

A Qualitative Study of Individuals Engaged in Consensual Open or Non-Monogamous Relationships

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DECLARATION

‘I declare that this thesis that I have submitted to Dublin Business School for the award of BA (Hons) Psychology is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated, where it is clearly acknowledged by references. Furthermore, this work has not been submitted for any other degree.’

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1. ABSTRACT

As previous research explores the structures and the emergence of new configurations within non-monogamous communities, the focal aim of the current study examines the unique experiences of the sole individual who engage in consensual non-monogamous relationships. A total of 4 in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with 2 females and 2 males whom have had experience engaging in non-monogamous relationships for a minimum of six months prior to participation and were all over the age of 18. The interviews were audio-recorded, lasted between 30-60 minutes long, transcribed and anonymized. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. All four interviews led to the development of four themes 1. The Navigation of Rules, 2, A Cohesive Community, 3. Personal Growth and 4. Emotional and Physical Connections. To conclude, the current research highlights the importance of the discovery in which deeper understanding of oneself is achieved through the experiences of engaging in consensual non-monogamy.

2. INTRODUCTION

2. 1. Background

The practise of non-monogamy has been around for years, even before humanity arose. It is believed that monogamy came into existence within human society to prevent males from killing rival males; but it can be argued that monogamy came about through social construction, with the likes of the Christian commandment “thou shall not covet thy neighbour’s wife.” Before Christianity, and during the era of paganism, sexual orgies were prevalent in Ancient Rome, and if we look to before the age of the Roman Empire, polygamy was quite common amongst ancient tribes also. However, it has come to the attention of researchers how these practises of non-monogamy have come about within human beings, seeking to grasp the notion behind the functioning of successful non-monogamous relationships today. The author aims to discover the following through a qualitative approach, conducting face-to-face in-depth interviews with individuals willing to share their individual experiences.

2.2 Defining The Term

To begin, consensual non-monogamy has been considered an umbrella term summarising several different relationship configurations that have come to light in previous years. According to Parson et al (2015), the term “monogamish” is a configuration where partners agree to have sex outside of the relationship only while together, indicating that it is a closer form of configuration to that of monogamy than any other non-monogamous relationship in terms of the benefits it acquires. Open-relationships on the other hand is defined as a non-monogamous “sexual agreement which is characterised by implicit or explicit rules” that define which extra-dyadic sexual activities are permitted (Hosking, 2013). Additionally, you can also find more relationship structures under the umbrella of “open-relationships” such as a) swingers who engage in non-monogamy in social settings, b) polyamory, a configuration in

which partners have more than one loving relationship, c) solo-polyamory, a term used to categorize non-monogamous individuals who do not wish to have a primary partner and d) poly-fidelity which involves three or more people who have made a commitment with each other (Zimmerman, 2012). Among all of these configurations, it is best to mention that the current study will be focusing more on a particular configuration, open-relationships, specifically polyamory. As mentioned earlier, this is a form of non-monogamy wherein partners are involved in more than one romantic, loving relationship.

As we will come to terms with later on in the current study, the majority of non-monogamous relationships are practised differently and consists of mutual agreements unique to the relationships of these individuals. Moreover, research indicates that the heterogeneous category is where non-monogamy lies, confirming that this consists of a number of different forms of relationship arrangements wherein these arrangements differ in terms of the following; 1) specific terms of mutually-agreed conduct (i.e behavioural contracts) or the scarceness of them, 2) the degrees of disclosure and transparency involved, and 3) the kinds of relationships engaged in (Berry & Barker, 2014). Evidently, non-monogamy can be defined in many ways depending on the different arrangements mentioned, however what is believed to hinge the concept as a whole is described by Cohen et al (2017); “consensual non-monogamy follows an existing structure where one or both partners are engaging in an emotional and/or sexual relationship with other individuals”.

2.3 Previous Research

In the academic and research sphere, a number of articles and books have begun to explore the issue of non-monogamy. Rubin (2001) for example began its academic research on alternative lifestyles and believed that the continued practise of these behaviours is worth studying for as they do in-fact “fulfil ongoing purposes and functions” (Rubin, 2001). Rubin

(2001) brought forward their reasons for doing further research in this topic merely due to their concern for the lack of research being done on these lifestyles. One of many reasons being that these alternative lifestyles resulted in the appearance of AIDS and the increase of it; “swingers do not consistently practise safe sex” (Rubin, 2001). From these findings, Rubin (2001) argues that it has become even more important to note that healthcare professionals have more of a responsibility now than ever before as these styles of relationships will persist to grow. Rubin (2001) goes further to argue that they “should be knowledgeable about alternative lifestyles, given AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases”, giving it more of a reason why research should be continued (Rubin, 2001).

Other reasons for the cease in research in this field includes the lack of funding for research that examined personal and family choices. It was believed that if were done so, it could cause problems for individuals engaging in non-monogamy with “achieving status, success in contemporary society and acceptance” which in-turn, prevented more studies done on it (Rubin, 2001). Rubin (2001) argues that it is as if it is a “family secret”, after finding that three popular textbooks at that time found no mention of the above alternative lifestyles.

Rubin (2001) also brings to light the role of marriage and family therapists and how information regarding alternate lifestyles aren’t being acknowledged in therapy due to training based on the traditional monogamous “nuclear family model” (Rubin, 2001).

To summarise, Rubin’s (2001) paper attempts to deliver information about the relevance of studying alternative lifestyles that strictly “remain on the periphery of study and tolerance because they threaten the cultural image of what marriage is supposed to be”, however Rubin (2001) is confident that this avoidance will no longer be possible as he finalises the argument with the movement of “same-sex marriage” as this was believed to set the stage for the broader discussion over which relationships should be legally recognized next.

Barker & Langridge (2010) explores the common themes in non-monogamy research, identifying that the use of qualitative analysis is the most common form of collecting data in this topic. Research on non-monogamy tend to focus on just one type of configuration found within non-monogamy. According to my findings, gay open relationships are often researched individually, it is the same case with swingers and polyamory in which Barker & Langridge (2010) highly suggests that involvement of different types of non-monogamy in one study is essential. Barker & Langridge (2010) also discovered that often, themes in non-monogamy research were usually the notion of comparing monogamy and/or infidelity between consensually non-monogamous practices. Though it isn't difficult to imagine that these specific topics were often discussed due to the societal impact of major influencers such as Will Smith, Scarlett Johanson, George Michael and Tilda Swinton whom have admitted or have been exposed to various newspapers and magazines regarding their taking part in forms of consensual non-monogamy (Barker & Langridge, 2010).

2.4 The Self

Secondly, we will look at literature that delves into the formation of identity within individuals engaging in non-monogamy. The exploration of The Self in non-monogamous relationship is crucial as previous studies have touched on little to none in regards to the notion of The self in terms of engaging in such a lifestyle. Conducting research and gathering findings revolving around the development of the individual still remains relatively unknown in literature. However, in a qualitative study conducted by Jamieson (2004) which focuses on intimacy, negotiated non-monogamy and the limits of the couple, the study highlights the notion that "couple relationships play a significant role in maintaining a person's identity" (Jamieson, 2004). Jamieson (2004) conveys this by focusing on the transition from marriage to the pure relationship.

Dating back in the 1960's, research indicates that the "marriage relationship" was key to the construction of self and society. Wherein, the private domestic space of the home that marriage offers was key to maintaining and developing their identities through couple activity such as conversation that built "privileged and shared knowledge and understanding of others, the world and, the self" (Berger and Kellner, 1964). Consequently, in the 1970's and in the 1980's, feminists argued that the ideology of love and romance at that time "maneuvered women into a trap of subordinate unpaid domestic services and reproduction". Other issues were also brought up, such as that the rules of conduct were forced more vigorously on women. This view in turn gave light to the issues regarding gendered power dynamics of couple relationships, in other words the "marriage relationship" (Jamieson, 2004).

In Jamieson's (2004) paper, he finds that in the late twentieth century these past notions have proved to no longer be relevant. A form of intimacy based on mutual self-disclosure is of relevance in today's age in regards to identification, which Jamieson (2004) defines as "disclosing intimacy". In regards to personal identity, it is argued that people seek to anchor themselves in a "pure relationship". This has been defined as a relationship in which "some external criteria has become dissolved". Meaning the relationship purely exist for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver. With this, trust can be mobilized only by a process of mutual disclosure" (Giddens, 1991). Nonetheless, what is central to the notion of identity here is found within the couple.

According to Jamieson's (2004) findings, women voice out their expressions of being "special to a partner against a sense of identity threat from being too submerged into a couple" (Jamieson, 2004) more than men do. However, Jamieson (2004) believes that equal expressions of hopes and dreams between the genders do not affect the gender differences in how men and women want to go about negotiated non-monogamy.

2.5 General Life-Satisfaction

There exists a lack in variety when it comes to what previous studies have provided on general life-satisfaction. This is extremely evident with studies in reference to heterosexual couples as studies focused more on the experiences of non-monogamy in homosexual couples.

Interestingly, in recent times, the old polygamous sexual curiosity has returned in the form of swinging—or as it was called in the fifties: wife-swapping (Bergstrand, C., & Williams, J. B, 2000) which is evidently often practiced by heterosexual couples. Swinger couples tend to combine the monogamous mental framework of prioritising one partner, with the idea of exploring sexual desires with others together as a couple. Bergstrand & Williams (2000) conducted a study on ‘Today's Alternative Marriage Styles: The Case of Swingers’ which covers this type of non-traditional relationship.

They conducted a quantitative study using a national online survey, gathering data from 1092 swingers in the U.S. The descriptive statistics showed that approximately 70% of the sample were males and approximately 30% of the sample were females. Data also shows that 85% of both sexes were either married or in a committed relationship. The remainder of the participants identified as single, divorced or separated. Additional information about the demographic characteristics of the respondents show that the average age in the sample was found to be 39 years old, as well as having had experience in a monogamous relationship for approximately 10 years, and thus had been involved in swinging for 5 years. In terms of ethical backgrounds, 90.4 percent were predominantly Caucasian, 4.1 percent were African-American, 3.0 percent were Hispanics and 0.1 percent indicated “other”.

Results show that swinging improved their marriages and relationships by 62.6%, while 35.6% stated that there were no improvements in their relationships. Importantly, from this, only 1.7% said they became less happy. Overall, swingers felt 49.7% happier on top of their already “very happy” marriages (Bergstrand, C., & Williams, J. B, 2000). Admittedly, this

study may provide biased or otherwise inaccurate results regarding overall general life satisfaction within non-monogamous relationships due to the unequal percentage of gender in participants. However, it is important to note that there exists a significant result in improvements of relationships and happiness for individuals who participated in this study whom are involved in these alternative relationships that would be useful for further investigation.

2.6 Sexual Well-Being

In addition, a very recent quantitative study was conducted which focuses on the differences based on the sexual agreement within couples that were specifically in long lasting romantic relationships registered on a dating website called “Second Love”. It is important to note that these websites such as “Second Love” promote interactions with other romantically involved individuals. Rodrigues & Pereira (2016) argues that studying samples in this area of the dating sphere is relevant for literature purposes as, in this day and age “online infidelity is perceived to be one of most serious forms of infidelity” (Rodrigues & Pereira, 2016). A total of 329 Portuguese self-identified individuals took part in this study by completing a web survey hosted on the website Second Love. The measures present in the survey range from demographic questions, revised socio-sexual orientation inventory (SOI-R), satisfaction scale and perceptions of dating infidelity scale (Rodrigues & Pereira, 2016). Participants were individuals who engaged in sexually monogamous relationships (SMR) and individuals who were in sexually non-monogamous relationships (SNMR).

According to Rodrigues & Pereira (2016) individuals who engaged in SNMR were said to be more socio-sexually unrestricted in comparison to individuals in SMR. They also reveal to have experienced greater relationship quality, personal happiness and, report a significant result of sexual frequency (Rodrigues & Pereira, 2016). Importantly, both forms of

relationships believe that deceptive behaviours were perceived by both as infidelity, this in turn corresponds with Rodrigues & Pereira's (2016) hypothesis that above all, sexual agreement influence relationship satisfaction. From a SNMR point of view, they confirm that extra-dyadic interactions is not at all considered infidelity and that using Second Love on the internet and engaging in extra-dyadic sex there does not result in or cause relationship problems. In fact, Rodrigues & Pereira (2016) found that it actually increased their personal well-being and happiness. This is believed to be the result of having engaged and communicated in such agreement with ones partner in SNMR (Rodrigues & Pereira, 2016). To summarise, Rodrigues & Pereira (2016) assures that their findings prove to aid in deconstructing the existing negative stigma around SNMR and the individuals whom decide to agree on alternative forms of romantic relationships other than sexual monogamy.

2.7 Current Study

Notably, previous researchers have focused more on the notion surrounding the actions that occur when individuals willingly decide to engage in consensual non-monogamous relationships and what happens prior and during the establishment of configurations in their individual relationships and agreement as a whole. From this, the author has noted the lack of research surrounding the sense of self and the overall wellbeing of the individual itself, whom is involved in these alternative styles of relationships which is of importance to the literature. Previous studies have commonly stuck to qualitative studies in which the author agrees is the most suitable form of gathering in-depth information from a face-to-face semi-structured interviewing process for the current study. Moreover, previous studies have also showed lack of research with heterosexual individuals in which the current study attempts to collect from an equal number of male and female participants, predicting that it will hence form significant results regarding the topic surrounding the importance of the individuals overall well being.

Consequently, the current study attempts to focus on and explore the general life satisfaction encapsulated within an individual, their attempts of defining their sense of self and simply, convey, from personal experience how their sexual well-being has been impacted upon discovering this form of alternative relationship style. Conducting qualitative analysis allows the researcher to focus on the context which is very important as it requires that the researcher center's on the attempt to achieve a sense of meaning that others give to their own situations, which can be achieved easier with a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative approach. Additionally, the data collection in a qualitative study not only includes words but attitudes, feelings, vocal and facial expression and, other behavior's that are also involved which can not be conceived through numbers and scales in the quantitative approach.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants and Recruitment

The current study consists of 4 purposive samples of individuals who engage in consensual non-monogamy. The selection criteria consisted of the sample to have been actively practicing consensual non-monogamy for a minimum of six months prior to the participation as well as strictly being over the age of 18 as this is the age of consent. Participants were split evenly into two males and two females to attain a balanced result in terms of gender. The four members that declared an interest and whom were willing to voluntarily give full consent for research purposes without pay or incentives in return for participation were officially chosen as the participants. The participants were unknown to myself or my family.

3.2 Design

To explore the construction of consensual non-monogamous relationships, the researcher used a social constructionist approach. In order to obtain information from people who engage in this alternative style of relationship, the researcher used a phenomenological qualitative research design which is most familiar with researchers in this topic, seeking to comprehend meaning in events and in human interactions (Choudhuri et al, 2004). The majority of the data was collected through semi-structured interviews which not only included words but attitudes, feelings, vocal and facial expression and, other behavior's that are also involved which can not be conceived through numbers and scales in the quantitative approach which is rather important when gathering information so not to misunderstand the experience of engaging in consensual non-monogamy.

3.3 Materials and Apparatus

An advertising sheet was required in order to advertise the call for participants for the research study on an online Facebook page called “Polyamory Ireland” (See Appendix B). An interview guide was used to conduct the semi-structured interviews (See Appendix D). The majority of the interviews took place in a private space and at a time which was agreed upon by both participant and researcher. Participants were required to fill in the Consent Form and was also handed a physical copy of the information sheet on the day of the interview (See Appendix A & C). The interviews were recorded using a Zoom H1 recorder and an iPhone 7 (using the voice memo app).

3.4 Procedure

Upon contacting the admin of “Polyamory Ireland” on Facebook, the researcher was given permission to promote the call for participants using the advertising sheet which was posted by the admin of the online page. Following this, individuals who emailed the researcher and whom showed interest in participating were first sent a copy via email of the information sheet and the consent form by the researcher in order for participants to receive full information about the research project prior to agreeing to participate (See Appendix A & C). From this, the researcher then selected four members that then responded and confirmed to volunteer.

The location and time of the interviews were agreed upon together by both the participant and researcher weeks in advance via email. On the day of the interview all of the participants were given a physical copy of the information sheet and to read over it before commencing. Once done, participants were required to sign the consent form manually in which the researcher stored away safely. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in length and were analysed using Braun & Clarke’s (2012) systematic method for organizing patterns of meaning (themes) in a data set which consists of six steps which is called

“Thematic Analysis”. These six steps consist of the researcher to assessing the data thoroughly through transcription. Secondly, creating codes then permits the researcher to highlight important subjects or patterns. With this, codes created by the researcher that seem to represent a specific topic are then combined into one theme. This is repeated until the majority of the codes have been placed under a certain theme. The next step consists of reviewing these themes and narrowing it down to create a more vivid picture of the research question and provides more of a structure for the thesis ensuring that the quality of each theme is unique to the rest. Once the themes have been labelled and defined this will be presented in the result section of the paper where each theme created from analyses will be introduced consisting of direct quotes from the data set which best represents the theme.

3.5 Ethics

Prior to conducting the current research project, a research proposal was submitted and approved by the DBS filter committee. This research project followed the ‘DBS Ethical Guidelines for Research with Human Participants’ as well as the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI, 2010) guidelines. Issues of informed consent and right to withdraw were made clear to participants and the interview process was explained prior to each participant providing consent. Participants were also informed that all data collected would be anonymous and stored on a password protected computer. Written data was stored securely and only the research team had access to the data.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for this study and is defined by Braun & Clark (2019) as a systematic method for organizing patterns of meaning (themes) in a data set which consists of six steps. This systematic method of organizing patterns of meaning was chosen for this study as it allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the notion of non-monogamy through what has been shared by those who participated in the study. As the topic of non-monogamy, alternative styles of relationships, non-traditional relationships become more and more relevant in today's society, the researcher sought to explore this area which has been overlooked in previous studies. The researcher's aim is to specifically grasp a detailed understanding of where the exploration of the sense of self lies within these alternative relationships styles and whether it has a significant effect to the well-being of the individual or not.

The first step that was taken was for the researcher to familiarize themselves with the data through transcribing the recorded interviews and reading interview responses. As per Braun and Clark (2019) is important for the researcher to read and immerse in the data thoroughly. This allows the researcher to be familiar with the data that he or she will be working with. Importantly, this can be achieved by transcribing the interviews yourself. This is crucial in terms of delving into the lives of the participants and thoroughly recognizing and acknowledging their own relationships.

Following the first step, initial codes were then created using the entire data set. This stage in thematic analysis is an active process which involves identifying features of data that are interesting, an opportunity for the researcher to pinpoint a trend/theme, creating codes. This process may be done through a software best used for qualitative research or manually. The researcher in this case generated codes manually without the use of a software. This process

allowed the researcher to further delve into the information. This step will also shine light onto little aspects brought up in the interview that have a possibility of being followed up by further research not already aware of.

The third step follows the transitioning of codes generated to themes. From the initial creating of codes, these codes may then be used and combined into one theme representing similar codes. It is important to note that not every code may fit into the research and the researcher may find that some codes may never be included. This allows for a more vivid picture of the research question and provides more of a structure for the thesis.

The fourth step is crucial as it is at this stage that determines whether the information and the development of the quality of the themes works well in relation to the data. If it does not, some codes may have to be discarded or relocated to other themes that best fits it.

The second last step in Braun & Clarke's (2019) process includes the defining and labelling of the themes. For this stage, the researcher needs to be able to clarify and state the uniqueness of each theme in comparison to the others. Guaranteeing that the themes have a singular focus, similar to the other themes but does not overlap and, directly address your research question.

Finally, the "producing the report" step relates to the final production of thematic analysis. This final analysis connects the themes back to the research questions and the previous literature on non-monogamy which will include 2-3 most vivid quotes from the codes generated. Having a quote from each person would be ideal to represent their sense of their meaning regarding the research question.

4.2 Themes

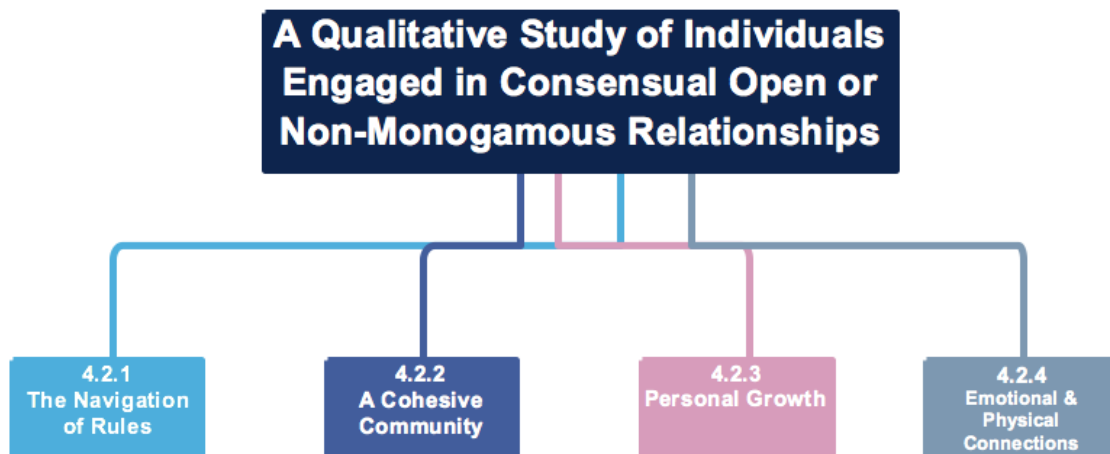


Figure 1. Model of Themes Developed by Thematic Analyses

Upon analysis of the data obtained through the four interviews using Braun & Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis method, four major themes were developed as seen in Figure 1. The themes that submerged from analysis aim to capture a greater depth of understanding of how individuals who engage in non-monogamy define their particular relationship style, the key characteristics of it's style and the obstacles that they believe result in a greater understanding of oneself. These experiences are encapsulated in greater depth through the sub-themes within each of the four themes.

4.2.1 Theme 1: The Navigation of Rules

Table 1. Table of Sub-Themes in Theme 1

Table 1. Theme One	
Theme	Subthemes
The Navigation of Rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ruling your own life • The necessity to bend the rules • Rules vs. Agreements • Societal rules

The first theme was “The Navigation of Rules” which revolved around how rules existed among the lives of the participants in terms of their personal life, and how they maneuvered themselves around existing societal rules and expectations. This theme also distinguishes the difference between rules and arguments, and how through practicing non-monogamy they came to believe that some rules are simply not meant for everyone (See Table.1).

A very common sub-theme that featured across all of the interviews were strong views of having control of one’s own life within a relationship style that is very much interconnected. Each participant elaborated more on this from reflecting hugely on the promise of true independence that they have acquired from this form of relationship. Rules in this case referred to the concept of ruling one’s own life, and having the ability to make a decisive decision on being true to themselves which can sometimes result in often not following a specific norm such as simply practicing non-monogamy.

‘...or even – the fact that my mother is a stay at home housewife and the fact that you get the rich husband that works for you and does everything for you... well with polyamory – all this is not - this is not part of it. Because I’m the own maker of my own destiny and I’m the one that grows my own life without having to base it on a person – being independent.’

Participants also believe that rules can be understood in multiple ways. They highlight the importance of understanding what is a rule and what is an agreement. In any type of relationship that exists there exists boundaries and rules. However, the difference lies in how these affect an individual. When it comes to non-monogamous relationships, rules do exist in contrary to what the society perceives it to be. Participants believed that with any other relationship, each individual in that partnership will have existing boundaries that need to be

understood and communicated by the other. And, if not communicated clearly between another, this will inevitably have negative results.

‘When there’s a rule, that’s an imposition to you – but an agreement is something that you’ve played more of a part in making and an agreement is something more capable of change than a rule. You don’t have to rebel against an agreement.’

Overall, when participants were asked if they found rules to be helpful, the answers varied. However, what is very important to these individuals is that no one is forced to do anything they do not simply want to do and this is done through agreements. Each individual that is part of the relationship is assured to make their voices heard, and subsequently be listened to. Consequently, if a rule is established, they acknowledge that it will not be a set rule; they claim that it can change and that they need to grow with that rule. Overall, they make it very clear that in the realm of non-monogamy, rules are not for just anybody. There is an existing need in this style of relationship to be equipped and confident enough to somewhat bend the rules that tailors to the overall relationships needs.

‘I believe that rules are meant to be bent – because – rules are made for a sample of people and for a sample of experiences. They can’t be applied to every single thing in the same way so, they obviously need to bent somehow.’

4.2.2 Theme 2: A Cohesive Community

Table 2. Table of Sub-Themes in Theme 2

Table 2. Theme Two	
Theme	Subthemes

A Cohesive Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive support system • Circles of deep connections • An overflow of appreciation
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As seen in Table 2, the second theme – “A Cohesive Community” focuses on what commonly surrounds an individual or a couple that practices non-monogamy. This theme highlights how the participants have all expressed their gratitude for having an incredible support system in the community that they are in. They elaborated on their experiences that they have previously never experienced from a community of people before such as: a positive support system, and circles of deep connections subsequently experiencing a unique flow of appreciation for one another.

When it comes to polyamory, participants believe that in a sense, polyamory is a polyamorous constellation which equates to a community. Despite the different forms of structures within polyamory, the difference between them does not matter as much as they all inevitably look out for each other and show support. For instance, this can be seen between kitchen polyamory and parallel polyamory. Kitchen polyamory is when the partners can all sit down together at the kitchen table and have a great time. Parallel polyamory just means that your partners don’t have to necessarily engage with each other. However, participants make it clear that in a community – connected or not – they are all looking out for each other in a positive manner.

‘.. in a sense (the) polyamorous constellation is a community, even if it’s in a parallel way - we are all connected in it, whether it is kitchen or not because we are all looking out for each other’.

For some, they really value the deep connections between the partners of their partners (the partner of an individual's partner is also referred to as a metamour). From this they learn a great deal about themselves, improving in ways that they never knew this opportunity could provide them, such as: bettering the relationships that they have with the same-sex for example.

'..one thing polyamory has helped with is – I've been very close with my metamours and some of the closest male relationship's I've had have been through that and that's also helped me make relationships with other men afterwards.'

The support that the participants receive from their partner's and from the community that they are involved in, has taught them a number of things that not only benefit their relationships, but the relationship that they have with everybody else in the society. They are more appreciative and grateful for their surroundings, which – in due course – ground them.

'.. sometimes there are moments where like – wow – I'm surrounded by so much love. For me that's crazy – and that's experiencing that amount of support and community and love from people instead of one person or your family.'

4.2.3 Theme 3: Personal Growth

Table 3. Table of Sub-Themes in Theme 3

Table 3. Theme Three	
Theme	Subthemes
Personal Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An instinctual connection • Challenging beliefs • Self-confidence • Accepting one's own shadows

A theme which arose quite frequently was that of Personal Growth. All of the participants expressed greatly how their experience with engaging in non-monogamous relationships have taught them numerous lessons that enabled themselves to grow. Throughout their encounters with individuals, they recognized their ability to multiply and merge their love for individuals rather than divide. They encountered many challenges that are twice as harder than that of a monogamous relationship and subsequently brave their own shadows. As a result, this leads to increased personal growth and increased belief in oneself (See Table. 3).

According to the participants, it is very common for an individual prior to engaging in non-monogamy to have experienced having a monogamous relationship. All of the participants who were interviewed experienced somewhat of a downfall while being in a monogamous relationship, and personally experienced the cons of the monogamous structure in a self-impacting way. Polyamory on the other hand has challenged their beliefs more than monogamy ever has, and participants claim that it's due to the beauty of the loving and self-challenging complexity of it all.

'I love the growth part of it. I don't think there's anything where you grow as much, where you have to reflect as much, be aware of yourself as much and be forced to communicate as much'.

They have all experienced what jealousy feels and looks like. In turn, their beliefs have strongly been challenged going into non-monogamy. More than fifty percent of the sample expressed great satisfaction in seeing their partners be loved by someone else. However, they make it very clear that polyamory does not disappear jealousy.

'I am so happy this person makes them happy too, because it doesn't take away from what I give them – that is something we had – which is sometimes hard to remember'.

Existing fears of abandonment is also a concept that challenged some of the participants. And how they came about to understanding their shadows is in learning to complete oneself by accepting oneself wholly.

'I wouldn't feel incomplete (without my partner). Both partners feel complete as people individually – one doesn't equal two, but three. One partner and another fulfilled partner and a relationship. And when they separate, you don't have nothing. You just have two fulfilled people but the relationship is gone – and that makes so much sense to me'.

Additionally, with time they have learned how to better love someone by first acknowledging the fact that they are capable of loving more than one. They also relate this to an instinctual feeling as well as a spiritual one.

'....it felt like such a natural thing to me. Maybe that also kind of connected to my spiritual beliefs but, I feel like that's kind of more or less how it should be – that we love more people. It doesn't mean that you are romantically involved with them but, just being open to love, with and from other people'.

The significance of confidence also lies within this theme. With the personal challenges that they have battled through, consequently gives them a significant sense of purpose. They see the value in learning and accepting who they are, which subsequently assures their partner to trust who they are about to commit a relationship with.

‘.. it’s only when the third person comes in or the fourth or fifth – that you learn that I have a much better value on this relationship with two or three people that’s very deep, than if it was say, a monogamous relationship and friends. Whereas in the polyamorous one, you have a circle of deep relationships’.

4.2.4 Theme 4: Emotional and Physical Connections

Table 4. Table of Sub-Themes in Theme 4

Table 4. Theme Four	
Theme	Subthemes
Emotional and Physical Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional outsourcing (emotions) • Different bonding style (emotions) • More does not mean less (physical) • Integration through technology (physical)

The fourth theme encapsulates the overall experience that the participants are exposed to in non-monogamous relationships in relation to their “Emotional and Physical Connections”. This theme touches on the notion of emotional outsourcing and the difference in how they claim they bond with their partners. Participants also share their thoughts on the technology we have today and its use in their relationships. Lastly, this theme addresses and defines their sexual physical connections, clarifying that having more intimate partners does not mean that they should be less respected or be perceived as never sexually satisfied (See Table.4)

What was often expressed by the participants is the advantages of having more than one partner to share emotional experiences with. They see this as something that is of great use whenever disagreements between two individuals in the relationship occur. For instance, the third person is readily present in this case to be the mediator and assess the situation with a greater understanding as he/she already knows each individual quite well. This is perceived

to save up a lot of time trying to explain to friends who would not necessarily be able to understand and thus find difficulty helping out problems that occur in their relationships. However, a quarter of the sample did admit that this role was also a personal challenge at the same time.

‘.. I’ll be there as well to comfort them, and being part of the triangle you help mediate the issues between them. The challenge is probably the same thing because if there is a fight between the two of them, now you’ve to mediate it.’

Unlike previous monogamous relationships that the participants have encountered, the style of communication is very different. They have found liberation through communicating every need, desire and thoughts that they may have to their partners.

‘..the relationship has taught me to really open up about everything and to share all aspects of myself. With my anchor partner, we share – discuss – decide and discover together – but that’s because we were able to talk about it. Communication is key in all relationships but in all monogamous relationships I’ve had, it wasn’t working. Polyamory forces you to talk – and if you have it on that level, you take it to other levels of sharing what you are feeling.’

The level of communication has changed drastically for them, allowing them to be confident enough to claim that they have improved greatly on their communication skills since choosing this style of relationship. As a result, they bond differently with all of their partners, including their metamours which results in improved emotional connections.

‘You have to work on your communication skills just in general which is useful for life and then B, you can develop a great level of intimacy and knowledge about you partner because you have that communication’.

To an extent, all of the participants agreed that variety is somewhat an important aspect of their sex life. Polyamory in this regard does allow for less restrictions in comparison to monogamous relationships. However, participants clarify that the amount of sexual partners that they have certainly does not define who they are as a person. What is important to take note of however, is the knowledge that one acquires when encountering with other individuals on a genuine deeper level. As a result, this can be seen as a significant increase in knowledge.

‘.. (variety) – it’s a wonderful bonus – however (polyamory) is very permissive so It allows you to explore a lot of different sides to yourself with a lot of different people’.

Participants also addressed the perception that individuals who engage in non-monogamy are always available. Availability in this regard is a choice that is made by the individual without any external influences.

‘I’m not always available, just when I want. There’s not a man or a woman there or a person that tells me that I am available, I decide when I am and that’s important to me’.

Lastly, technology has made such a huge impact on the perception and definition of non-monogamy. Technology has been seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage to the polyamorous community. Firstly, based on analyses, it is common to see a geographical

distance between partners. In this case, technology has enabled them to remain connected. On the contrary, in regards to dating online and the effects that the media has on the society, dating as a polyamorous person in this case has been very challenging. The media has portrayed a very different image of the community and has often emotionally troubled polyamorous individuals who are genuinely seeking for love.

'Monogamy is becoming more normalized just from online dating – I don't necessarily think it's a good thing because I don't think its polyamory that's becoming more common, its "monogamish" – where people will just kind of half be involved with three of four people – using people to not commit to anyone because theoretically you could find somebody better soon. (Therefore) the idea of non-monogamy I think is more acceptable because of that'.

In summary, each participant found the experience a positive one and saw value in choosing this style of relationship and incorporating it into their individual lives. The challenges of engaging in non-monogamy were perceived in numerous ways which however, is overcome by the wave of positivity that is experienced from a personal development perspective. Each experience shared highlighted the importance of communication and the enabling of one's natural behavior to love another individual genuinely and being privileged enough to be able to express that naturally in the form of polyamory. In regards to the technologically developed society we live in today, it has both had a positive and negative impact on the non-monogamous community. A model of the themes and sub-themes can be seen in Fig. 2 below.

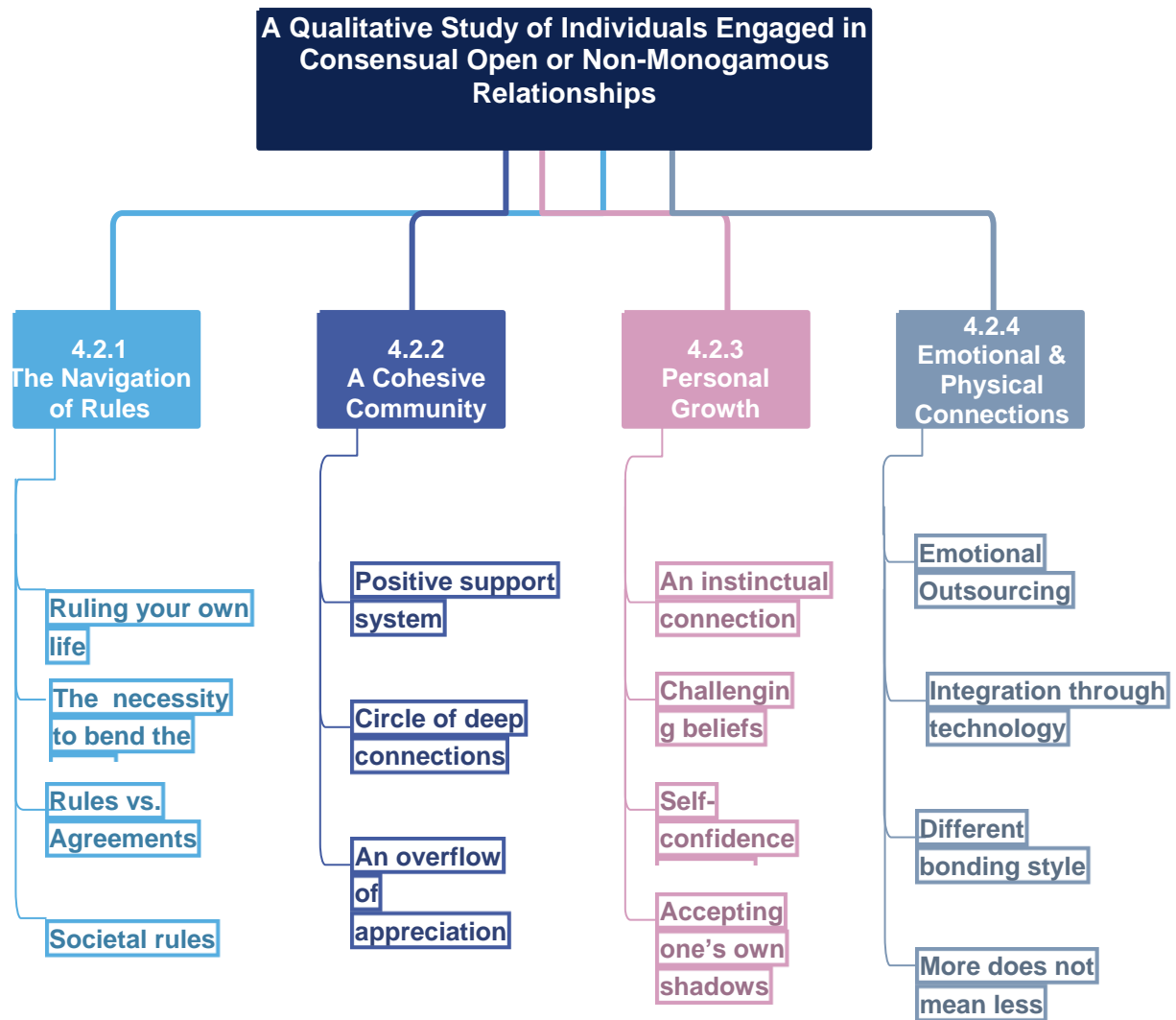


Figure 2. Model of Themes and Sub-Themes Developed by Thematic Analyses

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Summary of Findings

Previous studies have shown the significance in changes occurring within relationships between individuals engaging in non-monogamy, providing evidence that engagement in non-monogamous relationships has resulted in improvements of relationships and happiness for individuals (Bergstrand, C., & Williams, J. B, 2000). Similar findings have also stated that couples engaging in forms of consensual non-monogamy have shown an increase in personal well-being (Rodrigues & Pereira (2016). These findings correspond with the results of the current study which states that the sample found the overall experience of being in a non-monogamous relationship, a positive one. Additionally, the findings of the current study have also taken in complete consideration the honesty of the answers given by the participants stating the importance of balance and accepting that nobody is perfect, and that our own flaws, fears and shadows exist and, need to be addressed appropriately with respect with every type of relationship that one finds themselves in. These insights can be referred to the following themes that emerged through analysis.

The current study looked at the general life satisfaction captured within an individual, their attempts of defining their sense of self and simply conveying from personal experience how their sexual well-being has been impacted upon discovering this form of alternative relationship style. Throughout this study, qualitative analysis has allowed the researcher to center on the attempt to achieve a sense of meaning that others give to their own situations through 4 in-depth, face-to-face interviews which were analyzed and anonymized. Upon analyses, four themes with sub-themes emerged that best conveyed key aspects in their lives in which they experienced a significance in value. Lastly, these were supported by rich quotes from the interview transcripts.

5.2 Significance of Findings

5.2.1 The Navigation of Rules

As we know the current study explored one particular non-monogamous configuration (which are open-relationships), and in specific, polyamory which as a whole is defined as a “sexual agreement which is characterized by implicit or explicit rules” (Hosking, 2013). The first theme explored the concept of rules that proved to have somewhat existed in the relationships that were shared by the sample which indeed were characterized by implicit or explicit rules. Participants discussed rules in a variety of different contexts referring to rules that involved the process of understanding the difference between a rule and an agreement between themselves and their partner(s), to establishing personal rules for their own well-being which aligned to their beliefs (i.e having full control of their own life and braving away from external influences).

Furthermore, the findings from the current study supports Jamieson’s (2004) statement regarding the disappearance of gendered power dynamics of couple relationships – also referred to as the “marriage relationship” – proving to no longer be relevant in accordance to the experiences shared by the sample today. Participants often discussed the notion of agreements which were followed between individuals rather than rules, which subsequently possibly ensured less of a gendered power dynamic between couples. For the reason that unlike rules, agreements were defined as a concept that individuals that are in the relationship partake more in, and is simply something that is capable of change, proving to reflect more of a positive view (less-limiting) rather than a negative view (strict) on non-monogamous relationships. Moreover, the sample as a whole often reflected on the idea of rules prone to being bent as it is simply not made for everybody. They relate this closely to the practice of polyamory, wherein they claim that it possibly will not work for each and everyone. Herein, the importance lies in

the magnitude of the understanding that the individual has and how well they can adapt to this crucial change in lifestyle prior to engaging in non-monogamy in relation to rules.

5.2.2 A Cohesive Community

The participants in this study addressed the change in view they experienced with regards to the support that they receive from whom they surround and share their lives with in general. As mentioned earlier in the study, the constellation of polyamory was defined by the participants as feeling like a united community; confident in stating that whether you practice kitchen polyamory or parallel polyamory, or whichever form of non-monogamy that one practices. They expressed that they are all inevitably one and in connection with one another. The sample brought forward that this community – that they are proud to be part of – will always look out for each other. Additionally, participants exhibited the possibilities of change in the functions of today's society with regards to the notion of masculinity through the practice of polyamory. The engagement in non-monogamous relationships for one specific male participant in particular brought about a massive change in their life when it came to his male encounters. Having experienced the openly understanding environment he had been in, he developed stronger bonds with his male encounters that prior to engaging in polyamory, was disclosed to have been quite challenging. Overall, the findings above support Rubin's (2001) endeavor to pursue studying alternative lifestyles, as according to the current study, they do indeed "fulfil ongoing purposes and functions" (Rubin, 2001) not only necessary for their own personal development but also for the society we live in today.

5.2.3 Personal Growth

While previous studies have focused more on the mere construction of non-monogamous relationships and how they function, there has been very little focus on the

outstanding benefits of engaging in these alternative styles of relationships for the individual. In relation to infidelity however, it is important to note that in the study conducted by Rodrigues & Pereira (2016) their findings claim that extra-dyadic interactions or engaging in extra-dyadic sex did not result in or cause relationship problems. From this point of view, the current study does in some way uphold these findings. This can be seen in the light of how the sample expressed their successful events of overcoming challenges (i.e jealousy) that they encounter in their relationships. Importantly, as these relationship styles don't necessarily have a blueprint to follow, all situations the individual experiences are very unique to themselves and often initiates the processes of reflecting on their own beliefs when encountering with such challenges. Upon analyses of the current study, the sample very rarely focuses on the problems of how non-monogamous relationships are constituted, and rather, viewed the downfalls that they experienced as something that is of a reflection of their personal flaws and something that they personally need to address, learn and improve on. In regards to challenges that occur within their relationships, results from the current study convey how the emphasis is on the individual rather than the notion of non-monogamy itself.

5.2.4 Emotional & Physical Connections

Numerous studies have succeeded in defining the concept of non-monogamy, in which some have even narrowed down the defining of particular configurations, for instance, the definition of 'swinging' or 'monogamish' and so on. On the other hand, Cohen et al (2017) simply construed consensual non-monogamy as "an existing structure where one or both partners are engaging in an emotional and/or sexual relationship with other individuals." The findings of this study confirm this statement, proving incorporation of both emotional and physical connections between individuals involved in consensual non-monogamy. The final theme captures the emotional and physical aspect of a non-monogamous relationship

experienced that were claimed to have been different to what the majority of the participants previously experienced in monogamous relationships. Having said that, the significance of the difference mentioned did not lie in the fact that with consent they were now capable of engaging sexually with another individual outside of their relationship. Rather, participants valued the emotional aspect of uniting with another individual, most importantly one that they bond with naturally allowing them to learn from and deeply communicate with, which follows a natural path of exploration both of oneself and of the other.

Additionally, being always sexually available is often what the general public perceives the individuals engaged in this lifestyle to be. Participants passionately expressed that that is certainly not the case as what is truly of value to them is the advantages of the knowledge within an existing emotional support system outside of their primary relationship, and that the opportunity for them to engage in sexual relationships – which was clearly communicated – is perceived to only be a bonus. This finding however, does support Rodrigues & Pereira's (2016) statement that sexual agreement does support their hypothesis that it influences the overall relationship satisfaction.

5.3 Considerations, Limitations, Future Research

The study succeeded in gathering information from sources that were of value, and met all requirements necessary for conducting this research. A qualitative approach to the study was done which thus provided an opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews. Earlier on in the study it was agreed that a qualitative approach was the more favorable choice in capturing the experiences of the participants who were involved in a non-monogamous relationship. The guided semi-structured questions touched on a variety of concepts that were efficient and aided the analysis phase. Moreover, previous studies are heavier on the qualitative aspect of research in this topic. The current study encourages the movement of research towards a more

quantitative direction. Hopefully evolving in the formation of surveys, or to go even further, creating relationship scales that consider numerous configurations of alternative relationship styles. This would be of great use, not only for research purposes, but it could possibly be useful for the technological dating world we live in today. As a result, a survey of this kind could be the beginning of bettering the decision-making experience of a user in the realm of online dating that is available to the population today.

Further, upon the careful use of previous research which has all produced significant information regarding the concept of non-monogamy – as well as the recent emergence of this topic in society today – the size of the sample of the current study, could however be considered a limitation. Nonetheless, this highlights the importance of mental health professionals to stay up to date with research regarding alternative lifestyles and incorporating knowledge attained from significant findings in their practice.

Lastly, further research needs to be done with regards to the role of the individual in these styles of relationships. The theme “Personal Growth” was prevalent in the entirety of the research project, which thoroughly expressed the complexity of our human behavior. This is contrary to the societal norms we were always exposed to from a very young age. The concept of marriage in a heterosexual aspect has recently shifted successfully with time across the globe. Consequently, this could possibly be the same for the acknowledgment of consensual non-monogamous configurations if further research on this topic continues to be pursued.

5.4 Conclusion

The current study collected favourable outcomes with regards to the effects of non-monogamous relationships in relation to the samples' overall well-being. Through thematic analysis, four themes emerged from the data presenting how each individual expressed their experiences of being in a consensual, non-monogamous relationship: through navigating

around the rules, the possibilities available for a cohesive community that they found themselves in, the significance in attaining a deeper level of personal growth, and lastly, the after-effects of gaining from emotional and physical encounters. To conclude, the current research highlights the importance of the discovery in which deeper understanding of oneself is achieved through the experiences of engaging in consensual non-monogamy.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMATION SHEET

You are invited to participate in a research study that will form the basis for an undergraduate thesis. Please read the following information before deciding whether or not to participate.

What is the research about?

This study is interested in the experience of individuals who have engaged in consensual non-monogamy and how they define it. It also seeks to find out what these individuals have learned about themselves, their relationships, and broader societal ideas around open relationships. The research study, therefore, seeks to develop a better understanding of what is perceived to be the benefits and disadvantages to these styles of relationships from someone who has experienced it first-hand. It is hoped that this qualitative study will provide somewhat of a beneficial impact on the future understanding of this sensitive topic.

Why have I been asked to participate?

I would like to collect information from people who has had experience engaging in non-traditional relationships. The research requires participants to take part that meet the following:

- Must be 18 and over
- Must actively engage in ethical non-monogamy
- Must be able to speak English
- Must have the ability to reciprocate verbally in a conversational interview
- Must be comfortable with being asked personal questions
- Must be comfortable being interviewed

What does participation involve?

If you decide to participate in the study, you will be interviewed about your experience in your involvement of non-traditional relationships. Each interview should take about 30-60 minutes. The interviews will be conducted at a mutually agreed location and time. All the interviews will be audio-taped.

Right to withdraw:

Participants have the right to withdraw permission to use data from the interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

Are there any benefits from my participation?

While there will be no direct benefit from participation, studies like this can make an important contribution to our understanding of human sexuality and human relationships. As such, the findings from this study may be presented at national and international conferences and will be submitted for publication in peer-reviewed journals. However, no individual participant will be identified in any publication or presentation and the taped-audios will be discarded. Individuals will not be offered any monetary or other rewards for their participation.

Are there any risks involved in participation?

There are no risks associated with participation. Any inconvenience involved in taking part will be limited. At the end of the interview, the researcher will provide contacts of support in case it is needed.

Confidentiality:

All individual information collected as part of the study will be used solely for experimental purposes. During transcription, identity will be skewed and be made un-identifiable. Following this, all taped-audios will be deleted. Identities of participants will be safely and will securely remain anonymous as a result of the destruction of all identifiable files after examination.

Note: There is the possibility that quotes may be used to display examples via thematic analysis from which it will be extracted from the data. Direct quotes, shall be made un-traceable to any given participant, and shall remain anonymous.

Contact Details:

Researcher	Supervisor
Name: Aidyl Mhay Sanchez Email xxxxxx@mydbs.ie	Name: Aoife Cartwright Email: xxxxxxxxx@dbs.ie

APPENDIX B

A qualitative study of individuals engaged in consensual open or non-monogamous relationships.

Do you have experience engaging in non-monogamy?

Would you be willing to share your story as part of a research study?

Why might you want to get involved?

At present, there is little information about open, non-monogamous, or polyamorous relationships in Ireland. The research study, therefore, seeks to develop a better understanding of what is perceived to be the benefits and disadvantages to these styles of relationships from someone who has experienced it first-hand. It is hoped that this qualitative study will provide somewhat of a beneficial impact on the future understanding of this sensitive topic.

Who will participate in the research?

Individuals who have had a minimum experience of 6 months engaging in non-monogamous relationships and who are over the age of eighteen will be invited to share these experiences as part of a study.

What is the research about?

This study is interested in the experience of individuals who have engaged in consensual non-monogamy and how they define it. It also seeks to find out what these individuals have learned about themselves, their relationships, and broader societal ideas around open relationships.

What will participation involve?

If you decide to participate in the study, you will be interviewed about your experience in being involved in consensually non-monogamous relationships. Each interview should take about thirty minutes to one hour. The interviews will be conducted at a mutually agreed location and time. All the interview will be audio-taped. Confidentiality is secured and the individual will be completely un-identified.

More information on the study will be provided upon request via email.

If you would like to take part in this study or require additional information, please contact:

Researcher

Aidyl Sanchez

BA (Hons) Psychology Student

Email: xxxxxxxx@mydbs.ie

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

- I.....voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves that I be interviewed about my experience in my involvement of non-traditional relationships.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in a final year research project, presentations and future published papers.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in Dublin Business School, with researcher Aidyl Sanchez and her supervisor until September 2019.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for 1 year from the date of the exam board.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Researcher	Supervisor
Name: Aidyl Mhay Sanchez Email: 10347527@mydbs.ie	Name: Aoife Cartwright Email: aoife.cartwright@dbs.ie

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

APPENDIX D

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Section 1: General

- How old are you?
- Where do you live? Where did you grow up?
- How would you identify in terms of your gender?
- How would you identify in terms of your sexual orientation?
- What is your current relationship status? (married, common law, single, involved with one or more people)
- How long have you been in engaging in an open or non-monogamous relationship or relationships?
- How do you negotiate your relationships? For example, it is important to you to have a “primary” partner, or do you prefer to keep it completely open? Do you find rules to be helpful or not? Please explain.
- How did you come about choosing this style of relationship? / When did you realize you would like to experience this sort of relationship style?
- How do you define Polyamory/ _____ (other forms of non-monogamy)?

Section 2: The Self

- What are the major things you have learned about yourself throughout this experience of practicing non-monogamy. Do you think you have changed a whole lot as an individual ever since?
- Did you notice any effects on your self-esteem or self-confidence?
- Would you feel incomplete without your partner(s)? Please explain.

Section 3: Relationship & Sexual Satisfaction

- How has this relationship contributed to your sexual well-being?
- Do you think that a good sex life is necessary for a good relationship? How important is variety in terms of your sex life?
- What is it like having to share your romantic life with more than one person both physically and emotionally? Has being in an open/non-monogamous relationship changed how you communicate with your sexual or romantic partners?
- Could you talk a little about the benefits in terms of relationship satisfaction? And then also the challenges?

Section 4: Social and cultural support and stigma

- Can you describe what it was like informing your family & friends about your current relationship style?
- Do you feel comfortable talking to people you just met about your experiences or practice of non-monogamy?
- Do you think social attitudes to non-monogamy are changing?

Q5: Opportunity for interviewees to bring up anything, share etc