  
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5 below the mid-point. This suggests that although participants do draw a distinction  
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7 between relationships which are monogamous or not, and those that involve just sex or  
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9 also have an emotional component, the binary distinction which has the greatest effect on  
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11 attitudes is whether the protagonists are honest with each other and have made a  
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13 consensual decision about the nature of their relationship.  
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17 The results described above are representative of the heterosexual participants,  
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19 who formed the majority of the sample, but interestingly minority sexual orientation  
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21 participants did not distinguish between monogamy and consensual non-monogamy. The  
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23 cheating couple was assessed by minority sexual orientation participants in a similar way  
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25 to heterosexual participants: as less satisfied, less moral, and having poorer cognitive  
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27 skills. The data from the sexual minority group most clearly illustrates the binary  
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29 distinction we noted above, with consensual relationships on one side of the divide and  
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31 non-consensual relationships on the other. We hypothesize that this difference between  
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33 majority and minority sexual identity groups derives from the experiences the minority  
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35 sexual orientation participants have had in accepting and building their identities in a  
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37 heteronormative world. It seems logical that because gay, bisexual and pansexual  
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39 individuals have had experiences challenging assumptions of heteronormativity around  
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41 relationships so too they are more likely to be ready to challenge assumptions of  
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43 mononormativity (Pieper & Bauer, 2005); this is an area for further investigation.  
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51 Participants classified as high or low in knowledge of consensual non-monogamy  
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53 did not perceive relationship styles differently to each other; this may be because we only  
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55 recorded knowledge of consensual non-monogamy, rather than feelings about consensual  
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57 non-monogamy. Our measure of familiarity conflates people who have positive  
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perceptions of consensual non-monogamy with those who have negative perceptions of consensual non-monogamy. We interpreted knowledge of consensual non-monogamy as an indicator of familiarity with the relationship structures, but intellectual knowledge and personal understanding are different constructs. In other words, knowledge of consensual non-monogamy is not a sufficient condition for a reduction of prejudice, rather the tolerance displayed by the minority sexual orientation participants is as a result of personal identification with alternative relationship structures. In future research it would be interesting to investigate this further and determine whether exposure to consensually non-monogamous individuals results in reduced attitudinal negativity.

Monogamy is not necessarily the most adaptive relationship model (Dow & Eff, 2013) but we are culturally taught to perceive it as the ideal and thus alternatives are judged against it. The social intuitionist theory explains how we are able to make quick evaluations about right and wrong and it also claims that those judgments are a tool for maintaining social norms (Haidt, 2001). Moral judgments are not just an indicator of social norms they are also an engine for social conformism because no one wants to be the recipient of negative opinions. Prejudice towards consensual non-monogamy works like a self-confirming rule where the intuitive judgments and others' opinions are mutually strengthened. In that light we can hypothesize that people tend to see the non-monogamous relationships negatively as it serves their initial negative moral judgment. The perception of lower satisfaction or capabilities of people engaging in such relations can be then construed as post-hoc rationalizations which help people to deal with the dissonance resulting from the gap between a broken norm and no visible punishment reflected in the stories. An additional study to ask people if they can articulate why exactly they feel that consensual non-monogamy is wrong would be worth conducting.

### Limitations of the study

We said above that our conclusions could offer some encouragement to people engaged in consensual non-monogamy, in that our participants clearly took the consensual nature of the relationships into account when making attitudinal judgments. However, this comes with the caveat that our sample was comprised of undergraduate students in their early twenties, in other words it was not diverse or representative. Haidt (2012) reports that students give distinctively difference responses to other groups when asked to make morality judgments. Students tend to focus on the harm caused to others, whereas non-student participants tend to consider additional factors such as authority and normative behaviors. Thus, it may be the case that our sample could have judged the three consensually non-monogamous couples less negatively than a general population sample. Nevertheless, the fact that monogamy was still judged to be superior to consensual non-monogamy would be expected to be replicated. Further research with more diverse samples is certainly recommended.

The second limitation is theoretical in nature. The attitudes that have been studied in the present research differ from genuine discrimination and stigmatization (i.e. social exclusion or limited access). Stigmatization is not an inevitable consequence of prejudice, as the latter occurs at the individual level, while stigma is "socially shared knowledge about ... devalued status in society" (Herek, 2007, p. 906). In other words an individual's prejudice is not necessarily translated to a societal level. Research should explore this issue, by examining whether relational choices lead to devalued moral status and structural discrimination (Kleinman & Hall-Clifford, 2009).

Finally, following on from the second limitation the hypothetical nature of the vignette methodology needs to be examined. Our method is less abstract than that used

by Matsick et al. (2013) who asked participants to rate abstract descriptions of relationships, they acknowledged that rating definitions of relationships might not be comparable to rating specific individuals practicing those relationships. A more ecologically valid methodology would be to flesh out the vignettes and make them as realistic as possible, perhaps even employing video interviews.

**Concluding remarks**

          This research helps us to understand the attitudes towards different non-normative relationships, demonstrating that people who engage in monogamous relationships are perceived more favourably than those who engage in consensual non-monogamy and much more favourably than those who cheat. Investigating which social norms play the biggest part in people’s judgments may help prevent prejudice. This research helps us to understand the sources of prejudice, especially the significance of socially shared norms around morality. The results demonstrate that the inclusion of emotional connection mitigates the negative assessment of consensual non-monogamy, in that polyamory is perceived more favourably than open and swinging relationships. However, the gap between perceptions of monogamy and consensual non-monogamy is not as extreme as the gulf between perceptions of consensual relationships and cheating. It appears that the consensual nature of consensual non-monogamy greatly softens judgements of people engaging in these relationships.

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Table 1

*Descriptions of Each of the Five Relationship Styles Used in the Vignettes*

Relationship style	Vignette description
Monogamy	Values of emotional and sexual loyalty are very important to them. They are faithful to each other and they plan to stay such for life.
Polyamory	From the very beginning they declared an interest in other, parallel relationships. Both she and he have their secondary partners, with whom they have romantic and sexual relationships. They meet together in a group quite often.
Open relationship	Before their marriage they decided to have an open relationship: he can meet other women, she can go out with other men. However they promised to be emotionally exclusive, so any contacts with lovers which can develop into more romantic feelings are immediately broken.
Swinging	They both consider themselves non-monogamous and they seek pleasure in sex-parties during which they swap partners. They do not have sexual contacts with others except at these parties. They also want to be emotionally exclusive.
Cheating	They both engage from time to time in short affairs, but because both of them want to maintain the marriage, they don't mention these liaisons to each other. Each of them supposes that revealing the truth would end their marriage.

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Table 2  
*Subscale Sample Items for Ratings Given to Relationships*

Rating subscale	Sample items
Relationship satisfaction	Love each other. Have a satisfying sex life. Have quarrels (reversed).
Cognitive abilities	Are intelligent. Cope well in their life. Show presence of mind in difficult situations.
Morality	Are brave. Are trustworthy Behave appropriately.

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Table 3

*MANOVA of relationship type, knowledge of consensual non-monogamy (CNM) and sexual identity on dependent variables.*

Factor	Dependent variable	$F(1,369)$	$p$	partial $\eta^2$
Relationship type				
	Relationship satisfaction	138.88	< .001	.27
	Morality	156.04	< .001	.30
	Cognitive abilities	34.20	< .001	.09
	Overall	133.07	< .001	.27
CNM Knowledge				
	Relationship satisfaction	1.32	.262	.00
	Morality	3.14	.014	.01
	Cognitive abilities	2.37	.051	.01
	Overall	2.86	.023	.01
Sexual identity group				
	Relationship satisfaction	6.80	< .001	.02
	Morality	7.29	< .001	.02
	Cognitive abilities	7.05	< .001	.02
	Overall	9.19	< .001	.02
Relationship type $\times$ CNM knowledge				
	Relationship satisfaction	.11	.743	.00
	Morality	.83	.362	.00
	Cognitive abilities	.74	.389	.00
	Overall	.32	.566	.00
Relationship type $\times$ sexual identity group				
	Relationship satisfaction	10.03	.002	.03
	Morality	4.12	.043	.01
	Cognitive abilities	4.06	.045	.01
	Overall	7.45	.007	.02

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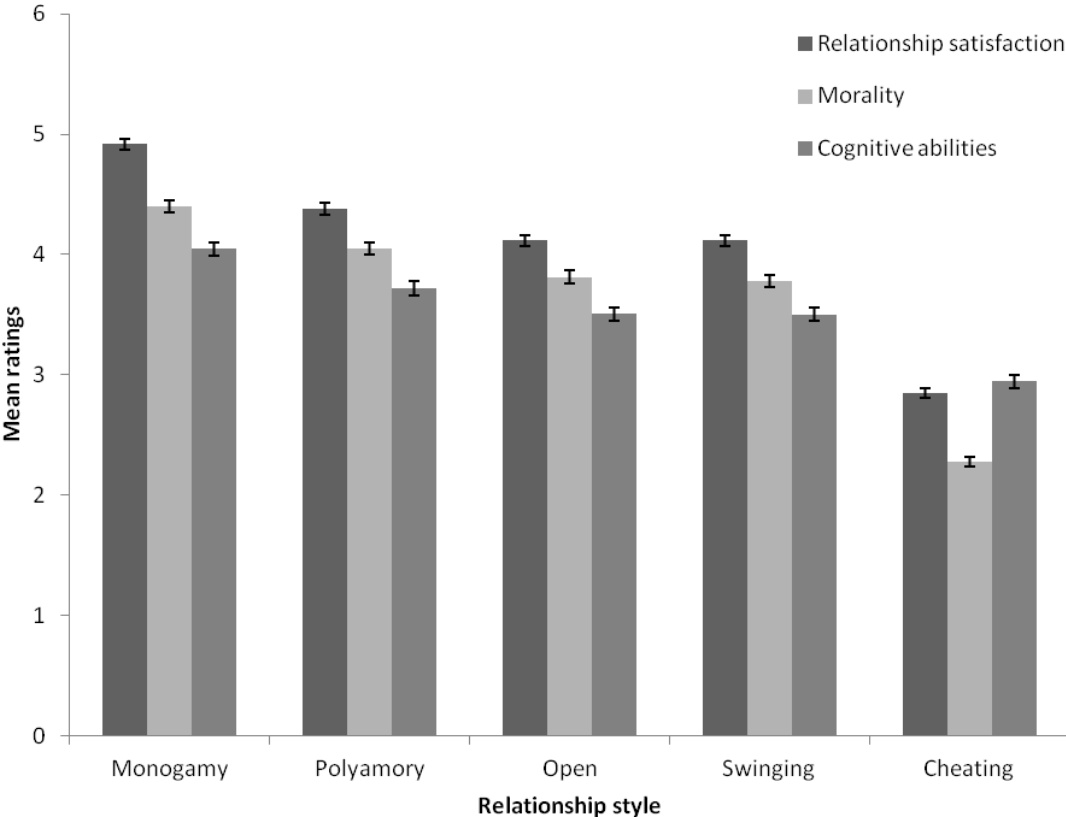


Figure 1. Mean ratings of relationship satisfaction, morality and cognitive abilities of people in five different relationship styles. Error bars indicate +/- 1SE.

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Table 4

*Means (standard deviations), and post hoc analyses of ratings of relationship types by participant sexuality.*

Items	Relationship type				
	Monogamy	Polyamory	Open	Swinging	Cheating
Relationship satisfaction items					
Heterosexual participants	4.96 (0.85) <sub>a</sub>	4.35 (0.97) <sub>b</sub>	4.10 (0.89) <sub>c</sub>	4.07 (0.89) <sub>c</sub>	2.83 (0.79) <sub>d</sub>
Minority sexuality participants	4.60 (1.12) <sub>a</sub>	4.58 (0.90) <sub>a</sub>	4.24 (0.93) <sub>a</sub>	4.48 (0.83) <sub>a</sub>	3.00 (0.77) <sub>b</sub>
Morality items					
Heterosexual participants	4.43 (0.99) <sub>a</sub>	4.00 (0.98) <sub>b</sub>	3.77 (1.02) <sub>c</sub>	3.71 (0.97) <sub>c</sub>	2.26 (0.77) <sub>d</sub>
Minority sexuality participants	4.11 (1.15) <sub>a</sub>	4.45 (0.99) <sub>a</sub>	4.12 (1.13) <sub>a</sub>	4.18 (1.04) <sub>a</sub>	2.40 (0.92) <sub>b</sub>
Cognitive abilities items					
Heterosexual participants	4.09 (1.06) <sub>a</sub>	3.68 (1.06) <sub>b</sub>	3.48 (1.08) <sub>c</sub>	3.47 (1.06) <sub>c</sub>	2.94 (1.02) <sub>d</sub>
Minority sexuality participants	3.65 (1.21) <sub>a</sub>	4.02 (1.32) <sub>a</sub>	3.70 (1.24) <sub>a</sub>	3.78 (1.15) <sub>a</sub>	3.00 (1.10) <sub>b</sub>
Overall					
Heterosexual participants	4.49 (0.84) <sub>a</sub>	4.01 (0.89) <sub>b</sub>	3.38 (0.88) <sub>c</sub>	3.75 (0.86) <sub>c</sub>	2.68 (0.73) <sub>d</sub>
Minority sexuality participants	4.12 (1.06) <sub>a</sub>	4.35 (0.94) <sub>a</sub>	4.02 (0.99) <sub>a</sub>	4.15 (0.90) <sub>a</sub>	2.80 (0.82) <sub>b</sub>

*Note.* Subscripts a to d indicate post hoc results conducted within participant sexuality groups. Means that do not differ significantly from each other ( $\alpha=.001$ ) share subscripts; means that differ significantly from each other ( $p<.001$ ) do not share subscripts. Subscript 'a' denotes items with the highest means, subscript 'b' denotes items with next highest means etc.