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The Casualization of Intimacy: Consensual Non-Monogamy and the New Sexual Ethos

Abstract

This dissertation explores the discursive construction of consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships. The focus is limited to non-monogamists involved in primary, committed dyadic relationships who also pursue secondary, more casual partners. Using the framework of "casualization," the dissertation carries out a discourse analysis of 25 in-depth interviews with straight and LGBT individuals and couples involved in CNM relationships. The term casualization of intimacy makes an analogy between the evolving norms of private life and the casualization of labor. For scholars of work in a global economy, the casualization of labor refers to decreasing job security for workers, coupled with increasing productivity and the demand for new skills. The casualization of intimacy means that our personal lives, like our work lives, are characterized by precarity, the need for flexibility, the feminization of communication, and the valorization of individual "hard work." Analysis of interviews with non-monogamists demonstrates a construction of CNM in line with casualization. Non-monogamists portray their lifestyle as protective of partners' autonomy and uniquely accommodating of change; individual adaptability to changing expectations is construed as a necessary virtue. The feminization of communication norms is demonstrated in interview subjects' construction of verbal communication, particularly self-disclosure, as central to and distinctive of CNM relationships. Frequent communication about emotionally-fraught topics - jealousy, desire, insecurity - is considered essential to the success of CNM partnerships; interview participants often argued communication was "more important than sex" in distinguishing CNM and monogamous partnerships. This emphasis on communication suggests one reason CNM appeals to some women; it also disrupts an understanding of non-monogamy as inevitably sexist. Additionally, by framing the self-disclosure required by CNM as "hard work," interview subjects align their lifestyle with the ethos of casualization. In sum, non-monogamists contrast an image of traditional, rigid, hierarchal, and monologic relationships with their construction of non-monogamy as a modern ethic of intimacy, one that is flexible, egalitarian, and dialogic, while also deemphasizing the instability and insecurity inherent in CNM. In trading predictability for excitement and security for freedom, the discourse of consensual non-monogamy highlights the promise and peril offered by the casualization of intimate life.

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THE CASUALIZATION OF INTIMACY: CONSENSUAL NON-MONOGAMY AND THE NEW

SEXUAL ETHOS

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THE CASUALIZATION OF INTIMACY: CONSENSUAL NON-MONOGAMY AND THE NEW
SEXUAL ETHOS

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ABSTRACT

THE CASUALIZATION OF INTIMACY: CONSENSUAL NON-MONOGAMY AND THE NEW SEXUAL ETHOS

Brittany Griebling

Dr. Carolyn Marvin

This dissertation explores the discursive construction of consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships. The focus is limited to non-monogamists involved in primary, committed dyadic relationships who also pursue secondary, more casual partners. Using the framework of “casualization,” the dissertation carries out a discourse analysis of 25 in-depth interviews with straight and LGBT individuals and couples involved in CNM relationships. The term casualization of intimacy makes an analogy between the evolving norms of private life and the casualization of labor. For scholars of work in a global economy, the casualization of labor refers to decreasing job security for workers, coupled with increasing productivity and the demand for new skills. The casualization of intimacy means that our personal lives, like our work lives, are characterized by precarity, the need for flexibility, the feminization of communication, and the valorization of individual “hard work.” Analysis of interviews with non-monogamists demonstrates a construction of CNM in line with casualization. Non-monogamists portray their lifestyle as protective of partners’ autonomy and uniquely accommodating of change; individual adaptability to changing expectations is construed as a necessary virtue. The feminization of communication norms is demonstrated in interview subjects’ construction of verbal communication, particularly self-disclosure, as central to and distinctive of CNM relationships. Frequent communication about emotionally-fraught topics – jealousy, desire, insecurity – is considered essential to the success of CNM partnerships; interview participants often argued communication was “more important than sex” in distinguishing CNM and monogamous partnerships. This emphasis on communication suggests one reason CNM appeals to some women; it also disrupts an

understanding of non-monogamy as inevitably sexist. Additionally, by framing the self-disclosure required by CNM as “hard work,” interview subjects align their lifestyle with the ethos of casualization. In sum, non-monogamists contrast an image of traditional, rigid, hierarchal, and monologic relationships with their construction of non-monogamy as a modern ethic of intimacy, one that is flexible, egalitarian, and dialogic, while also deemphasizing the instability and insecurity inherent in CNM. In trading predictability for excitement and security for freedom, the discourse of consensual non-monogamy highlights the promise and peril offered by the casualization of intimate life.

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CHAPTER 1: NON-MONOGRAMY IN AN ERA OF CASUALIZED INTIMACY

This work focuses on the organization of intimate life in our particular historical moment. It examines one of our era's unique relationship forms, that of consensual non-monogamy. Specifically, I focus on dyadic partnerships where both partners form sexual and emotional attachments with others outside the primary relationship. These partnerships are sometimes referred to as "polyamorous" or "open" relationships; I use the phrase "consensual non-monogamy" for a number of reasons, the most important being its emphasis on the mutual, openly-acknowledged desire for emotional and sexual connections with outside partners.¹ Though various forms of agreed-upon non-monogamy have existed in other times and places, I am interested in consensually non-monogamous relationships as a distinctive product of the neoliberal moment in U.S., one which highlights this era's possibilities and contradictions. In this dissertation, I focus on the justificatory discourses of consensual non-monogamy (CNM), the ways people define, make sense of, and defend a disparaged minority lifestyle and what this can tell us about conflicting cultural messages about love, sex, and commitment.

In romantic comedies, advertisements, reality TV shows, magazine advice columns, news reports, and pornography, we are inundated with contradictory messages about sexuality, love, and intimacy. On the one hand, our highly sexualized media frequently presents no-strings-attached sex with numerous partners as one of the most desirable experience in life. On the other hand, therapists, religious officials, and a variety of relationship "experts" argue that

¹ Throughout this dissertation, the word "relationship" refers to sexual relationships between adults unless otherwise noted. Additionally, this study focuses on consensual non-monogamy but I will often simply use the term non-monogamy. If I am actually discussing *non-consensual* non-monogamy, I will call this behavior "cheating" to distinguish it from consensual non-monogamy.

loving monogamy is the only way to be happy and fulfilled. To simplify a rich, complex ideology, intimacy's central dilemma is presented as a struggle between commitment and freedom, between the satisfactions and compromises of monogamous couplehood and the pleasures and risks of the independent single life. For some people, consensual non-monogamy offers the best of both of these worlds, the comfort of a committed relationship with the thrill of novelty. But this reconciliation is not easy and the psychological, emotional, and practical difficulties that accompany it mirror similar struggles in other areas of our lives.

Perhaps this tension in the zeitgeist explains the recent media interest in consensual non-monogamy, which is often called polyamory. There has certainly been an uptick in fictional and factual coverage of alternatives to life-long monogamy. TV programs like HBO's *Big Love* and the short-lived CBS show *Swingtown* put non-monogamous partnerships at the center of the storyline. *New York Magazine* and *Newsweek* have given serious attention to those in committed relationships who question the monogamous ideal (Bennett, 2009; Weiss, 2008). Over the summer of 2011, *Salon.com*, a popular "online news and entertainment Web site" (<http://www.salon.com/press/fact/>), featured a series of articles on monogamy by journalist Tracy Clark-Flory (2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d). Clark-Fory's reporting did not constitute a full-on attack on monogamy, but it maintained a consistently critical perspective. Her skepticism can best summed up by the title of an earlier piece: "Why do we still believe in monogamy" (2011e)? Over the last several years, the *New York Times* published several sympathetic accounts of CNM (DeDanto, 2008; Elliot, 2005; Williams, 2008). Recently, the *Times* provided a mainstream outlet to for the views of sex-columnist and author Dan Savage, who has long argued that people should consider being "monogamish," (Oppenheimer, 2011) and that stable, loving relationships – rather than strict sexual fidelity – should be the goal.

The fact that strict sexual exclusivity is so often problematized in the mass media demonstrates a new willingness to critique the monogamous ideal, but it is hardly the case that monogamy is being renounced *en masse*. Perspectives that question monogamy are more like fissures in the ossified edifice of sexual fidelity. In a 2003 Gallup survey of moral beliefs among Americans aged 18-65+, “married men and women having an affair” [*sic*] was reviled almost equally by all age groups. Only 6-9% of respondents viewed affairs as “morally acceptable,” making cheating more reprehensible than human cloning, suicide, abortion, or the death penalty (2003). Public attitudes toward cheating are on view each time a male politician’s extra-marital dalliances make the news, with New York governor Elliot Spitzer, New York congressman Anthony Weiner, and former presidential candidate Herman Cain representing three of the more recent casualties. Republican presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich was embarrassed when his second ex-wife revealed that he asked her for an open marriage at the same he was involved in an affair with the woman who would become his third wife (Williams, 2012). Monogamy remains hegemonic, but at the same time, its dissidents are becoming more visible than they have been for the last 30 years.

Despite conservative politicians’ assertion that one woman, one man model of marriage is a universal and age-old standard for adult sexual intimacy, diverse forms of non-monogamy have been and continue to be practiced in many different cultures (Stacey, 2011). In fact, some biologists and anthropologists argue that non-monogamy, not strict sexual fidelity, may have been the norm for our pre-historic ancestors regardless of their gender (Barash and Lipton, 2001; Ryan and Jethá, 2010). As for more recent human history, surveys of known human cultures dating from 5,000 BC through the present show that a greater number of cultures have endorsed polygynous unions, in which a man may have multiple wives but women may only

have one husband at a time, than have insisted upon monogamy (Melotti, 1981). During its short existence, the United States has been the site for many different forms of non-monogamous partnerships, including the “common marriage” of utopian communities (Muncy, 1973) and free-love feminists in 19th century (Friskin, 2000; Passet, 2003), early 20th century New York bohemians (Stansell, 2001), 1960s communes (Kanter, 1973; Miller, 1999; Rubin 2001), 1970s suburban swingers (Denfeld and Gordon, 1972; Karlson, 1980; Walshok, 1971), and pre and post-AIDS gay bathhouses (Bérubé, 2003; Tewksbury, 2002). Members of these all communities have turned to non-monogamy for a variety of reasons: economic support, to satisfy a desire for excitement and sociability, to forge new ways of organizing family life, to improve the status of women, or to experiment with non-possessive love and sexuality.

Non-monogamous people, though they may only be a small portion of the total U.S. population, should not be dismissed as too “weird” or inconsequential for scholarly consideration. Clearly, non-monogamous intimacy is part of a rich, if often disjointed tradition in the United States. Those who experiment with non-monogamy can throw into relief the prevailing understanding of marriage, love, family, and sexuality. And, as certain of the above examples attest, “fringe” groups can exert an influence that is disproportionate to their size. They may also give us a hint of future trends. But certainly, groups that practice non-monogamy can also diverge from one another in many ways. Just as the lifestyles and beliefs of suburban swingers and urban gay men in the 1970s differed in many ways, today, the lives of those involved in dissimilar forms of non-monogamy may also exhibit both significant similarities and major disparities.

My research on consensual non-monogamy does not examine every kind of non-monogamous relationship in the U.S. For example, I do not consider those who practice non-monogamy for religious reasons, including fundamentalist Mormons and some Muslims. Some members of both of these communities practice polygynous marriage, whether or not it is recognized by the law of the land (Altman and Ginat, 1996; Bartolone, 2007; Bradley, 2004; Bradley Hagerty, 2008). Fundamentalist Mormons, and Muslims who practice polygyny, may experience the pressures of what I call “casualization,” but polygynists’ justification for their form of non-monogamy necessarily diverges in important ways from my mostly secular sample of non-monogamists; for example, religious non-monogamists maintain that they are adhering to a standards of family life approved by God (Rehman, 2007; White and White, 2005). Moreover, polygyny allows men to have multiple wives while women are limited to one husband (Altman and Ginat, 1996; Rheman, 2007), a patriarchal norm that many secular non-monogamists would question.

In addition to excluding religious polygyny from my analysis of CNM, I also do not focus on gay male relationships, which frequently incorporate some degree of openness to additional sexual partners. There is a well-developed body of academic research on male homosexual non-monogamies, both past (Chauncey, 1995, D’Emilio and Freedman, 1988/1997; Humphreys, 1975) and present (Adam, 2006; Hoff and Beougher, 2010; Klesse, 2007; Montenegro, 2010). The reason that I do not deal directly with gay men in my research is that though my self-selected sample included one bisexual male, I did not interview any men who were exclusively involved with other men. The absence of gay men in my sample is an unfortunate lacuna; however, I will compare findings from my sample with other researchers’ work on gay male non-monogamies where appropriate. This issue will also be discussed further in the methodology

section of the dissertation (Chapter 2). Having explained who this dissertation is not focusing on, I would like to move onto describing the population from which I drew my sample and say a little about how these individuals talked about CNM.

The consensual non-monogamy this dissertation explores is engaged in by educated urbanites approximately age 40 and younger, who are of middle-class status or higher and are usually secular. Though some of my generalizations may be applicable to gay men, my sample only includes women, men who have sex with women, and trans or genderqueer individuals. Additionally, only two members of my 25 person sample are people of color, so it is likely that the findings of this research are less application to racial minorities involved in CNM. Throughout the project, when I use the term “CNM” or “non-monogamists,” I am referring to people who are demographically similar to my interview participants. My generalizations are not meant to apply to homosexual men or those who engage in non-monogamy for religious reasons, though other researchers may find areas of overlap in the ways these different groups construct non-monogamy.

Consensual non-monogamy can be conceptualized as a particular iteration of a phenomenon that has occurred in many times and places for a variety of reasons. By looking at a particular expression of CNM – the ways extra-dyadic sex is constructed among a sample of urban, relatively youthful, and mostly secular individuals – we can learn about shifts in the understanding of intimacy among the members of these populations. Investigating the discourse of CNM among the educated middle-class provides us insight as to how many members of this population think about sexual and emotional intimacy in a casualized, neoliberal era. Non-monogamists have discovered one way to navigate the inevitable conflicts

between self and other, sex and love, freedom, and commitment in an era profoundly shaped by neoliberal economic restructuring and ideology, as well as social movements like feminism. CNM is one way people are forging satisfying relationships in a historical and cultural context characterized by increasingly delayed marriage, high divorce rates, more single-person households, diverse gender and sexual identities, and more sexual opportunities. This lifeworld, characterized by both instability and high expectations at work and at home, is one that encourages what I call casualization.

My use of the term casualization is metaphoric, and it carries a tinge of irony. In this dissertation, casualization is deployed primarily as an analogy. Casualization is a phrase drawn from academic discussions of the work world. To put it very simply, casualization refers to the expenditure of more effort for more uncertain returns, as when workers spend longer, more productive hours on the job while enduring greater job insecurity and receiving lower wages than in years past. Before delving into a more detailed description of labor sociologists' and political economists' understanding of casualization, I'd like to clear up one possibly confusing aspect of the term casualization. Casualization does not mean that people behave less seriously or that their emotions or beliefs are less forceful or strong. This is what I am referring to above when I say that "casualization" is slightly ironic; it is hardly casual in the sense that it is "nonchalant," which means "lacking a high degree of interest or devotion," or "done without serious intent or commitment" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Rather, casualization describes a process that requires considerable intensity of effort and affect. This is the understanding of casualization that I derive from the work world and apply to the private realm.

At this juncture, I would like to provide a map for the rest of the introduction. To make a compelling case that CNM expresses the casualization of intimacy, we need to explore, concretely and in greater depth, how exactly consensual non-monogamy expresses casualization. First, I look at changes in Americans' private lives, particularly regarding marriage, love, and sexual behaviors and attitudes. Second, I give an overview of the casualization of labor – the original phrase from which my casualization of intimacy is drawn. I look at how increased precarity, effort, and flexibility have increasingly come to characterize the work lives of even relatively privileged American workers, and how these same features influence our private lives. Third, I further elaborate the central conceptual framework of this dissertation, and explain how the discourses of casualization is articulated through the language and logic provided by psychotherapy and feminism. Finally, I elucidate the overlap and distinctions between monogamy and consensual non-monogamy in a casualized age and close the introduction with an outline of the dissertation.

Casualization in our personal lives

A sense of the changing demographics of intimate life, and people's shifting beliefs about sex and love, is essential for understanding the context in which people decide to engage in CNM partnerships. Below, I construct a mosaic of contemporary intimate life, using shifts in age at first marriage, household composition, factors affecting women's decision to marry, average number of lifetime sex partners, greater tolerance of sexual diversity, the influence of feminism and the ideology of consumerism to provide a sense of milieu in which many Americans live today. I explore how the context created by these factors encourages casualization – the expenditure of greater effort for more unsure returns – in our romantic

partnerships. I then move into a detailed examination of what the casualization of intimacy looks like in CNM relationships. I show how consensual non-monogamy differs in significant ways from monogamy, and explain how these differences stem from divergent responses to the tensions engendered by the casualization of intimacy.

In trying to understand evolving beliefs about romance, sex, and commitment, looking at people's beliefs and practices regarding marriage is a natural starting point. What is considered an "ideal" age to be married has changed dramatically over the last six decades. The lowest average age of first marriage in the 20th century was in 1956, when first-time grooms and brides were 22.5 and 20.1 years old, respectively. From the 1950s forward, the average age at first marriage rose by approximately a year each decade. By 2010, the average age at first marriage was 28.2 for men and 26.1 for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a). At the same time that many people were delaying first marriage, the rate of those who never married climbed significantly. In 1960, about 23 percent of men and 17 percent of women over the age of 15 had never been married. Exactly fifty years later, the ranks of the never-married increased by more than a third, with 34.2 percent of men and 27.4 percent of women over the age of 15 never having tied the knot. As for divorce, only 2.2 percent of men and 2.9 percent of women had experienced the dissolution of a marriage in 1960; in 2010, 8.5 percent of men and 11.1 percent of women had gone through at least one divorce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b). In polls, Americans say that they "value" marriage more than almost any other nationality; nevertheless, they hold the world record for highest divorce rate, and, even the highest rate for "romantic breakup[s]" (Cherlin, 2010). For example, in Sweden, children of unmarried parents are less likely to witness their parents' breakup than children of married parents living in the U.S. (ibid).

In addition to delaying marriage, getting divorced, or foregoing marriage altogether, many more Americans are living alone, without a romantic partner, family member, or housemate, than in the past. Between 1990 and 2000, single person households outnumbered nuclear households, e.g. households made up of a married (almost always heterosexual) couple and their offspring. In 2000, single-person households made up 32% of the total (Hobbs, 2005). These households dropped to around 27% of the total by 2010 – perhaps due to the ongoing recession – but still remain more prevalent than any other household type (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). Overall, more people are spending more of their lives outside of marriage and, because many of them live alone, they have greater personal space and privacy than they probably otherwise would. There are myriad factors contributing to this profound demographic shift towards singlehood. Reduced familial pressure to marry and have children; growing work demands; increased geographic mobility; less integration into local communities; and very high expectations of compatibility with romantic partners all make staying single more possible and, for some, more appealing (Klinenberg, 2012). People are of course affected by these developments differently; for example, due to lower geographic mobility, working-class people may have a reduced range of choice in regard to romantic partners, and those in devoutly religious communities are less likely to escape familial pressure to marry. Nevertheless, broader cultural and economic trends make the single life socially and economically viable for many.

Of all the influences encouraging people to remain outside the legal bonds of wedlock, there are two specifically that suggest why consensual non-monogamy makes sense in a casualized lifeworld: men's lower median earning power compared to women, and profound changes in sexual behaviors and attitudes, particularly for people in their 30s and younger. Women's increasing participation in the workforce and rising income levels are historically

correlated with delayed marriage but, new findings about education and achievement complicate the imagined scenario of the free-wheeling, single, career girl. Studies have shown that in contrast to previous decades, the more highly educated a woman is, the more likely she is to be married and to stay married (Goldstein and Kenney, 2001). At the same time, women with college and postgraduate degrees are more likely to be wed than their less educated peers, many educated, employed women remain unmarried for the lack of equally credentialed and well-off husbands (Stevenson, et al, 2010). There is a reduced incentive for many women to wed not simply because they are self-supporting but because there is a reduction in the value-added by a spouse. The evaporation of the family wage, relatively high rates of unemployment for working-class and poor men, and greater stability and higher wages in the economic sectors that employ more women than men, make marriage not only less necessary for many women, but a possible liability (Tavernise, 2011). It should be emphasized that the increasing number of single people and trend towards serial monogamy is not simply a new wave of Free Love enlightenment. First, not everyone favors single life or more sexual partners (and this is true even among the single and promiscuous). Some young people long for an era of chastity, where stability and family togetherness would be prized over individual freedom. As sociologist Arlie Hochschild argues, long-term singlehood is more common among and less beneficial to working-class and poor people (2009). But, in contrast to the political conservatives and fundamentalist Christians who decry the “decline of family values,” Hochschild maintains that it is the very ideology that such figures usually hold so dear – the free market and “small” government – that are largely to blame for the lack of structural incentives to marry (after all, in polls, Americans of all backgrounds consistently express very positive attitudes about marriage) (ibid).

The reduced economic reward of marriage for many women is an important influence driving down marriage rates and raising the age of first marriage. But, it doesn't tell the whole story; another factor is at work. More liberal and entitled sexual attitudes governing peoples' intimate lives also impact when and why they "settle down" into marriage. In the segment below – after first dosing out a grain of salt regarding survey findings about American sexuality – I explore the changing demography of American intimacy. I use Americans' self-reported number of sexual partners; the phenomenon dubbed "hook-up" culture; changing sexual identifications; and increasingly liberal attitudes toward sexual issues to paint a picture of shifting norms for intimate life in the United States.

Reliable statistics on sexual behavior are notoriously difficult to gather. Many factors conspire to make data on sexual activities and beliefs less comprehensive (in both the questions asked and answers received) and less standard and coherent. Even in scientific studies, findings may vary widely. For example, one of the more notorious findings about American sexuality is the major discrepancy between the reported number of sexual partners since age 18 for men and women. In the 2005 General Social Survey, the average number of sexual partners claimed by men was 12.9; for women, it was only 4.2 (Smith, 2006). This discrepancy cannot be satisfactorily resolved unless we assume that men, women, or, more likely, members of both genders, are bending the truth.² Unfortunately for my dissertation, which looks at the sexual and romantic lives of people who were born between 1965 and the late 1980s, many of the large-scale, more comprehensive studies of sexual behavior focus on people born before 1975.

² There are several possible reasons for this discrepancy – men having more same-gender sex than women and/or men's recourse to female prostitutes (a demographic that's less likely to take part in national surveys) – but the most likely explanation is that men tend to inflate and women tend to decrease their actual number of sexual partners.

Because of this, we have an incomplete picture of younger generations, since researchers obviously haven't had the chance to follow them over the life course. This means that my younger interviewees might illustrate demographic shifts that are difficult to verify. Nevertheless, with the qualitative and quantitative studies available, we can get some sense of the landscape of romantic and sexual intimacy for young, single Americans.

The transition to college, which often means young people move out of the parental home and live among peers, can bring a wealth of new sexual opportunities. For example, researchers found in 2002 that 28.5% of females and 30.5% of males aged 15-19 had had 2 or more sexual partners (Smith, 2006). Another study determined that 25.7% of college students aged 19 -24 had had 6 or more sexual partners (ibid). The norms of sexual intimacy for many young people can be markedly different than they were for their parents, particularly among those young people who attend college. At a time when a large number of youth are attending four-year universities, sexuality on campus is increasingly influenced by what sociologist Kathleen Bogle terms "hook up culture" (2008). Bogle explains that the hook up script reverses the order of the traditional getting-to-know-you process. Instead of couples moving onto sexual contact as they know each other better, in the hook up scenario, physical intimacy comes first (47-48). These encounters, which may include as little as kissing or as much as sex, sometimes lead to relationships, but often, they do not (29). Bogle argues that hooking up becomes less a part of young people's intimate lives once they leave college and begin dating; she doesn't direct any attention, however, at those whose experiences have encouraged them to question the ideal of committed monogamy, nor does she theorize how hook up culture relates to broader trends in sexuality in the U.S. Bogle's sample is limited to college students and recent graduates, but it is likely that for many young people now, the hook up scene in universities is a

continuation of patterns established in high school (see Denizet-Lewis, 2004). Though Bogle's analysis tends toward a conservative reading of hook up culture, with young people ultimately returning to dating and holding tight to the ideal of monogamous marriage, not everyone uniformly rejects hookups and other forms of casual, non-traditional sexual relationships immediately following graduation. Among some of my younger interview participants (those aged 30 and younger at the time of the interviews) the hook up culture of their adolescence and college years could be viewed as a kind of "gateway" relationship style for CNM. It is not only young people's behavior that is becoming more liberal, their attitudes are changing as well.

One area in which this is very apparent is in younger people's sexual identifications and beliefs about homosexuality. The long-touted percentage of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the population is 10%, but it appears that the portion of the U.S. population that openly identifies as such only recently reached 9%. A 1992 survey of American voters revealed that 3.3% of men and 2.3% of women identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Smith, 2006). In 2002, among people aged 15-44, 2.3% of both men and women saw themselves as gay or lesbian; 2.8% of women and 1.8% of men defined themselves as bisexual, about 6% of men and 11% of women reported ever having had a sexual experience with a member of their gender (ibid). This means that in the decade between 1992 and 2002, both men and women became more likely to say that they were attracted to members of their sex. More than 10% of women reported having at least one sexual encounter with another woman. The growing multiplicity of sexual identification among young Americans signals a greater degree of openness and comfort with erotic diversity and experimentation.

Attitudes toward homosexuality are changing much faster than previously anticipated. If we use a person's approval of legalized gay marriage as an indication of their attitudes toward gay men and lesbians generally, homophobia has decreased significantly in the past 15 years. For example, in 1997, only 27% of people aged 18 and over approved of same-sex marriage; by 2011, approval of same-sex marriages jumped to 53% (Newport, 2011). Younger adults are particularly likely to believe that same-sex marriage should be legalized. Among people aged 18-34 in 2011, 70% supported legalization. In contrast, among people aged 50+, only 35% of men and 45% of women approved of legalizing gay marriage (ibid).³ Greater tolerance of sexual diversity is also apparent in younger Americans' attitudes towards issues like abortion and premarital sex (Lyons, 2003). In a 2003 survey, 68% of people aged 18-24 believed that sex between an unmarried man and woman was morally acceptable, and 55% believed that homosexual behavior was morally acceptable.⁴ This is in contrast to 28% and 21% of survey respondents aged 65+.

Despite changes in Americans' attitudes and behavior, there continues to be widespread support for marriage (Pew Social Trends Staff, 2010). Psychologists and sociologists have further determined that many Americans, young and old, highly value romance in a committed relationship and wish for it in their own lives (Illouz, 1997a; Regan, 1998; Regan, et al, 1998; Swidler, 2001). At the same time that marriage is relatively fragile and less common than before,

³ The approval rate rose by 3-16 percentage points among all age groups between 2010 and 2011. The article accompanying this survey ventures no guess as to why approval should have uniformly risen during this time; my hypothesis is that it might have something to do with positive media coverage of gay marriages and families, and perhaps the conversations this coverage generated among viewers. Despite the overall shift towards greater approval of same-sex marriages, differences between younger and older people are dramatic. Among people aged 18-34, approval of same-sex unions soared 16 points between 2010 and 2011 (Newport, 2011).

⁴ The higher approval rating of the legalization of same-sex marriage quoted above comes from a study conducted 8 years later.

many people in the U.S. still desire the stability, support, and companionship offered by a committed relationship. Their struggle is to reconcile high expectations, new sexual norms, and structural constraints shaped by a changing economy, with the formation and maintenance of long-term, fulfilling partnerships. This is where CNM comes in as a viable lifestyle for some.

Later and fewer marriages, hook-up culture, shifting economic realities, and increasingly liberal and accepting attitudes about sexuality, make possible and even encourage casualization in close relationships, with consensual non-monogamy being a particularly lucid example of this phenomenon. But the social and cultural shifts underlying the casualization of intimate life do not occur in a vacuum. Economic transformations parallel these shifts and also affect how we engage in intimate relationships. Because casualization occurs not only at home, but at work, I will now turn to a description of the neoliberal economic changes of the last four decades, changes that are the root cause of the casualization at work and which often mirror transformations in our intimate lives.

Casualization at work

To understand casualization, we must first understand neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a term that is variously used. In this dissertation, I use neoliberalism to refer to a form of economic organization and an ideology.⁵ In this brief overview, I first focus on how a neoliberal

⁵ On the one hand, the economic transformations wrought by neoliberalism are anything but new – many aspects of neoliberalism are strikingly similar to the more *laissez-faire* capitalism of the 19th century. On the other hand, neoliberalism differs from early incarnations of pro-capitalist beliefs insofar as it exists within a matrix of social and cultural factors that differs radically from those that characterized the newly industrialized West. There is obviously not the space or expertise to detail each and every way in which our situation today differs from the realities of the past. I will simply say that what is distinctive about neoliberalism in the contemporary U.S. (and in many other places around the globe) is the degree to which it enjoys unprecedented hegemony, due to the acquiescence of popular Christianity to

organization of markets affects labor; second, I examine “flexibility” as an “ideological” value in the Marxist sense and as a practical, affective way of being in the world. As an economic model, neoliberalism describes the process by which capitalism has moved away from the mid-20th century model based on manufacturing, limited profit-sharing, and a certain degree of nationalism, and towards a “flexible,” globalized model that privileges short-term returns to investors over the development of enterprise itself (Harvey, 2005; Howard, 2007). Casualization is a key side effect of this process.

The casualization of labor is becoming the “new normal” for an increasing number of wage-earners. Though precarious or “non-standard” work, i.e. work that is part-time, short-term, or by contract, has long existed in the context of U.S. capitalism (Kallenberg, 2000), there are a number of trends contributing to the decline of positions that offer long-term, stable employment and worker benefits. First is the globalization of markets for labor. The entry of China, India, and former Soviet bloc countries, among others, enabled Western corporations to locate much of their manufacturing, and increasingly, basic services and certain high skill jobs (for example, those in computing and finance), in lower-wage countries. The export of jobs had dramatic consequences for rich nations like the United States, and leads to a second trend promoting the casualization of labor: the expansion of the service sector. Since the 1970s, wealthy countries have experienced major growth in the service sector of their economies. The third, and perhaps most complicated, trend concerns the re-writing of the implicit social

consumerism, the widespread belief that there are no viable alternative systems, such as socialism, and the omnipresence of corporate-owned media that normalize and naturalize market-based logic. The tendency to believe that markets are the ideal structure for almost all human endeavors sets neoliberalism apart from its classical antecedent (Harvey, 2005, 3). This helps to explain why neoliberal principles and buzzwords – freedom, choice, individualism, competition, flexibility – are so ubiquitous and influential.

contract forged between corporations and labor during the New Deal. Instead of workers exchanging their allegiance and talent to a corporation in return for pensions and slow, if reliable, increases in pay, corporations are increasingly divesting themselves of obligations to their workers in order to reap ever greater profits for their shareholders and top management (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Kallenberg, 2000, 2009; Veltmeyer and Sacouman, 1998). For example, lay-offs have become a common tactic to raise stock prices, even when a corporation is doing well. Cutting workers and assigning their work to remaining employees or shipping it overseas, reduces costs and raises profits. Such “restructuring” or “down-sizing” undermines workers’ power as a collective and increases their sense of precarity – even if you’re doing your job really well, it might not be enough to keep you from being fired (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Kallenberg, 2009). Losing one’s job is a particularly daunting prospect in the current economic climate: long-term unemployment has only increased since 2001 (Kallenberg, 2009, 6).⁶ In their book, *Gurus, Hired Guns, and Warm Bodies: Itinerant Experts in a Knowledge Economy*, Barely and Kunda detail how some corporations have shed significant numbers of full-time employees, only to hire similarly skilled individuals (or even the same individuals) as “independent contractors.” The goal behind this strategy is to reduce the corporation’s responsibility for payroll taxes, health benefits, and pensions (2004, 12-15). Even highly-skilled, white-collar professionals are not spared; one of the largest abusers of the independent contractor status is Microsoft. The company’s firing and rehiring of their own programmers and engineers as contractors led the IRS to sue the technology behemoth in 1989 (14). This is only one particularly egregious example

⁶ Long-term unemployment means that someone has been actively searching for work for more than six months. For the last few years, both short and long-term unemployment rates have been unusually high. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that unemployment rate during the summer of the current recession was about 9 percent (<http://www.bls.gov/cps/>), though other sources argue that if those who have given up looking for work or are marginally employed are also counted, the rate is closer to 16% (Engels, 2011). Minorities, younger, and older workers are the groups that are hardest hit (ibid).

of a much more widespread effort to lower wages and deprive workers of benefits and job security.

Since about the mid-1970s, "growth in inflation-adjusted, or real, hourly compensation has lagged behind labor productivity growth" (Fleck, et al, 2011). In other words, workers' wages have not kept up with their increasing productivity. And this gap in compensation has continued to widen over time, with a notable increase after 2001 (ibid). Though there are many variables that play a role in rising productivity, including changing technology and new strategies of work organization, research tells us that laborers' worries about job security are an important factor. In a culture where workers feel expendable, many try to prove their worth to their employers by working hard for fewer rewards. Kallenberg (2009) reports that U.S. workers' sense of job security decreased steadily between 1977 and 2002. For many workers, there is considerable pressure to exceed employer expectation in order to hold on to the job one has, let alone advance. A 1995 study conducted by the *New York Times* found that 64% of employees believed that workers "were less loyal" to companies and 75% of those surveyed believed that companies "were less loyal" to their employees than they had been in years past (Kallenberg, 2009). If many workers do feel less loyal to the companies that employ them, they have good reason. For example, organizations that protect workers' interests are in steep decline in the United States. In 1983, union membership was 20.1 percent; by 2010, it had fallen to 11.9 percent. Most remaining union members are in the public sector – about 36% of public sector workers are now unionized, versus about 7 percent of those working in the private sector (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001).

Despite the sense of unease many workers experience, corporate rhetoric encourages them to identify with the corporation or brand, to view themselves as members of the corporate “family” or “team.” Yet, at the same time many workers feel a decreasing sense of trust in and allegiance to the companies that employ them, many are also cultivating their occupational identities through networking and personal development (Barley and Kunda, 2004). Corporations may pressure workers to identify with the company’s brand, but many workers are highly likely to identify as members of particular occupation and to report derive a strong sense of accomplishment from their jobs (Hochschild, 2003a). At the same time that people may feel underappreciated or exploited at their jobs, they can draw meaning and a sense of self from their labor. Deep ambivalence – a tension between identification and dis-identification – characterizes these individuals’ relationship to work. Given these conditions, it should be no surprise that “flexibility” becomes a key word in an era of neoliberal casualization (see McGee, 2005). Flexibility makes a virtue of necessity. Capital demands that workers be “flexible” – willing and able to develop new skills, perhaps pick up and move at a moment’s notice to a far-off location – to remain employed. For workers, flexibility means being able to handle quickly changing circumstances while retaining a core sense of self that is also able to evolve. Flexibility reconciles identification and alienation, the investment of one’s self in one’s efforts with the recognition that the reward for hard work might be a pink slip. In this way, flexibility is a reaction to the uncertainties people face in their economic lives, but that doesn’t mean it has no relevance in private life; as this dissertation will show, flexibility is also essential to navigating the casualization of intimacy.

What is the “casualization of intimacy?”

Now that we have looked at what casualization means in the context of work and labor, I want to examine how casualization impacts the private lives that people have apart from work. As with the casualization of labor, hard work, precarity, the need for flexibility, and individualism prevail. This section provides more information about what each of these terms means in the context of intimate relationships. I draw parallels between the work place and private relationships, illustrating how casualization is a pervasive set of factors influencing peoples’ lives. Though I discuss the impact of casualization on romantic relationships generally, my goal is to give a sense of the conditions and tensions that affect intimacy at our particular historical moment and which some people choose to navigate by adopting consensual non-monogamy.

Casualization, both at work and at home, means working harder for less. There are fewer guaranteed returns for more effort. At work, this may mean a person puts in considerable time, effort, and creativity without being able to hold onto her job during the next wave of “downsizing.” In romance, expending more energy on a relationship – having long conversations about the relationship, spending more “quality time” together as a couple, investing money and energy in joint domestic projects – can make a partnership stable and long-lasting; yet, it might also simply not be enough to meet one or both partner’s high expectations for personal fulfillment or “true love.” It makes sense that hard work and insecurity would go together. If people can’t take their relationships for granted, they will put more energy into maintaining them. Where there used to be more coherent and powerful social norms and practices supporting life-long heterosexual marriage, social and ideological shifts, along with reduced economic incentives for women to remain in less-than-satisfactory relationships, mean that

precarity haunts even happy partnerships. In a sense, we always interviewing or auditioning for our job or relationship, even while we're in it, because it's always possible to be replaced by a newer model (Sender, 2006; Sennett, 1976, 329). Now, adaptability is the key to adjusting to changing circumstances in both public and private life. In his classic, *The Lonely Crowd*, first published sixty years ago, David Riesman (2001) wrote that the advent of modern corporations and consumer society made us "other-directed." We make choices based on others' feedback rather than an internal moral "gyroscope" derived from religion or tradition. Our era's ubiquitous advocacy of flexibility is a continuation of the trend Riesman first identified.

Flexibility is a key strategy for dealing with the uncertainty wrought by casualization. It is the ability to adjust oneself to better fit new situations. At work, a flexible employee is able to switch quickly from one type of task to another. Frequently learning new skills – for example, mastering new technologies – is essential in many jobs. In relationships, flexibility means the capacity to change one's habits and expectations to better fit the needs of one's partner. In a modern lifeworld where both members of a couple are subject to circumstances that may change their beliefs and habits – in moving to different jobs, encountering diverse people, traveling to other cultures, being exposed to novel ways of thinking via a variety of media – maintaining a committed partnerships means being able to accommodate changes to both individuals' personalities and perspectives over time. Flexibility both complements and contends with the emphasis on the individual in U.S. culture. On the one hand, flexibility contradicts the hegemonic belief that everyone should cultivate and express her innate, unique self. Flexibility encourages us to suppress many personality traits – perhaps, for example, pronounced introversion, or firm adherence to principle – in favor of perpetual openness and malleability.

On the other hand, flexibility becomes the ultimate expression of self-reliance, a key virtue in individualist ideologies.

Individualism is the ideological corollary of capitalism, and part of the political and religious beliefs that have shaped the West over the last 250 years (Elliot and Lemert, 2009; Howard, 2007). Over the last 100 years, the increasing pervasiveness of corporate, market capitalism, Anglo-liberal political philosophy, and a popular version of Protestantism that is often acquiescent to both, means that it is harder to develop a way of thinking, let alone an entire way of life, that withstand individualism's influence. Howard contends that the ubiquity of individualist thinking is "a result of the changes wrought by social modernization in the twentieth century... Human lives have been extracted from the bonds of family, tradition, and social collectives, which once prescribed in detail how people were to behave. Humans have been liberated from these detailed determinations to take greater control of and responsibility for their own lives" (2007, 2). Such changes hardly erase the power of social institutions; rather, massive, impersonal structures profoundly shape our life trajectories: "people are now more dependent on a series of modern institutions... including the welfare state, education systems and labor markets, and that these impose new and often contradictory demands on individuals" (ibid).

Individualism is a belief system that places the individual, her desires and rights, at the center of moral reasoning. Anglo-American individualism argues that each person should be able to make choices that determine the course of her life; she is also responsible for the choices she makes. The free pursuit of personal fulfillment, however it may be defined, is understood to be life's main objective. Individualism provides a map which shows us "how to

lead a meaningful and autonomous life, how self-development – particularly through developing abilities and skills – generates fulfillment, what intimacy and eroticism means to the individual, and how we can open ourselves to others and explore the richness of relationships...” (Elliot and Lemert, 2009, 7).

Over the past 25 years, many scholars have investigated the ways in which the individualism described by Elliot, Lemert, and Howard shapes our understanding of “intimacy and eroticism.” Scholars ranging from Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002), Robert Bellah (Bellah, et al, 2008), Anthony Giddens (1992), and Steven Seidman (1991), have written extensively about the ways in which two frameworks in particular – feminism and psychotherapy – provide everyday people with ways to think about their intimate relationships. My dissertation draws heavily from the work of these authors, particularly my argument that the discourse of CNM is a striking iteration, and a logical consequence, of the variants of individualism to found in these two revolutionary ideologies. Though they will be discussed in considerably more detail in chapter 2 and chapter 4, I would like to give the reader a basic understanding of what I mean by two terms I will be using throughout the dissertation, “feminism” and “psychotherapeutic.” Feminist and psychotherapeutic discourses are central to cultural and discursive changes that characterize the casualization of intimacy.

Feminism refers to popular understandings of feminism promulgated largely via the mass media in the U.S. The feminism I heard articulated by my interviews typically includes aspects of second and third-wave feminism that are compatible with the neoliberal individualism at the heart of casualization. This kind of feminism espouses women’s equality with men, right to personal choice and freedom, and right to pleasure; (even) more

transgressively, it asserts these rights for LGBTIQ⁷ individuals. This includes non-normatively gendered individuals, such as trans and genderqueer people. Reliance on a language of rights, equality, choice, and individuality produces a discourse of CNM that is at once conventional and counter-hegemonic. On the one hand, they retrench a kind of atomistic individualism that discourages personal investment in group identities and endeavors. On the other hand, non-monogamists use the language and logic of feminism to question heteronormative monogamy.

Psychotherapeutic discourse overlaps with certain aspects of feminist rhetoric insofar as it shares an emphasis on self-fulfillment, and individual solutions to what are often endemic social problems. I adopt Dana Cloud's (1998) definition of "psychotherapy" as encompassing a variety of "psy" discourses: psychology, psychiatry, psychology, social psychology, and all of the lay and popular discourses based on faith in the "talking cure" and its ego-orientation. Psychotherapeutic discourse privileges the individual self, its desires and sufferings, past and future. Accordingly, the understanding of psychotherapeutic discourse used in this research is also informed by Bellah et al's analysis of "the therapist" in their ground-breaking study of American character, *Habits of the Heart* (2008). They write that the therapist (or for our purposes, psychotherapeutic discourse), "proffers a normative order of life, with character ideals, images of the good life, and methods of attaining it... [Therapeutic discourse] empower[s] the self to be able to relate successfully to others in society, achieving a kind of satisfaction without being overwhelmed by their demands" (47).

Men and women of various backgrounds and orientations believe in the precepts advanced in feminist and psychotherapeutic thought: equality, autonomy, and the pursuit of

⁷ The acronym LGBTIQ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, intersexed, and queer people. There are similar acronyms that are shorter (LGBT, LGBTQ, etc.); I chose LGBTIQ because it is the most inclusive terminology that I know for denoting non-heteronormative sexualities.

pleasure and fulfillment. The challenge is to pursue these goods not only for ourselves but to recognize that others are entitled to them as well. Along with the neoliberal acceptance (or even advocacy) of precarity and flexibility, the kind of individualism encouraged by feminist and psychotherapeutic thinking is part of the culture of casualization. Because casualization is pervasive, non-monogamists are not the only ones affected by the pressures of casualization; monogamous couples are subject to them too. In the next section, I will explain how the challenges of casualization are dealt with differently by monogamous and CNM couples. I look at the similarities and differences between these two relationship forms and explain why consensual non-monogamy is logical extension of casualization in our private lives.

Monogamy, CNM, and the casualization of intimacy

I would like to delineate how CNM differs from (and overlaps with) monogamous relationships. My goal is to call attention to the ways in which consensually non-monogamous partnerships uniquely exemplify the casualization of intimacy, while also acknowledging that monogamous couples also face many of the challenges wrought by casualization.

Monogamy and CNM share many important characteristics. In my project, I focus on dyadic CNM relationships, committed couples who also have less important, secondary relationships outside the primary partnership. Consensually non-monogamous relationships share a number of similarities with monogamous partnerships. Both of these relationship forms uphold the dyad as the central locus of intimacy, love, sex, and commitment (Finn and Malson, 2008). In the case of male-female couples, CNM partners are like their monogamous

counterparts in being able to marry. Like monogamous partners, some non-monogamists have children. More important, people in both monogamous and CNM relationships are subject to the same tensions and cultural contradictions surrounding love and commitment. Both must deal with the inevitable conflict between pleasing oneself and pleasing one's partner, the need for security and the desire for excitement, the pull toward commitment and the desire for freedom. My argument is that whether a relationship is monogamous influences, and perhaps even structures, how such tensions are dealt with.

In some respects, the distinctions between monogamy and CNM relationships are of degree, not kind. For example, while people in CNM relationships describe themselves and their relationships as fluid, evolving, non-conformist, and unpredictable, they also express the same deep emotional attachment and bondedness to their primary partner that monogamous couples do. The significant differences between monogamy and consensual non-monogamy, as described by my interviewees, fall into two categories: sex and communication. According to my interview subjects, monogamy and CNM exemplify opposite norms. In the simplest sense, these opposing norms are either more sex partners or fewer, more communication or less communication. These distinctions are depicted in the graphic below.

Communication	# of sexual partners	Relationship style
Less disclosure	One partner	Monogamy
More disclosure	More than one partner	Consensual non-monogamy

While few would dispute that monogamy is characterized by one sexual partner and CNM is characterized by more than one sexual partner, differences in communication may seem more debatable. There are no studies available to tell us whether there actually is “more communication” in CNM relationships as opposed to monogamous partnerships. What is important is that non-monogamists *believed* they engaged in more self-disclosure or “disclosing intimacy.” To clarify the meaning of this term, I would like to provide a general definition of intimacy and explain exactly what disclosing intimacy entails. Intimacy is defined as:

....a close, familiar, and usually affectionate or loving personal relationship with another person or group; a close association with or detailed knowledge or deep understanding of a place, subject, period of history; an act or expression serving as a token of familiarity, affection, or the like; an amorously familiar act [or] liberty.

As is clear from this definition, intimacy can be understood to have many different features or expressions. Disclosing intimacy is a particular form of intimacy, one that encompasses what the definition above describes as “a close association with or detailed or deep understanding [of a person].” Sociologist Lynn Jamieson, who conducts research on intimate relationships (1998, 1999), including CNM partnerships (2004), defines disclosing intimacy as “talking about yourself, disclosing, [and] ‘sharing’” (1998, 7). The advocacy of disclosing intimacy is closely tied to the increasing hegemony of individualist ideologies (Sennett, 1978). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, disclosing intimacy began to be broadly endorsed by a variety of relationship experts, such as psychologists, psychiatrists, religious leaders, doctors, educators, and social workers (Bellah, et al, 2008; Illouz, 2008; Lystra, 1989; Seidman, 1991). The focus on individual pleasure, encouraged by mass consumer culture, helped cement the benefits of disclosing intimacy as hegemonic commonsense. Jamieson offers a critical view of this development, arguing that an overwhelming emphasis on disclosing intimacy causes us to overlook intimacy’s other aspects

(1998, 7-8). The practical and mundane facets of intimacy are subordinated to the expression of emotion and the revelation of personal secrets. My interviewees had an intuitive sense of the relationship between disclosing intimacy and “modern” – that is, more individualist – attitudes about close relationships. Non-monogamists had a hard time not positing themselves as the vanguard of a new and better kind of intimacy.⁸ In contrast, my interview subjects often discussed monogamous relationships as though they were all traditional, or not influenced by feminist and psychotherapeutic perspectives. However, the push for more communication in close relationships has a much longer and more complicated history.

Rather than being unique to CNM partnerships, the impetus for more communication is a long-term trend entwined with the push for romance and pleasure on the one hand and equality and fairness on the other (Birkin, 1988; Campbell, 2005; Illouz, 1997a; Seidman, 1991). These two trends are generally thought to distinguish modern intimacy from more traditional attitudes about sexuality and marriage (Cott, 2000; Coontz, 2005; Giddens, 1992; Santore, 2008) and they are heavily indebted to late 20th century feminism and psychotherapeutic discourse. If traditional marriage is defined by discourses of duty, self-sacrifice, and hierarchy drawn from Judeo-Christian teaching, modern relationships draw on feminist and psychotherapeutic perspectives, both of which are profoundly shaped by individualism. They stress personal pleasure and individual rights; in its purest incarnation, individualism is a philosophy that advocates these goods for all people, regardless of differences like gender, race, or class (Yeatman, 2007). As shown by the second graphic below, more traditional relationships would

⁸ Consensual non-monogamy as a vanguard relationship style is prominent theme in many “how-to” and “self-help” books on the subject. The “newness” or innovative nature of CNM is suggested even in the titles. Deborah Anapol’s book, which may have been the first text to introduce the neologism “polyamory,” is entitled *Polyamory: The new love without limits* (1997). Wendy O-Matik’s (2007) title tells readers that the book will help them “redefine” their relationships and the subtitle of Easton and Liszt’s *The ethical slut* (1997) is “a guide to infinite sexual possibilities.”

have less disclosing intimacy, and more modern relationships would have more disclosing intimacy.

Communication	# of partners	Relationship style	Ideology
Less disclosure	One partner	Monogamy	Pre-feminist/pre-psychotherapeutic
More disclosure	One partner	Monogamy	Feminist / psychotherapeutic
More disclosure	Many partners	CNM	Feminist / psychotherapeutic

I do not believe that monogamous couples necessarily engage in less disclosing intimacy or talk about sex less honestly, but the CNM view of monogamy does point to one important distinction. Both CNM and monogamous relationships are influenced by feminist and psychotherapeutic perspectives, but monogamy necessarily involves a more traditional sexuality that limits the individualist ethos of the relationship. The feminist and psychotherapeutic directive is to work for personal fulfillment and discover your unique self through new experiences, rather than to achieve a sense of self through adherence to inherited norms and familiar routines. Even if a couple has a modern monogamous relationship, in that they treat each other as equals with the same rights and engage in a lot of disclosing intimacy, they have tempered their selfish individual desires in one important realm, that of sex. Insofar as monogamy puts certain definite limits on both partners' sexualities for the good of the relationship, it is less individualistic than CNM. In contrast, non-monogamous partners negotiate a greater degree of sexual autonomy for each person. Freedom to pursue sexual pleasure is

privileged over the protection of a partner's feelings, and possibly, the stability and longevity of the relationship.

Both monogamous and consensually non-monogamous relationships are affected by the casualization of intimacy. These two different relationship styles are divergent ways of accommodating the challenges and tensions of casualization. Monogamy emphasizes mutual sacrifice. The sacrifice and challenge of monogamy is to sometimes suppress individual sexual desires for the stability of the relationship. This stability is prized over the excitement – and strain – introduced by having multiple lovers. People may choose lifelong, monogamous marriage as an antidote, an alternative, or a palliative for the casualized world of work. CNM allows instead for mutual indulgence at the cost of greater insecurity. In CNM, individual sexual desires should be pursued. This puts pressure on the primary relationship, for example, when a partner is jealous, or reduced time and energy for the primary relationship creates dissatisfaction. Non-monogamy likely introduces difficulties the couple would not otherwise have, but many non-monogamists believe that CNM also acts as a kind of release valve that can relieve the pressures of their primary partnerships. Proponents of CNM argue that having multiple partners alleviates boredom and means no one lives with the burden of needing to be their primary's "everything." Moreover, non-monogamists believe they achieve a greater affective intensity in their relationship: enhanced appreciation of the primary partner, a sense of being her "true self" and living "authentically," and often, increased sexual drive, experience, and satisfaction.

A potent mix of excitement and insecurity generate strong emotional energy in CNM relationships. This is why consensual non-monogamy is a unique and telling response to the

casualization of intimacy. Instead of retreating from the pressures of casualization, non-monogamists embrace them. It's a different balance, appropriate for those who can handle greater risk, insecurity, and who crave more affective intensity and personal growth. Monogamy essentially tempers casualization, and CNM embraces it. Consensual non-monogamy is an acclimation to, and perhaps a medium of, casualization.

Outline of the dissertation

The argument at the heart of this dissertation is that consensual non-monogamy, or CNM, is a logical strategy for dealing with the tensions and competing demands of intimate relationships in a casualized, neoliberal era. To demonstrate the relationship of CNM with its cultural and historical context, we have looked at the transforming realities of work, marriage, and sex as well as number of concepts – precarity, flexibility, disclosing intimacy, individualism, feminism, and psychotherapeutic discourse. This framework shapes my analysis of the discourse of consensual non-monogamy throughout this project. In the remainder of this dissertation, I will show how and why the model of casualization is “good to think with” when it comes to understanding non-monogamous relationships in particular and perhaps contemporary intimacy more generally. Casualization is a key feature of our zeitgeist, and consensually non-monogamous relationships are one, though not the only, means of dealing with the challenges and tensions casualization brings into our personal lives.

The dissertation will proceed as follows. The remainder of the introductory chapter will provide more information about consensual non-monogamy as a lifestyle. I begin by providing a more detailed definition of consensual non-monogamy. Because it can be a widely encompassing category, I specify exactly what kind of CNM relationships I focus on in this

project. After this clarification of terminology, I look at the demographic characteristics of my sample, such as education level, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and race, and discuss how this influences my findings. I close the chapter with some speculation about the prevalence of CNM in the United States.

Chapter 2 includes the literature review and an explanation of my research methods. The literature review familiarizes the reader with scholarship on consensually non-monogamous relationships; surveys a broad field I term intimacy studies, which includes work from sociologists, feminist, and queer scholars; and research on psychotherapeutic discourse as an ideology that powerfully influences American understandings of marriage, love, and sexuality. The methodology section explains how interviews were conducted, addresses some of the ethical concerns of research on sexuality, and sets out a model of discourse analysis used throughout the dissertation. Chapters 3 through 6 deal with the substantive findings of my research. Chapter 3 explores the ambivalence my interview participants expressed about labeling or definitively naming consensual non-monogamy as an identity or lifestyle. In this chapter, interview subjects explain their wariness of being pressured to conform to other non-monogamists' norms for CNM relationships. They also express a fear of being associated with undesirable people, in this case, certain other non-monogamists, who don't meet my interviewees' standards of attractiveness. In the concluding section of this chapter, I relate these findings to the individualism informing our sense of the self and its relationship to society in this moment of casualization. I also hypothesize the implications of this ambivalence for the political solidarity among non-monogamists in the face of legal discrimination against non-normative intimacies.

Chapter 4 looks at the ethics of consensual non-monogamy. Focusing on my interview subjects' use of the logic and language of popular feminist and psychotherapeutic discourse, this chapter demonstrates the ways in which non-monogamy, typically understood to be a radical rejection of prevailing norms, is in some ways confluent with hegemonic beliefs about what constitutes a good or "healthy" intimacy. Chapter 4 shows how, far from being a Dionysian free-for-all, consensually non-monogamous relationships are often organized by a clear value schema, which privileges fairness, consent, honesty, and freedom for both partners. Chapter 5 focuses on CNM men who have sex with women. It examines "polyhegemonic" masculinity, a gender identity that incorporates certain aspects of traditional manliness while rejecting others, and which enables non-monogamous men to embrace more progressive, feminist attitudes without completely renouncing male privilege. Chapter 6 explores how people in CNM relationships navigate challenges to the ideal non-monogamous partnership narrated in chapter 4. Non-monogamists rely upon a discourse of their relationships that renders the balancing act between stability and commitment even more delicate than is in monogamous partnerships. Despite its emphasis on freedom and personal growth, the discourse of CNM must also accommodate those situations that prevent the CNM ideal of fully autonomous selves, namely overwhelming jealousy, the decidedly visible and unfair hand of the sexual market, and the need to take leave of secondary partners in certain circumstances. The careful, thoughtful responses to such situations recounted to me by my interview participants shows the ingenuity and compassion possible in CNM discourse and the people who use it. In this way, chapter 6 further elucidates how non-monogamy mirrors the potential and precarity that haunts many aspects of our lives in casualized age. In other words, CNM discourse subtly mediates between stability and dissolution in relationships. In the concluding chapter of the dissertation, I summarize how the

discourse of CNM is at once the apotheosis of the casualization currently taking place in public and private life in the U.S. I also consider the positive and negative consequences of casualization for those who practice non-monogamy. I end with a reiteration of my argument that consensual non-monogamy makes sense for many Americans at this particular historical juncture because it is so thoroughly convergent with the ways the self, communication, and sex are frequently understood in an era of casualized intimacy.

Defining CNM

In the introduction to this dissertation, I have already offered a definition of consensual non-monogamy as a romantic partnership that is open to sexual and emotional involvements outside the “primary” relationship. Hypothetically, CNM may involve any number of people; however, contemporary sources indicate that ongoing consensually non-monogamous relationships are usually composed of a small number (2-5) of partners (Emens, 2004; Finn and Malson, 2008). In this dissertation, I focus on dyadic primary relationships. This means that the people I spoke to for this project are in or have been in primary couple relationships in which both members are free to pursue sexual and often, romantic, connections with others. Yet, even with this more limited focus on a particular sub-type of CNM relationship, the term “consensual non-monogamy” needs further clarification. This is because consensual non-monogamy can encompass many other terms, including open relationships, swinging, and polyamory. These terms also denote relationships in which both parties are open to sexual, and sometimes, emotional, connections with others. However, those who claim the respective identities of swinger, polyamorist, and member of an open relationship might have very divergent understandings of what is good or acceptable in their intimate relationships; conversely, they

may have similar understandings of the right way to be non-monogamous, but identify their lifestyle differently (Frank and DeLamater, 2010). The lack of a single agreed-upon term among people in CNM relationships presents an analytic challenge for this research, but disagreement over terminology also reveals quite a bit about how non-monogamy is conceptualized, a subject chapter 3 of this dissertation explores in detail.

People who engage in consensual non-monogamy typically distinguish between primary and secondary relationships. Primary and secondary can be used as adjectives to describe a relationship or as nouns, or to stand in for a person, e.g. “She’s my primary.” A primary relationship usually involves only two people, recognized as couple by friends, family, coworkers, and others. Primary partners who engage in consensual non-monogamy often resemble their monogamous counterparts in many ways. It’s possible they’ve been together for a few years or many decades. They may be married or have children together. They may live together or apart. Like others in committed relationships, consensually non-monogamous partners have the right to make substantial claims on each other’s time, energy, and resources.

More so than primary partnerships, definitions of desirable secondary relationships are likely to differ from one CNM person to the next. A secondary partner is a lover that a person might see only once a year or several times a week; in some cases, secondaries may live very near or even with a person in a primary relationship with another partner. Different primary relationships have different rules about the level of emotional connection each partner may have with others outside the dyad. In this dissertation, nearly all the people I spoke with said they developed emotional relationships with secondary partners.

Unlike 1970s-era swinging, most non-monogamists now develop relationships with secondaries that persist over time, rather than semi-anonymous encounters with strangers.

Many of those I interviewed for this research expressed a dislike for the hierarchy denoted by the terms primary and secondary, but they also believed that it was hard to avoid making such distinctions. A hierarchal model provides a schema not only for organizing multiple intimacies socially, emotionally, and cognitively, but also for prioritizing them. Demarcating primary and secondary relationships clarifies what a person can reasonably expect in a particular relationship. A secondary partner has a lesser claim to the time, energy, money, and emotional support of her lover; however, a secondary owes less of these resources to her lover. A handful of my interlocutors who disliked the hierarchal distinction between romances complained that calling some relationships “secondary” simply retrenched the couple as the status quo, a tendency noted by scholars who study CNM (Finn and Malson, 2008). My research provides further support for this claim. Consensual non-monogamy could be practiced in such a way that no relationship is primary, but for both sociological and idiosyncratic reasons, couplehood remains a highly desirable state. Overall, the majority of my interviewees were either currently involved in dyadic relationships; single and carrying out relationships with one or more partners, none of whom was “primary.”

Currently, there is no academic work that investigates how the discourse of secondary relationships – from the vantage point of secondaries themselves – differs from or overlaps with the discourse of primary CNM partnerships. This is a topic that needs to be integrated into the growing body of work on CNM. However, though discussion of

secondary relationships occurs throughout the dissertation, my research continues the practice of focusing on primary relationships. For example, my study does not consider the discourse of CNM from the perspective of secondary partners. This is because my principal interest is how primary couples construct their relationships as committed, ethical, and pleasurable in the absence of monogamy. I have included further discussion of this issue in chapter 2.

The demographics of my research sample

There are many characteristics that set apart my research participants from those who practice other kinds of relationships. The people I spoke with represent a relatively rarified slice of the U.S. population. Though many had been brought up in religious traditions, only three currently participated in any formal religious observance. Many of my interviewees identified as queer (as opposed to gay or lesbian); some were trans-people; all but one espoused left-leaning political beliefs; almost all had at least some college education; several had graduate degrees; nearly everyone was white; and almost all of them grew up and currently live in the mid-Atlantic region. Personality-wise, those I spoke with tended to be highly reflexive and to value psychological and emotional independence. They often were in positions that that allowed them to be unconventional in their intimate lives. For example, most people I spoke with would not have jeopardized their jobs if others knew about their unconventional romantic lives. As artists, academics, retail workers, IT professionals, and activists, few worried that “being out” at work compromised their job stability (this might be different, say, for a corporate lawyer or a high school teacher). Though those I spoke with do not constitute a representative cross-section of the U. S. population, they appear to be in some ways representative of non-monogamous

people interviewed by journalists and scholars. For example, what little available evidence there is suggests that non-monogamists are more likely than the average person to identify as queer and to be politically liberal (Sheff, 2005, 2006). My sample supports these generalizations. A much more detailed discussion of the demographic composition of my sample can be found in the chapter 2, in the “Methods” section. Additionally, Appendix 1 of this dissertation includes a graphic representation of demographics of my research subjects.

The prevalence of CNM in the United States

Despite many cultural and material circumstances that make it possible, it appears that relatively few people engage in consensual non-monogamy. However, because of a lack of survey data, it is difficult to estimate the number of people involved in non-monogamy in the United States. The biases of researchers, coupled with the beliefs, desires, and fears of survey respondents make it extraordinarily difficult to gather accurate data about American’s sexual behaviors and beliefs. For instance, even when it comes to accepted and “normal” behaviors, e.g. heterosexual intercourse or the number of opposite-sex partners a person has had in a lifetime, statistics on sexual behavior are unreliable (Kipnis, 2007; Poovey, 1998). Findings regarding the frequency of more controversial behaviors, such as cheating, are even more dubious and difficult to replicate successfully (Kipnis, 2007).

Researchers studying swinging in the 1960s and 1970s estimated that approximately 2-5% of people had tried swinging (Karlen, 1980; Murstein, 1978b). It stands to reason that in forty-plus years later, at least that same percentage of people had been in one or more non-monogamous partnerships. Particularly if we do not limit our purview to heterosexuals, but

include LGBTQI people, a ballpark guess of that 5% of adults have been in at least one non-monogamous relationship is conservative. There is some evidence that gay men especially are more likely to practice consensual non-monogamy, as are bisexuals of both genders (Klesse 2006, 2007). Additionally, the way my research participants talked about non-monogamy suggests that many people may be involved in consensually non-monogamous partnerships even if they do not think of them as such. For example, though the term polyamory is gaining in popularity and recognition, only a minority of my research participants identified with this term. This suggests that the number of people who participate in polyamorous social groups or who interact with others on websites devoted to polyamory likely represent only a small fraction of individuals in non-monogamous relationships. If we estimate that 5% of the population has been in a non-monogamous partnership at sometime, then this means that 17.5 million American would have experience with this kind of arrangement. Even if only 1% of the U.S. population has been in a consensually non-monogamous relationship this would translate to 3.5 million adults. Though small statistically, 3.5 million is numerically sizeable. Despite limited numbers, small minorities can be very culturally influential.⁹

Having laid out some basic definitions used by members of my research sample, I would like to return to the theoretical frameworks that enable me to analyze my interview data and relate it to phenomena external to my interviewees' private relationships. Consensual non-monogamy doesn't occur in a cultural vacuum. Different forms of non-monogamy have existed in various cultures throughout human history but the construction of CNM in the United States

⁹ Comparing the number of non-monogamists to the number of certain religious minorities might help the reader achieve a better sense of the size – and potential influence – of this sexual minority. In 2008, the United States Census Bureau estimated the number of American Jews to be about 2.2% of the total population of the U.S., or 6,489,000 people (including those who didn't practice the faith but did identify as "culturally" Jewish) (2009). Mormons make up about 1.7% of the U.S. population (Newport, 2010) and Muslims constitute about 1% (Grossman, 2011).

today is a reflection of, response to, and sometimes, a form of resistance against, a number of different social trends. Neoliberal modes of labor and production, coupled with profound attitudinal and behavior shifts in the realm of sexuality, love, and family life, play a role in making consensual non-monogamy an appealing and feasible way of life. In the literature review, I look at empirical studies of CNM in the United States, and scholarship on intimacy and the language of psychotherapy. My goal is to provide a fuller historical and analytic context for this research. In particular, I wish to further elaborate the intellectual traditions I have drawn from in theorizing the casualization of intimacy. The literature review's analysis of intimacy studies and psychotherapeutic discourse should also help the reader see the connections between the discursive frameworks compatible with casualization and the actual language and logics used by my interview participants.

CHAPTER 2: LITERTURE REVIEW AND METHODS

This dissertation is an analysis of a body of discourse gleaned from interviews with people who participate in non-monogamous relationships. The project is thoroughly interdisciplinary and does not fit easily into existing categories of academic scholarship. The literatures that inform my thinking come from communication, sociology, cultural studies, and history. My primary methods, interviews and discourse analysis, have roots in anthropology, sociology, and literature studies. Nevertheless, my inquiry into the language and logic of consensual non-monogamy is situated within the field of communication. As the *bricolage* of the field itself demonstrates – media critique, survey analysis, experimental research, and public speaking are only some of the areas of inquiry that fall within the purview of the discipline – communication studies is a motley composite of often competing and occasionally harmonious scholarly concerns and approaches. Yet, the investigation of human practices of communication is always at the heart of communication research. In relying upon a variety of literatures and methods to better understand specific communicative phenomena – the discursive construction of CNM and non-monogamists’ understanding of disclosing intimacy – my dissertation draws extensively from one of communication’s most significant research traditions, cultural studies.

Qualitative communication research and cultural studies are natural allies. A major concern of much cultural studies work is the intersection of the belief systems promulgated by popular media, and the frameworks regular people use to make sense of their lives (Ang, 1991; Hall, 1973; Morley, 1992). Very broadly, the basis of my methodological orientation to my material can be located in cultural studies works, specifically audience analyses, that explore the similarities and disjunctures between prevailing ideologies and the beliefs of everyday people

(Bird, 2003; Radway, 1991/1984). Like an audience analysis, my work engages with the consumers and creators of various discourses. It focuses on how people redeploy particular tropes – precarity, flexibility, individualism, disclosing intimacy – adopted from a diffuse body of “texts”: psychotherapy, feminism, and the language of neoliberal labor. More specifically, I see this project as similar in its approach to a text that heavily influenced it, Eva Illouz’s *Consuming the romantic utopia: Love and the cultural contradictions of capitalism* (1997a). Like Illouz’s study, my work traces connections between overarching cultural trends to the consciousness of specific people, using, in both cases, interviews with individuals about their intimate relationships.

Both audience analyses and my interview-based research are interested in how people use available discourses to make sense of the world around them. Such questions are at the heart of communication studies, though I have necessarily explored work in other disciplines to get a fuller sense of the relationship between my interview participants’ construction of non-monogamy and the rhetorics upon which this construction is built. The literature review and methods section included below elaborate further on the scholarship and techniques used throughout this project.

Literature review

This review covers three major bodies of literature. I begin by looking at academic work on consensual non-monogamies from the 1960s through the present. The second body of research I review can be broadly labeled as “intimacy studies.” Intimacy studies encompasses critical analyses of the rise of the ideology of intimacy, particularly over the last fifty years. I start

by providing a detailed definition of the term intimacy as it is used in this project. Because the work of British sociologists Lynn Jamieson (1998, 1999, 2004) and Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992) informs my analysis in fundamental ways, I focus on their competing conceptions of intimacy in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Next, I provide a brief overview of the scholarship on “de-traditionalization” theory to explain the increasing centrality of intimacy as an affective mode in Western culture since the early modern era. De-traditionalization theory typically encourages an optimistic reading of the growth of intimacy; to complicate this sanguine assessment, I engage with by feminist and queer scholars who question the supposed liberatory potential of intimacy. Feminism in particular has provided the theoretical apparatus for interrogating intimacy as a social construct. The final major body of literature explored below is comprised of historical and critical accounts of therapeutic culture and discourse in the U.S. I examine the dominant themes of psychotherapy – particularly the ideology of individualism – and indicate how both neoliberalism and feminism inflect contemporary psychotherapeutic discourse. The ubiquity of these discourses in everyday life, as well as their tendency to emphasize the individualism, reflexivity, and communication, corresponds with my own findings in interviews about consensual non-monogamy. Throughout this review of the literature, I point to how this work has informed my thinking about CNM and state what my dissertation stands to contribute to these three rich areas of research.

Empirical work on CNM

The scholarly study of sexuality is often always fraught with anxiety and taboo (Kulick and Wilson, 1995; Lenza, 2004; Phillips, 1994). However, this has not prevented the academic study of sexuality, including investigations into various forms of non-monogamy. There are

innumerable anthropological studies of non-US peoples who engage in consensually non-monogamous intimacies (see Charsley and Liversage, 2012; Malinowski, 1913, 1929; and Kockvedgaard Zeitzen, 2008 for classic and recent examples). There is also research on contemporary non-monogamy in the United States practiced for religious reasons, such as fundamentalist Mormons (Altman and Ginat, 1996; Bradley, 20004; Jacobson and Burton, 2011). Finally, gay male non-monogamy has been a subject of research for nearly 40 years (Chauncey, 1995, D'Emilio and Freedman, 1988/1997; Humphreys, 1975) with much recent work focusing on how gay men forge new norms for committed CNM partnership (see Bonello and Cross, 2009 and Stacey, 2005 for examples). While I recognize these bodies of work on non-monogamy, their cultural contexts and populations differ so substantially from my interviewees that I do not draw significantly from this research. My dissertation focuses on women, trans and genderqueer people, and men who have intimate relationships with women. Its purview is also limited to secular, middle-class educated, mostly white adults. In my review of the empirical literature on CNM, I attend to the research that concerns members of the same populations as my interview participants.

Roger Rubin, a sociologist who has spent nearly 40 years studying sexuality in the United States, argues that the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s was the catalyst for the study of “alternative lifestyles” like swinging and other forms of consensual non-monogamy among heterosexuals (2001, 711). Scholarship on swinging yielded contradictory findings, though academics agreed that swingers tended to be typical members of the educated, white,¹⁰ middle-

10 In both older and more contemporary work, little information exists on CNM relationships involving people of color. This may reflect their lesser participation in these relationships but other factors are also at work. In the 1960s and 1970s, racism sometimes meant that blacks were banned from all white swing parties (Bartell, 1970, 119). This prejudice was not limited to swingers themselves. Gilbert Bartell, whose

class whose deviance was limited to “consensual adultery” (Denfeld, 1972; see also Gilbert, 1970; Varni, 1972). On many other points, however, studies on swinging could yield contradictory information. Many sociologists presented sympathetic accounts of swinging, open marriage, and group marriage (Denfeld and Gordon, 1972; Libby and Whitehurst, 1977; Murstein 1978; Ramey, 1975; Smith and Smith, 1970; Symonds, 1971; Varney, 1971). They maintained that swingers were, on average, as psychologically healthy as the rest of the population (Murstein, Case, and Gunn, 1985) and that swinging could be very positive for some couples, increasing overall satisfaction in their primary relationship (Cole and Spaniard, 1974; Denfeld and Gordon, 1972). Contrary to this, some viewed swinging as an expression of a shallow, fearful, conformist culture, with swinging being inferior to more advanced and enlightened ways of reorganizing family life such as communal living (Walshok, 1971). Others claimed that men and women involved in swinging were “neurotic” and were highly likely to have emotional problems, poor relationships with their families, be “substances abusers,” and suffer a host of other difficulties (Duckworth and Levitt, 1985).

This flurry of sociological interest in swingers and CNM would soon be eclipsed by what can best be called benign neglect. After the early 1980s, sociologists turned away from studying swingers and other non-monogamous arrangements (an exception is Jenks, 1985, 1986, 1992, 1998). Rubin believes that a lack of institutional support, the assumed disappearance of swinging after the advent of AIDS, and the increasing attention to other alternative lifestyles (single-parent families, gays and lesbians, step-families, etc.), were all contributing factors to

350 person sample included “midwestern and southwestern white, suburban, and exurban couples and single individuals” specifically excluded “individuals from the inner city, Blacks, and Latin couples” (1970, 113). His stated intention was to “keep [the] sample restricted”; of course, eliminating such data skews our understanding of swinger culture and ignores certain participants merely because of their race or ethnicity.

decreased scholarly interest in different kinds of consensual non-monogamy (Rubin, 2001, 712). Beginning in the late 1990s, however, CNM began to reappear in academic research. In part because of generation change and in part because of the opportunities provided by the internet, consensual non-monogamy is again becoming visible as a distinctive cultural formation, and scholars are taking notice.

For the most part, research on consensual non-monogamy remains on the margins of academic inquiry; however, there is a growing body of work on CNM. The majority of recent scholarship on CNM has been published in psychology journals, in journals that specialize in interdisciplinary work on sexuality, or in edited books. Scholars have focused on the management of jealousy by heterosexual couples (De Visser and MacDonald, 2004) and the relationship between language and identity construction among women in CNM partnerships (Barker, 2005; Ritchie and Barker, 2006). Christian Klesse's (2007) book on polyamorous bisexuals and gay men describes how some people negotiate power, gender, and their identities as citizens in and through CNM relationships. Lynn Jamieson explores how gender and sexuality impact people's experiences with long-term CNM partnerships (2004). Through the present, most of the work on non-monogamy comes from the U.K., with little research on CNM being produced in the U.S. One exception to this rule is the work of Elizabeth Sheff, who focuses on gender and identity construction among polyamorous men and women (2005, 2006). Another is Richard Jenks, whose traditional social scientific approach to the subject provides us with two decades of demographic information for heterosexuals who identify as "swingers" (1985, 1986, 1992, 1998). There are heartening signs that the study of consensual non-monogamy is expanding further and growing more sophisticated in its analyses. Recently, Routledge published a book-length collection of scholarly essays entitled, *Understanding non-monogamies*

(Barker and Langdrige, 2010). The use of the term “non-monogamies” shows that academics recognize the multiplicity of different kinds of consensually non-monogamous relationships, which can be quite varied.

One of the major goals of this dissertation is simply to contribute to the small but growing body of empirical work on consensual non-monogamy among women, men who have sex with women, and non-normatively gendered individuals in the early 2000s. Documenting the discourses of consensual non-monogamy as they are used by people involved in such relationships gives us insight into how some non-monogamists manage the contradictory desires for both freedom and commitment in an age of casualized intimacy. A more ambitious goal of this research is to combine an empirical study of the discourses of CNM with theoretical work on intimacy. Though academics in the United States may not have carried out much research on people involved in CNM, many scholars, mostly feminist and queer scholars working in the humanities, have provided us with sophisticated critiques of intimacy. For these scholars, intimacy is an affective mode that often enforces heteronormativity and reduces our ability to imagine “alternative worlds” but which, nonetheless, can also be a source of great pleasure. Such an understanding captures the protean nature of intimacy, an affective mode which is at once private and public, limiting and enabling.

Intimacy studies

In the context of sexual relationships, intimacy is multifaceted, linking together emotional, physical, and mental realms of experience. Because a general definition of intimacy is so broad and inclusive, scholars who study it tend to focus on one or a few distinct aspects. In

this dissertation, I focus specifically on what Jamison has termed “disclosing intimacy” (1998). Disclosing intimacy links the feeling of intimacy to specific communication practices. In disclosing intimacy, intense conversations are used as a vehicle for the mutual construction and revelation of selves. Talking becomes the way to reveal oneself to one’s partner, with the quality and frequency of these mutual disclosures strongly influencing many couples’ assessment of their relationships. Disclosing intimacy differs from other ways of achieving intimacy, such as simply passing a lot of time in another person’s company or long-term familiarity with another’s body. Jamieson explains that in disclosing intimacy: “The emphasis is on mutual disclosure, constantly revealing your inner thoughts and feelings to each other. It is an intimacy of self rather than an intimacy of the body, although the completeness of the intimacy of the self may be enhanced by bodily intimacy” (1998, 1). In the ideology of disclosing intimacy, it is assumed that “people participate as equals... across genders, generations, classes, and races” (ibid).

Jamieson’s disclosing intimacy provides a basis for what Anthony Giddens called the “pure” or “confluent” relationship in his influential book, *The transformation of intimacy* (1992, 61). Pure or confluent relationships are by definition built on the norms of intimacy, such as reciprocity, equality, communication, reflexivity, and trust, and are part of the movement toward more democratic and egalitarian societies (1992, 3). Much of Giddens’ other major research is on the social transformations ushered in by modernity (1990, 1991); in expanding his purview to encompass private life, Giddens is applying the ideals of modernity to heterosexual romantic relationships. Overall, Giddens provides an optimistic assessment of intimacy’s expanded significance in romantic partnerships.

Jamieson is deeply critical of Giddens' take on intimacy. She (1999) argues Giddens' account seriously overestimates the degree of gender egalitarianism in heterosexual couples. Jamieson points to statistics regarding childcare, housework, and domestic violence to demonstrate that lived experiences of "democracy" and "egalitarianism" are rare even among the most conscientious couples. She also suggests that Giddens' faith in disclosing intimacy is misplaced (1998). Jamieson argues that communication and reflexivity are flimsy tools for combating the inequalities and power differentials that have been entrenched in private lives and public institutions for centuries (1999, 2004). For the most part, I think Jamieson is correct in her criticisms. Heterosexual relationships rarely exhibit the honesty and disclosing intimacy Giddens seems to assume they do (see Benjamin, 1998; Hochschild, 2003). Having acknowledged the problematic aspects of Giddens' work, however, I also believe his theory can be useful for empirical research so long as the "transformation of intimacy" is read as an account of new *ideals* rather than lived realities. Giddens' analysis identifies trends in ideology that influence beliefs and attitudes about love, even if such ideas influence behavior only in subtle ways or not at all. In this dissertation, I will remain cautious about the degree to which the dominance of disclosing intimacy as an affective mode has increased equality in intimate relationships; however, my interviews and perusal of texts on CNM leads me to believe that equality is indeed central in the rhetoric of disclosing intimacy and likely to be a goal for many who practice it. Democracy and egalitarianism can remain elusive in societies that value such principles; similarly, perfect reciprocity, equality, and trust may be more ideal than real in people's romantic relationships.

Though it seems universal, intimacy and its discourses are shaped by their historical and cultural contexts. This is why it is important to understand how intimacy became more central

in Western culture generally and in sexual relationship in particular. “De-traditionalization” theory (see Santore, 2008; Gross, 2005) offers the fullest explanation for these changes. According to this theory, modernity, with its rhetoric of individual rights, bourgeois government, and technological dynamism, reshaped social life. The greater complexity, mobility, and diversity facilitated by advances in transportation, education, and manufacturing, as well as increasing global interconnection, slowly liberalized attitudes. Political and economic upheavals meant that all kinds of human relationships were reshaped by new ideals of egalitarianism and individualism (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1990, 1991, 1992). The ideological centrality of a unique self housed in every individual was reiterated by multiple schools of thought from the early modern period through the present. These schools of thought range widely, from Romanticism to Protestantism to contemporary advertising (Campbell, 2005; Garrett, 1998; Lystra, 1989). Elements of these discourses are interwoven and imbricated in complex ways. What is important for this research is the degree to which modern rhetoric upholds and extols an individual selfhood that stands in contrast to the more closed, ascribed identities often viewed as more characteristic of traditional societies. The notion that each person has an individualistic self longing to be expressed has perhaps found fullest expression in language we use to describe romantic relationships. Of course, not everyone views intimacy’s increased importance as an affective mode as a positive development. Feminist and queer scholars offer some of the most comprehensive and sophisticated critiques of intimacy. They remind us that the hegemonic status granted to disclosing intimacy is not experienced as a boon by everyone. Though the discourses of intimacy tend to be universalistic, gender, sexuality, race, and class profoundly impact the role of intimacy in private life. Since the late 1960s, feminists,

and then queer theorists, have greatly enhanced our ability to think about intimacy as not only a private experience but as a political construct.

Given longstanding cultural norms that assign emotional work and caretaking to women, intimacy has a complicated place in feminist theory; it has been both lauded and vilified. Some feminists believed that females possessed a greater innate aptitude for intimacy and that this was a virtue which should be defended (Gilligan, 1982; see also Echols, 1990, chapter 6). However, for many feminists, especially those writing in the 1970s, intimacy was viewed as a tool used to oppress women. Central to much feminist work were condemnations of heterosexuality, marriage, violence against women, prevailing child-care arrangements, and even sexual activity itself (Brownmiller, 1976; Dworkin, 1987; Firestone, 1970; Rich, 1980). Intimacy was viewed as “ideological” in the Marxist sense. Women’s capacity and need for intimacy trapped them into a subordinate status vis-à-vis men. This “false consciousness” was accomplished through the inculcation of a particular emotional habitus for women and the devaluation of the intimate support women provided to others. Some authors believed that education and media messages cultivated women’s psyches to require high levels of emotional intimacy. This rendered them susceptible to the ideology of romance, which portrayed women’s material and psychic dependence on men as both natural and desirable (de Beauvoir, 1989/1949; Firestone, 1970; Jackson, 1993; Radway 1991/1984). Intimacy became women’s special area of expertise and was relegated to the private sphere. This meant that the substantial emotional work that women performed for their husbands and children was obscured in the law and in economics (MacKinnon, 1983; Fraser, 1994; Hartsock, 1998).

Feminism can be credited with recognizing intimacy as a social construct, rather than an expression of women's innate nature. In problematizing intimacy, feminism critiqued its operations in everyday life, bringing to light the previously obscured power relations that closed off the freedom and opportunities of both sexes. However, not all feminist work on intimacy was condemnatory. "Pro-sex" feminists defended women's right to sexual pleasure, arguing that the last thing women needed was to be hindered from experimenting with new and different kinds of intimacy (Vance, 1984). Being pro-sex does not mean abandoning a right to critique sexual norms or behaviors; rather, it is taken for granted that sexuality is profoundly complex. A feminist viewpoint is valuable for my own investigation insofar as it laid the groundwork for thinking about intimacy as constructed, historical, and suffused with power differentials.

Queer theory has broadened the scope of feminism's critique of intimacy by casting a critical eye on the condemnation of non-normative gender identities and sexual practices, including homosexuality (Epstein, 1994; Katz, 1995; Rich, 1980; Sedgwick, 1990) trans-sexuality (Stone, 1991; Stryker, 2004), BDSM sex (Califia, 1994), and promiscuity (Klesse, 2007). The significance of queer theory for my work on consensual non-monogamy lies in the ways that such work has helped further uncover the oppressive aspects of intimacy, especially with regard to non-normative sexualities. Lauren Berlant (1998a, 1998b) and Michael Warner (1999) are two scholars of intimacy whose work has been profoundly influenced by feminism and queer theory and who have extensively critiqued the politics of intimacy in the United States. Berlant and Warner demonstrate the ways in which culture and institutions recognize and honor private, monogamous, heterosexual unions at the expense of other kinds of intimacies. In a co-authored article, they write: "Heteronormative forms of intimacy are supported, as we have argued, not only by overt referential discourse such as love plots and sentimentality but materially, in

marriage and family law, in the architecture of the domestic, in the zoning of work and politics” (Warner and Berlant, 1998, 562). This stands in stark relief to “[q]ueer culture,” which, “by contrast, has almost no institutional matrix for its counterintimacies” (ibid; see also Warner, 47-48). Berlant and Warner’s argument expressly encompasses queer sexual intimacies, but their argument has resonance for those who practice consensual non-monogamy. CNM is anathema to the law (Emens, 2004) and rearing children in a multi-parent/partner household is fraught with risks. Even in an age when many liberal-minded people find gay and lesbian marriage acceptable, multi-person unions often appear beyond the pale (ibid). There are few traditions to fall back on for guidance in navigating the emotional, social, sexual, and material complexities of CNM relationships and scant public recognition of such partnerships. In the absence of long-established rituals and norms for CNM, disclosing intimacy offers a language and logic for understanding, explaining, and defending consensual non-monogamy. Of course, the rituals of disclosing intimacy are not exclusive to those involved in non-monogamous partnerships, or even to realm of romance and sex. The logic and rhetoric of disclosing intimacy derive in large part from psychotherapeutic discourses and practices.

Therapeutic discourse

My definition of therapeutic discourse incorporates two different understandings of the therapeutic in the scholarly literature. First, I draw from work that stresses the positive, creative, and reflexive aspects of psychotherapy. Sociologist and theorist of modernity Anthony Giddens has famously (and controversially) argued that reflexivity – meta-cognition in which one questions one’s own thoughts and feelings – is uniquely important in modern life; in fact, one cannot be a responsible, self-sufficient citizen without it (1990, 1991, 1992). In the realm of

intimate relationships, reflexivity is the foundation for self-disclosure. Though they maintain a critique questioning attitude toward many forms of therapy, many feminists have also recognized the liberatory potential of psychotherapeutic language and practices (Schwartzman, 2006; Young, 1997); feminist consciousness-raising circles of the 1970s are a particularly clear example of how analyzing the unhappiness and injustice in an individual life can illuminate structural inequalities.

Second, my conceptualization of psychotherapeutic discourse is influenced by what communication scholar Dana Cloud terms the “therapeutic”: “[T]he *therapeutic* refers to a set of political and cultural discourses that have adopted psychotherapy’s lexicon – the conservative language of healing, coping, adaptation, and restoration of a previously existing order – but in contexts of sociopolitical conflict” (Cloud, 1998, xiv, emphasis in original). In her work, Cloud is most interested in the ways that the use of psychotherapy tends to depoliticize, to render personal and individual, collective social problems like war, the violation of civil rights, and racial and gender strife. Her identification of the individualizing impulse of the therapeutic is useful in my work because it meshes with discourses used by many of my interviewees. Psychotherapy tends toward what social scientists call “methodological individualism”; it takes the individual, her personal history and intra-psychic dynamics as the starting point for analysis. In the individualist perspective of psychotherapy – as a professional discipline and as a discourse popularized on “soap operas, popular psychology, self-help books, and women’s magazines” (Illouz, 1997a, 234) – people are largely responsible for their own lives: their relationships, their economic well-being, even their personalities and emotions. Psychotherapeutic language focuses its subjects’ thinking inward towards an abstract self and away from external conditions, like gender, race, sexuality, and other characteristics that shape an individual’s life chances

(Miller, 2008). In this way, the therapeutic encompasses the rhetoric of self-help, with its emphasis on individual choice as opposed to systemic critique of the practices, institutions, and ways of knowing that indelibly social (McGee, 2005). Similarly, disclosing intimacy encourages people to discern and express their unique motivations, desires, and identities, to privilege reflexivity and honest, respectful communication as the means to personal and interpersonal happiness.

Disclosing intimacy is a practice that draws heavily on the logic and language of the therapeutic. The premise of disclosing intimacy is that people create trust, emotional closeness, and knowledge of the self and other through verbal disclosure. By sharing certain kinds of personal information, individuals form bonds with others and discover new truths about themselves. To understand the genealogy of disclosing intimacy, it is important to look even further back than modern psychotherapy, to other traditions that supplied the discursive and institutional structures of this practice.

Disclosing intimacy, as one of the central techniques of the therapeutic, has several antecedents; here, I focus primarily on the practice most relevant to this research, the religious ritual of confession and its secular reincarnation the process of psychotherapy. French social theorist Foucault identifies confession as a foundational mode in the construction of Western selfhood. Introduced in the 13th century by the Catholic Church, over the next several centuries, confession became a frequent and routinized procedure that trained the laity in self-criticism (1978/1990, p.58). Foucault contends that confession was a “practice of the self,” a kind of mundane technology which helped give shape to the modern experience of oneself as an

individual. In this way, the truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of individualization (p.59).

Confession forged an inexorable link between sex and self: “[T]he confession of the flesh...continually increased... to [include] all the insinuations of the flesh: thoughts, desires, voluptuous imaginings, delectations, combined movements of the body and the soul; henceforth all this had to enter, in detail, into the process of confession and guidance” (p.19) As this passage makes clear, modern individuality is inextricably bound up with the then-novel concept of sexuality. In confession, the secret of the self and the secret of sexuality fuse together, making it difficult to know where one ends and the other begins (Foucault, 1978/1990, p.19-20). This stood in stark contrast to what Foucault contends was the earlier conceptualization of sex as a set of (mostly sinful) discrete behaviors. In the modern era, sexuality became a largely and unchangeable component of an individual’s identity: “The sodomite was a temporary aberration; the homosexual was a species” (Foucault, 1978/1990). From the 17th century forward, numerous secular institutions, particularly medicine, policing, and education, developed forms of categorization, profiling, discipline, and punishment that brought sex into discourse and constructed it as an inherent element of the individual self. But it was the quasi-medical invention of psychoanalysis in the late 19th century and its distinctive form of irreligious confession, that inexorably melded together sexual identity, sexual desire, and the individualistic self (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Foucault, 1978/1990; Halperin, et al, 1990; Katz, 1995).

Freudian psychoanalysis – despite its current repudiation by many doctors, therapists, and members of the public – continues to provide the basic intellectual framework for the

modern Western understandings of human psychology, what Eve Sedgwick, following Paul Riceour, calls “the hermeneutics of suspicion” (2003). The hermeneutics of suspicion refers to a way of looking at the world that assumes that surfaces are deceptive; commonsense images, events, or norms are actually complicated symbols that must be decoded either by experts (in the case of psychoanalysis) or by the “enlightened, those freed from false consciousness” (in the case of Marxism, the other example given by Sedgwick). The process of analysis, as it was originally conceived by Sigmund Freud, entailed the trained analyst eliciting the analysand’s memories – often obscure childhood recollections or dreams – and then interpreting this information to help the patient achieve self-understanding. This process replays the Catholic ritual of confession in its incitement of speech, its provocation of reflexivity, and its stress on dark, sexual secrets at the core of the self. Speech rehabilitates the troubled self by bringing dark elements into the light; it makes them available for examination by the trained psychoanalyst. The analyst then assesses the secrets, provides a verdict, and sends the patient off into the world hopefully more psychologically healthy than when she arrived.

Today, the psychotherapeutic model of reflection, discovery, expression, and absolution is reenacted in myriad venues, from the psychiatrist’s office to TV talk shows, from addiction support groups to private conversations in romantic relationships. These iterations of disclosing intimacy rely upon the model first developed by the Church and later given a secular makeover by psychoanalysis. For almost 100 years, the therapeutic understanding of the (sexual) self has been inculcated in doctor’s offices and psychiatric treatment centers, as well as circulated to the general public via the mass media. The wide availability of therapeutic discourse means that it is not completely controlled or administered by experts. As many social theorists have shown, the reflexive mindset encouraged by psychotherapy is adopted and used by people in different

areas of life, many of them far removed from psychotherapy proper (Cloud, 1997; Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1998; Illouz, 1997a, 1997b, 2008). In fact, some argue that certain forms of reflexivity – particular ways of reflecting upon and questioning one’s own feelings and behaviors – is a hallmark of the contemporary age (Giddens, 1990, 1991, 1992). Numerous studies, my own among them, demonstrate that many Americans rely very heavily upon the psychotherapeutic as a framework for working through relationship difficulties and experiencing intimacy.

In her research on the discursive construction of love and romance, Eva Illouz contends that contemporary relationships are maintained in part through skilled use of “the middle-class therapeutic ethos.” Illouz contends that psychotherapeutic discourse is particularly entrenched among the middle and upper classes, who use it to mediate between the various tensions – between self and other, between freedom and obligation – that inevitably occur in romantic relationships. Verbal disclosure is often considered one of the key processes for creating love and intimacy. For example, TV shows, films, novels, and other media frequently depict “ideal love as an eminently *talkative* love” (Illouz, 1997a, 234). And there is reason to believe that this image reflects certain realities: “Many studies of love and marriage agree that communication, self-expression, self-disclosure, and verbal intimacy are prerequisites of a successful relationship and are crucial to eliciting and maintaining romantic feelings” (ibid.) Illouz’s characterization of modern understandings of erotic love as “based on self-knowledge, gender equality, and open-ended communication” is similar to my interviewees’ definition of a good romantic partnership.

The psychotherapeutic is a discursive framework that encourages an individualist perspective, one that privileges reflexivity and the belief that mutual self-disclosure is vital to

the experience of intimacy. It locates sexuality and desire at the center of the authentic self. The psychotherapeutic privileges talk, emotional revelation, sexual pleasure, and immersion in the couple at the expense of non-intimate relationships. In these ways, it is highly compatible with the current neoliberal zeitgeist and the ethos of casualization. My interviewees frequently argued that verbally “processing” thoughts and feelings is essential for “healthy” intimate relationships. Their deployment of self-disclosure as an affective and erotic catalyst attests to their mastery of the psychotherapeutic as means for experiencing intimacy and understanding both self and the other.

Methods

Sample methods and the composition of the research sample

Before conducting interviews, I submitted my research plan to the University of Pennsylvania Internal Review Board. I received permission to conduct my research in May 2009. Between June 2009 and March 2010, I conducted formal interviews with 25 people who had been or were currently in consensually non-monogamous relationships. All of my research participants were between the ages of 22 and 45. They included men, women, transgender, and genderqueer people who identified as straight, bisexual, and queer; no self-identified gay men are included in my sample.

I had two main methods of meeting individuals for the interviews that constitute my research data. My first strategy for finding interview participants was to post a profile advertising my study on OKCupid.com. OKCupid is a social networking website where individuals post online profiles (with varying levels of information about themselves) in order to meet new

friends, find dates, or arrange sexual encounters. I posted a profile on the website clearly stating that I was a graduate student conducting research on CNM relationships and requesting interviews with interested people. Individuals self-selected to contact me; I never initiated contact with anyone I met via OKCupid.com. One reason I used OKCupid.com to find interview participants was that, unlike other major dating websites like Match.com, it is known for attracting less “mainstream” people, e.g. those who are interested in alternative lifestyles. Also in contrast to Match.com, many users of OkCupid.com announce that they are, depending on their preferred terminology, in non-monogamous, polyamorous, or open sexual relationships.¹¹ I met with sixteen research participants through OKCupid: Luke, Erika, Carson, Ian, David, Janice, Carathea, Liam, Pearl, Rob, Theresa, Matt, Leah, Amy, Hank, and Colin.¹²

The second group of people who composed my research sample were found using a “snowball sample” (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). A snowball sample is often a good way to meet members of non-normative cultures, who might otherwise be difficult to identify or find (ibid). They were all friends, colleagues, and acquaintances of another Annenberg graduate student.¹³ My colleague gave my email address to those whom he/she thought might be interested in speaking with me. As with the people I met via OKCupid, research participants self-selected into this study. Interview subjects I met through my colleague include: Austin, Kelly, Lisa, Paige, Rowan, Maria, Autumn, Zadie, and Henry. The nine research participants from this group were

¹¹ My generalizations about these websites are based on personal use. I have had a couple of “dating” profiles up at OKCupid.com off and on since 2005. From the fall of 2006 through the fall of 2008 I also had a profile on Match.com. These dating profiles were unrelated to my research.

¹² Demographic characteristics of my research participants are also listed in Appendix 1. Subjects are numbered and listed in the order I interviewed them. For each person, the appendix provides information about gender, sexual orientation, age, race, educational level, childhood socioeconomic status, current job, marital status, whether s/he has children, and religious affiliation if any.

¹³ Snowball samples are often facilitated by someone who is part of the subculture or lifestyle in question; however, in this case, my colleague does not practice CNM.

more likely to identify as queer than those in my OKCupid sample. All of them were female or gender-queer. Additionally, they were relatively young (all in their 20s) and less established professionally and financially than interviewees I met through OKCupid.com. The femaleness of this group stems from my complaint to my colleague, at an early point in my research, that I was having trouble meeting women who practiced CNM.

My sampling methods – using the internet to make contact, relying on a snowball sample facilitated by an academic colleague, and not correcting for the exclusions that came with participant self-selection – have important implications for my findings. First, my sampling methods increased the chances that more youthful, affluent, and socially privileged people would contact me for interviews. All of the people I spoke with for this research had regular access to the internet. This may seem like a trivial point, but while relying on the internet made it easier for me to find people who practiced CNM, it also helped determine the kinds of non-monogamists I would meet. This method favors people who are younger, more educated, and better off financially, though it by no means shuts out people who do not conform to one or more of these criteria (Zickuhr and Smith, 2012). Moreover, the website I used for meeting interview subjects may have skewed my sample towards younger people, since OKCupid has many younger (20s – 40s) users. Additionally, since people tend to be friends with those who are like them in regards to education, class status, and race, a snowball sample typically includes people who are similar to one another in many ways.

It is possible that the people – from both OKCupid and the snowball sample – who chose to contact me were more likely to share my race, class, or educational background. I am a 30 year-old white woman with a middle-class background who is earning a Ph.D. Everyone in my

sample was white, with the exception of two women, who identified as Asian-American (Maria) and African-American (Erika), respectively. The majority of my study participants lived a middle-class lifestyle, though several had grown up working-class (Amy, Maria, Matt), and some were raised in divorced, female-headed households (Autumn, Ian, Maria, Rob, Rowan).

Most, if not all, of the people I spoke with for this research can be classified as middle-class. It can be difficult to define what (or who) counts as middle class, but this designation is typically taken to apply to college-educated middle and upper-middle income earners. First, the educational achievements of my sample mean they are highly likely to earn more than less educated people over their lifetimes; they can also expect to suffer through less frequent, and shorter bouts of, unemployment (Dougherty, 2010). In my 25 person sample, all but one person (Henry) had attended at least some college. Seventeen were working towards or had college degrees and seven had earned (or were working on) graduate degrees. Four (Carathea, Kelley, Liam, and Rowan) were full-time college or graduate students. As for careers, several research participants had solidly middle and upper-middle class careers in IT (Ian, Leah, Rob, Ryan), media (Colin, Zadie), the arts (Austin), education (Amy, Carson, David, Hank, Luke), health (Autumn, Janice), and activism (Henry). Erika had worked in international finance for a decade and was now employed by a non-profit. Only four interview participants worked in minimum or low-wage jobs (Lisa, Maria; Paige; Pearl). One research participant, Theresa, was unemployed at the time of our interview; however, she lived with her fiancé, Rob, and relied on him for financial and emotional support while looking for a new job. Given their combination of education, financial, and professional capital, it is fair to characterize my sample as predominantly middle-class.

The relatively privileged social status of many of the individuals in my sample has at least three possible origins. First, interview participants may feel more comfortable talking about sensitive topics with people they view as like themselves in regard to race, class, age, gender, and sexual orientation. Second, the socio-economic, educational, and racial privilege demonstrated in my study and others sample may reflect the fact that many people in non-monogamous relationships are members of social groups that enjoy a number of cultural and economic advantages in modern American society. People from privileged backgrounds often find it easier to hide or selectively reveal their transgressive sexual practices than those from less privileged backgrounds. The combination of educational capital with the cultural capital derived from their class (and perhaps, racial) backgrounds means that the individuals in my sample are conversant with the bourgeois norms of white-collar workplaces. They are able to keep their unorthodox private lives under wraps (and may have strong incentives to do so), or share information about them if the circumstances are right. Third, More importantly, the kind of reflexivity and verbal skills necessary for disclosing intimacy are much more likely to be inculcated in educated, middle-class and wealthier families that embrace the “talkative” version of love advanced by psychotherapy (Illouz 1997a, 1997b, 2008). This means that highly educated men and women, and the middle and upper-classes are more likely to acquire the discursive and affective proficiencies that I observed in most of my subjects.

It is unclear how representative my sample is of American non-monogamists. The few studies of American non-monogamists published since 2000 suggest that people in CNM relationships are more likely to be educated, professional, urban, and white (Barker and Langdridge, 2010; Emens, 2004; Gould, 2000) than the general population. Unfortunately, this dissertation cannot provide definitive data on the class, educational, or racial makeup of non-

monogamists in the United States. Despite the difficulty of answering this question – getting accurate information about sexuality is always challenging, especially with non-normative groups – it is an issue that deserves to be answered in future research.

My sampling methods also potentially influenced my findings in another crucial respect. Allowing participants to self-select into this research led to exclusions that I didn't consider until after the data-gathering phase of the study was complete. For example, all the interview participants who had children were straight men in their mid-30s to mid-40s. It is suggestive that no mother selected to talk to me about CNM. Despite significant changes over the last 40 years, women are more likely to still do the majority of housework and especially, childcare (Bianchi, et al, 2000; Hochschild, 2003b; Jamieson, 1998). Unfortunately, this may continue to be the case among some non-monogamists, despite their commitment to equality and other “progressive” values. This may be one reason while no women with children at home chose to participate in interview for this research. Certainly, their experiences are important for a fuller understanding of how non-monogamists' balance of personal desire and obligations to others, but my research cannot provide much insight into their lives. I will suggest, however, that because of the demands children make on parents' – especially mothers' – time and energy, partnered women with children may experience more ambivalent (or simply negative) attitudes towards CNM.

It is important that so few of my interview participants had children, since it distinguishes them from the general populace. In 2000, about 64 percent of men and 75 percent of women older than 18 were parents (Child Trends, 2000). It is unclear what the relationship is between the overall childlessness of my sample and the practice of non-monogamy. The existing

scholarship on CNM provides no comparative data. Perhaps after having children, many non-monogamists give up outside relationships because of a lack of time, energy, and interest. This would suggest that CNM might be a way of life better suited to younger people (before they are parents) or for those who do not have children. It may also be that people who practice non-monogamy are less interested in having children than monogamists. It is also possible that a study with a different methodology—such as participant observation or a snowball sample of CNM parents-- would have found commonalities between childless and childrearing non-monogamists. Because my sample includes few parents (and no mothers), my findings should not be taken to be apply to non-monogamists who are raising children.

If the self-selection of my research participants left out parents, especially mothers, it also resulted in a highly secular sample. As with parenting, I do not know if the secularity of my sample is representative of non-monogamists more generally; however, it is probable that non-monogamists are more likely than others to be secular. Traditional, orthodox, and fundamentalist religions in particular advocate male and female chastity and heterosexuality, and no mainstream denomination advocates the sexual license enjoyed by non-monogamists. Only three of my research participants were religiously observant. Two of them identified as Jewish; one other person was very involved in the Unitarian Universalist church. These faiths – Reform Judaism and Unitarianism – are less concerned with orthodoxy in thought and behavior and their teachings are less antagonistic towards those who choose non-normative lifestyles. The other sixteen research participants who spoke of their religious upbringings made it clear that they long ago broke with sexual teachings of their childhood faiths.

Along with my sampling methods, my method of conducting interviews also has implications for my findings. I conducted interviews with individuals and with couples. Because five of my interviews were with couples, only 20 households are represented in this research. Furthermore, the middle-class status of my interview participants is recapitulated, insofar as couples (particularly heterosexuals), are highly likely to share the same class status (Stacey, 2011).

In addition to contributing to a making the socioeconomic composition of my sample more homogenous, a mix of single and two person interviews may have had other effects on my findings. In many interviews with individuals, there was a slight bias towards more individualistic narratives, and more (often mild) criticisms of partners, both primary and secondary. Nevertheless, many couples stressed individualistic values when interviewed together and other solo interview participants emphasized more egalitarian principles like fairness and consent. It is also possible that when primary partners were interviewed together, their narrative of their relationship focused more on shared understandings and areas of agreement than on problems and conflicts. Men in particular were more likely to difficulties in their non-monogamous relationships when they participated in an interview one-on-one.

In the case of partnered heterosexual men, there was an important distinction between those who chose to participate in an interview as an individual or a couple. For men, meeting with me as a couple with their primary partner signaled the female partner's enthusiasm for CNM. In these relationships, women were as committed to non-monogamy as the men; sometimes, they had been the initiators of non-monogamy. Examples of such couples include Liam and Carathea (Chapters 3 and 6), Rob and Theresa (Chapters 3, 4, and 5) and Ryan and Lisa

(Chapter 4). Straight men in committed relationships who talked with me individually appeared to do so in part because they could express their desire for CNM without judgment. The interview gave them a chance to blow off steam, so to speak. My interviews with Carson, Ian, and David were of this nature. As for the other men interviewed for this research, Hank and Luke, with whom I met individually, were single at the time of our interviews. Finally, Colin was a straight married man whom I met individually because his wife was unavailable to be interviewed.

There is one final limitation of sample. This dissertation does not provide any accounts from the viewpoint of secondary partners. I give no insight into the advantages or drawbacks of being a secondary partner to someone who is in a committed CNM partnership. As stated in the introduction, my work focuses on primary couples. I am interested in how non-monogamists find a way to rhetorically balance self and other while having a sexually open relationship. Chapters in this dissertation will consider identity labels, ethics, and challenges to the ideals of CNM only from the perspective of committed non-monogamous couples. Though many of my interview participants talked about being a secondary, as well as their own experiences having secondary partners, I limit my analysis. There are several reasons why I made this choice. First, I wanted to limit the scope of my research question to focus on the tension between obligation and freedom, the other and the self in committed CNM couples. Secondary relationships, which often require a much lower investment of emotion, time, and material resources, are often talked about and valued very differently than primary partnerships. To do justice to the discourse and practice of secondary relationships, a separate project is needed, one which could do justice to the distinctive features of this kind of partnership. Second, in the already small body of work on contemporary CNM, there is no research that explicates a collective point of

view or shared experience among secondary partners. Of course, my interview participants talked about their secondary partners and occasionally discussed what it was like for them when they were another's secondary; however, the focus of the interviews was on primary relationships.

To sum up, the limitations of my sample means that the arguments I make in this dissertation are most relevant for people who are like my research subjects. My sample was small, containing 25 adults (20 households) from the urban Northeast. The non-monogamists I spoke with were relatively young (20s – 40s), well-educated, middle-class, mostly secular, and almost all white. They all identified as heterosexual, bisexual, or genderqueer; this study does not deal with gay men who practice CNM. Ultimately, my findings about the discourse of CNM are most applicable for non-monogamists who lead lives that are culturally and materially similar to my interview participants. My findings are less likely to describe the discourse of CNM among non-monogamists whose lives differ significantly from the lives of my interviewees.

Interviews

Typically, a research participant and I would exchange a few emails before meeting in person for an interview. In every case, research participants chose whether to be interviewed singly or as a couple; I encouraged them to do what felt most comfortable for them. If a couple elected to be interviewed together, I did not interview them separately before or after. Interviews were usually conducted in a public place, like a park or a coffee shop, though some interview participants invited me to meet them at their homes. Interviews often began with small talk unrelated to the research topic but which gave me some information about the interviewee's

lifestyle. For example, we would discuss the research participant's work, friends, or family. I relied on an interview script during our conversations but often deviated from these questions to inquire further about a something my interview participant(s) had said. Interviews ranged in length between about 45 minutes to about two hours. The mean interview length was about 75 minutes.

With the exception of three interview subjects who did not consent to have their interviews audio recorded, I transcribed each of the interviews. In my transcriptions, the interviews are reproduced word-for-word; however, in the excerpts featured in the dissertation, I tended to delete the "uh," "like," "yeah," "um," and other filler words unless they signaled that the interviewee was at a loss for words or uncomfortable proceeding. When these filler words appeared to be only verbal ticks, I did not include them in dissertation because they hurt the readability of the passages. In this text, I've also marked when an interview subject paused for an extended length of time. I tried to leave in these kinds of details only if they have significance in the context of the interview.

Ethics in sex-related research

Research on human subjects raises a host of ethical questions. When this research regards sexuality, these ethical questions can be especially challenging. Though my work is interview-based, many of the possible quandaries raised by my research have been discussed in work by ethnographers. These concerns are consonant with the five main ethical concerns in ethnographic work as recognized by anthropologists Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson: informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation, and consequences for future research (1995,

p.264).¹⁴ I will succinctly address each of these possibilities in turn. To ensure informed consent, all research participants were provided with an information sheet that provided a brief explanation of the purpose of my dissertation. This handout included contact information for the University of Pennsylvania's IRB board should any of my interview participants have complaints or questions that they wished to address to someone other than me. To protect their privacy, I did not require my interview participants to sign any documents since this might compromise the anonymity of their responses.¹⁵ Furthermore, neither my interview notes nor the typed transcripts of the interviews contained unique or identifying characteristics. Harm from participating in the study is unlikely but it might include emotional harm to those who granted interviews, insofar as they might later regret their participation. It is also possible that participation in the study might have caused strife in my interviewees' relationships with their partners. Because interview participants chose to participate, however, it seems less likely that this would lead to serious emotional difficulties. Finally, if the confidentiality of this research were not maintained, information about interviewees' private lives might somehow become public. Public awareness of my research participants' intimate relationships might result in job

¹⁴ Other ethical schemas for human research foreground different values. For example, Lenza suggests that researchers adhere to the principles of "beneficence, justice, and respect for autonomy (informed consent)" (2004, p.20). However, I believe Hammersley and Atkinson's list is more consonant with IRB requirements I was required to address in my research plan. It is therefore more appropriate for me to respond to the issues raised by their model.

¹⁵ There are several good reasons to not use signed consent forms in this research. Relying on oral, rather than written, consent is typical when a researcher studies illegal or deviant behavior. Not using consent forms protects informants from exposure; many who have consensually non-monogamous relationships do not want to be "out" to their families or coworkers. There is a small chance that if someone chose to sign her real name on a consent form that this form would be available to the general public. Consent forms are stored with the University of Pennsylvania and can, depending on the conditions, be accessed either publically or through subpoena. Though my hope is that this research advances the social acceptance of consensual non-monogamy, information I gather during the course of this project could hypothetically be used by local government agencies, law enforcement, or others to persecute people involved in non-monogamous relationships.

loss, alienation from family and friends, or other professional and personal difficulties. However, public disclosure of identifying information is extremely unlikely because of the measures taken to anonymize the identities of research participants and protect the confidentiality of research materials. For example, the digital voice recordings of interviews were transcribed and then destroyed, eliminating the possibility that a third party might recognize an interviewee's voice. Additionally, between the time the recording was uploaded to my laptop and the time it was completely transcribed, the audio file was stored in a password protected folder on my home computer. After the interview was written up, the file was deleted from the recorder and from the computer.

A final ethical concern that my dissertation raises is that of exploitation. Research subjects were paid \$20 for participating in interviews. This monetary amount was sufficient to encourage potential interviewees to contact me but not large enough to be coercive. The nature of my dissertation also raises the question of sexual contact with research subjects and the potential for sexual exploitation. I did not have sexual contact with any of my interviews either during or after the time I was conducting research; nevertheless, given the topic of my research, I do not have the luxury – or pitfall – of pretending that my interviewees and I are not sexual subjects. Typically, academics are admonished to downplay, ignore, or deny their own and others' sexuality in the research context (Cupple, 2002; Goody, 1999; Kulick and Wilson, 1995; Markowitz and Ashkenazi, 1999). Because the interrogation of sexual norms lies at the heart of my research project, I question the conventional teaching that social scientists should portray themselves and their research subjects as asexual beings. Not only can I not pretend to be asexual; my involvement in CNM relationships over the years fostered my interest in this project and helped sensitized to me to the pleasures and challenges of non-monogamy. Additionally, my

sexual subjectivity would have undoubtedly been recognized by research participants even if I had tried to erase it. For example, I occasionally had to negotiate the advances of a research participant. My experience in CNM relationships was sometimes a boon, as when I made comments or offered anecdotes from my own romantic life to build rapport with my interviewees.

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is the main methodology I use to frame and interpret my data, whether this data is drawn from interviews or texts. My definitions of discourse and discourse analysis are drawn primarily from the work of Norman Fairclough (1995, 2003) and Michel Foucault (1990, 1994a, 1994b, 1995). Fairclough is the founder of an approach known as “Critical Discourse Analysis” (CDA). He describes discourses as, “ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the ‘mental world’ of thoughts, feeling, beliefs and so forth, and the social world” (2003, p.124). For example, “scientific English,” which “uses many passives with deleted agents” works to uphold the image of the scientist as someone who presents nature’s truth “objectively” by following universal rules (Fowler, 1985, p.62). Fairclough’s work is in turn informed by the work of Foucault, who understood discourses to be “systems of meanings which reflect real power relations, and which in turn are a consequence of the material and economic infrastructure of society” (Wooffitt, 2005; see also Kress, 1985).¹⁶ In Foucault’s work, power and discourse, while not the same thing, are interwoven in their operations. Foucault argues that “power relations are exercised, to an

¹⁶ In addition to “reflecting” or refracting social relations, discourse can have an agentic role in social relations by acting as one factor shaping human understanding. For example of how discourse restricts and enables particular understandings, see Somers and Bloch, 2005.

exceedingly important extent, through the production and exchange of signs” (1994b, p.136). In Foucault’s theory of discourse, language is used to cultivate particular understandings of the world, justify certain social arrangements, shape institutions, and carve out areas of specialization which can then be deployed as power. These understandings become discursive “objects,” which then become part of the special purview of experts (see Wooffitt, 2005, p.146).

Both Fairclough’s (1995, p.76) and Foucault’s (1994b) work understands power not as entirely concentrated within a few groups but as pervasive in social relationships. For example, modern communications – books, the internet, television, radio – make many once esoteric discourses available to non-experts. Mass media makes some discourses much more ubiquitous than they might otherwise be; additionally, the media likely enables greater psychological penetration by discourses associated with powerful institutions and interests. Nevertheless, though language subjugates us to particular views of the world, it can also be a tool. Language is one feature that inevitably inheres in social relationships; though not all groups possess equal access to or dexterity with every discourse, the near-universality of written and spoken language means that those embedded in less powerful social relations may author new discourses or manipulate and shift existing discourses to suit their own purposes.

Throughout this dissertation, there is a tension between viewing discourse and communicative practices as a constraint and as a resource. I argue that it is always both. The individuals whose stories I recount in this work necessarily draw upon available ways of looking at the world to understand their unconventional relationships. For example, my research participants’ understanding of CNM relies very heavily upon therapeutic discourses that are not of their own making. Discourses stipulate certain practices, which people then incorporate into

their own lives. These practices constitute a sort of discipline, a way of regulating behavior and feelings. Through the internalization of discourses, people govern themselves.

This discussion may seem remote from intimacy, which is usually considered part of the “private” realm. This is because intimacy is often experienced as the natural expression of spontaneous feelings. But intimacy is also a social and historical construction. Conceptualizing the discourse of intimacy as a mode of governmentality enables a more analytic useful approach to thinking about this CNM. Moreover, this move enables me to make connections between seemingly disparate realms of discourse, such as the world of work and the world of sex and love. I am also able to suggest a relationship between a micro-level phenomenon – communication in and about intimate relationships – to large-scale cultural trends. As Fairclough explains, “‘micro’ actions or events, including verbal interaction, can in no sense be regarded as of merely ‘local’ significance to the situations in which they occur, for any and every action contributes to the reproduction of ‘macro’ structures” (1995, p.35). In other words, by paying close attention to the stories of my interviewees, I hope to highlight the discursive overlap in two realms of casualization: the private world of intimacy and public world of work.

Because of this project’s location in the disciplinary field of communication, my interest in discourse goes beyond the use of discourse analysis as a methodology. I am interested in understanding not only the content of my interviewees’ discourse, but the way in which communication itself is an important process and symbol in non-monogamous partnerships. Whether communication in CNM relationships is conceptualized primarily as an expression of governmentality or a strategy selected from a “tool box,” it is a practice that my interviewees value highly. Nearly every research participant listed “good communication” as necessary for

building and maintaining happy CNM relationships. Experts have long posited communication as the key to a strong relationship (Illouz, 2008; Perel, 2006). People in non-monogamous partnerships spend a remarkable amount of time engaged in meta-communication. My interviewees not spend a lot of time of communicating with their partners, they also spend a considerable amount of time *communicating about communicating*. This in and of itself makes CNM a compelling topic for communication scholars. CNM relationships present a clear and rather pronounced example of a popular belief regarding intimate relationships. They provide insight into how verbal communication is used in an era of casualized intimacy.

Before moving onto my analysis, I should say that one potential drawback of my methodological approach is its reliance on self-report. Self-report can produce misleading or false accounts of how my interviewee subjects actually feel and behave in their relationships. However, because I am interested in how people talk about consensual non-monogamy, how they create distinctive discourses about this kind of intimate relationship, the “accuracy” of my interviewees’ accounts is not my main concern. I am studying the a particular rhetoric of intimacy, specifically casualized intimacy in non-monogamous partnerships. Storytelling is a universal phenomenon and stories enable us to make sense of our lives. Stories outline our identities, enable us to define our “Others,” strengthen our bonds with family and friends, reveal our indebtedness to particular intellectual traditions, and help reconcile contradictions, among other tasks.

Ken Plummer, a scholar of storytelling who focuses on “sexual stories” (1995), explains that sexual stories are “simply the narratives of intimate life, focused on the erotic, the gendered, and the relational. They are part of the wider discourses and ideologies abroad in

society” (p.6). Though Plummer insists that “sexual stories,” like all stories, “connect to a world that lies beyond stories: an obdurate empirical world ‘out there,’” he also warns, “Whatever else a story is, it is not simply the lived life” (1995, p.168). In other words, a sexual story – which is inevitably informed by popular discourses about love and sex, not to mention shaped by distorted memories – cannot be seen as a “100% true” recording of an interviewee’s sex life. Stories can not begin to make sense until they have some degree of accordance with the mores and rhetoric of the society in which they are found. Now, because of changed cultural contexts and the availability of new languages for talking about sex, intimacy, monogamy, and its alternatives, stories of non-monogamy are stories “whose time has come” (p.120).

CHAPTER 3: WHAT'S IN A NAME? LABELING CNM RELATIONSHIPS

The way language is used to define and describe relationships is of particular interest to people involved in consensual non-monogamy (Barker, 2005; Ritchie and Barker, 2006). To tell the stories of CNM, they need an appropriate vocabulary for their relationships, one that moves away from the familiar language of “cheating.” For many monogamous unions, the revelation of a partner’s sexual infidelity is interpreted as a devastating betrayal of trust, and sometimes, legitimate grounds for the dissolution of a relationship. “True love” in many monogamous relationships means limiting your sex life to your partner (Easton and Liszt, 1997); choosing to have sex with another is assumed to demonstrate immaturity, selfishness, and superficiality, among other negative traits (Kipnis, 2004; Perel, 2006). In contrast, non-monogamists do not believe that the desire and/or choice to sleep with other partners necessarily constitutes a betrayal, people with multiple lovers are bad, or that “real” romantic love means sexual monogamy. To make CNM intelligible as a legitimate way of life to themselves and to others, my interviewees define their practice of non-monogamy in a way that differs from “cheating.” The first step in making this distinction is to claim a name for their lifestyle¹⁷, a recognizable word or phrase that would act as an umbrella and encompass a singular and general understanding of what this kind of intimate relationship looked like.

Yet, despite an acknowledged need for respectful and accurate language for discussing non-monogamy, one of the first sentiments expressed by many research participants was a

¹⁷ I’m not using the term “lifestyle” the way it’s used by marketers and popular media. Following Giddens’ (1991) use of the word, I mean lifestyle in a very substantive sense. Giddens uses the term broadly, to refer to the kinds of choices many individuals in Western societies are faced with making. The lifestyle choices include options regarding where and with whom to live, whether to pursue higher education, what kind of job to take, whether and whom one should marry, how many children to have, etc. My work is more limited in its scope than Giddens’ analysis, so in this dissertation, lifestyle refers to the kinds of personal beliefs and practices that inform how people engage in intimate relationships.

wariness of labels. In this chapter, I use excerpts from interviews with six different non-monogamists – Erica, Rob, Theresa, Liam, Rowan, and Pearl – to better understand why the issue of labeling their lifestyle was so important to many of my interlocutors. There were two main reasons behind my interview participants' ambivalence towards adopting a single, widely-shared definition of CNM and identifying with a larger community of like-minded people. First, it was a commonly held belief among my interviewees that a person should not feel beholden to another's definition of what constitutes the "correct" kind of relationship. There were some ethical ideals they endorsed for themselves and others (I will go into more detail about this in Chapter 4) but overall, they expressed very little support for individual interference or social regulation of the sexual relationships of consenting adults. For many of those I spoke with, part of the point of being non-monogamous was experimenting with relationships that didn't conform to prevailing norms. Intimate relationships were viewed as highly individual and unique; everyone should be able to explore that uniqueness in her own way. This desire for freedom sensitized several of my interviewees to the possibility that not only monogamists but others in CNM relationships might try to enforce a single orthodox definition of what a "real" CNM partnership should be. For those with this fear, "polyamory" was usually the worrisome term.

The second reason many of my research participants felt ambivalent about naming their relationship style was a reluctance to be grouped with other non-monogamists they deemed undesirable. Among my research participants who did identify with more recognizable labels and identities – as polyamorists, for example – there was still a form of CNM that functioned as "Other" against which they defined themselves. These "othered" non-monogamists were objectionable not because they were ethically wrong but because my interviewees thought they

were unsexy. For example, among those who defined themselves against polyamory, polyamorists were depicted as nerds and social misfits; for those who disliked swinging culture, swingers were believed to be physically unattractive and too indiscriminate in their choice of sexual partners. These stereotypes are perhaps less a fair portrayal of polyamorous or swinger culture than straw men for my interviewees to define themselves against. Instead of primarily contrasting their beliefs with those of monogamists, my interviewees frequently illustrated what Freud called “the narcissism of small differences”: rather than comparing themselves with people in monogamous relationships, they chose to portray themselves as freer, more accepting, and sexier than others in consensually non-monogamous partnerships.

Anthropologists have long noted the tendency for people to define themselves by what they are not (Douglas, 1966); however, for my interviewees, this wasn’t just a matter of binary oppositions, i.e. who was in the group and who was out. Along with rejecting identities associated with particular words like “polyamorist” and “swinger,” many interviewees expressed a general skepticism about the ability of words to adequately capture what consensual non-monogamy meant to them. Furthermore, they distanced themselves from groups that used CNM as an identity that could form the basis of a broader political or social community, a rhetorical move that relied on both a “privatization” of the self and longstanding Western beliefs about romantic love as a rebellious, individualistic experience. This chapter explores the tensions and complexities of defining a non-monogamous identity that is at once distinctive and flexible, and capable of differentiating self-identified non-monogamists from similar but objectionable others, whose desires and practices contradict their understanding of CNM.

Erica: Labels are limiting

Several interviewees took the position that intimate relationships were too singular, too different from couple to couple, to be encompassed by the generalizations supplied by a label. Erica provides a good example. A fashionable, self-possessed African-American woman in her mid-30s, Erika had worked as a high-power corporate professional for almost ten years before deciding to switch career tracks and join the non-profit sector. The hours for her new job were flexible and Erika agreed to meet me one afternoon in late autumn. We met up at a park. I started out the interview the usual way, by asking her how she defined her relationships. Erika responded that relationships were too unique to be accurately and completely defined by any one label.

B: What's the term you would use to describe your relationships: open, non-monogamous, polyamorous...?

E: I actually wouldn't use a term.

B: You wouldn't?

E: Yeah, I think it's too convenient to dismiss whatever mutation a situation takes by putting a term on it because any term is going to mean something different to different people.

Erika takes the position that a single label can not accurately capture the arrangements between lovers, which are always in flux. Her comment that using a particular term makes it "too convenient to dismiss whatever mutation a situation takes" implies that labels make it easy to assume someone else's definition of what constitutes a "good" relationship. The implication of her remark was that if this happens, a person stops being as sensitive and aware of their own and their partner's needs. That was the fate that befell Erika's first marriage. This relationship, which had been monogamous, worked "as long as it fulfilled [her] needs" but once it didn't,

Erika got a divorce. She explained that the divorce “was definitely... about his ability to support me versus my ability to support him, you know, the basic relationship underpinnings of ‘lifelong partners should do this.’” When Erika uses the term “support,” she means in the sense of providing emotional, rather than financial, support; this is also true of her understanding of her “needs.” Erika was a high-earning professional who could more than provide for herself economically. Unlike most women of previous generations (as well as many today), Erika had the luxury of not only of safely leaving her husband but also of seeking out a new male partner who would show her the affection, respect, and emotional compatibility to which she felt entitled.

In seeking a divorce from her first husband, Erika was showing how the expectation of a “pure relationship” can shape a person’s intimate life. Giddens writes, “All relationships which approximate to the pure form maintain an implicit ‘rolling contract’ to which appeal may be made by either partner when situations arise felt to be unfair or oppressive” (192). For Erika, a marriage to man who didn’t “support” her in her endeavors, who didn’t provide her comfort, love, and encouragement, wasn’t a marriage worth remaining in. Erika perceived that her marriage was changing over time and her “conventional” husband was not willing to evolve along with her. Relying on “convention,” on a singular, time-honored understanding of what it meant to be husband and wife, was not enough to keep Erika and ex-husband together. In keeping with casualization’s demand that individuals be flexible, Erika wanted her husband to be adaptable, to be capable of changes as their relationship did. For Erika, the failure of her first marriage demonstrated the limitations of holding to just one definition of what a “good” intimate relationship is. Labels encouraged stasis; what Erika had needed from her first husband

was attention to the “mutation” that had altered their marriage. This wariness was articulated several other times during the interview.

Erika’s tendency to dismiss labels dovetails with her varied sexual experiences. In many ways, Erika upheld the norm of the bourgeois, heterosexual life trajectory (Berlant, 1998b). She had gone to college, established a successful, high-paying professional career and settled down with her partner in a monogamous relationship. When that relationship ended, she sought out another life partner. But not every detail of Erika’s personal life conformed so neatly to hegemonic expectations. Though the majority of her romantic and sexual experiences had been with men, Erika talked about her sexual and romantic interest in women, including a relationship she had with a woman a few years previously. When I asked her if she identified as either bi or queer, her response echoed her feelings about relationship or lifestyle labels:

B: Do you consider yourself bi or queer?

E: I don’t know about “queer.” Queer sort of lends itself to political positions. Bi is fine. I’m sexual, I’m not necessarily bisexual. I don’t know if I feel comfortable with those set up labels as they are, they’re very limiting. If you actually let people do what they would do without, I don’t know, social constraints or conventional restraints, they would probably all be that way.

Erika’s unwillingness to subscribe to mainstream understandings of sexual orientation may have signaled some discomfort regarding her sexual attraction to women. In responding to my question, Erika contradicted herself, saying at first that “bi” was an appropriate description of her sexual orientation only to follow that up a moment later with, “I’m not necessarily bisexual.” She felt comfortable claiming her sexuality in the most general terms but preferred not to identify as bi or especially “queer,” which she thought was tied to a set of political beliefs. Erika didn’t want to be reigned in by even the term bisexual, which she found “limiting”; the idea that

her sexuality would tie into a political ideology was even worse. Instead, she voiced the opinion that when it came to sex, if people simply stopped labeling their identities and their sexual preferences, they would enjoy greater sexual freedom. Erika's distaste for labels is stronger than most of the people I talked to over the course of my research, but her attitude is not unusual. In fact, Erika's desire to be free of the constraints of commonly ascribed identities would come up time and again as I conducted interviews with other non-monogamists.

Rob and Theresa: Polyamory as orthodoxy

Rob and Theresa, two newly engaged 20-somethings I met over coffee, expressed views similar to Erika's. Rob, a tall, soft-spoken man with shorn hair, worked in local media; Theresa, was between jobs when we talked. Theresa had short, brightly colored hair and an endless supply of witty one-liners. Both Rob and Theresa are white. The couple provisionally identified as polyamorous; the reason for such tentativeness was that Rob and Theresa felt very strongly about every person being able to define what polyamory was for himself or herself. They too portrayed every couple as unique, making it impossible to describe a relationship with a single word. This came across very clearly at the beginning of our interview:

B: How do you refer to your relationship? Do you call it non-monogamy, an open relationship, polyamorous...?

R: We call it polyamorous, just for ease...

T: Because it's not exactly non-monogamous. Non-monogamy means sex without looking necessarily for any sort of connection. And open... open also implies kind of a lesser degree of intensity [in secondary relationships]. Polyamory is just the best fit because it implies that there's a certain level of emotion there, but it's still not ideal.

B: What would be ideal?

T: I don't know... Just to not call it anything. We're just us.

R: I really think the dynamic in every single relationship is different in one way or another. Whether that implies the boundaries of what you're free to do, um, without hurting the other person...the uniqueness is what's great.

Like Erika, Rob and Theresa were wary of the limiting power of labels. They expressed ambivalence toward even their preferred term, polyamory, saying that the "ideal" would be to not have "to call it anything." This desire to escape from the constraints of language exhibits the individualism at the heart of the Western understanding of romantic love. The ideology of individualism is robust and protean, remaining central to the idea of romance while managing to modify its definition in keeping with broad social and economic changes (see Campbell, 2005; Coontz, 2005; Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 1997a; Jackson, 1993; Regan, 1998 for examples and analysis). Whatever its variations over the centuries, from its inception in the courtly romances of the early middle ages to the present, romantic love has always been based on two foundational themes, "the sovereignty of the individual" and the "privilege of sentiments over social and economic interests" (Illouz, 1997a, p.9) If the ideology of romantic love has long privileged a sense of individualism and rebellion, a desire to forge intimate relationship free of limitations of "mainstream" society makes sense. My interviewees' desire to shed the restrictions of language is an even more idealistic (not to mention a diffusely post-structuralist) example of romantic, anti-conformist attitudes. Rob and Theresa believed that a label shared with others could never authentically communicate an irreducibly unique relationship.

In addition to expressing distaste for labels, Rob and Theresa also felt ambivalent about identifying with any community that shared their lifestyle. They feared that any group they became involved with would be too doctrinaire and restrictive regarding what a consensually

non-monogamous partnership should look like. Because of this fear, they disassociated themselves from organized communities of non-monogamists:

T: Plus, when you pick a label, you have to stay in the borderlines of that label. Even the poly community seems to, like, "Smack!" you if you don't...

R: Oh yeah. [Laughs]

T: ... follow the certain, the *one* true path.

B: Can you give me an example?

T: Um... it's just like....

B: Did anything specific happen?

R: No, it's just that people have specific definitions of what something is, in this case, what poly is, if your relationship falls outside the boundaries of that then they're like, "That's not real poly."

T: We don't have another partner right now like... I might go out occasionally with a girl or make out with somebody but we don't have that other relationship there, so does that make us not polyamorous? ... I don't want to belong to a group that's going to put me in a box.

Interested to hear more about the people with whom Rob and Theresa discussed polyamory, I asked who was trying to push a particular definition of polyamory on them. Rob and Theresa confessed that this was less an issue with friends or people in their community that with anonymous individuals they communicated with on poly-oriented websites:

B: It sounds like you've had experiences with friends who are poly and who hassle you [about] this...?

R: No.

B: You just disagree with each other?

R: No, more on the internet than actual friends.

Here, it becomes clear that the harassment Rob and Theresa believe they have experienced hasn't come from any face-to-face interaction. Rob and Theresa's agitation suggests that in addition to online arguments, they might be trying to figure out exactly what "being poly" means for them.

Consensual non-monogamy is already an often misunderstood minority practice. For people like Rob and Theresa, dealing with other non-monogamists who contested their self-understanding was unsettling. Such interactions threatened to further destabilize a relatively expansive and fluid lifestyle identification. Their insistence that every intimate relationship is singular and unique helped them set themselves apart from killjoy rule-makers who would quash others' free choice while also ironically positioning themselves as among the select few who really understood what CNM was all about. This response to their critics shored up and validated Rob and Theresa's identities as non-monogamists. Yet, Rob and Theresa were not the only ones who opposed themselves to rhetorical others; it was a strategy used by several interviewees. The specter of "othered" non-monogamists enabled interviewees not only to downplay the inherent ambiguity of what constitutes as a "real" consensually non-monogamous partnership, but also mediated whatever ambivalence they might feel towards their own identities as non-monogamists. People who were perceived as pushing a unitary definition of CNM, by whatever name, whether non-monogamy, polyamory, or swinging, or as building a totalizing identity around non-monogamy, were understood to be the enemy of a vanguard who actually understood and respected diversity and freedom in the construction of intimate relationships. Such hostility was not only due to "the narcissism of small differences." It also derived from some interviewees' need to distinguish themselves from non-monogamists they

perceived as holding different norms about sexuality, identity, and physical attractiveness, or to use their word, “unsexy.”

Liam and Rowan: Polyamory as unsexy

Rob and Theresa’s perception that outsiders were contesting their definition of polyamory and pushing their dogma onto more open-minded non-monogamists was a sentiment shared by others, as was Erika’s distrust of labels. Liam is a slim, bespectacled, white graduate student in his late 20s. He grew up on the East Coast and attended a prestigious university before undertaking his Ph.D. Liam was circumspect, but very firm in his opinions, when I spoke him and his girlfriend in their home. The excerpt below is what followed after I asked Liam what word he used to refer to his relationships.

L: [I don’t like the word] “poly” to some extent because the people that I know who use that word aggressively mobilize an identity around it, and I don’t feel the need to do that.

B: Is it that you don’t like that particular identity or you don’t want to mobilize an identity around non-monogamy at all?

L: The latter, but I find the word corny, often.

B: “Corny,” what do you mean by that?

L: They’re corny individuals. I don’t feel the need to deal with the trappings of a movement and honestly, there isn’t that much push-back. Right? Like, I don’t feel like I’m fighting very hard. I get misunderstood sometimes, and I get slightly judged by people but, you know, no one’s ever going to throw a punch at me because I’m not monogamous.

As this exchange makes clear, Liam has two problems with the term polyamory. Liam doesn’t want to create a social or political identity based in CNM because he doesn’t believe it is

“necessary.” Somewhat like Rob and Theresa, Liam feels that neither he nor anyone else should have “to deal with the trappings of a movement.” A community of self-identified polyamorists is viewed as at least as much of a threat as a benefit. Because he does not feel threatened by discrimination, Liam sees little reason to engage in identity politics, a familiar strategy in which a group of people united by similar traits band together to fight for their rights. Liam leaves open the possibility that if he were to experience “push-back,” presumably in the form of violence (“throw a punch”) or political or social discrimination, that he might make more of CNM lifestyle. But he believes that is no practical need for “fighting very hard” against the pro-monogamy majority.

Another reason Liam distances himself any identification with polyamory because he thinks polyamorists are “corny.” Liam doesn’t offer much elaboration on this opinion but one interpretation is that he’s dismissive of those who view consensual non-monogamy as a cause. Their earnestness in identifying as polyamorists strikes him silly because it’s unnecessary; if most non-monogamists do not encounter significant oppression because of their relationships, why make a big deal about their unorthodox sex lives? Finally, dismissing polyamorists as corny betrays the postmodern suspicion of fixed identities and the labels that go with them. As with Erika’s argument that people should not assume labels can accurately describe an ever-evolving relationship, flexibility is again set up as a virtue in the context of casualized intimacy. In contrast to hip, modern non-monogamists like Liam, those who strongly identify as polyamorous, who see it as part of who they are, rather than as something they merely do, are sentimental and old-fashioned. Liam was not alone in his skepticism that non-monogamy was an identity worth organizing larger communities around. Even for those who embraced certain kinds of identity politics, the label “polyamory” could be off-putting.

Rowan is a 20-something, white, self-identified “genderqueer” individual. Ze’s¹⁸ an intrepid person who’s lived in many places around the United States, often surviving on what ze had in her backpack. When Rowan and I spoke in the fall of 2009, ze was in an online college program studying religion, specifically, liberation theology. Rowan had a strong intellectual bent and was a long-time activist involved in issues related to queer youth. Ze supported herself financially sometimes through hir activist work and sometimes through sex work with male clients. When Rowan said that ze identified as genderqueer, ze meant that her gender identity did not fit most people’s expectations of femininity. Furthermore, most of Rowan’s intimate relationships were with females and Rowan said that ze was attracted to people who were also non-normative in their gender performance.

Growing up in the Midwest, Rowan had had the good fortune to find adults who provided examples of what happy consensually non-monogamous relationships could be like. Like many queer youth, Rowan was eager for adult figures in hir life to act as examples. Rowan spoke of hir CNM “mentors” with respect and affection. Around the time ze was 15 years old, a group of CNM adults wanted to affiliate with the church Rowan attended. Ze said that this generated “mad pushback” from the church’s members – who considered the group “gross, bad... and patriarchal” – but this incident introduced hir to people who had politicized their non-monogamy. Because Rowan witnessed overt prejudice against these men and women, ze viewed non-monogamy as not only a personal choice, but as a political issue:

¹⁸ Rowan’s cis-gender, the gender she was assigned at birth, is female. However, since Rowan identified as genderqueer, I decided to use the gender neutral pronouns ze (instead of he or she) and hir (instead of his or her). For interviewees who identified as “trans,” meaning “transgendered,” I use the pronouns that correspond to their chosen gender identity.

“I was like, ‘Oh, fighting for poly rights is important. Fighting for poly visibility is important. Awkwardness sucks. And, you know, that’s also who I am, and I’m a little shy about it but I’m not about to be monog-ed [sic] out.’”

In part because of hir familiarity with this group, Rowan related that ze identified as poly before ze came out as queer. However, this didn’t mean that Rowan felt no ambivalence about applying the label “poly” to hirself. Like many of my research participants, ze favored “non-monogamous” as a descriptor for hir lifestyle:

B: Do you have a community not just of queer people but of poly queer people?

R: I would say more of non-monogamous queer people.

B: Ok. So what’s the difference between non-monogamy and poly?

R: I think that poly has a weirder subculture that’s more about like wearing capes and fanny packs and being Dungeons and Dragon-y with each other. Like at the café that I worked at in [a Northeastern city], there’s a monthly poly night which is not reflective of what polyamorous communities across the board look like but it’s like a very specific subset that’s rallied around, “We’re poly and that’s what we do together.” Which is great, and more power to them, and amazing...

B: Have you been to the poly meet-up in town?

R: No.

B: Did you know there was one?

R: No. But I’d imagine it’s similar.

Rowan does not reject the term poly outright, the way that Liam does, nor does ze exhibit quite the same global distaste for labels that Erika does. Like Rob and Theresa, Rowan is more ambivalent about the label polyamory. On the one hand, Rowan used the word “polyamory” to refer to the relationships of the adult friends that ze had growing up, as well hir early identification as someone who rejected monogamy. On the other hand, when ze needed to talk about hir life as an adult, ze was uneasy about calling hirself “polyamorous,” preferring “non-

monogamous” instead. This is particularly notable given Rowan’s embrace of the term “queer.” “Queer” is a highly politicized sexual identification articulated and widely disseminated in American culture in the late 1980s and 1990s, particularly around AIDS activism by gays and lesbians. Moreover, though Rowan didn’t speak negatively about the polyamorous people ze knew growing up, ze explained that ze didn’t use the term polyamory for himself because people who did were part of a “weirder subculture.” People in this subculture played geeky board games and participated in “cosplay,” a subculture whose members dress up in elaborate costumes, often borrowed from sci-fi films and anime. There is some evidence that many people in “geek” subcultures engage in CNM relationships (Aviram, 2010); however, this generalization hardly applies to every poly-identified person. Nevertheless, like Liam, Rowan viewed those who actively built an identity around a “polyamorous” identity as uncool.

“Polyamorist” was not the only label with which my interviewees maintained a conflicted relationship. Another non-monogamous identity, “swinger,” fared a worse fate. Whenever an interviewee brought it up, “swinger” was a term that she unequivocally rejected. This is likely due in part to the association of the word with 70s-era key parties, coupled with the relative youth of my research participants; however, part of the antipathy stemmed from what was viewed as the beliefs and attitudes behind swinging. Swinging is in fact a kind of consensual non-monogamy; however, swingers typically prefer to limit emotional intimacy with their non-primary sex partners (Gould, 2000; Symonds, 1971; Walshok, 1971). Referred to as “wife-swapping” in the past, the term “swinging” implies sexist and heterosexist attitudes that self-identified swingers today are less likely to adhere to (Bergstrand and Bevins, 2000). Another aspect of swinging that offends many younger people involved in CNM relationship is the supposed lack of discrimination among swingers. Swingers were viewed as willing to have sex

with anyone; they were viewed as having no taste. Swingers were also thought to be less attractive. As one of my interviewees put it: “Swingers... Ew.” But the most important reason that none of my research participants identified as swingers was the different attitude toward secondary partners in swinging and other forms of consensual non-monogamy.

In swinging culture, love and affection are reserved for one’s primary partner and non-sexual contact with other lovers is often verboten (O’Neill and O’Neill, 1970; Symonds, 1971; Walshok, 1971). In contrast, no one I spoke with prohibited herself or her partners from emotional connections with other lovers. One genderqueer white woman named Pearl¹⁹ told me that ze had briefly dated a couple in a heterosexual relationship. Pearl is in hir mid-20s, and when ze wasn’t working in her retail job at funky boutique, ze spent her time on two things: hir art and hir relationships. Pearl said that the relationship between hir and the heterosexual couple “never expanded into anything serious because they’re swingers and I’m polyamorous.” When I asked hir to explain how this difference limited the relationship, ze explained that couple identified more as swingers than as non-monogamous or polyamorous. Pearl wanted to share not only hir sexuality but hir affection. Ze said ze falls in love easily and enjoys being infatuated with new people. In contrast, Pearl found that, “[for] swingers...the sex is first and foremost.” Ze explained that ze found the emphasis on sex, at the cost of emotional connections, “obnoxious.” Pearl also argued that swinging tended to be “very heteronormative and bisexuality for men is discouraged.” These attitudes contrasted sharply with Pearl’s strong desire to explore various gender identities and sexual kinks that disrupted gender norms. Pearl’s observations accord with both academic (DeVisser and MacDonald, 2007; Jenks, 1998; Murstein, 1978b) and journalistic

¹⁹ Pearl identified both as a woman and as genderqueer. She chose a feminine pseudonym for herself and had only until recently begun exploring a genderqueer identity.

(Gould, 2000) accounts of swinger culture, and helps explain why young people in consensually non-monogamous relationships are less likely to identify as swingers.

Among the non-monogamists I met, there was skepticism of the relevance of identity politics for emerging lifestyles like consensual non-monogamy. At the same time, there is a concern for a different, less clearly defined identity. For lack of a better term, I'll call this "sexiness." Despite this emphasis on being sexy, however, few of these people I interviewed conformed to image of airbrushed, perfectly-toned sexiness promulgated in the mass media. In fact, most of my interlocutors cultivated a casual appearance with women wearing little or no makeup and nearly everyone wearing outfits of jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers or flip-flops to our interviews. My interviewees did not emphasize youth, physical "perfection," and stereotypical embodiments of gender as desirable in sexual partners, though they often mentioned the importance of physical attraction in intimate relationships. I received the impression that for many of my interviewees, being sexy was more about being open rather than rigid, playful rather than staid, and authentic rather than proper. In this way, the desirable persona that many of my interviewees found attractive and wished to exhibit themselves was less about physical appearance *per se* and more about attitudes, interests, and personality. The faults of "othered," undesirable non-monogamists stemmed more from the perception that such people were inflexible, domineering, hung up on categories and definitions, and overly serious: in other words, that big-P polyamorists or swingers were simply less fun.

Such an emphasis on desirability is no doubt in part a function of my relatively youthful sample; nevertheless, the stress placed on being hip, coupled with the perceived need to differentiate oneself from others who practice undesirable forms of CNM, encourages

divisiveness rather than community. For example, Rowan's rejection of the term polyamory mirrors the way other respondents distanced themselves from forms of CNM that they perceived as unsexy or uncool, a choice that bodes poorly for even a bare-bones, strategic solidarity those in CNM partnerships are likely to need if they wish to secure the rights and recognition that would protect non-monogamous relationships (particularly families with children) from discrimination and ill-treatment (see Emens, 2004 for examples of legal discrimination against non-monogamists and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010 for a discussion of how poly families negotiate their identities in relation to their children's schools).

Identity and CNM sexuality

Words like "heterosexual," "gay," and "straight," took decades to become commonly recognized labels for sexual orientations (Chauncey, 1995; d'Emilio and Freedman, 1997; Katz, 1995). Now, however, it would be hard for many people to think about sexuality without them. The language we use to refer to gender, sexual practices, and lifestyles – labels such as vanilla, BDSM, celibacy – are not simply neutral or "objective" descriptions; they carry subtexts and suggest associations between practices and people. The language we use to identify, describe, and categorize sexual behaviors and identities is both a reflection of our beliefs and an active agent in shaping them. The non-monogamists I interviewed for this research have a keen awareness of this fact. They recognize both the necessity and the difficulty of developing a coherent label for their way of engaging in intimate relationships. Yet, they are concerned about the limitations that identification brings. In this chapter, I have examined two major sources for my interviewees' ambivalence towards articulating and relating to a non-monogamous identity:

a fear of labels as limiting and a need to differentiate oneself from othered, unsexy, non-monogamists.

Many of the non-monogamists I spoke with have a heightened awareness of the power of language to define identities and situations. Their wariness regarding labels derived in part from a fear of being limited. These limitations could take the form of self-imposed psychological or emotional limits or externally-imposed norms that approved and disapproved of various ways of having CNM relationships. This unwillingness to be hemmed in by an affiliation with a group based on shared lifestyle traits has a postmodern – and in its focus on language, poststructuralist – feel. Of course, non-monogamy itself is a label, but interviewees preferred this term because, in their opinion, it had the fewest connotations and was the most divorced from any kind of self-conscious identity shared by a group of people. My research participants' wariness about the limiting effects of labels, and the group allegiances they imply, is in line with the findings of other research on CNM/poly identification (Aviram, 2010). This suggests that those involved in consensually non-monogamous relationships are not likely to support the kind of identity politics that provided ideological structure and emotion energy for social movements in the second half of the 20th century. There may be benefits to this trend. For example, less dogmatic beliefs might decrease the possibility of a cultural backlash, like backlash against feminism, civil rights, and leftist policies in the U.S., especially during the 1980s and 1990s. But for those in CNM partnerships, a failure to develop an organized group identity and use this as a basis for activism may have negative repercussions, especially if people continue with non-monogamy in relationships where they are also raising children.

The reluctance to cultivate a strong identity as non-monogamists expressed by many of my interviewees derived not only a wariness of the limiting effect of categories, but also of possible negative associations called to mind by terms like “polyamory.” They rejected any strong identification with other non-monogamists not only because they did not want to be criticized for their idiosyncratic sexual norms but because they believed that many people associate polyamory with the image of unattractive people, with few social skills and a penchant for niche, “geeky” interests like Renaissance Faires and Dungeons and Dragons. While many people wish to be perceived as attractive, being attractive to many people other than one’s primary partner is of particular importance for many non-monogamists. For those in CNM relationships, the search for a sexual partner doesn’t end with membership in a couple. This reality partially explains why so many interviewees were eager to differentiate themselves from “unsexy” non-monogamists.

Unlike monogamous couples, who might think of themselves as no longer “being on the market,” non-monogamists continue to look for partners after they’ve established a committed primary relationship. Though many individuals in monogamous couples put considerable effort, time, and money into maintaining or even upgrading their desirability, the decidedness of monogamy, particularly monogamous marriage, provides less incentive to worry constantly about one’s image. In contrast, non-monogamists move in and out of secondary relationships; some may also have a much keener sense of the insecurity of their primary relationships. Distancing one’s image from that of undesirable others discourages overtures from such people and appeals to “sexy” partners. This need to not alienate partners or close down one’s sexual and romantic possibilities by allegiance to a well-defined or politicized minority identity exemplifies the casualization of intimate life.

At work in the ambivalence over identity labels is a strong streak of individualism but also a sort of privatism, an unwillingness to work with others, at least outside of intimate, personal relationships. The privatism running through many non-monogamists' distrust of labels highlights the ways neoliberalism insinuates itself into understandings of intimate relationships in an era of casualization. If intimate relationships are precarious, unable to be held together by external pressures and instead maintained by individual bonds of attraction and affection, a persistent focus on the self and its desirability is a sound strategy for cultivating and sustaining committed partnerships. The neoliberal language of flexibility and marketability is also related to this turn away from collective identity and towards the private self. According to my interview participants, fixed labels and identities can't be trusted because they make it difficult, if not impossible, for individuals to alter themselves to fit the current realities of their partnerships.

A preference for flexibility and individual choice in relationship is a mixed blessing. Sociolinguist George Lakoff has argued that people with more "liberal" mentalities are usually quite comfortable with diversity. In this context, a liberal mindset means there is usually means there is little desire to "force" others to conform; a negative effective of this laissez-faire attitude, however, is that unity and cohesion can be elusive (Lakoff, 2002). An open mind often means more personal freedom but less social solidarity and support. Nonchalance about discrimination and a recognizable group identity stems from the relative freedom and privilege the people in my sample enjoy. It's easy to take one's privacy and safety – one's privileges – for granted. My sample was overwhelmingly white and well-educated; some were in legally-recognized heterosexual marriages. Few of my interviewees had children, and those who did

were straight-identified men. Members of these demographics enjoy the security that race privilege, wealth, and conventional gender identity bring.

Yet, even among interviewees with less socioeconomic security or non-normative gender performances, few people expressed interest in or commitment to developing a shared consciousness and identity among non-monogamists. This is in part because younger interviewees tended to socialize frequently or even almost exclusively with like-minded people. More than half of my interviewees reported having friends who are also not monogamous. Others mentioned that they were able to find support among open-minded friends. Because their social worlds provided some insulation from outside prejudices, consciously setting out to publicize and politicize their lifestyle seemed beside the point. Despite their reticence to politicize their sexuality, an aversion to old-fashioned identity politics doesn't mean that the non-monogamists I spoke with meant to defend simple-minded self-absorption as a life philosophy. In fact, many of my interview participants were deeply concerned with behaving ethically in their intimate relationships.

The ethical schema of consensual non-monogamy is deeply individualistic. Though individualism is sometimes decried for being little more than an apologetics of narcissism (see Lasch 1995), it does proffer a moral rubric for interacting with others and limiting one's own selfish desires. In the next chapter, I explore how non-monogamists draw upon the logic and language of feminism and psychotherapy to advance an individualist but also egalitarian ethics of sexuality. Fairness, consent, honesty, and personal freedom are the central values that must shape the practice of non-monogamy if it is to be an ethical engagement with others. According to my research subjects, if a person's behavior towards her partner isn't fair or honest, if it

doesn't cultivate both partners' autonomy or seek consent, then it cannot rightfully be called CNM. Instead, such a relationship is likely to be either debased non-monogamy or sugarcoated infidelity. The values of fairness, consent, honesty, and freedom are themselves couched in the rhetoric of psychotherapy and popular feminism, which provide an accessible, familiar way of talking about what is desirable and right, or undesirable and wrong, in intimate relationships.

CHAPTER 4: THE ETHICS OF CONSENSUAL NON-MONOGRAMY

In the absence of the strong (even coercive) practices, economic conditions, and institutions of the past that shaped intimacy, scholars have become more interested in the ideas that help people organize their relationships. Research on the way Americans talk about their relationships has explored the influence of the rhetoric of consumerism (Birkin, 1988; Illouz, 1997a), Protestant Christianity (Cott, 2003; Garrett, 1998; Hochschild, 2003a; Lystra, 1989), and the biological sciences (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Lancaster, 2003). However, I believe that non-monogamists draw far more from the languages of feminism and psychotherapy than they do shopping, religion, or science. Feminism and psychotherapy provide my interview participants with a vocabulary for describing their desires and relationships, but their importance is even greater than that. These two bodies of discourse offer two complementary, essential logical structures for understanding how non-monogamous partnerships are a valid, ethical lifestyle.

Decades of scholarship have demonstrated the profound influence of feminist and psychotherapeutic philosophies on the language people use to understand romantic relationships (Bellah, 2008; Benjamin, 1998; Cott, 2000; Coonzt, 2005; Giddens 1991, 1992; Hochschild, 2003a; Illouz, 2008; Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 2004; Miller, 2008; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Rubin, 1991; Seidman, 1991). Feminism and the psychotherapeutic provide people with a framework for conducting relationships in an era where old certainties have been upended and individuals have greater freedoms in their personal lives. Outside of traditional religious communities, strict patriarchal dominance is no longer a desirable way to organize intimate relationships. The emphasis on consumption, sexual pleasure, and wealth trumpeted

by a range of neoliberal media outlets is not much more helpful. Many Americans, particularly those without strong religious inclinations, must find their guide for relationships elsewhere.

The discourses of feminism and psychotherapy offer models of intimate relationships that are more thoughtful and humane than many of the available alternatives. Often opposed but frequently complementary, feminism and psychotherapy champion various tenets of egalitarian and individualist thought. Feminism emphasizes women putting themselves first (or at least not last), as well as their equal worth to men; therapy's implicit promise that we all share a similar psychological makeup and the right to pursue our own happiness, attest to the egalitarianism in both philosophies. Each ideology is also indebted to individualism. While Anglo-American feminism deals with women as a group, part of the argument is that women should be able to develop their unique identities and skills, as men have long been encouraged to do. And though psychotherapy makes assumptions about the shared nature of human beings, its primary purpose is to help individuals overcome their problems through their own efforts, to seek for the necessary answers within themselves. Such similarities notwithstanding, in discourse and practice, feminism is the more egalitarian perspective, psychotherapy the more individualistic. Because of this, many feminists and leftist scholars are strong critics of psychotherapeutic discourse for an individualism they believe makes it the handmaiden of capitalist exploitation (Cloud, 1998; Illouz, 2008; McGee, 2005). In a different kind of attack, second-wave feminists singled out Freudian psychoanalysis, popular in the United States at the time, for its blatant sexism and silencing of women's experiences (Millett, 2000). However, many feminists also participated in consciousness-raising sessions, which used psychotherapeutic methods to help women recognize their oppression as a group (Sarachild,

1978; Sowards and Renegar, 2004). Whatever their conflicts, there is clearly a history of fertile exchange between these two intellectual developments.

The discourses and values of feminism and psychotherapy, as sometimes confluent, sometimes divergent, articulations, are demonstrated through four crucial themes – which can also be thought of as four justifications – which my interviewees used to validate consensual non-monogamy as an ethical practice. A reliance on feminism is demonstrated by my research participants' emphasis on the values of fairness and consent in intimate relationships. The influence of psychotherapy is apparent in my interlocutors' insistence on the importance of the values of honesty and personal freedom. These two discourses and four main values comprise the ethical lens of consensual non-monogamy, through which the rightness or wrongness of sexual relationships can be evaluated. The principles of fairness, consent, honesty, and freedom, as they are understood by and shaped through the languages of feminism and psychotherapy, enables non-monogamists to build a coherent moral defense of CNM that is different from the ethics of monogamy, and works with, rather than against, the norms of casualization.

Instead of creating a bastion from the demands of neoliberal society, non-monogamy invites the pressures of casualization into the home, and bedroom. Precarity, with its demand for flexibility, hard work, and disclosing intimacy profoundly shapes non-monogamists' definition of fairness, consent, honesty, and freedom. In CNM relationships, egalitarianism is operationalized as respect for each partners' sexual and emotional entitlements, which frequently go beyond the bonds of the primary relationship. Fairness means that both partners will pursue pleasure and respect one another's pursuit of other lovers, should they choose to seek them out. To sustain a sense of fairness in CNM relationships, consent is crucial. In the context of CNM, negotiation between primary partners, as well as with secondaries, acquires a

heightened importance because the strictures provided by monogamy cannot be taken for granted. To achieve mutual consent for the “rules” of any individual non-monogamous relationship means that couples must engage in intensive, ongoing, and honest communication. The “radical honesty” legal scholar Elizabeth Emens (2004) argues characterizes many non-monogamous relationships points to the individualist moorings of CNM thought. Reflecting upon and honestly sharing their emotions allows both partners in a primary relationship to express their needs and desires, and to participate authentically in the partnership. In keeping with non-monogamists’ distinctive understandings of fairness, consent, and honesty in intimate relationships, they also privilege a greater degree of sexual and social freedom for partnered individuals than do monogamists. Freedom means being able to seek out new erotic and emotional experiences; it is a sign of love and respect between partners that they honor one another’s desire for pleasure and novelty. Together, these egalitarian and individualist values enables non-monogamists to resolve a fundamental tension at work in CNM: the tension between pleasing the self and pleasing one’s partner, between fulfilling one’s own desires and fulfilling obligations to the Other. At once hegemonic and innovative, my interview participants’ articulation of the values of fairness, consent, honesty, and freedom empower non-monogamists to deal with the dilemmas and challenges consensual non-monogamy, as a form of casualized intimacy, presents.

CNM and feminism

A belief in the substantive equality between partners in sexual relationships is hardly a time-honored tradition in Western culture, but rather attributable to feminism. Feminism is of course a fraught concept. What I mean by feminism throughout this chapter is a branch of

feminist thought called “third wave feminism” (see Haywood and Drake, 1997 and Gillis, et al 2004); it is a version of feminism that has become a kind of common sense in Anglo-American countries. Third wave feminism espouses women’s equality with men, their right to personal choice and freedom, and their right to pleasure; (even) more transgressively, feminism asserts these rights for LGBTIQ individuals. It encompasses many elements of its intellectual progenitor, liberal feminism, an ideology that champions greater recognition and equality for women within the existing social and political systems of Western society (Echols, 1989). This mainstream, popular feminism, enthusiastically embraced by the non-monogamists I interviewed, is frequently voiced in magazine articles, online publications, “girl power” advertising, TV plotlines, non-profit advocacy, and news and infotainment programs. Much more so than its ideological predecessors, third wave feminism endorses a pleasure-seeking and individualist ethos that complements neoliberal casualization at least as much as it critiques it. Though such an understanding of feminism might not please those with more radical analyses of patriarchal, capitalist society, the message of female equality and entitlement to pleasure resonates with millions.

Given this dissertation’s topic and the privileged place of sexual pleasure in third wave feminism, it is not surprising that many non-monogamists thought about equality and fairness in relation to sex. This was particularly true for non-monogamous women, who viewed themselves as sexually empowered by their non-traditional relationships. These women believed that their lifestyle was a powerful refutation of the patriarchal sexual double standard. Straight and queer women both displayed this attitude, reminding us that sexual equality is not only an issue for heterosexual relationships. Third wave feminism’s egalitarian call to recognize the rights and desires of both partners is not limited to straight men and women. As this chapter will show,

queer non-monogamists easily apply the notions of fairness and consent to their own sexual encounters.

Consent, as a concept that would become increasingly “good to think with” in the neoliberal Anglo-American political climate, was originally thrust into public discourse by the women’s movement. Beginning in the 1970s, second-wave feminists were able to make consent an inescapable topic in the public and private realms. Feminist activists and lawyers can be credited with popularizing now-mainstream beliefs about consent and choice, at least in intimate relationships. From the mid-20th century through the present, the most powerful and successful popularizations of consent have come from this quarter. For example, feminist activists worked for decades to redefine rape law to better protect victims (Donat and D’Emilio, 1992) and invented the notion of sexual harassment (Siegel, 2003). Consent is the principle that perhaps goes the farthest towards legitimizing CNM in the eyes of its practitioners: if both people freely agree to this arrangement, then no one is being treated unfairly, no one is being lied to. Those who practice non-monogamy are quick recognize the moral centrality of consent. Whether implicitly or explicitly, my interviewees regularly acknowledged that without consent, CNM – *consensual* non-monogamy – isn’t possible.

Fairness

Fairness, defined as the recognition of each partner’s desires and boundaries, is the goal for many non-monogamists, particularly in their primary partnerships. Sexual fairness, in particular, of was great importance to my interview participants. Unlike monogamy, where sexual fairness is a kind of austerity, with both partners giving up outside partners, for non-

monogamists, fairness was each partner allowing the other the same sexual freedom she herself enjoyed. This means that the latitude given to another's desires and boundaries is not infinite; it is curtailed by the imperative that neither partner should make the unfair demand that the other give up their lover(s) without a very good reason for doing so. Because of this norm of sexual fairness, only a handful of the 30 people interviewed for this research had an asymmetrically non-monogamous relationship, with only one half of the couple who wanted to pursue secondary partners. Only one man, David (Chapter 6), had practiced this kind of asymmetrical CNM, and his relationship with his wife was rocky because of it.

The CNM understanding of fairness is based in a broadly feminist take on love and sexuality. Of the egalitarian ideal in intimate relationships, Anthony Giddens writes, "the individual is able to treat others as such and to recognize the development of their separate potentialities is not a threat" (1992, 189). Non-monogamists exemplify this credo, and show how the feminist ideal of egalitarian fairness is exemplified in the sexual openness of CNM. Instead of locking down sexual and emotional intimacy within the primary relationship, each partner retained a large degree of individual freedom to continue exploring new intimacies and pleasures with others. Precarity does not end with the establishment of a committed partnership. Instead, it is in a sense, multiplied: the primary partnership became fraught...The division of emotional and sexual energy between lovers produces, and new relationships are inherently precarious. Yet, time and again, my interview participants said that each partner in a relationship should pursue not only her own happiness and pleasure but allow and even help her primary to do the same. This was fair, and non-monogamists believed that this form of sexual fairness strengthened, rather than weakened, their bond to one another. Below, I present a close reading of a conversation with two women in a CNM relationship. It provides a

more detailed picture of what fairness – the equal right of each partner to autonomy and pleasure – looks like in the context of consensual non-monogamy.

Autumn and Maria are two women in their late 20s who have been involved for about a year. Autumn, tall with bright red hair, has outgoing personality and an infectious laugh. Just as friendly, but more soft-spoken, than her partner, Maria has lovely blue-green eyes, curly hair, and tan skin inherited from her Southeast Asian father. Autumn and Maria have a bohemian lifestyle, working outside the corporate world and living in old, rambling houses shared with friends, and both have pleasant, open demeanors. In the course of our interview in a downtown coffee shop, Maria told the story of a conflict between herself and a past girlfriend. In this previous relationship, Maria craved the emotional energy and sexual variety that comes with having multiple partners; however, her ex wanted their relationship to be sexually and emotionally exclusive. Maria's ex was going through a difficult time and felt she only had enough energy for her primary relationship. Though Maria didn't have a problem with her girlfriend not having other partners, it was very challenging for Maria to give up her outside relationships. Moreover, Maria did not feel that her secondary relationships detracted from her primary partnership. There was a conflict between her ex's request and Maria's desires, a conflict Maria's current girlfriend, Autumn, believes grew out of the ex's unfair expectations. In the excerpt below, Maria recounts her difficulties with her previous girlfriend. Towards the end of the segment, Autumn jumps in with her analysis of the situation.

M: [My ex-girlfriend] wanted [monogamy]... But it was really difficult and I felt like that moment was make-or-break. It was really hard and I was like, I'm either going to break up with this person because I want to be able to sleep with other people or I'm going to stay with her. And I stayed because I was like, you know, I think what I have is really amazing and great and I'm not going to find that with someone else and I want to be with her. So, I sacrificed.

B: How did that go?

M: It was very difficult. I feel like over time I was able to, not get over it, but I was able to get used to it.

B: Was it just difficult because you wanted the sexual contact?

M: Yeah. I feel like there were other people I was excited about dating too and that was totally nil. I'm a very sexual person, I'm attracted to a lot of people and I have a very flirtatious personality and really having to watch that, and really having to harness that took a lot of time... to be able to do that well.

B: Yeah.

M: And I did it. It was a lot of hard work. I feel like the reason our relationship ended was a result of me compromising.

A: Maria's ex wasn't meeting her needs and wasn't allowing Maria to get them met anywhere else.

There are two basic inequities in this scenario. First, the ex was being unfair because she disregarded the original agreement (to be non-monogamous). In monogamous relationships, it is frequently assumed that it is only fair that both partners sacrifice equally by giving up sexually and emotionally intimate relationships with others. Standing on the outside looking in at the scenario above, monogamous people would see Maria's renunciation of other relationships as the sensible, loving, and moral choice; the thrill of multiple partners *should* be sacrificed in favor of being there full-time for a partner who's dealing with emotional problems. However, Maria and her ex had originally decided to be non-monogamous. Changing one's mind after this agreement puts both partners in a problematic position. In Maria's case, this is not what she had originally "contracted" for.

This raises the second major inequity. According to Autumn, Maria's ex was not being fair when she tried to impose her desires (for monogamy) on Maria without what many non-monogamists would recognize as a legitimate reason. As will be discussed at length in Chapter 6,

many non-monogamists believe that some situations justify “closing” a relationship and being monogamous with one’s primary partner, at least for a time. Examples of good reasons for switching from CNM to monogamy might include the birth of a child, a partner’s serious illness, or the shared perception that a couple needs to devote more time and energy to the primary partnership. However, given the centrality of sex and multiple intimate relationships in CNM, reasons for giving up non-monogamy, even temporarily, must be compelling. Individual emotional “hang-ups,” like jealousy or fear, or subjective rather than objective considerations – a lesser sex drive versus the upheaval introduced by the arrival of a new child – are very difficult for many non-monogamists to accept as legitimate reasons for closing a relationship. As Autumn’s comment suggests, part of Maria’s reluctance to be monogamous with her ex stemmed from the two partners’ discrepant libidos. Maria wanted more sexual contact than her partner did. In Maria’s telling of the story, she made the decision to prioritize her girlfriend’s feelings over her own desire for multiple relationships. Autumn offers a different take on the situation. She portrays the problem as one of Maria’s ex denying Maria’s sexual “needs.” Though sexual desire is not literally a “need,” Autumn’s use of the term increases the seriousness of Maria’s deprivation. By labeling Maria’s desires as needs, Autumn emphasizes the importance of sexuality and casts Maria’s ex in a negative light. The fact that Maria’s ex couldn’t meet her sexual needs but also prohibited her from having sex with others was seen as unfair. Compounding this was the fact that Maria’s partner was also technically free to be with others. From the ethical perspective of someone practicing CNM, Maria of course could not coerce or wheedle her partner into sex if she didn’t want it. But, if Maria’s partner couldn’t satisfy Maria’s desires, Maria had a right to continue to seek sex even though she was in a relationship. If the issue for Maria and her ex had been time, i.e. Maria’s outside relationships were demanding too

much of her time and energy, this would strike many non-monogamists as a legitimate reason to not practice CNM. If this had been the issue, it is likely that Autumn and Maria would have recognized the ex's demands as legitimate. However, as Autumn argues, Maria's ex's disinterest in pursuing outside sexual relationships was used as a kind of emotional blackmail. The ex-girlfriend was trying to control Maria's behavior, instead of respecting Maria's desires and autonomy.

The egalitarianism at the heart of my interviewees' moral logic is clear. From this perspective, partners have the right to be treated equally, but Autumn and Maria go beyond a strict understanding of literal equality and emphasize substantive equality between partners. Their treatment doesn't have to be literally the same, as long as their rights (in this case, to sexual pleasure or gratification of sexual "needs") are respected. One partner's desires – to have sex or to not have sex – are not supposed to take precedence. Rather, the couple should come up with a compromise that is as fair to both people as possible. Autumn and Maria's story demonstrates how, within the ethical framework of CNM, fairness is preeminent and linked to the individual's sexual entitlement in fundamental ways. But fairness is only one value privileged within the egalitarian ethics of CNM. Consent, as I illustrate below, is also crucial.

Consent

Consent is an egalitarian principle insofar as it recognizes and accords autonomy to each person, validates the good faith of an agreement, and (ostensibly) helps ensure fairness in interpersonal relationships. The elusiveness or impossibility of informed, free consent is also one of the most difficult realities to acknowledge in our own social and economic structures,

however pervasive such circumstances may be. Being able to make informed decisions is essential within the commonsensical Anglo-American morality. Consent is a pervasive moral concern in U.S. rhetoric and is now frequently discussed in relation to issues ranging from medical research to healthcare, from consumer privacy to labor conditions. Perfect choice and full consent are abstract ideals, one which may only be rarely realized in lived experience. Nevertheless, like the other principles discussed in this chapter, it is a value that deeply inflects my interviewees' discourse of CNM ethics.

The term "consent" perhaps most strongly evokes sex, and the right of all individuals to say yes or no to sex. Consent is foundational for non-monogamists not only because of the moral importance of informed decision making in intimate relationships, but also because it separates their lifestyle from cheating. Consent shows respect for the self of the Other. If a person is being deceived, then true consent cannot be obtained. Cheating is discursively important to many non-monogamists because it differentiates them from an undesirable out-group, wayward "monogamists." Without open conversation and negotiation about non-monogamy, many CNM relationships would devolve into mere cheating. This is why consent is at once a definitional and ethical issue for many non-monogamists. Just as breaking the "rules" around monogamy would be cheating in a monogamous relationship, having covert sexual relationships, or not respecting other important sexual limits would count as cheating in many CNM partnerships. Below, I explore the meaning and significance of consent within the ethical framework of CNM and the queer-identified interviewees who explicitly brought consent into our conversations. Additionally, I analyze how consent functions discursively and ethically to separate non-monogamy from cheating.

Consent was always mentioned when an interview participant identified as queer or genderqueer. My interviews with queer non-monogamists suggest that queerness – whether in sexual orientation, gender performance, embodiment, and/or some other form – heightened the speaker’s sensitivity to the importance of consent. There are several reasons for this greater emphasis on consent by queer non-monogamists. Unlike heterosexual men and women, who can fall into a sexual routine dominated by the “coital imperative” (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips, 2003), queer people are less likely to adopt a unitary, singular norm of what qualifies as “real” sex. The sexual “scripts” used by members of the LGBTI community are generally more diverse than those of heterosexuals, in part because of the widespread recognition of different sexual subcultures among sexual minorities (Califia, 1994; Klesse, 2007; Warner, 1999). Particularly for those who identify as genderqueer or trans, the uniqueness of gendered and sexual identities often makes explicit conversations about sexual expectations necessary. Varied experiences of gender and a broader possible menu of sexual practices make it much harder to assume you know what a partner wants.²⁰ The importance of consent for LGBTQI non-monogamists came out quite clearly in a conversation I had with Austin, a queer woman in her mid-20s, about what made for a good, versus an unpleasant, sexual encounter.

B: So what’s like a good sexual encounter? What have been bad sexual encounters?

A: Um. [Long pause]. I think sometimes when people – I think again that consent is just *sooo* important, for everything, it’s not just like “we’re consenting to have sex”... I think sometimes especially with a new partner, there’s a lot of checking in.

B: Like “informed consent.”

²⁰ The greater propensity towards open discussions of sexual desires and boundaries may be one of the reasons that CNM is practiced more often within the LGBTQI community than by people who self-identify as straight (Heaphy et al, 2004; Klesse, 2007). If your community socializes you to discuss sex with partners as a matter of course, it becomes easier to broach the subject of consensual non-monogamy. Additionally, if many of your friends and acquaintances are involved in CNM relationship, it may make this lifestyle seem viable for you and your primary partner.

A: Yeah, and I mean there are just so many things that people have hard lines about and don't want, so many ways people don't want to be touched, and don't like... there are so many ways to have sex, as we all know and there are so many ways that people don't want, a lot of traditional ways of engaging in sex people are not into and are not up for. [Pause] So I talked about people's history with sexual abuse, I think that's something, if you don't know people that well and they kind of have a panic attack or a freak-out, which I think is a really common story... I wouldn't say that's a bad experience, but that happens.

When Austin is asked what characterizes a positive sexual encounter, what she first calls to mind is consent. She mentions consent even before pleasure. This is not necessarily because consent is "better" or more desirable than pleasure. Rather, consent is the pre-condition for pleasure. Austin does not want to enjoy herself – maybe she couldn't enjoy herself – if her partner is not ready and able to enjoy herself, an assurance that Austin receives via her partner's consent. This eroticizing of consent opens a space for sexual creativity and experimentation. During our interview, I asked Austin "what do you get out of sex?" in other words, what did Austin get from sex that she couldn't get any other way? This is what she said:

B: And what do you get out of sex, *qua* sex? . . . You know, why sex and not just being friends?

A: ..."I think sex is a really awesome way to play with gender, and with different constructs, sex can be super-performative or really, it can be just... [Pause] I think everybody I have sex with, it's really different, depending on what we're both up for or into or, you know, it just brings out different aspects of me and the other person...."

After this, Austin explained that "playing with power dynamics" could also be a fun and exciting part of sex:

A: Playing with power is huge. Having sex has so much power play involved... I think sex can be so many things, and I think that I will probably be like 95 and still feel like there are lots of different ways to have sex that I still haven't even done, you know? So I think that it can be a really healing outlet too, and I've noticed that a lot of my partners I've been with have really intense histories of sexual abuse.

By explicitly securing consent before sex, Austin is able to create a space for experimenting with gender roles, experiencing different levels and kinds of intimacy, or “healing.” Even “playing with power” becomes a possibility. Once consent is obtained, sex can become a game, in the sense that a game has agreed upon rules that everyone follows. Austin is very aware of her partners’ sexual boundaries, which may exclude “a lot of traditional ways of engaging in sex” from their encounters. She’s even attuned to the ways her partners might want or not want to be touched. This sensitivity to another person’s desires is partially attributable to Austin’s compassionate personality. It is also partially due to the influence of feminism. Austin is exceptionally reflective about sex. Even if she were not involved in consensual non-monogamy, empathy for her partners would undoubtedly define her intimate relationships. Nevertheless, that Austin’s compassionate nature should be compatible with, or nurtured by, consensual non-monogamy, is important in its demonstration of CNM ethics.

Though CNM might be outside the mainstream of American life, the ethical beliefs that many non-monogamists bring to their sexual relationships should sound familiar. This is because of the discursive and logical scaffolding of egalitarianism, particularly as it is voiced in mainstream understandings of feminism. Of course, non-monogamists are not the only ones who care about sexual ethics; it’s hardly that those in monogamous partnerships are unconcerned with fairness and consent. Rather, what is important is the particular discursive deployment of fairness and consent in my interviewees’ construction of CNM as ethical. Autumn, Maria, and Austin are all 20-something young women who self-identify as queer. All three came of age in the 1990s. Though none of them is wealthy, they are well-off enough to

maintain economic independence from men.²¹ Third wave feminist precepts have been part of their cultural and cognitive “tool kit” (Swidler, 1986) since they were children. Like their monogamous sisters, these women had learned about the importance of fairness and consent in intimate relationships from their schools, family, peer groups, and the media. Unlike most other young women, they both tended to be sexually involved with other women and enjoyed the relative fluidity and freedom of CNM. Unencumbered by children and largely free from dealing with men’s expectations in their intimate lives, liberal feminist tenets like fairness and consent could be uppermost in their minds when discussing what they required in their intimate relationships.

Fairness and consent, central as they are to non-monogamists’ understanding of their lifestyle, are only two of four discursive pillars providing the frame for ethical CNM. The following section explores the importance of the values of honesty and freedom within the ethics of CNM. I begin by looking at how the individualist logic of psychotherapy has inflected the modern, Western definition of “good” intimate relationships generally, and non-monogamists’ perspective in particular. I then link the therapeutic values of honesty and personal freedom to non-monogamists’ constructions of authenticity and personal growth as

²¹ At the time of the interviews in 2009 and 2010, all three women were employed. Though none of them appeared to lead lavish lifestyles, all were capable of supporting themselves economically Autumn made a comfortable but modest living in the healthcare field and Maria worked a minimum-wage job while looking for more remunerative and rewarding work. Austin was an artist and activist. All three explicitly stated that their families were not wealthy. Autumn was raised by a single mother; one of Maria’s parents was in the military, the other in healthcare. At one point, Austin said of her long-term roommate with whom she wished to buy a house, “She has money, I do not.” All three young women had completed at least some college. Autumn and Austin are white and Maria is a fair-skinned woman of color. My point in sharing these details is to give evidence that demographically, Autumn, Maria, and Austin exemplify many of my interviewees. The people I interviewed were more likely to be white and college-educated than the general populace (even among their age group) and all were employed at least part-time (or students) when I met with them. Most of them had grown up in middle-class families; some in working-class families. Though their backgrounds were not uniform, they were a relatively privileged group. These sociological factors certainly affected understanding and practice of consensual non-monogamy.

moral goods. Additionally, the analysis below interweaves the moral “test case” of cheating into the discussion, providing another example of how non-monogamists differentiate themselves from “cheaters.”

CNM and psychotherapeutic discourse

In addition to a respecting others’ rights and requiring that their own be recognized, non-monogamists want to live honestly and realize their potential as unique individuals. All my interviewees believed that consensual non-monogamy demanded truthfulness in a number of ways; in fact, CNM could not work without it. They also consider personal freedom – to express themselves, to enter and leave relationships, to explore the world around them – to be essential. Honesty and personal freedom are key values within the ethics of consensual non-monogamy because they empower those in CNM relationships to be authentic and to grow as people. This focus on authenticity and personal development or “self-actualization” draws heavily from psychotherapeutic thinking.

The psychotherapeutic is a discursive framework that encourages an individual perspective over a more sociological one. In other words, the psychotherapeutic prescribes individual strategies for dealing with problems that often have societal roots (e.g.). Instead of encouraging engagement with institutions or collective, collaborative action, psychotherapeutic discourse typically focuses on the individual, her personal experiences, motivations, desires, and identity. It also privileges verbal self-disclosure, or disclosing intimacy, as the means to achieve personal happiness and successful relationships. In keeping with these precepts, non-

monogamists believe that by reflecting on their own emotions and sharing them with others, individuals form bonds and discover new truths about themselves. Additionally, because the psychotherapeutic locates sexuality and desire at the center of the authentic self, it is especially amendable to an ethical framework for consensual non-monogamy, a lifestyle that privileges that privileges sexual pleasure so highly.

Clinical and popular psychotherapeutic discourse impresses upon the patient the necessity of honest communication and individual freedom – the freedom to determine the direction of one’s own life – for personal psychological health and fulfilling interpersonal relationships (Bellah et al, 2008, 48). Knowing yourself and learning how to be yourself are key goals of the psychotherapeutic process. In *The Ethical Slut*, a guidebook for navigating multiple relationships that is strongly influenced by the discourse of psychotherapy, authors Dossie Easton and Catherine Liszt write, “To truly know yourself is to live on a constant journey of self-exploration, to learn about yourself from reading, therapy, and, most of all, talking incessantly with others who are traveling on similar paths. This is hard work, but well worth it because this is the way you become free to choose how you want to live and love, own your life, and become truly the author of your own experience” (2008, 65). “Reading,” “therapy,” and “talking incessantly” constitute the “hard work” of the “way you become free” to lead a satisfying, authentic life as a non-monogamous person. Though the authors of *The Ethical Slut* include some advice for dealing with legal issues CNM people are likely to encounter, overall, their text advocates a “journey of self-exploration” rather than confrontation with the people and institutions that treat monogamy as the only moral, sane, healthy, civilized way of organizing our intimate lives.

In offering a critique of psychotherapeutic discourse as individualistic, however, I do not want to portray it as the inevitable enemy of civil society or participation in public life. As the 1960s and 1970s feminist appropriation of psychotherapy's confessional mode demonstrates, psychotherapeutic discourse can be used to reveal the social origins of individual experiences of injustice. Furthermore, it is my personal opinion and experience that psychotherapy does indeed help many people to lead happier, more productive lives. Therefore, I am not opposed to the ideology and practice of psychotherapy. Rather, my argument is that psychotherapeutic discourse is typically individualistic, in the sense that it does not advocate participation in collective, social actions as the way to develop the self. This does not make psychotherapy bad or its perspective useless; rather, I want to attend to the ways psychotherapeutic discourse offers a way of thinking about the self and others that is strongly individualistic.

In this section, I relate non-monogamists' core values of honesty and freedom to their understanding of intimate relationships. Just as feminism provided much of the logical and discursive structure for the fairness and consent, psychotherapeutic discourse, with its belief in self-disclosure and personal growth, provides the framework and vocabulary for my interviewees' conceptualization of honesty and freedom as essential principles of ethical non-monogamy.

Honesty

Psychotherapy has two components, goals – healing, self-knowledge, reconciling the individual to society – and processes – recollection, narrative, confession. Honesty is an essential

component of both. Without honesty, the revelations shared in therapy are pointless. Without honesty, the therapist cannot help the patient face, and recover from, the past hurts and current neuroses that stand in the way of happiness. In basing itself in part on the model of confession, psychotherapy has from the beginning maintained the necessity of complete honesty on the part of the patient. It is through the process of self-searching and then sifting through and analyzing the discoveries such searching produces that the therapist and patient accomplish their work. Their objective is to help the patient achieve psychological health and improved relationships with others. As the authors of *Habits of the Heart* note, "For such expressive selves, love means the full exchange of feelings between authentic selves" (2008, 102). In the logic of psychotherapy, honesty is the lynchpin of the personal well-being.

The centrality of honesty in psychotherapeutic discourse is mirrored in the ethics of non-monogamy, where a person often simultaneously inhabit the roles of patient and healer. Honesty is not just about treating others well; honesty is fundamental for the individual. Without honesty, without acknowledging her own thoughts and desires, a person cannot be her authentic self. And an authentic person is a desirable, attractive person in the opinion of many non-monogamists. The appealing, pleasing, desirable self is one that is able to face, understand, and communicate her needs and wishes. Accordingly, my interviewees' frequent disapproval of lying was more than a detached ethical stance; it revealed a visceral repugnance for dishonesty. Below, I explore why non-monogamists value honesty so highly, and the role they believe honesty plays in deepen intimacy and cultivating a sense of an authentic self in intimate relationships.

Kelly, a 22 year-old queer woman, was the youngest person I interviewed for this research. A slightly shy girl with close-cropped brunette hair, Kelly had only been in three relationships. All three relationships had been with other women and all had been non-monogamous. Because of her youth and relative inexperience, Kelly was still trying to figure out what she wanted from her intimate relationships. During the course of our interview, Kelly mentioned that many of her friends were involved in CNM relationships, and that many of them were very happy with the arrangement. I asked her what she thought made those CNM relationships work:

B: For people who you see that have polyamorous relationships that work out, what do you think are the characteristics of those? Or what do you think it takes to make a good polyamorous relationship?

K: You have to be really honest. I'm trying to think of examples...

B: Honest about what sort of stuff?

K: About your feelings and about your behavior. I can think of one relationship among my friends where this is currently working out.

B: Ok. And what are the characteristics that you think make it work for them?

K: Um, they have honesty and openness. They seem to have a good relationship in general. They're clearly together a lot of the time but also, one of them works in New York and is up there for half the week, [and] they both... travel and spend a lot of time apart and have, like, crazy amounts of sex with other people, and I think that they're just both really open... They're just both a little bit older than some of my friends.

After having been involved off-and-on for year with a charming but manipulative woman who lied to her, Kelly was aware of how essential honesty was, particularly in non-monogamous partnerships. In Kelly's description of her friends, she explains that "honesty and openness" is key. The couple, a woman and a trans-man, are "together a lot of the time" but each person also has "crazy amounts of sex with other people." Kelly believes this couple is able to make their relationship "work out" because "they're just both really open." Here, "honesty and openness"

means being honest about other lovers; it is unclear if the couple also share intimate details of their secondary relationships. In defining what it takes to have a good CNM relationship, honesty trumped a host of other possible answers, like love, commitment, or putting each other first.

Of the nearly 25 people I spoke with, Austin, the 20-something queer artist woman featured above, was perhaps the most eloquent on the subject of honesty. The subject came up when we were talking about how Austin first became involved in CNM relationships:

B: So, how did you get involved in being in open relationships? How did that happen?

A: How did that happen...?

B: Like, did you just start dating more than one person at a time, or...?

A: Yeah, dating more than one person at a time. I think the more mature relationships I had the more communication about it we had. So I think that, I definitely have been in monogamous relationships and realized that it didn't quite work for me for a lot of reasons. Not because I didn't think it was as intimate or as committed; in fact, I think sometimes monogamy can feel less of a commitment because it doesn't always feel honest to me. And so I feel really lucky...

B: Why doesn't it feel honest?

A: Well, I think that it can be honest but I think that there's this level of ownership that I don't always relate to about towards mutually owning each other as partners in a way that I just don't feel good about. I feel that it's really natural to be attracted to other people and it's really natural to be open to exploring that... But I think that a lot of times [communication about these attractions] is really shirked off culturally and people end up cheating on each other...

B: You're saying that people shirk off communication about difficult topics like attraction to others [in monogamous relationships]?

A: Yeah, totally.

Austin argues that her early monogamous relationships felt dishonest because she was not able to say what she really felt. She believed that monogamy kept her from being able to express “natural” desires, desires that in no way reflected negatively on her partner or herself. In having to lie, if only by omission, Austin felt she could not share her authentic self with her lover. Austin explicitly states that her wish to date and have sex with other people did not stem from a lack of intimacy or a fear of commitment, the two assumptions often made about non-monogamists. Rather, because she kept important thoughts and desires from her partners, Austin felt less emotionally connected to them.

For Austin and many other non-monogamists, being able to at talk open about desire created greater intimacy and encouraged a real, more complete commitment. Austin simply felt less bound to people she viewed as unwilling to learn true, if perhaps upsetting, realities about her. Had she been able to disclose her desires to her partner, the discussion that would have followed might have made her feel more accepted and loved. In response to this emotional largesse, Austin could experience gratitude and trust in her lover. Facing what many people view as one of the most serious threats to a stable, loving relationship – the fact that your partner can desire and maybe even love other people – sets the stage for being able to talk about any other challenging topics that might come up. This explains why Austin felt less committed in her monogamous relationships. Austin believes that lovers who are willing to face difficult realities about sexuality and desire are stronger, more mature people who are therefore more worthy of commitment and more capable of achieving a deeper, more emotionally-based commitment. Instead of simply going through the motions or letting habit and tradition hold her relationship together, a mature person’s commitment grows out of an emotional connection with her partner.

Austin's debt to psychotherapeutic thinking is apparent in the link she makes between "mature relationships" and "more communication," i.e. honest, confessional communication. In this instance, the revelation of painful truths is linked not with selfishness or a lack of intimacy or commitment, as it might be in a monogamous relationship. Instead, Austin argues that greater intimacy and commitment is achieved not through ignoring or submerging desire but rather through acknowledging it. In this way, intimacy, honesty, personal well-being, and being a more "mature" partner are discursively bound together. Similarly, Austin's dislike of the sense of ownership that she believes characterizes some monogamous couples intersects with the emphasis psychotherapeutic discourse places on both independence and disclosing intimacy.

Austin's argument about honesty and monogamy also highlights significant areas of overlap between the discourse of CNM and the casualization of intimacy. The ideal relationship is between unique individuals who treat each other as peers. Withholding information or not wanting to engage in mutual self-disclosure with one's partner signals an unwillingness to engage with the partner as an equal. In a respectful relationship between peers, people put in the time and energy to understand what another thinks and feels. It is communication – not feelings of ownership – that properly characterizes the relationship between people. In discouraging open conversations about desire, sexuality, and love beyond the bounds of the couple, Austin believes that monogamy – or maybe what could be called "fundamentalist monogamy" – discourages people from treating one another like peers, instead encouraging them to view one another as objects. In committed romantic relationships, many people feel entitled to partners' emotional and psychological energies. Someone with this attitude believes she should get her lover's energy and commitment by default, simply by being in a monogamous relationship. Austin views this mentality as profoundly misguided. A person with

this attitude is not only deceiving her partner but being dishonest with herself. In putting certain topics off-limits, she shuts down communication about vital topics and inhibits deeper intimacy in her relationship.

It might surprise outsiders that many people in consensually non-monogamous relationships would be so bothered by dishonesty. Those who prefer monogamy might also not know that many non-monogamists are strongly averse to cheating, even if they define cheating differently from their monogamous counterparts. Those unfamiliar with CNM might wonder if cheating isn't what non-monogamists are doing already, but as the discussion of fairness and consent earlier in this chapter illustrates, the concept is still relevant. My interviewees frequently depicted cheating as a violation of fairness, consent, and, most fundamentally, honesty. This preference for honesty and against cheating was so strong that it often colored their interactions with others who did not meet their high standards. For example, during our conversation about non-monogamy, I asked Rob and Teresa if they cared whether a potential sexual partner was involved in a (supposedly) monogamous relationship. In other words, was a potential sexual partner's dishonesty to another something that would bother them?

B: What about hooking up with somebody who is already in a relationship that's ostensibly monogamous. Does that bother you?

R: If they're cheating, you mean?

B: Yeah.

R: Oh yeah, that would bother me.

T: Not that you would have much control over their decisions but...

B: Yeah, yeah.

R: It would still bother me.

T: Yeah, it's a lot better just to have it be open and out front without bullshit, and lies, and sneaking around. Like, I don't have the time for that.

Teresa and Rob both disapprove of cheating and the dishonesty it necessarily entails. This distaste is so strong that they would not want to be sexually involved with someone who was cheating on her partner. This type of sexual dishonesty earns the couple's contempt for being disrespectful, even cruel to the monogamous partner. It goes against Rob and Teresa's idea of what kind of people they want to be. Teresa makes this clear when she says, "It's a lot better just to have it be open and out front without bullshit, and lies, and sneaking around." She indicates that this is not a purely ethical judgment when she concludes: "Like, I don't have time for that." Teresa and Rob look down on cheaters because they deceive and hurt people they supposedly love; however, as Teresa's remark, "I don't have time for that," demonstrates, her preference for honesty is due in part to the fact that lying and "sneaking around" use up energy she could be directing towards other activities. Instead of spending her time and energy deceiving her partner, she would rather use that same time energy to deal with the difficult emotions consensual non-monogamy can generate. Teresa would rather talk to her partner about his jealousy, unmet desires, anger, or fear (or tell her partner about these same emotions) than have either of them hiding outside sexual relationships.

As we discussed hooking up with people in ostensibly non-monogamous relationships, Teresa brought up one of Rob's and her housemates. The story of his behavior provided a concrete example of how many non-monogamists view deception in intimate relationships:

T: Some... like, our roommate is engaged to [to a woman]... But he was hooking up and having sex with this other girl but not telling his girlfriend.

B: Was that understood to be ok in that relationship?

R: No, not at all.

T: Not at all ok and it was really uncomfortable for me because he essentially, like – I was supposed to lie.

B: And he wasn't even doing anything to hide his behavior?

R: No, not really. Not from us.

T: But it was awful. I really kind of lost respect for him. The fact that he was sneaking around having sex with somebody... that makes me uncomfortable. Like, if other people want to do that on their own time, that's fine, but if I have to live with it...

Teresa's comment, "If other people want to [cheat] on their own time, that's fine..." is more of a rhetorical signal that she is tolerant and liberal-minded than the expression of a genuinely blasé attitude toward cheating. Her disparagement of cheating and dishonesty is pronounced. Teresa resents how her roommate's blatant affair puts her in the position of lying by omission, insofar as she did not mention the roommate's behavior to his fiancé. Though some individuals (like Liam, discussed in chapter 3) were indifferent regarding secondary partners' other relationships, Teresa and Rob's disapproval of cheating was representative of the attitudes of many of the non-monogamists I interviewed.

While honesty was explicitly cited as an important principle by many of my interview participants, what it means to be honest with one's partner in an intimate relationship is not necessarily transparent or uniform. Different people had different understandings of what constituted "honesty." Of course, couples cannot tell each other literally everything; there is always a process of selection at work in what people reveal to one another. Because this research is interview-based, I am limited to relying on the texts of my interviews and my interactions with my research participants when it comes to drawing inferences about how non-monogamists' understanding of honesty was operationalized in relationships. Yet, I would like to

provide a more detailed picture of what my interlocutors believed honest communication entailed.

Generally speaking, interviews conducted with couples, rather than individuals, provided greater insight into how people believed honesty was enacted within a CNM partnership. This was perhaps because people who chose to be interviewed as couples were better practiced at mutually navigating CNM's communicative and affective minefields. In other words, many of the interviewees who were able to provide a more concrete sense of what constituted honest communication in a CNM relationship seemed also more experienced in revealing and receiving potentially upsetting information, such as one's desire for another person or strong feelings of jealousy. Some of the couples I spoke with related that they openly and frequently discussed the emotional and sexual details of encounters with secondaries with their primary partners. For example, Liam (Chapters 3 and 6) and his girlfriend, Carathea (Chapter 6), regaled each other with exciting details from their escapades. Rob and Theresa had engaged in threesomes and group sex before, and talked openly together about their recent mutual interest in a particular woman.

In my interview with Autumn and Maria, Autumn recounted the time she received a miniature crash-course in CNM honesty when she first started seeing Maria. She related:

A: [W]hen we were casually dating, [Maria] would say, "I just want you to know that I have a lot of marks on me from my other date that I had. And you're going to see me naked so it's really evident on my body that I had a date recently. So, I just want you to know ahead of time." And I was like, "Ok." And that was actually a little challenging for me because normally, I can just not think about it and pretend that it didn't happen but, like, if I'm looking at someone else's... hickey on [Maria] you or whatever, I can't ignore that this is happening. So I went into that date between us being like, "Huh, I don't know how I'm going to feel about this." But it was fine because she had talked to me about it and I knew who the person was – not that I always need to know who it is because I've never actually met that person because they live somewhere else – but

just sort of like, I knew that I had enough information to not feel insecure about it, whereas if she had just tried to keep the lights off that would have [made me feel more insecure]....

This anecdote provides a good example of how many of my interview participants conceptualized honesty. It also points to some of the nuances and complexities of honesty as it is constructed by some non-monogamists. Instead of waiting until her hickeys healed or trying “to keep the lights off,” Maria warns Autumn about her bruises and more or less forces Autumn to acknowledge that Maria has another lover. Autumn’s story follows her change of heart from “pretending” to not notice the physical evidence of non-monogamy to feeling that she “had enough information to not feel insecure about it.” On the one hand, the excerpt demonstrates what I sensed was my research participants’ core belief about honesty: information known was information whose destructive power was greatly reduced. Telling someone about a lover or desire, and having that subject open for discussion, was preferable to looking the other way. For many, honesty meant giving voice to strong emotions and desires, which, if suppressed, could push primary partners away from each other and ruin the trust and faith necessary to hold a CNM relationship together. On the other hand, Autumn says she doesn’t always need to know everything about Maria’s “dates.” Autumn and Maria’s experiences was “fine because [Maria] talked to me about [her other partner] and I knew who the person was – not that I always need to know who it is because I’ve never actually met that person because they live somewhere else...” Autumn’s comments here raise a number of points. First, Autumn suggests that she felt more comfortable seeing evidence of Maria’s non-monogamy because Maria’s partner is someone Autumn knows. Second, Autumn explains that she doesn’t “always need to know who” Maria’s lovers are, especially if they are people Autumn’s never met “because they live

somewhere else.” Autumn seems to be saying that what she needs to know about Maria’s lovers is that they are not a threat to her & her girlfriend’s relationship. Presumably, local “dates” who are acquaintances can be evaluated and written off as dangers to the primacy of Autumn and Maria’s bond. Distant flings are acceptable for a similar reason; they are unlikely to destabilize the women’s primary relationship. Honesty in Autumn and Maria’s case may be more limited than in CNM relationships where partners share exciting details of outside sexual encounters, but the couple sometimes meets one another’s partners; they also felt comfortable independently sharing details about their individual and joint experiences with CNM in a conversation with a researcher. Though my research participants all stated that honest communication was essential for a healthy and functional CNM partnership, not everyone wanted to participate in an interview with her partner, or even have her partner hear what she had to say. This latter situation in particular raises questions about the variable construction of honesty as a principle in CNM relationships.

One young woman, Amy (described at length in Chapter 6), was like many other of my interviewees in saying that honesty was essential for CNM; however, she insisted on stopping our interview when her husband came home from work and into the living room where we were talking. Amy and I didn’t start our interview back up until her husband left the house a few minutes later. For whatever reason, Amy wanted our conversation to be private. Given the length of Amy’s relationship (about seven years), the status of the relationship as CNM since the beginning, and the fact that Amy didn’t say anything negative about her husband, makes it difficult to guess why she didn’t want her husband to overhear her interview. Whatever her reason for desiring privacy, a response like Amy’s indicates that the way honesty is enacted and

experienced in CNM relationships may very well be more complicated than its discursive construction suggest.

For many non-monogamists, honesty, whatever its parameters, is an obligation to both the self and the other. Along with their ethical preference for honesty, non-monogamists value honesty for aesthetic reasons, insofar as honesty renders a person more attractive and desirable. Honesty demonstrates respect for oneself and one's partner. It is a sign of emotional maturity and, in a sense, makes CNM possible. Truthful, straightforward communication makes for happier, more functional, and more ethical sexual relationships. Only by knowing your own thoughts and feelings can you experience intimacy with your partner and develop as a person. Honest communication makes it possible to acknowledge a partner's emotions and desires, as well as one's own. However, honesty would lose much of its utility if both partners did not have the ability to make changes and innovate in their relationship. This heightened awareness means that partners can work together to adjust their relationship as necessary.

Honesty goes hand-in-hand with the CNM values of fairness and consent. But there is another individualist value that shapes many non-monogamists' beliefs about what makes a healthy and happy relationship. In addition to honesty, my interviewees also emphasized the necessity of maintaining distinct, autonomous selves. Non-monogamists want the emotional closeness, support, and commitment of a long-term partnership, but they also say they want to enjoy their freedom. Even those lucky enough to have found someone who meets their high standards for compatibility, in interests ranging from life plans to sexual kinks to political beliefs to music, do not feel that they should renounce the personal growth – or pleasure – that comes from relationships with new people. Freedom enables individuals to continue growing as

people; in this way, non-monogamists find a distinctive strategy for balancing the obligations of their primary partnership with their desire to explore and enjoy the world.

Freedom

Heralded in both psychotherapeutic discourses and by my interview subjects, freedom is a fundamentally individualist value. In the context of CNM, freedom is the personal right to discover the self through new experiences, to push one's boundaries. It is also an entitlement that has to be reconciled with the constraints of a committed romantic partnership. In an era of casualized intimacy, the self is central. Relationships that accept the logic of casualization view themselves as unions of two unique people who have come together with the goal of knowing, loving, and helping one another, while also maintaining enough psychological independence to be able to act as autonomous individuals.

In the context of consensual non-monogamy, freedom is defined as a lack of constraints and a wealth of opportunities for both pleasure and personal development, particularly through the intimate relationships. Sexual relationships with outside partners, as well as emotional connections ranging from simple friendship or affection to deep love, are permitted or encouraged because fulfilling such desires is enjoyable and experiencing whatever challenges they generate is key to personal growth. Freedom must be preserved and exercised to be an ethical and "attractive" person. Someone who is unencumbered by unnecessary restraints or worries about others' prejudices is someone who expresses verve, possibility, and a strong sense of self. Greater freedom leads to greater personal growth and is meaningful, enriching,

and exciting. It also reflects non-monogamists' tendency to privilege pleasure over other goods, like predictability or comfort.

Autumn, of Autumn and Maria, the young queer couple discussed earlier in the chapter, interprets her desire for CNM as an expression of entitlements that hark back to both a feminist and a psychotherapeutic ethos:

A: ... I just feel like I never had any interest in... a closed relationship. Not that I didn't do it; I just like the idea of freedom...

B: What did you want that freedom for?

A: I just didn't want to feel owned or limited in my experience. I feel that, especially growing up so religiously, that people were afraid that if you experienced something and liked it and knew that temptation – to use religious terms – that you'd have this temptation in your life and you wouldn't be able to resist it. So this sheltered life was preferable so nobody knew what they were missing. We had this whole argument around waiting until you get married to have sex because if you've already had sex, maybe you'll be disappointed with your husband, you know? Because you've had a lover that's better or whatever. [A laughs]

B: [Laughs] So maybe he should try harder.

A: [Sarcastically] But that's not possible. So... I feel like I grew up with all these walls around me in terms of experience and I was the type of person who was like, "I want to experience; I want to experience." I didn't feel like I wanted anything extreme even, I just wanted to be able to explore if I wanted to.

Autumn's comments display a feminist sensibility in her contention that she shouldn't be limited sexually because of her gender. As a woman, she had a right to have sex with the partners of her choice. Autumn also gives voice to the psychotherapeutic perspective in her desire to develop beyond others' fears and their imposed limitations. Her desire for personal experience is typical of many non-monogamists. Claims for personal freedom to explore, make mistakes, and enjoy oneself are typical of the individualist ethics encouraged by psychotherapy. Autumn's

sentiments echo the individualism typical of the casualization of intimacy. According to the authors of *Habits of the Heart*, the “good life” according to modern individualism is: “A life rich in experience, open to all kinds of people, luxuriating in the sensual as well as the intellectual, above all a life of strong feeling...” (Bellah et al, 2008, 34).

Autumn sees herself as a woman who rejected her strict religious upbringing and chose an unknown but exciting future over a safe but boring predictability. When Autumn says that she doesn’t “want to feel owned or limited in” her “experience,” she reveals her belief that she is entitled to something called “experience” – new, challenging, exciting, and possibly even difficult occurrences. Concretely, this is likely to mean having new relationships and novel sexual experiences if she chooses to; however, it could also entail non-sexual experiences that are precluded by the assumed obligations to a monogamous (and heterosexual) marriage. Autumn’s remarks illustrate the logical and ethical justification for freedom in the moral worldview of CNM, namely, that it makes greater pleasure and greater personal growth possible. If in individualist ethics, one’s responsibility is at least as much to one’s self as to others, it is morally important to defend your freedom.

This desire for freedom in one’s personal life does not mean that my interviewees were cavalier regarding the responsibilities they had towards their partners. Nothing Autumn says above suggests that she doesn’t feel an obligation to be honest with or devoted to her partner(s). As with honesty, freedom was something both members of the couple needed to enjoy. Partners needed to “check in” occasionally to make sure their expectations were in sync. Each individual was also responsible for voicing her needs and desires. Autumn and Maria explained in considerable detail how they worked together to find the right balance between involvement in and commitment to the relationship on the one hand, and autonomy and

outside interests on other. Below, Autumn explains how she and Maria dealt with jealousy and the need to be reassured when one partner spent the night with another:

A: I feel like one of the biggest things that she [Maria] asked for that was really different for me was that – when she first said it, I was like, “Really?!” – she was like, after you have a date with someone else, as soon as is reasonable, and convenient, and comfortable for your date – you know, not while you’re lying in bed with them – that you call and just check in with me and let me know what happened, sort of just reconnect to each other, sort of. And when she first said it, I was like, “Oh that sounds terrible!” [A laughs] This was after we’d gotten serious and had some time of not having other dates for awhile and our relationship had really shifted, you know? It wasn’t in the beginning when we were just more casual with each other. And so she called me and was like... I don’t even remember the conversation but it was like, “Hey, blah, blah, blah, what did you do last night?” “What did you do last night?” “I had a date with so-and-so and how are you?” “Good.” And then us being sort of like, “I love you” and just having this conversation and then hanging up the phone and being like, “Actually... that feels so much better!”

Different couples in CNM partnerships have different policies about what should be communicated about outside partners, as well as when that information should be shared. The interview subjects I spoke with tended to value openness about what their primary did with other partners. Some only wanted to know if their primary had other partners, others wanted to know when their primary was with another lover, others; the amount of information shared varied from couple to couple. Every person I talked to for this research made sure their primary partner knew about other sexual relationships. In other words, no one I interviewed said they had a strict “Don’t ask; don’t tell” rule with their mate.²² It is impossible to know the extent to

²² However, there do seem to be some differences in levels of disclosure between heterosexual and LGBTIQ couples. Perhaps this is because heterosexual couples, no matter how “alternative” some aspects of their lives and identities are, can still view themselves as characters within an established, recognizable narrative, i.e. normative gender roles, legally-recognized marriage, parents in nuclear family, and so on. In other words, because CNM is difficult to reconcile with established narratives, there can be more dissonance and uncertainty over acceptable behaviors and identities. These incongruities may be exacerbated by gender stereotypes. Unlike same-sex couples who share certain gendered experiences, or trans or genderqueer people who deflect the imposition of gender norms, a man and a woman in

which this finding is shaped by the bias of self-selection; people who chose to talk to me were probably likely to be more into self-disclosure across the board. Nevertheless, I assume that the attitude of my interview participants and the advice given by self-help authors (ibid.) is representative of some non-monogamists. In fact, telling your primary about your relationships with outside partners – along with developing an emotional connection with secondaries – is one facet that distinguishes forms of consensual non-monogamy from “swinging” (see Symonds, 1971 and Walshok, 1971 for accounts of 1960s & early 1970s swinging).

In the excerpt above, Maria asks Autumn to call her “as soon as is reasonable and convenient.” “Reasonable” and “convenient” means not the instant the sexual encounter is considered over, but when there is a natural break in activity and conversation between Maria and her date. This helps cultivate a sense of normalcy and intimacy, rather than crude instrumentality, in secondary relationships. A well-timed phone call manages to accommodate the integrity of a secondary relationship without detracting from a primary partnership. Steps like this phone call help non-monogamists view themselves as moral people who adhere to a different, but legitimate sexual ethics. In keeping with mundane social niceties, Autumn says it was important to both women that the person making the phone call “be polite” to the “date.”

relationship must connect with one another across a series of existential unknowns. Women sometimes appeared to be worried that their sexual desires and activities would threaten the masculinity of their partner; men wanted to prevent or quell feminine jealousy of competitors. There also seemed to be more tension in heterosexual relationships over non-monogamy itself, with one partner desiring CNM much more than the other partner. This came out in interviews with individuals and with couples. For example, one of the first people I interviewed, a bisexual man in her early 30s named Carson, noticeably changed his demeanor as soon as his girlfriend joined our conversation. Carson ended his passionate defense of non-monogamy and became very subdued. Despite the fact that our conversation was supposed to focus on CNM, we switched to other topics. Carson’s girlfriend had never been in a non-monogamous relationship before Carson, and she had no interest in talking to me about CNM. Leah and Ryan, discussed below, appeared to be an exception to this trend. Leah and Ryan had decided separately, before meeting one another, that they wanted a CNM relationship. However, overall, I sensed greater tension over the relationship narratives of straight couples as opposed to queer non-monogamists.

This ethical norm extends beyond responsibilities to a primary to encompass an outsider, a lover one partner may never meet. The feelings of all three individuals – Autumn, Maria, and the date – are respected at the same time without slighting the CNM commitment to freedom, pleasure, and personal growth.

The delicate balance between self and others, freedom and responsibility to one's partner, is also reflected when certain obligations become an issue. Autumn and Maria didn't have the conversation about the post-coital call until their relationship had become more established, and, in a sense, exclusive. Neither woman expected this kind of courtesy until they had, as Autumn said, "gotten serious" and "the relationship had really shifted." Knowing when a relationship is established and "serious" can be difficult for monogamists and non-monogamists alike. Before getting serious with one partner, men and women who consider themselves monogamous may date and sleep with several people over the course of months or years; these relationships and encounters may overlap with one another. For monogamists, a serious relationship is one that ends this lifestyle. A serious relationship demands monogamy; there is no more dating – or sleeping – with other partners. In this case, monogamy connotes "seriousness." For non-monogamists, the seriousness of a relationship means sharing with one's most important partner, the primary, relevant information about other, secondary, lovers. Seriousness in a non-monogamous relationship is marked by greater disclosure and greater self-disclosure. The (sometimes difficult) work of discussing other lovers and dealing with possible jealousy demonstrates each partner's commitment to the relationship. A serious CNM relationship is one where the distinction between primary and secondary becomes clear, and primary partners agree that they have more obligations to each other.

Sometimes, the obligation to disclose can be much less awkward than anticipated.

Autumn said that she was surprised that Maria's calling after a night out turned out to be an easy way of deciding when and how to talk about outside partners. In their interview, both women mentioned traveling frequently, which increased the chances of hook-ups with new partners. Calling after the fact became a way to mediate between unpredictable desire away from home and transparency within the primary relationship. Autumn explains:

A: I didn't expect to have that reaction ... But actually, it takes some of the pressure off because I feel like when you do something with someone else ... you're like, "When do I tell you?" and the timing is sort of funny. I mean, when you're just getting it out of the way right away, there's no like, "When am I going to bring it up? When am I going to do this?" and whatever, so I feel like it actually makes it... much better. Even though when [Maria] first presented the idea, I was like, "Uh, that doesn't sound good."

Autumn was able to be open-minded and flexible about a relationship practice she didn't like initially. Though Autumn talks more about the tradition of calling after a date, the norm of calling one's primary after spending time with another partner was imported from one of Maria's past relationships. Maria's comments below illustrate how she was able to makeover a practice that had once been an annoyance:

M: It was my ex – [calling after spending the night with another partner] was one of the things that she wanted from me. I also thought that was awful. I was like, "How am I going to do that? But she wanted to talk first thing in the morning. She had more anxiety. And I was like, "That's really inconvenient." So, that's why I'm like, "At your earliest convenience," you know? If you call the next night, I know what happened.

Maria was able to adapt a practice that had been born out of anxiety into something that could effectively assuage a primary partner's misgivings. Maria's was resourceful and willing to rework a practice of disclosure until it accorded with her and Autumn's sense of propriety and ethics. In

tackling a difficult issue head-on – addressing the reality of secondary partners and inevitability of some feelings of jealousy and fear for the primary partner who was left out – Autumn and Maria exemplify how consensual non-monogamy embraces, rather than fights against, the casualization of intimacy. Casualization entails hard work, and necessitates flexibility. People who will get along best in a casualized era will be “good communicators”: highly reflexive and skilled at self-disclosure.

Like Autumn and Maria, Leah and Ryan were a couple who worked hard to balance out the right to new experiences with the obligations one has to primary partner. Leah and Ryan had been living together for over a year when I met them in on a chilly February evening. Both worked in IT for different firms and earned solid middle-class salaries. In her late twenties, Leah had a short dark bob that complemented her edgy outfit and sharp sense of humor. Ryan, who was in his mid-30s, wore a button up shirt and was soft-spoken. The couple was friendly, talkative, and open. Like several of the people I interviewed, Leah had previously been involved in a conventional marriage that made her unhappy. Leah’s story had parallels with Autumn’s tale of her failed heterosexual marriage. After getting married in her early 20s, Leah felt trapped by the unspoken norms of her monogamous relationship:

Leah: For me, I have fear of being trapped. I get real unhappy when I feel like someone is putting all these ties and borders on me. When I was married – and I keep going back to this but that was a huge relationship in my life – I was in a monogamous relationship with him, and I was monogamous in all relationships prior to him. And I cut off all contact with meeting new people because I was so scared if I met somebody new – and I tend to have more guy friends than girlfriends – and if I was affectionate with [these new guy friends] that I was cheating. So I stopped – I became stay-at-home-all-the-time, didn’t-have-any-friends, got fat, was miserable. And one day I just looked in the mirror and was like, “Who are you?” You know? And one thing I love about [my current relationship] is that I can be who I am. I don’t have to deny parts of me... Whereas my last long-term relationship it was trying to impress all the time and not being myself. And here, I can be myself; I can be like, “Hey, that waiter’s hot.”

As the excerpt above shows, while monogamy limited Leah's experience of sexual pleasure, the more serious problem posed by monogamy was the degree to which it reduced Leah's perhaps flirty, but ultimately platonic social contacts. Leah was not the only ex-monogamist with this complaint. Several of my interview participants noted that a benefit of CNM was the ability to meet and socialize not only with lovers but friends. For many who practice non-monogamy, friends are much less likely to be seen as potential competitors for the affection and desire of a partner. Men who dated women were particularly like to express an appreciation of this aspect of non-monogamy, since they were able to socialize with female friends without upsetting their partner. Leah felt less free in her monogamous marriage not principally because she had only one sex partner, but because to maintain this status and keep up the appearance – and not just the reality – of sexual monogamy she couldn't allow herself social relationships with men. Thus, for Leah, the biggest drawback of monogamy wasn't sexual fidelity per se. Rather, the "ties" and "borders" that constrained her were the expectations – whether spoken or unspoken is not clear – that accompanied her social life outside of her monogamous marriage. In contrast, one of the biggest perks of her current non-monogamous relationship with Ryan is that Leah can make friends with whomever she likes. Her sense of personal freedom is also enhanced by her ability to speak her mind.

Part of the happiness Leah experiences in her current CNM relationship comes from being free to simply *express* desire: "Hey, that waiter's hot." Maybe this desire will lead to an encounter or a relationship; most of the time, it will not. What is important for Leah is that she feels able to acknowledge this aspect of her sexuality in her relationship with her partner, Ryan. The two central values of expressive individualism, honesty and freedom, are bound up with

one another in this example. To feel free, to feel like her true self, Leah needed to be able to honestly express her desires and emotions. To speak honestly, she needed greater freedom of behavior and expression than she had in her monogamous marriage. One reason CNM works for her is that it puts honesty and personal freedom at the forefront of the relationship.

As the examples featured in this chapter show, consensual non-monogamy provides an alternative ethical framework for intimate relationships. The ethical schema embraced by many non-monogamists values the egalitarian and individualist values of fairness, consent, honesty, and freedom. But, of course, CNM is also about sex. In conducting this research, I wanted to understand how my interviewees thought about sex, how they might feel differently about sexuality and love than people who chose monogamy, and how their emotions were engaged by sex and their partners. In the course of trying to get develop a deeper understanding of the effects of CNM on people's sex life with their primary partner, I asked my interview participants "Does non-monogamy have wide-ranging effects on your sex life, other than just increasing the number of partners?" Below is Maria and Autumn's response to this question:

M: When you're monogamous, you obviously have less options. And emotionally...I feel like that's a sacrifice.

A: There's also a lot of research around couples who do things that feel new and exciting and challenging and even scary, that couples who do those kinds of things have a better, more long-lasting relationship. And there's a lot of research that supports that even though they're not promoting non-monogamy. [Autumn laughs]

B: Yeah.

A: I don't know... I just think that both of us have a strong fear of ever being bored.

[Maria laughs]

A: And I don't feel like we will ever be bored with each other.

Pleasure and excitement are clearly valued over predictability, comfort, and security by non-monogamists like Autumn and Maria. When asked how non-monogamy impacts her, Maria points to the increased diversity afforded by CNM; she also states her preferences for emotional intimacy outside her primary partnership. Maria's comments demonstrate that the freedom provided by CNM isn't limited to sexual encounters; it extends to emotional involvements. As with Leah, these bonds might be sexual, but they are not necessarily so. Both women felt it was easier to develop platonic friendships while in CNM relationships as opposed to monogamous partnerships. Non-monogamy allows for a greater number and wider range of relationships since social contacts are rarely hemmed in or eliminated because of her partner's insecurities. For her part, Autumn argues that the otherwise selfish desire for experience can be channeled in ways that ultimately strengthen the couple. In saying, "I don't feel like we will ever be bored with each other," Autumn is providing a blueprint for a relationship that balances the self and other, pleasure and obligation, novelty and commitment. Though sex with other people is not an experience that would bond all couples, for women like Autumn and Maria, CNM makes their primary partnership stronger.

Both young women feel entitled to excitement; this excitement is, in part, the objective of the freedom valued by therapeutic, individualist ethos of consensual non-monogamy. The *frisson* produced by the excitement, desire, hope, jealousy, and fear that almost inevitably accompany CNM are channeled by non-monogamists back into their primary relationship. The result is that both partners engage in self-disclosure and experience the personal growth that comes with it. Working to make one's selfish desires benefit a primary relationship is a delicate task. However, within an individualist ethics, taking care of one's own needs is just as important

as caring for others. As the authors of *Habits of the Heart* write, “In the [psycho]therapeutic view, a kind of selfishness is essential to love” (Bellah et al, 100).

A distinctive sexual ethics

A common preconception about non-monogamists is that the desire for more sexual variety is the only motivating factor for their lifestyle. Sex is of course important, but the reality is more complicated. Non-monogamous people often say “it’s not about the sex.” They claim that the effort involved in being successful, healthy non-monogamous partnerships demonstrates the seriousness and legitimacy of non-monogamy. A defense like these could be read cynically as an attempt to paper over the selfishness and lust that “really” drive non-monogamy; however, the complexity and richness of my interviewees’ stories belies such an easy dismissal.

As this chapter has shown, many non-monogamists recognize the challenges posed by CNM and work to develop an ethical system to navigate them. Deriving its language and arguments from the discourses of popular feminism and psychotherapy, the ethics of consensual non-monogamy aligns itself with the egalitarianism and individualism characteristic of the casualized age. In this way, non-monogamists use the rhetorical “tools” that are available to them to validate CNM ethics. The high value placed on fair treatment, consent and choice, honest self-disclosure, and personal freedom and pleasure would sound familiar to most Americans, even if they disagreed with how non-monogamists interpret such values and put them into practice. By rejecting the shibboleth of monogamy, non-monogamists elevate these

values above others – such as emotional and sexual exclusivity, psychological security, and altruistic sacrifice.

For a non-monogamist, the boundaries and entitlements of fairness, consent, honesty, and freedom often trump the traditional comforts of committed relationships. This attitude demonstrates how consensual non-monogamy is illustrative of the casualization of intimacy. CNM is lifestyle in line with the subject position cultivated by casualization. The ideal subject of the casualized era respects the autonomy and choice of other persons. She has a broadly egalitarian attitude, and emphasizes fairness and equality between people. A corollary of fairness is consent. To grant consent is to accede to a contract, however implicit, and to exercise one's autonomy in making meaningful choices. Honesty is a virtue for the casualized self, both because it makes fairness and informed consent possible, and because the honest revelation of one's thoughts and feelings to one's partner is construed as more respectful and fair. Honest communication makes it possible for a person to express herself, which many people feel is essential for experiencing intimacy as an affective state. Finally, the casualized self values her freedom, sometimes even preferring it to the security of a long-term relationship. Freedom means the ability to make choices without unnecessary encumbrances; it sometimes entails privileging one's own needs and desires above those of others. Such freedom is viewed as essential for personal growth, for the life-long development of a person so that she can become her truest, most authentic self. In this understanding, personal growth comes in large part from new experiences – including new sexual and emotional experiences – which non-monogamists believe shouldn't suddenly come to a halt because of an established romantic partnership.

The elevation of a hybrid egalitarian, individualist ethos demonstrates how CNM “operationalizes” the casualization of intimacy. Casualization is a discourse and a habitus that prizes hard work, flexibility, the individual, and disclosing intimacy in the context of social and economic precarity. This chapter has dealt with egalitarian and individualist discourses and examined how they provide non-monogamists with an ethical framework for their relationships. Non-monogamists were able to weave together two different but complementary perspectives into a coherent moral schema that recognized the tension between self and other in intimate relationships, and attempted to find a balance between them. The next chapter of this dissertation continues this exploration of the ethics of consensual non-monogamy. It focuses on non-monogamous men with female partners and examines how CNM men construct a “polyhegemonic” masculinity that both adheres to and conflicts with the values set out in chapter 4. Just as the discourse of CNM seeks to find a balance between self and other, many non-monogamous men try to reconcile aspects of hegemonic masculinity with the more emotionally available, egalitarian, and communicative self required by CNM relationships. Using Elizabeth Sheff’s (2006) term “polyhegemonic masculinity” to describe many non-monogamous men’s ambivalent identification with stereotypical maleness, chapter 5 looks at the intersection of gender performance and the discourse of non-monogamy to better understand the challenges presented by the casualization of intimacy.

CHAPTER 5: PERFORMING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Defining polyhegemonic masculinity

Though they may flout certain conventions by renouncing monogamy, straight and bisexual men in CNM relationships still need to come up with a gendered and sexual identity that is acceptable to them, their partners, and that is workable in everyday life. Though I did not explicitly ask them about the relationship between their identity as non-monogamists and its impact on their identity as men, the issue was raised by many of the men with whom I spoke. In this section, I focus on Carson, Rob, and Ian, three white, middle-class men between the ages of 28 and 40, and examine how they negotiated the expectations of hegemonic masculinity with their involvement in CNM relationships. Two major concerns shaped their construction of a specifically non-monogamous masculinity, namely sex with multiple partners and what they viewed as the heightened demands of disclosing intimacy. In our interviews, these non-monogamous men wanted to contrast what they saw as their distinctive, superior masculinity with hegemonic masculinity while also exemplifying certain hegemonic virtues, such as being successful with women and the ability to overcome challenges.

Scholars differ in their definitions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 2004; Korobov, 2009). I find Wetherwell and Edley's (2009) construction of hegemonic masculinity the most useful in understanding how my male interview subjects constructed a specifically non-monogamous masculinity. Wetherwell and Edley see hegemonic masculinity as a composite of a range of desirable traits stereotypically associated with men. These traits include "authoritativeness, rationality, independence... strength, boldness, winning challenges, [and] cool toughness" (28 - 29). Since no individual man perfectly embodies the masculine ideal,

it creates a deep feeling of ambivalence (Wetherwell and Edley, 2009). Men may feel inadequate if they don't embody the hegemonic ideal but they desire this identity so much they cannot give it up. One major strategy for dealing with this ambivalence is to distance oneself from hegemonic masculinity without rejecting it outright. For example, the men Wetherwell and Edley interviewed contrasted hegemonic, or "macho," masculinity with their own "ordinary" masculinity. This ordinary masculinity allowed men to depict themselves as "reasonable," "normal," "healthy" in distinction to "a macho stereotype dismissed as extreme, over the top, a caricature, [and] seen as a sign of immaturity..." (Wetherwell and Edley, 29). Such disavowals did not mean however, that hegemonic masculinity was not an ideal and (the ultimate) reference point for male identity. Rather, this was a way of reconciling oneself to hegemonic norms and assuring oneself of at least the possession of derivative attributes.

Many of the men I interviewed for this dissertation expressed ambivalence towards hegemonic masculinity that was fraught in distinctive ways because of their (1) ability to have multiple lovers and (2) obligation to engage in high levels of disclosing intimacy. Their identity as non-monogamists presented special challenges vis-à-vis the construction of a desirable masculine identity. Like many other men, they wanted to embody the good traits of hegemonic masculinity without the bad (such as arrogance, rudeness, or violence towards women); however, my interviewees were not given to see themselves as exemplars of "ordinary" masculinity. Because of their commitment to the ethical practice of consensual non-monogamy, my male respondents were likely to see themselves as superior to other men, especially those who did not practice CNM. Nevertheless, my interview subjects did not reject traditional understandings of gender altogether.

In her ethnographic and interview-based work on polyamory, Sheff (2006) contends that heterosexual, non-monogamous men variously identify and dis-identify with aspects of hegemonic masculinity. Sheff introduces the term “polyhegemonic” to describe the gender identity of men in CNM relationships. The neologism “polyhegemonic” invokes both meanings of the prefix “poly”: as a synonym for a polyamorous or non-monogamous lifestyle and as a signal of multiplicity. Sheff describes her interview subjects’ gender performance as “polyhegemonic,” insofar as “respondents reaped the benefits of their complicity with hegemonic masculinity” but had “their collusion undermined by their introspection and active refusal to sustain [certain] hegemonic conventions” (623).

Polyhegemonic masculinity is a polysemous term. Some might object that “polyhegemonic” is oxymoronic. I both concede and do not concede this point. Simply because it is paradoxical does not mean it is not an accurate description of how identity is constructed and experienced. The oxymoronic quality of polyhegemony therefore doesn’t make the description less apt, nor does it ultimately undermine the model of hegemony for thinking about the construction of masculine gender identities. The (poly)hegemonic can at once be a singular ideal and a set of possibilities.²³

²³ If some fear that the term (poly)hegemonic swallows up all possible gender performances and identities the moment they emerge, they need look no further than the formal and informal punishments, often in the form of violence, that are visited upon anti-hegemonic practices and selves. Anti-hegemonic gender performances often cause reactions that range from mild confusion to disgust and horror. An example of retaliation against non-normative practices and selves can be seen in bullying and violence against LGBTIQ youth (and adults), particularly those who don’t easily fit into either the male or female categories of our Western gender binary. Anti-hegemonic gender identities can also be those which are simply not recognized, such as when genderqueer, transgender, or transsexual individuals must decide which sex-segregated restroom to use in a public place.

If hegemony is the process of continual usurpation of new, originally rebellious and anti-hegemonic practices, ideas, and affects, then a degree of flux and change is intrinsic to hegemony's definition. However uneasily, the definite and the debatable can exist within the same cultural space. Simply because something is unstable does not mean that it has no parameters. Like the protons and electrons in an atom that cannot be located exactly but whose territories can be traced with the appropriate mathematical formulae, the hegemonic at any particular cultural-temporal matrix can be delineated. The men discussed in this chapter share in many aspects of the same cultural-temporal matrix: they are white, between about 28 and 40, have sex with women, and as their status as professionals attests, move with at least some degree of success within the norms of mainstream Anglo-American institutional cultures.

Like the polyhegemonic men Sheff interviewed, the straight and bisexual men in my study undoubtedly benefited from a conventional gender performance in their public lives, particularly in the workplace. Yet, overall, the men I spoke with offered a more progressive kind of masculine identity, one they felt was defined by an honest, mature, and hard-working engagement in CNM. In our conversations, Carson, Ian, and Rob related two important features appropriate for an ethical, non-monogamous relationship. First, they expressed distaste for anonymous sex. In their minds, the desire for an emotional connection with their sexual partners was part of treating women in a respectful and fair manner. Second, my interview participants talked about the effort they devoted to disclosing intimacy. They portrayed themselves as flexible and hard-working men who were able to dismantle the social programming of hegemonic masculinity and dedicate their energy to expressing themselves and listening to their female partners. The straight and bisexual men I interviewed consistently put

forward a distinctive self-image, one that fits the contours of casualization and uses its language to construct a polyhegemonic, non-monogamous masculinity.

The rejection of hypersexuality

Many of my male interview subjects liked to stress their anti-hegemonic traits, particularly their rejection of hypersexuality (Sheff, 2006). In this context, hypersexuality refers to the notion that a “real” man is constantly on the prowl for sex. Though he pursues “hot” women, he also indiscriminately seeks out female partners and sleeps with as many as he can, often only once. With this behavior, the hypersexual man at once demonstrates his virility and a marked lack of interest in his partners as individuals. Some non-monogamous men who have sex with women find themselves navigating between an affiliation with this unpleasant character and the reality that promise of more sex is part of what draws many men to CNM. Because of an assumed abundance of partners, the very term “non-monogamy” can conjure up the image of an oversexed Lothario. This was not the impression my interview participants wanted to convey. At least in conversation with a female interviewer, several men went out of their way to distance themselves from this figure. Instead, they wanted to depict themselves as guys who were strongly sexual but who also treated women ethically and with respect.

Carson was of the very first people I interviewed for this project.²⁴ At the time of our meeting, Carson is about 30 years old, with dark wavy hair. He works as an educator in the suburbs. Carson’s entry into CNM came about after college. According to him, despite his

²⁴ Though the audio-recorded interviews and transcripts for this research are strictly confidential, because he worked as an educator with young children, Carson did not want our conversation to be audio-recorded. Consequently, I do not have a transcript of our interview. I am drawing from my interview notes, which is why any direct quotes included above are very brief.

identification with a number of “alternative” social causes and ideologies – anti-war activism and support for gay rights – Carson explained that he didn’t encounter and embrace non-monogamy until after he started his adult worklife. He spoke about attitudes toward monogamy as though they were a kind of brainwashing. Throughout his high school and college years, Carson engaged in serial monogamy, moving quickly from one partner to another. He attributes this rapid succession of partners to a high sex drive coupled with an aversion to cheating. At the time, Carson reasoned that he had to break up with a current partner as soon as he started to have feelings about someone new. He first started exploring the idea of polyamory when a friend took him to a meet-up of a group called “Mindful Polygamy.” He eventually became part of this social circle, even holding an office in the organization. CNM was a revelation for Carson. He felt very relieved that he could maintain emotional and sexual contact with a primary partner while also seeking other sexual (and perhaps emotional) connections. According to Carson, this was how he reconciled his strong sexuality with a desire for more lasting relationships.

Though he said that he had a “high sex drive,” in our conversation, Carson focused on the emotional rather than the physical components of polyamory. As with other non-monogamists, a concern with ethical behavior suffused also Carson’s discussion of CNM. He explained that, contrary to what outsiders might think, “polyamory is not [only] about sex.” Carson described himself as “all about connecting and intimacy.” Carson, like many other non-monogamists, also looked down on cheating, viewing it as dishonest, disrespectful, and cowardly. This attention to the ethics of CNM – particularly the need to be fair and honest in intimate relationships – made Carson critical of the norms of hegemonic masculinity. During a discussion about honesty and many people’s hypocritical or contradictory attitudes towards sex, Carson recounted an incident with his healthcare provider. Carson prides himself on being

responsible regarding his sexual health, and is tested for STDs every six months. He said that once, after telling his doctor that he had multiple sexual partners, his male doctor high-fived him. Carson was very critical of his doctor's behavior. He told this story because he thought it conveyed how sexism can shape healthcare and because it highlighted the difference between the hypocrisy of a heteronormative, pro-monogamy culture and the more egalitarian world of CNM.

Carson's story suggests how his attitude and sexual behavior disrupt hegemonic masculinity in multiple ways. First, though Carson enjoys having sex with women that aren't his girlfriend, he also has had sexual encounters with men, an activity his doctor probably wouldn't congratulate him for. Second, he rejects his doctor's "scorecard" mentality, where a high number of female sexual partners is evidence of one man's superiority over others. Carson's rejection is partially due to ambivalence about male hypersexuality; it is also attributable to his recognition that there was a double standard lurking behind the praise of a man's sexual prowess. Carson was quick to observe that a woman would have been far less likely to be congratulated by her healthcare professionals for having multiple partners. A third way in which Carson performs a polyhegemonic masculinity is his definition of male virility. Carson repudiates the sexist and pro-natalist cultural directive that "real" men are able to impregnate women. Carson told me that the doctor who applauded his sexual success then reacted with horror to Carson's inquiries about vasectomy. The doctor's pro-natalism is in line with American cultural beliefs and institutional policies. Carson discovered that that he was below the age at which insurance plans will pay for the procedure and that he was therefore ineligible for reimbursement.

Another way Carson repudiated hypersexuality was through his distaste for one-night stands.²⁵ He was not alone among other non-monogamous men I interviewed. Rob, a twenty-something media professional who was introduced in Chapter 3, also said that he had very little interest in one-time sexual encounters. Rather than being thrilled by anonymity, he preferred emotional connections with his partners. During our interview, I asked Rob and fiancée, Theresa, if they have one-time, casual encounters with people. They responded that if they did, it was very rare, and they didn't prefer it.

R: Not even as a rule [do we avoid one-night stands but]... I mean, even when I was in a band, I dated a lot of people but it takes longer than one night to form a relationship with people and I never mastered the art of small talk –

T: You had one; didn't you have one one-night stand?

R: Sweetie, that was just, that was just weird. [Rob laughs] It was just weird. It was interesting, it was a novelty. I was staying –

T: Neither of us are one-night stand people.

B: Why is that?

T: Well, what's the point? Like, even when I was single I just never see the point of, like, meeting somebody and you don't even know if you like them. Like, why do you want to have sex with them?

R: Some things do progress really quickly...

T: That's true, but at the same time that's not an "I'm drunk, you're drunk. Let's leave this club and go fuck in the bathroom," or something.

B: And then never see each other again.

R: Right.

²⁵ The distinction between the term "one-night stand" and "hook-up" should be noted here. As Kathleen Bogle (2008) explains, hook-ups, which can involve anything from kissing to sex, are not necessarily singular events. Someone can hook-up with the same partner at different times. One-night stands are, by definition, one-time only occurrences.

T: Yeah and that's not what I want to do.

R: Usually if I connect with someone emotionally or physically, I want to continue to have some sort of relationship with them. It doesn't have to follow any particular path or...

T: Yeah, we can be friends or say hi to one another every now and then but I don't want to have a, "Well let's shag and say goodbye," you know, here's your parting gift. [Rob laughs]... They're just – there's no point. Like, I really see no point.

R: And it just seems like a lot of work too.

In addition to the mistrust of rules commonly expressed by many non-monogamists, there is a wealth of information in this excerpt. First, Rob walks a fine line, attempting to distinguish between dating "a lot of people" while being "in a band" (presumably on the road and in new locales each day), and one-night stands. When his fiancé corrects him – "Didn't you have a one-night stand?" – Rob plays down the experience, labeling "it weird" (twice), "interesting," and "a novelty." He tries to create distance between the decision of his past self and his current identity. Rob portrays himself as uninterested in one night stands now, but not because of any particular negative experiences in the past. Instead, he attributes his disinterest to the fact that his one foray into that territory was not sufficiently compelling.

At this point, Theresa jumps in and interrupts Rob's narrative, just as he was going to clarify his thoughts about his "weird" and "interesting" one-night stand. Theresa makes an announcement for the couple, "Neither of us are one-night stand people." In the context of the conversation, it did not strike me that Theresa said this primarily out of insecurity or a need for control. It seemed that Theresa wanted to emphasize the unity of her relationship and show that both partners shared similar attitudes. And while Rob and Theresa are in agreement generally, they offer different perspectives on one-time sex. For Theresa, liking someone's

personality is an important part of attraction. She has trouble understanding the appeal of sex with someone who is, for her, still unknown, even a non-entity: "I just never see the point of, like, meeting somebody and you don't even know if you like them. Like, why do you want to have sex with them?" She later reiterates her statement, saying "I really see no point" to what she calls "anonymous hook-ups."

Rob, while hardly endorsing faceless promiscuity, believes that people can develop a mutual attraction in a short amount of time. He counters Theresa's comments by saying, "Some things do progress really quickly..." In other words, you can feel a connection and like someone you've known only a little while. Rob distinguishes between an emotional and a physical connection with someone, but also emphasizes his desire to have a relationship with his sex partners. He says, "Usually if I connect with someone emotionally or physically, I want to continue to have some sort of relationship with them. It doesn't have to follow any particular path or..." Rob doesn't necessarily have fixed expectations of what this relationship will be like, but he does want to be in relation to another person. While a paragon of hegemonic masculinity may care little or not at all about the personality of a casual lover, Rob wants to discover the unique subjectivity of his female partners. Though Rob displays a typically masculine interest in sex with attractive women he's just met, he emphasizes that he wants more than just sex. Desire for an emotional connection with secondary partners allows Rob to perform a polyhegemonic masculinity, that at once distances itself from a hegemonic gender identity yet exhibits some of its features.

The last significant feature of Rob and Theresa's interview that I would like to briefly acknowledge is Rob's mention of "work." Every now and then, women and genderqueer people

I interviewed would characterize CNM as work, but this was a much more pronounced theme among men. In the passage above, after Theresa dismisses the practice of “let’s just shag and say goodbye,” Rob agrees with her by saying, “And it seems like a lot of work, too.” The conjunction “and” signals that he’s on board with his fiancée, and that totally anonymous hook-ups are “pointless.” But “and” also communicates he wants to add something new to the conversation: a complaint about the emotional work that goes into having secondary partners. Why having multiple sex partners counts as “work” is something that I will explore extensively later, in the section below on disclosing intimacy.

The disinterest in one-night stands voiced by Carson and Rob was echoed by Ian, who identified with conventional masculinity more than the other men I interviewed. A white man in his early 40s, Ian had been married and divorced twice. He was currently married to a woman in her early 20s with whom he had a daughter. Ian too said that he preferred to have personal connection with lovers.

Ian: Where non-monogamy, it’s where, I mean, I always have to have relationships, I always have to have [relationships] with people I’m connected to. I have never had a one-night stand in my entire life, and, uh, but, non-monogamy means I have a primary, I’m in a relationship with somebody, and I might have friends I’m intimate with. Well, that is the hope. [Ian laughs.]

Ian prioritizes his primary partner, his wife, but makes clear his desire for additional partners. He expresses his desire for “friends” with whom he can have both a sexual and emotional connection. There is some ambiguity around the word “intimacy” in the passage above, but since Ian previously states that he “always” needs to “have relationships” with his partners, intimacy here means appreciation for the subjectivity of the women with whom he has sex. His declaration of “hope” refers to the dating drought he was suffering

through when we met. Ian was somewhat perplexed by his recent lack of success finding suitable female partners outside his marriage.

Ian was surprised by the dearth of interested women in his life because of what he considered his exemplary performance of polyhegemonic masculinity. More than any other man I interviewed, he embodied a hegemonically masculine physique (minus the head of thick hair). Ian is tall, muscular, and fit; he clearly spent time at the gym. He put significant effort into his appearance but he did not project the image of the “metrosexual” (Simpson, 2002), the kind of man who enjoys buying and using personal care products like hair gel, face creams, and designer cologne. His clothes were slightly relaxed, not fitted, further aligning him with a more traditional masculine look as opposed to more youthful, aggressively trendy fashions. Yet, along with this image of strength, Ian cultivated a more emotionally responsive persona, and a willingness to engage in greater self-disclosure than men who adhere more strictly to hegemonic masculinity.

Given his combination of physical strength and emotional availability, Ian believed he should be a very desirable man. A discussion about difficulties finding partners and his jealousy regarding his younger wife’s easy access to new lovers (which is explored later in this chapter, and at length in Chapter 6) led Ian to explicitly compare himself with other men in his social circle, who performed a masculinity that was quite different from his.

I: ... I travel in a lot of bisexual circles. I am not bisexual.

B: You mean men who are also bisexual, not just women?

I: Yes, yes. And so there’s this....

B: Is it sometimes awkward for you because you feel like your friends might be attracted to you? Your male friends?

I: Not as much. No. I mean, to some degree, sure. But, I haven’t experienced that to any real degree, other than a competition, other than a sense of, like, I might be a lot

more open-minded than you are. It's not because they're bi. It's because they're people and they're competitive and quite honestly, so, I could be wrong, and this is only my experience. And I'm a sociologist; it's what my degree's in.

B: Oh, very cool.

I: So I look at big picture stuff... but my experience has been that a lot of the bi men I've been interacting with have largely been very metro, semi-androgynous kinda stuff. Quite honesty, I think I am a threat to that.

B: To their self-image?

I: Yes. Not in that they think they're not sexy. They know they're sexy. They know they're sexy. However, I'm a big guy; I'm a fit guy. I'm very aggressive. [Ian laughs]

B: You're more like a standard that they define themselves against?

I: Exactly, exactly. And I think there are still primal levels to which we operate. I still think there's genetic – or whatever you want to call it, because I don't think they're just social – that we crave and that excites us. And everybody's different. And so I think that some of those qualities in people are somehow natural.

B: Yeah.

I: Women are shaped in a certain way that attracts men. I think that stems from, like, in our lizard brain saying "Procreate." And so I think strong, what would be very masculine men, have an attraction on some level because that strength is very positive, you know?

Ian's and my exchange above starts off with an unexpected announcement that he "travels in a lot of bisexual circles," which include many bisexual men.²⁶ Ian explains that instead of

²⁶ I do not know enough about Ian's social life and platonic friendships to say definitively why Ian chose to talk mostly about his bisexual male friends as opposed to his heterosexual ones. I think there are a few factors that may have contributed to his focus on bisexual men he knew as opposed to his friendships with other straight men. First, Ian stated that after his divorce from his second wife (to whom he was married for almost a decade), many of their straight married friends "chose sides" with his ex, reducing his pool of straight guy friends. Second, perhaps he simply happened to have an unusually sexually diverse friend group for a straight man; perhaps he enjoyed the company of other folks who could qualify as "sexual minorities" because he believed they shared a common status. Third, and perhaps most likely, Ian may have chosen to talk about bisexual men he knew because he was participating in an interview about consensual non-monogamy. As interview participants in Chapter 3 who wanted to draw sharp distinctions between themselves and "polyamorists," this might have been another incident of the "narcissism of small differences." Ian may have been, given his admittedly competitive nature, eager to demonstrate his superiority over other sexual nonconformists.

desire, he senses some competition between his bisexual male friends and himself. The meaning of Ian's statement "like, I might be a lot more open-minded than you are," is uncertain. It is unclear if he is using the word "like" here as a filler word or to ventriloquize another person's speech or thoughts. If Ian is the speaker of these words, he is asserting that his friends, though sexual minorities, are not necessarily as enlightened and free of prejudice as he is. If an imagined bisexual friend is speaking these words, then it comes across as a claim that bisexuals, since they are sexual outlaws, are more open-minded and accepting of diversity than straight men like Ian. I am inclined towards the second reading, as Ian then says, "It's not because they're bi. It's because they're people and they're competitive..." In light of the subsequent sentences, Ian appears to be on the defensive, but also in the position of aligning his friends' criticism – and perhaps himself – within a more hegemonically accepted masculinity. In other words, by asserting that his bi friends are just acting like "people," Ian is attempting to discursively bring them back into the fold of hegemonic masculinity. Ian also emphasizes that his friends are being competitive and are therefore, more masculine than their other aspects of their gender performance attests. If bisexual men think that Ian, as a heterosexual, is not as "open-minded," this isn't because they are bisexual, but because they are competitive, as all (real) men are, in Ian's worldview.

Ian is at once stating that bisexual men are and are not like more traditionally masculine men like him. As with the discourse of "colorblindness" (Alexander, 2012), this logic of all-sexual-orientations-are-equally-good has a way of delineating and reifying the very stereotypes that it denies should exist. In Ian's comments, bisexual men are at once catty, falsely superior, delusional, and able to be reappropriated within the schema of

hegemonic masculinity via the trope of “competition.” According to this line of thinking, Ian’s bisexual male friends have their faults, but their inevitably competitive natures reveal that they are still men deep down. Bisexuality is second to real masculinity, with cattiness construed as a perverse rendering of a properly male attribute. Ian’s deft construction of his bisexual friends also renders him their moral and gender superior. He embodies the healthy, straightforward competitiveness of a real man but also displays the male allegiance and camaraderie without which hegemonic masculinity could not sustain its social power. By reclaiming his bisexual male friends as essentially real men, Ian at once criticizes and redeems them, elevating his own masculinity in the process.

Ian characterizes his bisexual male friends as considerably more effete, but he also acknowledges that “they are sexy.” Though he explained that he was not bisexual and never had sexual contact with other men, there is a tense, ambiguous desire running through Ian’s description of his own attractiveness. Taking Ian at his word, that he is not attracted to men, this recognition of his friends’ sexiness is Ian giving voice to what he perceives to be a wider societal (or maybe female) approval of bisexual male gender performance. With their desire for and appeal to both women and men, bisexual men are both Ian’s competitors and not in the same game. Ian shows that he is “open-minded” in being able to accept and even admire his bisexual friends, but also competitive in trying to be more manly and desirable (to women). He tries to walk a fine line, showing respect for his friends but also contesting their version of sexiness as better than his own.

In competing for sexual partners, Ian thinks that a man like himself has something distinctive, maybe even something superior, to offer. When I ask if Ian believes that he is a

“standard that [his friends] define themselves against,” he responds, “Exactly. Exactly.” In other words, there are pretty boys, and then there are big, fit, strong guys like Ian. Ian thinks that the appeal of strong men is “primal” and “natural.” He moved almost immediately from a contrast between his more metrosexual friends and his “big” and “aggressive” masculinity to an argument about the “primal” and “genetic” appeal of hegemonic masculinity. But here, it’s unclear what exactly the implications of Ian’s assertions are. After stating that people have instinctual urges, Ian then says, “And everybody’s different.” The dual contentions that we are primarily, genetically driven to behave in certain gendered ways, while all each being different from one another, isn’t strictly contradictory, but the emphases are at odds. Invoking natural gender roles stresses homogeneity. It draws attention to the similarities between members of the same gender and the differences between men and women. Recognizing that “everybody’s different,” emphasizes diversity. One again, Ian is switching between different tropes, in this case, evolutionary teleology and the diversity that challenges it.

Popular (heterosexist) thinking about evolution is helpful for Ian’s defense of his kind of sex appeal. He argues that “women are shaped in a certain way that attracts men” and attributes the appeal of women’s bodies to men’s “lizard brain[s] saying ‘Procreate.’” Ian explains that if men are instinctually drawn to women’s curves, then “strong, what would be very masculine men” should be attractive to women because “strength is very positive.” With the logic of evolutionary psychology, women want men to be protectors and providers, and out on the savannah tens of thousands of years ago, tall men with big muscles were best able to accomplish these tasks (Wilson, 1975; Wright, 1995). Thus, an

evolutionary perspective on gender, desire, and sexuality privileges a more, rather than less, hegemonic masculinity.

If the hypersexuality of hegemonic masculinity is competitive, powerfully appetitive, and always heterosexual, then it both is and isn't apparent in Ian's thoughts about one-night stands, male bisexuality, and the natural sex appeal of strong, assertive men and soft, curvy women. Throughout my conversation with Ian, there is considerable tension between the recognition of a new, fashionable, "semi-androgynous" metrosexual gender performance and hegemonic masculinity. Ian is caught in the middle, holding out his body as a hegemonic male ideal while also proudly displaying an anti-hegemonic distaste for one-night stands and an interest in relating emotionally to secondary female partners. This polyhegemonic gendered performance – like Carson and Rob's – enables Ian to navigate tricky issues that are of particular relevance to men who are involved in CNM relationships with women. These issues include an increased wealth of sexual opportunities and the heightened importance of men's physical appearance when "settling down" indefinitely with one partner isn't a preferred way of life.

As the analysis above shows, instead of being high-fiving frat boys or 40-something Don Juans, the straight and bisexual men I interviewed wanted to construct themselves as guys who were successful with women while also treating women honestly and fairly. No one wanted to come across as a predatory womanizer. Non-monogamous men wanted to convey strength without brutishness. This strength could be expressed with powerful muscles, but it could also be demonstrated by adopting an open-minded ease towards others' diverse genders and sexualities. No one wanted to be seen as homophobic. Unlike an imagined exemplar of

hegemonic masculinity, they were not threatened by other's choices. Yet, in this status contest with other men, they could not help but be in relation to hegemonic masculinity. Masculinity is competitive, but not in the way ardent evolutionary psychologists would have us believe. Culturally, masculinity is constructed as a prize. It is something one can win or fail to achieve, and prizes only have worth if not everyone can have one. This attitude is in stark contrast to notions about femininity, which many Western ideologies typically treat as a kind of default setting, an unimpressive consolation gift (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). As with my interview participants' attitudes about labels for their lifestyle, my male respondents at times exhibited a "narcissism of small differences." CNM men were interested in distinguishing themselves from male Others with whom they may have had much in common, including class, educational levels, generation or age, and sexual orientation. Sexist, pro-natalist doctors and metrosexual, bisexual men provided useful foils for my interview participants' masculinity. Carson, Rob, and Ian worked to project a more enlightened polyhegemonic identity that distinguished them from other men in their milieu.

The casualization of intimacy necessitates polyhegemonic masculinities. The hegemonic man – stoic, a provider, muscular, womanizing, disdainful of weakness – still has enormous cultural appeal and power,²⁷ but performing this sort of hegemonic masculinity to the letter is unlikely to lead to professional success or romantic happiness in the early 21st century (Illouz, 2008). In a casualized era, flexibility wins out over traditionally masculine rigidity, particularly when it comes to intimate relationships. Men who are flexible enough to move between

²⁷ Just look at the sex appeal of *Mad Men's* high-earning, workaholic, philandering advertising executive Don Draper, played by Jon Hamm. Hamm's old fashioned, chiseled jaw good looks, and strong, silent type persona, have won him the admiration of millions of women (Baker, 2009), the envy of men, and the covers of numerous magazines, including *Entertainment Weekly*, *Esquire*, *Details*, *GQ*, and *Rolling Stone*.

hegemonic and anti-hegemonic traits demonstrate a kind of strength, a strength expressed through a psychological agility rather than stolid immobility. A rejection of hypersexuality and the emotional and behavioral flexibility of polyhegemonic masculinity demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between casualization and non-monogamy for men who have sex with women. Even more important than the rejection of hypersexuality, however, is non-monogamous men's practice of disclosing intimacy.

The hard work of disclosing intimacy

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of non-monogamous men's performance of polyhegemonic masculinity is engagement in disclosing intimacy. Reflexivity and disclosure are integral to the self-understanding of many non-monogamists. Performing a highly verbal form of self-awareness, and being able to share with and listen to one's partner(s), is viewed as key to the practical and ethical demands of consensual non-monogamy. Yet, there are notable differences in the way disclosing intimacy is conceptualized and experienced by those who practice it in the context of CNM. During the course of interviews for this research, women, trans, or genderqueer people would occasionally state that non-monogamy was "hard"; however, heterosexual and bisexual men uniformly expressed their belief that consensual non-monogamy was difficult, considerably more difficult than monogamy.

What some interview participants called "processing" – talking out one's feelings with one's partner – was specifically identified by men as the most difficult aspect of non-monogamy. Disclosing intimacy can be a productive site for self-expression. In the discussion of CNM ethics, non-monogamous women extolled the fairness, consent, honesty, and personal freedom in

their intimate lives. These virtues were in large part facilitated by the central practice of disclosing intimacy, ongoing conversations in which partners reflected upon and revealed their desires and insecurities. Such conversations often roused raw and powerful emotions, and forced partners to face certain truths about their relationship and non-monogamous partnerships more generally. But for the straight and bisexual men in my research sample, disclosing intimacy was often perceived as a burden. Nevertheless, my male interview participants wanted to make clear that disclosing intimacy was a burden they could bear; it was an opportunity to demonstrate masculine traits like mental toughness and endurance. Framing disclosing intimacy in this way allowed men to integrate it into a polyhegemonic male gender performance through the trope of “work.”

The trope of “work” allows male non-monogamists to reconcile the stereotypically feminine behavior of disclosing intimacy with a polyhegemonic gender performance. In this way, non-monogamous men like Carson, Rob, and Ian embraced certain attributes of hegemonic masculinity, such as hard work and responsibility for the well-being of female partners, and rejected others, such as silent stoicism. Reflexivity allowed my male interview participants to think of themselves as more insightful and perhaps even superior to men who did not engage in the practice as extensively or as often. This is true even though reflexivity itself is not coded as hegemonically masculine. Disclosing intimacy can be successfully coded as polyhegemonically masculine for two reasons. First, if men in CNM relationships are willing to take on the work of disclosing intimacy, they can be rewarded with sex with secondary partners. Second, non-monogamous men can demonstrate their manliness through shouldering and carrying the weight of reflection and self-disclosure.

In the discussion of hypersexuality above, we saw how Rob and his fiancée, Theresa, had slightly different takes on one-night stands. Neither member of the couple preferred this kind of sexual encounter, but their reasons for not pursuing them diverged. Theresa believed “there’s no point” to one-time encounters. She felt that if there was no personal connection at all between partners, sex was unappealing. Rob related that he had once had a one-night and had mixed feelings about the experience. As Rob and Theresa ended their discussion of one-night stands, Rob contributed another perspective on the matter. Theresa reiterates her belief that sex with strangers is “pointless,” and Rob adds that such encounters are “a lot of work too.”

T: Yeah, we can be friends or say hi to one another every now and then but I don’t want to have a, “Well let’s shag and say goodbye,” you know, here’s your parting gift. [Rob laughs]... They’re just – there’s no point. Like, I really see no point.

R: And it just seems like a lot of work too.

The equation of CNM with work was a distinctly male rhetoric in my sample of non-monogamists. In this case, Rob labels one-night stands as “work.” If non-monogamous men embrace a discourse of “work” to reconcile disclosing intimacy with a polyhegemonic gender performance, how does Rob’s rejection of that work make sense? It makes sense because Rob is only rejecting one kind of non-monogamous encounter. What Rob is saying is not that he won’t work at relationships, but that the work he puts into his partnerships should produce sufficient compensation. For Rob, and other non-monogamous men like him who already have primary partners, it is more sensible to put their energy into longer lasting secondary relationships.

Non-monogamous men face the same challenges in attracting women and in starting relationships that monogamous men do. In fact, non-monogamists may face additional difficulties, since many women are likely to find CNM off-putting. Despite the influence of

feminism, many heterosexual men and women believe (whether consciously or unconsciously) that men should initiate sexual relationships. This means that men often feel obliged to approach women. Not only does the burden of introduction typically fall to men, heterosexual men in search of casual sex are more likely to be turned down than women with the same agenda. Men face, and at least occasionally endure, rejection in public settings like bars, nightclubs, and coffee houses. This means that straight men are more likely than women to feel that putting a lot of energy into trying to “seduce” new people all the time is not worth the effort. A woman who wants to find a partner for a one-time sexual fling is likely to have little trouble, especially if she is relatively young and her standards for a male partner are not high. When I asked Carathea (Chapter 3) how she met her lovers, she replied, “Anywhere... like, at the bus stop.” Carathea constantly met men with whom she could easily have sex at bars, at her university, walking around the city. She met guys while using public transportation. In contrast, most evenings a man spends out trying to meet women are likely to end with him returning home alone, after possibly spending quite a bit of money buying women drinks.

Women also rarely need to work hard to charm men into a one-time encounter by using their intelligence or great sense of humor. In Rob’s use of the term, “work” entails the painful emotions and labored effort that goes into sustaining the kind of persona and dynamic necessary to impress someone new, to get her interested in you, and to make sure she isn’t scared away, and to convince her to have sex with you. For men trying to pick up women, this can be a laborious process. In addition to the effort a man expends, he also opens himself up to emotional or psychological pain. Though the initiating a relationship is likely to involve only low levels of disclosing intimacy, trying to begin a new relationship creates a sense of vulnerability similar to what can be experienced during self-disclosure in more long-standing unions. It also

encompasses a certain degree of honest self-disclosure, including, usually, a discussion of CNM. Among my interview participants, straight and bisexual women never complained about finding male sex partners. Heterosexual and bisexual men, however, even though they practiced non-monogamy, didn't necessarily enjoy a sexual utopia filled with an endless supply of willing female partners.

For these reasons, it is quite understandable that non-monogamous men might believe that one-night stands were more trouble than they are worth. Along with the pleasure a one-time encounter may provide, these experiences can also have negative consequences. For example, sex with an unknown partner could turn out to be unsatisfying. A new partner might be more (or less) emotionally invested in the encounter than the man. And, even if an evening of flirting and self-disclosure did culminate in sex, the whole laborious process would need to be undertaken next time with a new woman. An ongoing sexual relationship may not have quite the heightened novelty of sex with someone new, but it would be steadier and offer the opportunity for the lovers to appreciate each other's preferences, skills, and quirks. What is implied in Rob's simple statement about one-night stands is that he only wants to put in the work if he will reap the reward, e.g. an ongoing emotional and erotic connection with a woman. Rob is not willing to put himself out there unless it's worth it, and what is worth his effort is a sexual relationship that offers a number of encounters.

Non-monogamous men like Rob are willing to be vulnerable, and work at disclosing intimacy with primary and secondary partners, when such intimacy was tied to more and better sex. This dynamic highlights one of the major divergences between monogamy and CNM. In a monogamous relationship, a greater push for disclosing intimacy and its associated values –

egalitarianism, the recognition of one's weaknesses, greater flexibility to accommodate a partner's needs – rewards a more feminine identity and habitus. This not only puts most men at a disadvantage, but can make a committed relationship with one woman seem stultifying. The demand for greater disclosing intimacy is likely to be less appealing to men than to women. Most men are not socialized into the norms and practices of disclosing intimacy anywhere near the degree that women are (Adkins, 2003; Connell, 1995; Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; Illouz, 1997a; Stearns and Knapp, 1993). They frequently find it more challenging to articulate their feelings to others, or even simply identify emotions than women do. Nevertheless, the potential for more sex, outside and perhaps within the primary relationship, helps make disclosing intimacy “worth” the additional affective and intellectual effort men see themselves as investing in intimate relationships. In this way, CNM balances a desire for communication and emotional closeness with excitement of sexual frisson and volatile emotion. In non-monogamous relationships, self-disclosure, trust, and comfort are invigorated by passion. In CNM relationships, disclosing intimacy isn't just about words. It's also about sex. More work put into communication is tied to erotic opportunities.

In a comment related to his worries about the “work” that went into managing multiple sexual and romantic relationships, Rob also made an analogy between non-monogamy (or polyamory) and the political system of democracy:

R: There's a Winston Churchill quote about democracy, how democracy is terrible, it's just better than all the other ones, you know? And I feel that way about polyamory too. Human relationships are by default messy and one of things people criticize about polyamory is the second something blows up or someone breaks up they're like, “Look, polyamory doesn't work.” But do people say that about monogamy every time there's a divorce? Human relationships are complicated and they change, so...

Rob was the second straight man²⁸ I interviewed who brought up the Churchill's maxim about democracy.²⁹ No woman or genderqueer person ever made this sort of comparison.

The association of CNM with democracy links two systems that (at least ideally) emphasize deliberation and fairness over stability and hierarchy. The comparison of non-monogamy with democracy is felicitous because democracy and CNM are both ways of organizing human relationships that call for the open communication of ideas and compromise. Democracy and CNM can be messy, in the sense that fairness and deliberation are often privileged over order and authority. In promoting deliberation over obedience or tradition, democracy parallels CNM's emphasis on verbal communication. Democracy is associated with social leveling and greater fairness, and egalitarianism and fairness enjoy pride of place in CNM ethics. Though I don't want to make too much of Rob's analogy between democracy and non-monogamy, he is able to easily and intelligibly compare them as two ways of life that, while not perfect, are "better than all other ones."

Describing non-monogamy as superior to the alternatives suggests that CNM, like democracy, can claim an ethical superiority. Rob calls attention to the ethical and pragmatic

²⁸ The other was Luke, a white professional in his early 40s. Like Carson, he declined to have our interview audio-recorded. Luke was involved in a divorce and custody battle for his young son and my promise of confidentiality could not assuage his fear of his wife's lawyer somehow discovering the interview. He believed his interview could be used against him even though his estranged wife had also had sexual relationships outside their marriage.

²⁹ Churchill expressed this sentiment in Parliament in November 1947. The full quote is, "Many forms of Government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time; but there is the broad feeling in our country that the people should rule, continuously rule, and that public opinion, expressed by all constitutional means, should shape, guide, and control the actions of Ministers who are their servants and not their masters." The document that includes Churchill's quote was retrieved June 29, 2012 from: http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1947/nov/11/parliament-bill#column_206

benefits of non-monogamy when he argues that CNM is unfairly criticized when such relationships fail. Rob points out that the majority of monogamous relationships end. Rob says, “Human relationships are complicated and they change.” What is implied by his statement is that because relationships are complicated and ever-changing, the norms that shape our intimate lives – like the rules that govern our political system – must accommodate complexity and flux. Unlike the unrealistically static model of monogamy, CNM is portrayed as a more honest, adaptive, and adapting way of accommodating evolving relationships.

For Rob, one-night stands were not worth it because they were too much work; yet, overall, the disclosing intimacy demanded by CMN was acceptable insofar as it entailed exciting sexual experiences. For a non-monogamous man like Rob, disclosing intimacy is linked to a diversification and enrichment of affective experience, including erotic encounters, in a way that accommodates polyhegemonic masculinity. Moreover, like democracy, that other idealistic but problematic way of organizing human relationships, CNM embraced ethical ideals that raised it above mere self-indulgence. Rob’s conceptualization of CNM as work finds a slightly different expression in interviews with Carson, another of the men featured in this chapter. Carson’s experience illustrate additional ways CNM men with female partners tried to find a balance between the work of disclosing intimacy and a more conventional masculine gender performance.

Carson believes that non-monogamy better facilitated the fluidity that characterized relationships in his life. He thinks that “people flow in and out of your life” and “drift apart and come together.” But this gentle imagery of flowing water and calm winds contrasts Carson’s description of non-monogamy as a difficult lifestyle. Perhaps this is because for Carson, it was

not necessarily entering and exiting CNM relationships that was trying, but rather, maintaining them. Carson, like other men I interviewed, stated that “polyamory is harder than monogamy.” He repeated this contention several times during our two hour conversation. Carson believed that polyamory was harder because it forced people to face the insecurities that could be suppressed in monogamous partnerships, such as jealousy, fears of not being desirable enough, fears of abandonment, and so on. Overall, Carson’s argument that CNM requires more and better communication than do monogamous relationships echoes the opinions expressed by many other non-monogamists (see chapter 4).

Despite his stated enthusiasm for communication, Carson explained that he did not tolerate “drama.” Drama colloquially refers to frivolous conflict and histrionics. Carson related a story about a pro-polyamory he group he joined when he was first exploring non-monogamy. Initially, Carson was so enthusiastic about the group that he became an officer of the organization. However, about a year later, he gave up his because of discord between some of the group’s members. Instead of taking an active role as a mediator, Carson left this social circle as soon as he became aware of the drama that played out among some of the circle’s constituency. Carson’s appetite for sharing emotions and navel-gazing, at least in the context of this group, was not as great as one might assume, based on his insistence on community and communication. This is not a personal criticism of Carson; what is important is the way his story illustrates a possible divergence of rhetoric and behavior when it comes to non-monogamous men’s engagement in the hard work of disclosing intimacy.

On the one hand, Carson prided himself on his ability to communicate openly and honestly with his partners. On the other hand, Carson had a limit to the amount of reflexivity

and self-disclosure he would engage with, and with whom. People often opt out of social groups that are contentious and perhaps Carson's behavior is simply an illustration of this tendency. But a quick exit from the group that introduced Carson to such an important part of his life is a little surprising for someone who claimed that he was "all about community," as Carson did more than once during our interview. Carson's personal philosophy that "people flow in and out of your life" extended to his friends and acquaintances, as well as his sexual partners. That Carson quickly took leave of what had been such an important part of his social life and personal identity suggests limitations to the uptake of reflexivity, self-disclosure, and more a democratic, traditionally feminine style of communication among some non-monogamous men.

In my interviews for this dissertation, women were less likely to complain about the "hard work" of reflexivity and disclosing intimacy; however, the degree to which non-monogamy was emotionally draining was revealed in women's comments about how much *time* CNM demanded. In women's construction of non-monogamy, time is a synecdoche for disclosing intimacy. The long talks, reflection, and heavy emotions that come with navigating more than one intimate relationship were translated as a problem of time, not effort. Women were simply used to this work, and saw it as an inherent part of relationships. The work of reflexivity was less pronounced in women's interviews, though many claimed multiple relationships were often too time-consuming or emotionally exhausting. These attitudes may give some credibility to non-monogamists' claims that CNM is subjectively experienced as "more difficult" for many people, though men and women frequently experience such difficulties differently.

As noted in the introduction, in the eyes of non-monogamists, CNM demands greater disclosing intimacy than does monogamy. In committing to greater verbal self-disclosure, non-monogamist men oblige themselves to greater reflexivity. Reflexivity is both a trait associated with modernity and the contemporary moment (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992, Howard, 2007; Illouz, 2008) and with the feminine *habitus* (Adkins, 2003). British social theorist Lisa Adkins (2003) argues that while the continuance of traditional gender norms mean that reflexivity is construed as hard work for men, women's reflexivity is less likely to be seen as laudable. Instead, women's reflexivity is viewed as "natural." There is praise for men taking on the challenges of reflexivity but not women.³⁰ In the workplace, the consequence of this double standard can be that women are not rewarded for deploying stereotypically feminine communication skills, such as providing encouragement, emotional support, gentle constructive criticism, or diffusing tense situation with soothing words. Adkins contends that women are unlikely to be acknowledged for carrying out the lion's share of emotion work. In this manner, our public lives can become more "feminized" without any necessary improvement in the status of women.

In the private lives of non-monogamists, divergent attitudes about disclosing intimacy may lead to a clash of expectations, with women wanting more communication from their male partners than the men feel equipped to provide. My research sheds little light on the emotional norms of the workplace but does show how non-monogamous men think and talk about the work of reflexivity and disclosing intimacy differently. The significance of this discrepancy is that it demonstrates how a non-monogamous, casualized masculinity can be at once progressive and

³⁰ It also means that women who are not "good communicators" are likely to be viewed as deficient. This puts women in the undesirable situation of ranging from satisfactory to defective.

limited. More importantly, however, it suggests a link between non-monogamous masculinity and broad social changes at work in the public and private lives of millions of Americans in an era of casualization.

CNM male gender identity in the context of casualization

As a heterosexual woman, I am an outsider looking in when it comes to masculinity. Through familial, professional, friendship, and intimate relationships, I have witnessed and shared in many men's struggle with and against male gender norms in a variety of ways. I believe masculinity generates enormous ambivalence in many men, and that there are few men who don't wrestle powerfully with the pressures and strictures of masculinity during some part of their lives. Though the sentiments of this chapter are obviously influenced by a feminist perspective, my analysis is also shaped by my feelings of empathy. As a feminist,³¹ I believe it is the work of everyone, of any gender or sexual identity, to critically engage with masculinity as a particular way of being-in-the-world. I think the three interview participants focused on in this chapter are doing just that. The critiques I offer are not meant as indictments. In fact, because of the commitment to reflexivity that comes with disclosing intimacy, these men are seem unusually self-conscious and critical in their appraisal of their performance of masculinity. It is important to recognize the efforts – and the failures – we all experience in trying to live up to

³¹ A precept of contemporary Western feminism is the performance of hegemonic masculinity tends towards the oppression of other kinds of subjects. This oppression is frequently actualized via physical violence (including sexual violence), control of resources, ranging from money to social prestige, physical and legal control over the bodies of women and children, and of the construction of belief systems that favor the oppressors. Traditionally, this systematic oppression was deemed "patriarchy." Feminism does not mean demonizing men or even all aspects of masculinity, but feminism does demand that we fight patriarchal inequalities.

our ideals, and to try to understand how our tactics, strategies, and habitus – the temporal-cultural matrix we find ourselves in – influence us in myriad ways.

Consensual non-monogamy is a lifestyle well suited to polyhegemonic masculinity and productive of it. In their rejection of hypersexuality and adoption of disclosing intimacy, non-monogamous men strive to embody both the egalitarian ethics of CNM and the values of flexibility and hard work integral to the ideology of casualization. Polyhegemonic masculinity is a subject position at home with casualized intimacy. It is flexible enough to navigate between hegemonic and anti-hegemonic gender norms, between power, strength, and virility and reflexivity, concern for women, and emotional availability. This flexibility between more conventional and more progressive styles of masculinity is essential for success in the casualized realms of work and love. A hegemonic masculinity that is too rigid can be off-putting both in romantic relationships and at the office (Illouz, 1997a). Since millions of men now work in sedate white-collar environments, gruff silent efficiency is unlikely to be the ideal work persona (Illouz, 1997b). Adkins (2003) suggests that while working women frequently find themselves “damned if they do, damned if they don’t” – called a bitch if they are forthright but passed over as weak and inconsequential if they act too ladylike or maternal – a man’s flexible inhabitation of his masculinity is more likely to be viewed as demonstrating personableness, maturity, and HR savvy. In his personal life, strength coupled with the skills of disclosing intimacy contributes to happier and more stable partnerships with women (Illouz 1997a).

Flexibility enables non-monogamous men to distance themselves from unsavory stereotypes of hypersexual men without renouncing the pleasures and privileges of some features of hegemonic masculinity. But the embrace of certain hegemonic attitudes and

behaviors is coupled with the progressive ethical framework shared by so many non-monogamists. In the discussion of CNM ethics in Chapter 4, I highlighted fairness and consent and argued that these broadly feminist values profoundly shaped non-monogamous relationships. The egalitarianism and honest approach to sex which non-monogamous men feel especially committed to is another demonstration of how the casualization and CNM are imbricated. Rather than being Casanovas on the one hand, or New Age “sensitive” men on the other, Carson, Rob, and Ian’s reimagining of masculinity demonstrates how non-monogamy and the casualization of intimacy share many of the same beliefs and practices.

The rhetoric of casualization is also at work in the way polyhegemonic men reconcile themselves to disclosing intimacy. They do this by constructing CNM as hard work because of the degree of emotional labor, particularly disclosing intimacy, is involved. The men I interviewed expressed ambivalence about the degree of work they believed non-monogamy necessitated. They wanted sex and “connection” with their partners, but sometimes the emotional labor required by CNM was depicted as almost not worth the effort it required. The specter of failure, however, generated anxiety; if non-monogamous men could not meet the rigorous demands of disclosing intimacy, they were unlikely to form satisfying relationships with CNM women. Additionally, an ambivalent attitude toward disclosing intimacy – as both a source of connection and strain – stemmed in part from the feminine traits involved in disclosing intimacy. Non-monogamous men value disclosing intimacy and perform it, but CNM helps re-masculinize this activity by coupling it with increased sexual prospects and providing men with an opportunity to perform a more traditional, dominant gender identity.

Though polyhegemonic masculinity possesses several positive attributes from a feminist, egalitarian perspective, other aspects of this gender performance are less heartening.

This is particularly true as regards disclosing intimacy. Economic and cultural shifts in the West since the 1960s – like the influx of women into the workforce, feminism, contraception, and relaxed sexual mores – have rapidly transformed gender roles in public and private life. Women’s lives have become more public and public life has become more feminine, with incorporation of feminism and psychotherapy in politics (Cloud, 1998) and the workplace (Illouz, 1997b, 2008; Richard and Rudnycjkyi, 2009). Yet, the incorporation of more feminine habitus in an era of casualization is not automatically a categorical good for women. As this chapter has shown, male participation in disclosing intimacy doesn’t necessarily elevate women’s status or ensure complete equality between men and women. Having acknowledged this caveat, however, I also want to acknowledge that many non-monogamous women undoubtedly benefit from male partners’ participation in disclosing intimacy; male partners who can identify and articulate their emotions are attractive to many women. For many women, polyhegemonic masculinity is more desirable than stoicism or chauvinism of hegemonic manhood. And there are numerous benefits for men as well: greater reflexivity and the ability to engage in self-disclosure about intimate topics can promote happier relationships, improved emotional well-being, and greater mental and physical health.

This chapter has explored how non-monogamous men construct a polyhegemonic masculinity that rejects hypersexuality and struggles with the demands of disclosing intimacy. An analysis of difficulties specific to men who have female partners is useful for thinking about CNM for two reasons. First, it elucidates one way gender factors into the habitus of consensual non-monogamy and the casualization of intimacy. In other words, it highlights how the relative

cultural and social empowerment of women, along with weakened security of male privilege, affects sexual relationships. Men can enjoy non-monogamy, but it cannot be only on their own terms; more “feminized” norms of disclosing intimacy are also at work. Polyhegemonic masculinity in CNM relationships is a far cry from the more stereotypically masculine culture of 1960s and 1970s era swinging, which often featured anonymous, one-time sexual encounters and downplayed (or outright prohibited) emotional bonds with non-marital partners (Frank and DeLamater 2010; Symonds, 1971). The second reason it is important to investigate CNM masculinity is because it gives insight into the ways in which more “feminized” intimate relationships actually do or do not benefit women. This chapter’s analysis of polyhegemony suggests both the potential and the limitations of more feminine – reflexive, emotionally expressive, and dialogic – norms of communication in public and private life in an era of casualization.

Though a look at the difficulties of non-monogamy for straight and bisexual men is illuminating, it is only one part of a larger story. Consensual non-monogamy poses many challenges for almost all of its practitioners, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. The next chapter takes a look other challenges that non-monogamists described in their interviews. Specifically, I explore how non-monogamists deal with the problems posed by prejudice, jealousy, and the difficulty of finding balance between short-term gratification and long-term commitment. No matter how happy a couple is, at some point, problems like these intrude upon almost every CNM relationship. Difficulties such as these challenge the construction of ethical CNM as it is depicted in chapter 4. Primary partners must address how prejudice, jealousy, and precarity raise questions of choice, possession, and sacrifice that

contest the precepts of non-monogamy as a lifestyle that achieves a near-perfect harmony of egalitarian and individualist principles.

CHAPTER 6: THE CHALLENGES OF CNM

My goal in this chapter is to recognize the limitations, inequities, and other problems that can affect consensually non-monogamous relationships. I explore the discursive balancing acts that non-monogamists must accomplish when the realities of their relationships cannot perfectly conform to the image of CNM as a uniquely ethical lifestyle. There are many contingencies that can intrude upon the narrative of a CNM partnership as two free, pleasure-seeking, and caring individuals who complement one another perfectly. Not everyone reported difficulties with their relationships, but many non-monogamists were candid about confusion, stress, and even pain CNM could cause, and what they did to try and solve the problems they encountered.

Prejudice, jealousy, and the tension between commitment and freedom can all disrupt non-monogamous relationships. Despite the idealistic rhetoric of CNM, people can still be discriminated against because of their age or appearance. Jealousy can also upset non-monogamous arrangements. In writings by advocates of CNM, jealousy is frequently cited as the most significant challenge for couples (Easton and Liszt, 1997; Emens, 2004; O-Matik, 2007; Toarmino, 2008). For other couples, simply finding a rhetorical and affective equilibrium between autonomy and obligation is a serious challenge. CNM, with its opportunities for connections with new lovers, continually reminds couples that the future of any relationship is full of unknowns. For some non-monogamists, integrating the openness and possibility of multiple partners with the solidity of a committed primary relationship is a complicated enterprise. Finally, some of my interview participants were in relationships that renounced non-monogamy, at least for a time. They were willing to

compromise a doctrinaire adherence to CNM in order to focus entirely on their primary partnership. “Taking a break” provided one way of negotiating between long-term commitment and short-term thrills without rejecting the precarity, flexibility, effort, or emphasis on pleasure that are all at the heart of the casualization of intimacy.

I would like to take a moment to further explain the nature of the three challenges – prejudice, jealousy, and the tension between commitment and freedom – before moving into an illustration of my argument through an analysis of interview materials. First in this chapter, I’ll look at how a few of my interview participants discussed ageism and sexism shaped their understandings of themselves and others as sexual subjects. Sexism and ageism contradict both the egalitarian and individual strains of CNM ethics. Prejudice is by definition unfair, and limits the choice of those who are discriminated against. It consists of treating people unequally, usually badly, because of (usually unchosen) characteristics. Also by definition, prejudice is more of a collective than individual phenomenon. The sort of prejudice I’m talking about is not directed at idiosyncratic individuals, but rather groups of people. Prejudice is the painful point where one’s existence unique identity and goals can be denied by forces beyond one’s control. In this way, prejudice challenges the lens of individualism through which many non-monogamists view their lives.

The second problem, jealousy, is conceptualized by many non-monogamists as a desire for possession. Perhaps more than any other lifestyle, non-monogamy endorses the cliché, “If you love her, let her go.” However, not everyone can bring herself into conformity with the ideal of freedom and autonomy exhorted in Chapter 4. With the discourse of CNM, a jealous partner is depicted as wanting to possess her lover, to enjoy an

ownership and complete entitlement to another's emotions, body, and time. Wanting to possess one's partner (or be possessed by her) denies, in various ways, the fairness and independence non-monogamists cherish. But, negative attitudes toward jealousy can make reasonable demands within a relationship – such as requests for a partner to give more time, attention, and affection to her primary – seem unfair, possessive, or immature. Jealousy can create quandaries because it is not always clear when a partner's expectations move from being acceptable and healthy to unsustainable. In this chapter, I examine how one couple accommodated a desire for possession without the pain of jealousy. I also look at an asymmetric couple, where one experienced jealousy but not the other, as well as a couple where both partners felt jealous.

Finally, all CNM relationships experience a tension between long-term commitment and short-term thrills, between obligations to the relationship and the desire for freedom and pleasure. This tension is the necessary entailment of the precarity that is an inescapable part of non-monogamy. Not everyone spoke with me about the impact of precarity on their relationships, but is something all non-monogamists must acclimate to. Accommodating precarity discursively is a challenge that only a few of my interview participants spoke about explicitly. To better understand how non-monogamists find a livable balance between commitment and autonomy, between staying together and breaking apart, I focus on two different examples. First, I look at Amy's attempt to mediate between obligation and autonomy in her marriage. Pressured into her marriage by financial and medical problems, Amy had to make sense of herself as at once an independent woman and a wife. Second, I explore how Lisa and Paige decided to return to monogamy after a disastrous foray into CNM. Though the couple is now monogamous, their

experience with CNM and their openness to possibly being non-monogamous at some point in the future means they provide a unique perspective into the effects of precarity and what happens when a couple mutually decides to return to sexual exclusivity.

Prejudice, jealousy, and the search for balance in the midst of precarity are all obstacles many non-monogamists must navigate. Paradoxically, key features of casualized intimacy can help address the difficulties this habitus creates. The acceptance of precarity and the privileging of flexibility and effort in intimate relationships mean that non-monogamists often think of themselves as adaptable, open-minded people who are dedicated to maintaining and improving their partnerships. Despite the “narcissism of small differences” exhibited in non-monogamists’ ambivalent boundary creation around CNM in chapter 3, the discourse of consensual non-monogamy can also be inclusive, resilient, and accommodating.

The problem of choice: Ageism and sexism

If we view choice through the matrix of casualization, it becomes clear why it is important for many in Anglo-American cultures, but especially for non-monogamists. That people are able to make choices, that they freely consent, is a longstanding precept of liberal thought that survives into our casualized, neoliberal present (Elliot and Lemert, 2009; Giddens, 1991; Harvey, 2005; Howard, 2007). Americans in particular can have a very difficult time seeing the moral stature or cultural worth of non-Western practices that violate our sense of free, informed choice, e.g. arranged marriage (Haidt and Graham, 2007). Despite a rhetorical privileging of choice in our political discourse, we are often blind to the ways in which our society restricts

choice. Prejudice – assumptions (usually negative) about a group of people based on race, gender, sexuality, age, or religion or other ascribed or achieved status – is one example of a phenomenon that limits choices and which many Americans would rather not acknowledge. Even among non-monogamists, who pride themselves on their open-mindedness, prejudice can drastically limit erotic and social choices. That not everyone enjoys perfect choice when it comes to intimate partners is a contradiction of the egalitarianism of CNM ethics. Some non-monogamists acknowledge this more readily than others. For example, Erika recognized the possibility that prejudice would shape her sexual opportunities, while Ian struggled with his complicity in sexist and ageist beliefs.

Non-monogamists often pride themselves on their independence from a variety of social conventions. Many of the people I spoke with lived outside of middle-class institutions, including white-collar jobs and the heteronormative nuclear family. Some identified with far left political ideologies, like anarchism; many defied gender norms, with a few adopting a genderqueer look and persona. Others, despite their unorthodox intimate relationships, hewed more closely to social customs in other areas of their lives. Erika, the 30-something black professional featured in Chapter 3, is an example of this more conventional type. She favored a live-and-let-live attitude towards sexuality but did not articulate a broad critique of sexual and gender norms. A comment Erika made during our conversation demonstrated that she believed her sexual life to be affected by the ageism and sexism that prevails in U.S. media and popular thinking about sexual attractiveness and desirability.³²

³² Erika, an African-American woman, did not discuss the issue of race with me, a white woman. I did not ask her how her race impacted her experience with CNM; this was also not a question I posed to other interview participants, most of whom are white. From our interview, I learned that Erika had dated black men and at least one black woman, but her first husband and her fiancé at the time of the interview were

Erika assumed that there was a time limit on CNM and that this had to do with conventional notions of a woman's attractiveness, in this case, youthfulness.

E: So I think I'm ok with the fact that at some point, I probably won't even have access to people, where, like, my tits will sag and... you know what I mean. Like, the door closes, so why not experience what's on the table?

More so than most of the people I interviewed, Erika held to mainstream standards of physical attractiveness for men and women, i.e. a youthful, fit physique, fastidious grooming, and trendy clothing. She expressed a preference for women wearing cosmetics and dressing in fashionable clothes. Erika's preferences suggest that she is more likely to have internalized ageist and sexist beauty standards than someone who, either through inclination or effort, rejects such norms. Erika was also in her mid-30s and perhaps more cognizant than my twenty-something interviewees about the impact of aging on appearance; moreover, she primarily had relationships with men and was therefore subject to the greater value men often place upon physical attractiveness in romantic partners (Feingold, 1990; 1991; Regan, 2008; Stacey, 2011; Wright, 1995).

During our conversation, Erika didn't seem bothered by the idea that at some point in the future "the door closes" on having new sexual partners outside of her marriage. She wanted the fun of CNM, but did not feel she needed non-monogamy to be happy. Her remarks about aging were not delivered in a tone of complaint or resignation. Unlike a single non-monogamist, her upcoming marriage meant that she had a committed, long-term primary partner.

Nevertheless, her awareness of a time limit for "access to people" means there is a heightened

both white, European-born men. Aside from noting the ethnic background of some of the people with whom she had been involved, Erika never mentioned the issue of race in regard to finding mates, nor did she delve into the subject of inter-racial relationships.

pressure to experience “what’s on the table” before it’s too late. Erika’s sense of entitlement to excitement, new experiences, and fun echoes Autumn and Maria’s sentiments from chapter 4; her expression of her desire reiterates non-monogamists’ prioritization of pleasure over ease and security. Erika’s remarks also are also one example that shows how CNM was of varying importance in the lives of those who practiced it.

Some non-monogamists felt the desire for multiple relationships much more acutely than did Erika. Liam and Carathea (chapter 3) and Carson (chapter 5) are examples of individuals who simply didn’t believe they were physically or psychologically capable of long-term monogamy and engaged in CNM in part because this lifestyle enabled them to satisfy their own needs while also being honest and fair with their partners. They saw non-monogamy as a necessary outlet for an overflow of sexual and emotional energy. Others viewed CNM as more of a kind of official designation. In other words, they did not always need to have secondary partners but they were committed to CNM ideologically and practiced it when possible in their own lives; this is the case with David, discussed later in this chapter. Though she had non-monogamous relationships, Erika was not a passionate advocate of CNM. Non-monogamy was an option she enjoyed having, a way of making life more fun. CNM was not necessarily a key feature of her identity or something she would sacrifice a primary relationship for. Erika’s casual and somewhat opportunistic involvement in non-monogamy explains why she was not distraught over the limitations ageism and sexism could impose on her sexual opportunities. However, the fact that Erika was not as deeply invested in CNM as many others I interviewed did not mean she was ignorant of the ways ageism and sexism could shape the private lives of many non-monogamists.

Women disproportionately bear our culture's antipathy for older bodies, and Erika's comment implicitly acknowledges this discrepancy. Her reference to "sagging tits" shows such sexism at work. However, while Erika references the effects of aging on the female body, her sense that a "door closes" eventually can extend to men. Sexism and ageism are intertwined prejudices, but American attitudes about age also affect men to some extent. Ian, the married IT worker in his early 40s discussed in chapter 5, felt that his age scared off many of the women he tried to meet via online dating sites.

Ian believed that his age made it harder to find partners. Because he considered himself to be an attractive, still youthful-looking man, Ian was surprised that he had recently been experiencing difficulty in meeting secondary partners who were younger than him. The fact that Ian's wife was nearly two decades his junior compounded his confusion. Ian disliked it when women rejected him because of his age, but he may have been engaging in similar behavior when he sought out women in their 20s and 30s as potential partners.

B: Is it hard [being romantically involved with] someone younger than you?

I: It's very hard. It's very hard.

B: Why is hard? Also, I have another question, about meeting women for yourself. What is your upper age limit?

I: That's a good question. I don't have an upper age limit per se, but I do have an aesthetic. [When I search online], I think generally around 40ish. That's not to say – as I get older, I've found that I find older women more attractive. And for me it's only through experience. And maybe that's what it is. Maybe it's girls who are seeing guys hitting on them that are in their 40s and they're like, "Oh my god." I understand that [many younger women don't want to date men in their 40s or older]. Because I see men my age... I don't know if they look their age, or if they look older than their age and they have pot bellies and they have no hair, I mean... And some of that I think is marriage. Some of that is, I think people just settle in, whereas I kinda refuse to do that...

Ageism and sexism are both apparent in the excerpt above, with Ian being at once the perpetrator and the victim of these prejudices. Ian, like Erika, believes that age can be impediment to finding partners. Unlike Erika, however, Ian wants younger partners and he has a much younger spouse. Because of this, Ian does not share Erika's complacency about ageism; he does not accept that his age might prevent him from dating partners he finds desirable. At the same time, however, Ian did not want to recognize his own tendency to dismiss older potential partners. When my question hinted that Ian might be hypocritical, Ian immediately tried to counter my implication.

Ian wanted to skirt around the possibility that he was perpetuating a double standard when it came to age but he admitted that when he is checking out online profiles, he screens out women who are more than a few years older than him. The only defense he offers for this behavior is that he isn't adhering to an "upper age limit, per se," but rather looking for women who fit his "aesthetic." This is a vague explanation – the use of the term "aesthetic" could be a euphemism for youthful appearance – but he does say that as he has aged, he has started find older women (i.e. women his age and older) to be more attractive than he did in the past. He says that it was "only through experience" that he was able to appreciate the appeal of women in their early 40s and older. Ian did not provide any details about these relationships, for example, if they were sexual or just social. Nevertheless, his experience allows him to hypothesize both why younger women are often uninterested in older men, and what could be done to change that situation. Ian's implication is that women in their 20s and 30s should be open to dating older guys. Ian finishes his the excerpt above attributing younger women's disinterest to the attentions of undesirable 40-

something men. If younger women were wary of his online overtures, it is not through any fault of his own.

Ian thought that many guys in their 40s fueled a stereotype of men his age as unattractive by not maintaining their appearance as they aged and settled into long-term relationships. In passing judgment against these men, Ian legitimated ageism while arguing that he should not be subject to it. According to Ian, acceptable ageism wasn't based strictly on biological age but on how youthful a person looked. Just as Ian differentiated himself from the gender performance of bisexual men in Chapter 5, he distanced himself from guys who "look older than their age... have pot bellies and... no hair." Ian figured that part of the problem for many 40-something men was marriage, because some "people just settle" into life with their partner and stop maintaining their appearance, something many non-monogamists, along with Ian, "refused" to do.

Ian felt that because of his polyhegemonic gender performance it should be easier for him to find partners. As discussed in chapter 5, Ian related strongly to many aspects of normative masculinity, and was disappointed that his ostensibly superior gender performance didn't net him the women he desired, and to which he perhaps felt himself entitled. If many of the 20 and 30-something women Ian pursues are not interested in him, the situation is partially the result of the same casualization that facilitates and helps legitimize non-monogamy in the first place. The greater relative empowerment of women vis-à-vis men is correlated with a shifting understanding of what it takes to be a desirable male (Stevenson, 2010). Egalitarian discourse about intimate relationships, lower median wages for men, greater employment and professionalization for women, and the objectification of men to higher and more youth-

oriented beauty standards via marketing and entertainment media all make it harder for men to meet the high standards of many women.

Both Erika and Ian perceived that ageism and sexism encroached upon their intimate lives. Sexist and ageist standards of attractiveness were understood by these non-monogamists as limiting their choice of partners. Erika and Ian felt differently about the affects of prejudice in their lives, however. Erika believed that as she aged, she would have fewer partners outside of her primary relationship because others would find her unattractive. Erika was less bothered by a dearth of sexual opportunities as she aged, even though as a woman this was likely to be more pronounced for her than for Ian. Ian expressed much more annoyance with ageism than did Erika. Ian's story about his difficulty in finding younger female partners highlights how ageism is sexist against women but not without negative effects for men. On the one hand, Ian believes that women his own age, let alone older than their early 40s, are unlikely to fit his "aesthetic." On the other hand, Ian feels that women in their 20s and 30s judge him to be "too old."

Factors completely beyond an individual's control can make it very difficult to find partners, regardless of a person's other redeeming qualities. My discussion has only touched on matters of age and gender; non-monogamists may find that race, class status, gender identity, or other factors impact their ability to find mates. Of course, such prejudices can affect those in monogamous relationships as well, but non-monogamists especially pride themselves on their ethical approach to sexuality. Erika and Ian's discussion of aging disputes a narrative of consensual non-monogamy as the epitome of fairness and choice in intimate relationships. Any resentment they felt towards the prejudice that

affected their sexual opportunities was proportional to their personal investment in CNM. Erika enjoyed being able to have multiple lovers, but was not strongly committed to CNM as a permanent part of her sex life. Ian, in contrast, who more deeply identified as non-monogamous, was irritated that age appeared to be limiting his number of partners. For Ian, the distance between the ideals and the reality of CNM was much more troublesome.

But the question of choice was not the only hitch in the attempt to live the ideals of ethical CNM. Jealousy – a desire to be your partner’s only love, to have exclusive access to her emotions and sexuality – was also an issue for some of my interview participants. More pressing than the matter of choice, at least among those I interviewed, jealousy is an anathema for non-monogamists for the obvious reason that it impedes the emotional and sexual openness necessary for a non-monogamous partnership to work. Non-monogamists believe that no one is entitled to possess their lover. Trying to limit a partner’s behavior because of one’s own jealousy is viewed as a violation of the partner’s freedom. Only a handful of my interview participants believed that jealousy was a problem in their relationships, but when jealousy did rear its green-eyed head, it was likely to cause significant difficulties in a relationship.

The problem of possession: Jealousy

In romantic and sexual relationships, a person often experiences a sense of possessing her partner, of having privileged access to her resources, love, and sexuality. We typically identify this feeling as ‘jealousy.’ The meaning of the word jealousy is multifarious. Some understandings of jealousy are closer to the definition of “envy” – “feeling resentment because

of another's success, advantage, etc..." – but what I mean by jealousy is more expansive, and incorporates other aspects of the term, including, "... inclined to, or troubled by, suspicions or fears of rivalry, unfaithfulness, etc., as in love or aims: a jealous husband... solicitous or vigilant in maintaining or guarding something..."

Though monogamous relationships could preclude or at least limit jealousy, jealousy is also tacitly legitimized within the context of monogamy because such unions are supposed to be exclusive. Given monogamy's requirement of exclusivity, it would probably surprise many to learn that those involved in CNM relationships share certain attitudes about jealousy with their monogamous cohorts. Many in both groups believe jealousy is natural, or at least, inevitable. Whether hardwired in our biology by evolution, or inculcated through social programming, jealousy of a partner's attraction to another is seen as widespread. Though it's an unpleasant emotion to experience, many monogamists and some of their multiply-partnered counterparts also believe jealousy has a silver lining. Insofar as jealousy demonstrates a strong attachment to a partner, it's acceptable; in small amounts, it might even be desirable.

Overall, however, non-monogamists view the possessive desires of jealousy more negatively than monogamists. Jealousy is frequently thought of as puerile at best, and dangerous at worst. Advocates of CNM have argued that sexual jealousy derives from a patriarchal need to control women's bodies (Jackson and Scott, 2004) and that the jealous urge to possess a wife's sexuality is at the root of much domestic violence (Easton and Liszt, 1997). Those in CNM relationships typically regard strong feelings of jealousy as an obstacle to fulfilling, mature, and healthy partnerships. Moreover, non-monogamists believe that the person who experiences jealousy is responsible for it. It is her job to control her sense of fear, anxiety, and

possessiveness in the face of what many monogamists would view as frightening threats to her primary relationship. The appropriate way to deal with jealousy is to channel it into positive behaviors, such as making the effort to be a better primary partner, or seeking out a secondary relationship of one's own.

Many people I interviewed identified personally with the problem, saying they had struggled with jealousy in the past or were continuing to deal with it. Fear of losing a partner, envy of a partner's erotic relationship, or disapproval of the dedication of time and energy to another were commonly cited reasons. In this section, I look first at one couple who reported that they had no problem with jealousy. I then turn my attention to two interview subjects whose primary relationships were impacted by one or both partner's feelings of jealousy.

Liam and Carathea

Only a handful of my interview participants said that jealousy had never been an issue for them personally. For example, Liam, a graduate student in his late 20s claimed he never felt jealous of his girlfriend Carathea's lovers. Liam recognized how unusual this was when he explained, "I think I'm broken, or something." Carathea also stated that she was rarely bothered by jealousy. Though several interview participants expressed sentiments similar to Liam and Carathea's, no one had been as low-key about sexual jealousy as this couple.

During our interview, I asked how Liam and Carathea balanced their time and energy between their primary relationship and their secondary partners:

B: So, tell me more about your secondary relationships. How do you divide up your time? Is it only about sex? How strong are your emotional connections [with these other people]?

L: “People that we’re fucking” is probably about as formal as we get with it.

C: Because the thing is, we haven’t had any relationships outside this relationship. Like, the closest we came was that dude that I was doing.

L: Like there’s repetitive – there’s a bunch of her exes that she’s been sleeping with for the whole time I’ve known her.

C: Yes. They don’t get a special name. We use their actual names, like “I fucked Jim again.”

This passage is significant insofar as it introduces what might be called a “strategy of reassurance.” In CNM relationships, the element of precarity introduced by other sexual partners can tip the balance too far towards anxiety and insecurity about the relationship. To counterbalance such anxiety, couples often rely on patterns of communication to signal to themselves and others the primacy of their bond. In the excerpt above, for example, Liam and Carathea engage in a rhetorical distancing that repeats and reifies the emotional distance between themselves and their secondary partners.

Liam and Carathea don’t have to worry much about their importance to one another because the relative insignificance of their secondary partners is readily apparent. The couple engages in a rhetorical distancing that repeats and reifies the emotional distance between themselves and their secondary partners. “People that we’re fucking” is hardly the way you refer to someone who plays a more multifaceted role in your life. “People that we’re fucking” reduces secondaries to sexual partners; they are not people Liam and Carathea saw often, or sometimes at all, outside of their sexual encounters. This is what Carathea means when she says, “we haven’t had any relationships outside this

relationship.” The people that Liam and Carathea have sex with don’t count as “real” relationships. They do not come close to the emotional intimacy and history that Liam and Carathea share.

Though it may sound harsh, Liam and Carathea’s rhetorical distancing shouldn’t be viewed as abusive. The couple’s earthy language doesn’t mean they didn’t care at all about their outside partners. Carathea said that she had ongoing casual sexual relationships with a handful of guys in two different cities; at one point, she had been willing to let a down-on-his-luck lover live in a spare bedroom. (That arrangement never came to pass because of Liam’s discomfort with the idea.) For his part, Liam said that sex and friendship often overlapped in his relationships with women:

Like, I tend to sleep with people who are friends, like, only a couple of times with a person, not for any particular reason, that’s just how it happens. Like, I meet someone, I kind of start to become friends with them, I sleep with them a couple of times and then they turn into kind of like a regular friend. That’s kind of my pattern. I would say I’ve slept with a lot of my female friends. Um... and, generally not sleeping with them so much afterwards. You know, I friends who live out of town and they’ll come to the city for, like, two days and I sleep with them and they’re gone.

Liam did not say whether any of these women had ever wanted more from their relationship with him, even in the relatively limited capacity of an ongoing casual sexual partner. If the women interviewed for Bogle’s (2008) research on college hook-up culture are any indication, some of them very well may have harbored a desire for a more serious relationship and simply settled for being a secondary partner. In either Carathea or Liam’s case, it is possible that a secondary partner may have felt hurt or misled, but neither member of the couple told stories about past misunderstandings or secondary partners’

hurt feelings.³³ Instead, both Liam and Carathea claimed that they did not “lead on” secondaries about the potential for an ongoing, committed relationship. Both insisted they were honest with their secondary partners about their own practice of CNM.

What clear is the degree to which Liam and Carathea tried to incorporate straightforward communication into their own relationship, assuaging any nascent jealousy by immediately letting one another know of new partners and even sharing the exciting details of their encounters with others:

C: I want to know who he’s seeing – I always tell him right away when I sleep with someone else. Or, when he sleeps with other girls, he tells me about it right away.

B: Do you tell him about things, like, in detail or just to alert him to the fact that you’re seeing somebody?

C: In detail. That’s another thing. I try to avoid telling people this: one of the reasons this works really well... hearing about sex that each of us had with someone else is really, really hot. So that really helps, I think, the whole thing.

Instead of letting sex with outside partners come between them, Carathea and Liam used their encounters with others to heat up their own sex life. Carathea says that she “avoid[s] telling people” about ways CNM enhances her primary relationship, but the phenomenon of being aroused by a partner’s sexual experiences – and her sexual appeal to others – is well-documented by researchers and relationship therapists (De Visser and McDonald, 2007; Perel, 2006). It may seem counterintuitive that talking about sex with other partners would bring a couple together, but sex with secondary partners added to, rather than detracted from, Carathea and Liam’s sex life. In possessing themselves, rather than

³³ I don’t mean to single out Liam and Carathea for special criticism regarding their relationships with secondary partners. Rather, I am using this opportunity to suggest possible drawbacks of CNM from the point of view of secondary partners.

possessing one another, the couple was able to enrich their erotic life together. Rather than feeling angry, hurt, insecure, or envious, the couple found one another's dalliances exciting. They capitalized on the energy provided by outside lovers to enhance their own relationship. Rather than being undone by sexual jealousy, this couple used the frisson of those encounters to enrich their emotional and erotic connection.

By distancing themselves rhetorically and emotionally from secondaries, and sharing the intimate details of outside sexual encounters, Carathea and Liam reaffirmed their commitment and attraction to one another. Distancing and sharing were strategies that worked to make them feel secure in their relationship and kept secondary relationships from supplanting their primary partnership. In particular, sharing the details of their sexual escapades allowed them to strengthen their connection without having to possess one another's sexuality. The makeup of their respective personalities likely made jealousy less of a problem, but these strategies enabled them to clearly communicate their priorities and desires. Not everyone I interviewed was able to prevent jealousy from marring their primary partnership. When individuals involved in non-monogamous relationships prefer the possession of the partner over self-possession, their partnership is likely to be marred by discord.

At this point, I want to turn my attention to David and Becca and Ian and Jennifer, two couples who struggled with jealousy in their marriages. In the case of David and Becca, the couple was at an impasse. Becca was jealous of David's lovers but David was loath to give up CNM. Complicating matters, David was a rational, cerebral person who had trouble understanding his wife's passionate jealousy. David and Becca's divergent temperaments made

their conflict especially difficult to resolve. In contrast, for Ian and Jennifer, jealousy was a mutual problem, but they both had different reasons for the feelings they experienced. The two couples offer different examples of how jealousy can disrupt the narrative of CNM as an exceptionally ethical and pleasurable lifestyle, one based on fairness, consent, honesty, and autonomy.

David and Becca

David, a white man in his early 40s, is researcher at a university. David and his wife, Becca have two children together. Becca works and is the primary caretaker for the kids. David and his wife have had an off-and-on CNM relationship since they met seven years ago. David explained that when he and his wife had first started dating, she was entangled emotionally and sexually with an old boyfriend. At that time, she asked David to be accommodating of ongoing contact with her other lover. David agreed to a “don’t ask, don’t tell policy” but his wife (then-girlfriend) eventually broke off any relationship with her ex. After a period of monogamy, David’s relationship with Becca transitioned back to CNM when she went abroad for several months to study. According to David, during this time, his wife “basically gave [him] license to play while she was away.” Although Becca had continued to see her ex for awhile after she met David, David consider her time abroad the first time they had “formally negotiated” consensual non-monogamy.

David had had three secondary partners over the course of his relationship with Becca. Two he had met online and one had been a work colleague; since moving across the country to their current home, David had not undertaken any outside relationships. David’s wife had met two of her husband’s three secondary partners (she hadn’t met one woman because Becca was out of

the country at the time). Becca got along well with the women when she met them, but still struggled with the fact that her husband had intimate relationships with them. David gave me an account of the most recent time he had another partner. After telling his wife about his interest in another woman, he pursued her while Becca was traveling overseas. Yet, according to David, despite the fact that, “we talked about it and knew exactly who this was, that didn’t work out too well either.” Below, he offers a theory of how differences between him and Becca contributed to these difficulties:

B: Why did things not work out well?

D: Because it turns out that the details of what Becca felt comfortable with... were not entirely clear.

B: Like, sexual behavior or emotional stuff? The time you spend together? What do you mean?

D: A little bit of all of these is probably true. Less so in the sexual behavior... She feels a lot less threatened by the sex and a lot more threatened by any emotional loyalty. I’m not like that...

B: It sounds like your wife is more conflicted about this but it also sounds like she brings it up. Why does she suggest it?

D: Yeah, I think she’s... I don’t think she’s conflicted about this. She would rather that I not prefer our relationship to be open. I think it’s pretty simple. I think she’s also come to realize, that, um, as have I – this was not obvious to me when we first got to know each other – but it probably wouldn’t work for me any other way.

Clearly, the impetus to define their marriage as non-monogamous came from David, rather than his wife: “I think... it is pretty clear now, much more so than it was in the past, that [CNM] was my preference, and that she would much rather be completely monogamous.” Becca acquiesced to David’s desire to have outside relationships – typically, one long-term secondary girlfriend at a time – to keep their relationship intact. But Becca issues stipulations about these relationships that strike David as unnecessary, even irrelevant. For example, Becca feels less

anxious about David's other relationships when his lovers do not live in the same city. David has difficulty being completely sympathetic to Becca's preference:

D: I think she... The part she's always been OK with and has worked fine between the two of us is if I have long-distance relationships. But the notion of someone being nearby...

B: So if you were to travel and see somebody occasionally then that's ok, but not somebody in the city, that's not ok?

D: Yeah.

B: I can see that. If you don't really see someone that often, it's a lot less threatening.

D: Maybe you can see it but for me, it doesn't make any difference whatsoever because I don't confuse geography with security. That's just it. To me, the security is about the decision in the other person's mind and not anything else... but, yeah.... Whatever.

David is a very cerebral person who told me that jealousy had not been a problem for him since childhood, when he decided that jealousy was "irrational." David's preference for logic over sentiment means that he is often affectively disengaged from other's emotional states; he is aware of them but offers an intellectual rather than empathic response. Such disengagement is apparent in our conversation above when I try to take Becca's view of long-distance relationships versus secondary partners who live nearby. I say that I could understand why this arrangement would feel less threatening. David's response is swift and uncompromising: "Maybe you can see it but for me, it doesn't make any difference whatsoever because I don't confuse geography with security. That's just it. To me, the security is about the decision in the other person's mind and not anything else." He finishes his pronouncement with a dismissive, "But, yeah... Whatever." For David, a decision to remain in his marriage is an unwavering intellectual decision to honor his commitments. David believes that an intimate relationship with another woman would never compromise his primary attachment to his wife and children.

Of course, David has privileged access to his own feelings. He experiences his commitment as an unwavering conviction, but Becca must take his word for it. Similarly, the idea that an objective fact, “geography,” could be “confused” with a subjective feeling, “security,” strikes David as absurd. In David’s mind, logic and emotions should be kept separate. He sees his wife’s jealousy as irrational and therefore illegitimate. For a rationalist like David, reasons might help him see the situation from his wife’s point of view. But Becca has not been able to provide him with any explanation for her emotions:

D: I think for her, as she discovered that time that she went overseas and I stayed here, she got extremely jealous. She actually said it was the first time in her life she just got completely jealous. She just lost it.

B: And why was she jealous?

D: I don’t think we rightly know. And I think, I think one aspect of it might have been that she just really felt out of sorts here in the States. And I was her security so anything that even slightly shakes her security in her relationship, I mean, it’s horribly amplified... but this is just me, guessing... And my summary would be that our whole experience with non-monogamy has been very difficult... [Non-monogamy] certainly causes a lot of strain.

B: Because of the jealousy?

D: Yeah.

B: Have you had a relationship with anyone here? Have you been on hiatus?

D: Nothing at all here.

David’s use of the pronoun “we,” as in “I don’t think we rightly know” why Becca is jealous, is a positive sign. It demonstrates that David and Becca did make some effort to figure out the origins of Becca’s jealousy; that he undertook this difficult conversation with his partner shows David is not completely without empathy for Becca, even if he cannot understand her perspective. Moreover, he has been on a “hiatus” from seeing other women since he and his

family moved to town from California a year earlier. To accommodate his wife's feelings, David has not sought out a new partner, even though he believes that his outside relationship is, in principle, totally defensible. In David and Becca's case, putting an end to outside relationships or an indefinite period of time was the most workable arrangement. If one partner desires a non-monogamous relationship and the other rejects it absolutely, compromise is probably impossible. However, David's and Becca's détente is not unheard of even among my small sample of non-monogamists. Resolving jealousy by taking a break from CNM is a strategy I return to in the next section, along with other ways that non-monogamists balance out personal satisfaction with obligations to their partners.

Ian and Jennifer

Compared with couples like Rob and Theresa or Maria and Autumn, David and his wife were not ideally matched in their beliefs, desires, or behaviors when it came to non-monogamy.³⁴ However, even couples who shared a desire for outside partners could experience bouts of passionate jealousy. Ian raised the issue of jealousy several times during the course of our interview. He explained that both he and his wife felt jealous sometimes, though for different reasons. Ian was jealous of his wife's ease in finding outside partners; Ian believed his wife was jealous of his interest in other women because she was afraid that he would leave her. While discussing the psychological dynamic between his wife and himself, Ian theorized why many people wanted someone other than primary partner to desire them.

³⁴ About six months after our interview, I ran into David while conducting research at an event that attracted a lot of non-monogamists. According to David, the situation in his marriage remained more or less the same; David and Becca were still on a break from CNM. David's wife was not with him at the event.

I: Your significant other, and I think this is really important to the whole non-monogamy, you know, open relationship sort of thing, your significant other, there's a certain point where you don't get gratification from what their opinion of you is. And, your opinion, oddly enough, your opinion doesn't matter on that level. I could tell my wife that she's beautiful, and she is, she's gorgeous...

B: It's like a compliment from your parents.

I: Yeah, and it's like, "Of course you think that," and I'm just like, "Wait, don't you understand? The other men just want to get in your pants." [Laughs] You know? I'm the one you should be listening to. Romance changes that.

Ian was jealous that the opinions of other men could take precedence in his wife's mind. Ian was really the one Jennifer should be listening to. In part, she should listen to him because he was her husband. As her spouse, Ian was committed to Jennifer and cared about her more deeply than a random guy she met at bar could. Another reason Jennifer should value his opinion highly is because these other men would say anything to convince Jennifer to have sex with them. They are not trustworthy the way Ian is. Despite his misgivings about these men, however, Ian was not bitter towards Jennifer or CNM as a lifestyle. He used his experience to analyze his jealousy, as a way of better understanding the dynamics of his relationship and his own psychology.

Ian was insightful about how commitment can create an ironic reversal. Instead of valuing your partner's opinion of you, familiarity dulls her approval. Logically, if someone who knows you well enough to see your faults and weaknesses still loves and desires you, that affection should be much more meaningful than the interest of a stranger. But the desire of someone new is exciting. The novelty of another's affirmation makes it seem somehow more real, more immediate and valuable.

For Ian, and presumably many others, there is a sense of competition between oneself and a partner's secondary lovers. Ian considered himself a competitive person, and this could be a handicap when it came to handling jealousy. Ian wanted to know how he measured up against his wife's lovers. He believed that the jealousy he felt was compounded by the fact that there was a pseudo-competition between him and Jennifer, since her youth helped her to find many more partners than Ian was able to. He provides a thorough explanation of his thoughts on the subject:

I: I mean, it's all jealousy, it's all about jealousy, and then I think you sorta, if you were to codify all that stuff you'd say, "Alright, and where is that jealousy coming from?" you know? I tend to be a competitive person, you know? So, definitely a sense of where do I stand, am I better, am I worse? Not that I think I could possibly be worse. Somebody else could be better but... [Laughs] So there's a competitive element.

B: Yeah.

I: There is a sense of deriving your sense of personal worth from somebody else. So there's a sense of 'You're going somewhere else, what's wrong with me? Why can't you get that from me,' you know? And in the very beginning that sort of stuff came through. Every once in a blue moon I might feel this sort of... and you know, this is really where it's coming from now... it's coming from a sense of here I am, home, and not having a lot of luck, and my partner's out having fun.

Ian is very aware of how the jealousy that often accompanies CNM is tied into one's feelings of self-worth. For Ian, and presumably many others, there is a sense of competition between oneself and a partner's secondary lovers: is he hotter than me? A better lover? Does he make her happier than I do? Ian reassures himself that he's "not... possibly worse" than the other men, but uncertainty follows this declaration, "Somebody could be better but..." This back and forth between confidence and self-doubt is probably familiar to anyone who's been jealous of a romantic rival. Ian continues to elaborate on the "competitive element" of his jealousy by returning to the question of self-worth in intimate relationships. If Jennifer is able to take Ian's

affection for granted, Jennifer's interest in other men prompts Ian to ask, "What's wrong with me? Why can't you get that from me?" Again, Ian faces the irony that the approval of near-strangers can sometimes outweigh the love of a partner. It is possible Ian would be less preoccupied with these questions, however, if he was "having a lot of luck" with other women. He would feel less possessive and threatened if he had a secondary lover to boost his self-esteem.

Such jealousy and insecurity is of course one of biggest drawbacks of non-monogamy for many people. In monogamous relationships, each member of the couple gets to feel like "the One," the one for whom their partners forsook all others. In consensually non-monogamous unions, the status of primary partner can feel more conditional and less completely safe and ego-satisfying. A non-monogamists who has a tendency to feel jealous may be hurt that he isn't the only important man in his partner's life (like Ian); one with a strong sense of self-possession and independence may be baffled by the jealousy of his primary partner (like David). Though some non-monogamists, like Liam and Carathea or Rob and Theresa (Chapter 4), believe that non-monogamy actually strengthens their bond – by allowing them to be honest with their partners, have greater pleasure in their lives, and by making their primary relationship more exciting – not all non-monogamists have this experience.

Jealousy is the primary emotional difficulty for many people involved in CNM relationships. This is because intense feelings of jealousy make it almost impossible to maintain satisfying CNM partnerships. But jealousy is not the only challenge facing non-monogamists. Non-monogamy has at its center an active tension between the selfish motivation to pursue one's own desires, and the obligations to one's partner that come with a long-term relationship.

Unlike jealousy, this tension between desire and obligation is inevitable; it is inherent in perhaps all committed partnerships but especially acute among non-monogamists, who value pleasure and personal fulfillment so highly.

The problem of precarity: Between commitment and dissolution

Non-monogamists are always trying to find equilibrium between the centripetal and centrifugal forces in their partnership. The centripetal forces, like love, domestic responsibility, and shared history together, bind them together, while centrifugal forces, like boredom and the desire for novelty, draw them outward into other relationships. The forces that draw non-monogamists out from their primary relationship can add stress to their home life, and makes them exceptionally aware of the precarity that haunts even the happiest partnership. In this section, I again look at two different couples, Amy and Cameron and Lisa and Paige, to explore how different individuals mediate between the pleasures promised by non-monogamy and what they must give up in order to sustain their primary relationships.

First, I focus on my interview with Amy, a young married non-monogamist who struggles to define herself as at a free, independent woman while also having to acknowledge her obligations to her husband. As a consequence, Amy's narrative of her marriage is rife with ambivalence. She is caught between her desire to see herself and her husband as free agents and realists who know the grim statistics about divorce, and the expectation that her marriage will be lifelong. Amy is dealing with a dualism that is only imperfectly resolved by non-monogamy's egalitarian and individualist ethics. She is only

able to reconcile the realities of her marriage with a rhetoric of personal freedom by shuttling between romantic cynicism and the more hegemonic language of true love.

Second, I look at Lisa and Paige's experience with non-monogamy and their decision to "close" their relationship after a particularly negative experience with a secondary partnership. Lisa and Paige, two queer people in their mid-20s, displayed a mix of cynicism and romanticism similar to Amy's. They differed from Amy, however, in the straightforward way they sacrificed secondary partners for the sake of their primary relationship. Though their relationship can be understood as existing on the continuum of CNM, their sacrifice of non-monogamy shows that sometimes, the only way to resolve the centripetal and centrifugal energies of CNM is to turn inward, and focus exclusively on the primary relationship. Becoming monogamous, even for a short while, may appear to negate a relationship's status as CNM; however, non-monogamy is a practice that exists on a continuum. Many couples who consider themselves CNM can go a considerable length of time without either of the primaries having outside relationships, making their partnership in effect monogamous.³⁵ For these individuals, it is the openness to outside relationships and the principles of consensual non-monogamy – fairness, consent, honesty, and freedom – that qualify their partnerships as CNM.

Amy and Cameron: Together forever?

³⁵ At an event that attracted many non-monogamists, I saw a man walking around with a t-shirt that read, "I am polyamorous. I'm just lazy." This kind of excuse is sometimes offered by people who consider themselves non-monogamous (and who have almost always had secondary relationships at some point) but who are de facto monogamists because they are not actively pursuing other lovers at the present time.

Amy and Cameron are a white, middle-class, highly educated couple. Cameron is a surgeon and Amy has a Masters degree and teaches. Amy is in her late twenties and her husband is about ten years her senior; they met while she was in college and he was completing his medical residency. Soon after meeting, Amy insisted that if Cameron wanted to be with her, he'd have to accept that she could not be in a monogamous relationship. They have practiced non-monogamy for the entirety of their seven year relationship. Though Cameron had initially struggled with accepting Amy's desire for non-monogamy, the couple eventually found a way to be non-monogamous that worked well for them.

Cameron and Amy each carry on secondary relationships in ways that suit their distinctive personalities and desires. For example, Cameron's profession demands a considerable amount of his time. Because of this, aside from his relationship with his wife, for many years he only occasionally pursued other women and had casual, "friends-with-benefits" relationships with his secondary partners. However, at the time of this writing, in the autumn of 2012, Cameron has a long-term girlfriend of over a year. Amy has a stronger desire for multiple partners, and has engaged in a variety of secondary relationships which sometimes overlap with one another chronologically. Amy identifies strongly as a bisexual; alongside occasional trysts with members of both sexes, she is also in a long-term relationship with another woman, Ruth, whom she has been involved with since 2010.

At the time of the interview, Amy was completing her degree and working, but she had health insurance only through her husband's job. Health insurance is elusive for millions of Americans and Amy has a special need for it. Amy has a rare, progressive illness that will probably leave her physically disabled in later life. The cost of her doctors' appointments (many

in distant cities) and prescriptions would put treatment completely beyond her grasp if she didn't have access to her husband's insurance. Even with Cameron's excellent health plan, at the time we spoke in 2010, the couple spent more than a thousand dollars a month for health costs. Adding to their financial burden were Cameron's and Amy's school loans. Amy is a naturally upbeat and energetic woman who is undaunted by the difficulties she's encountered; however, the burden represented by her health problems and the cost of treating them necessarily influenced her relationship with Cameron. Amy explained that though she hadn't particularly wanted to get married, she and Cameron did so that Amy would have access to his benefits.

B: Why did you decide to get married?

A: We were together for five years... He was 34... So both of our parents wanted us to be married for different reasons... They didn't understand what we were doing if we weren't getting married. Also for some minimal tax benefits and joint accounts and stuff. Health insurance was a big one because I've got boatloads of medical bills. So we decided to get married because of all that stuff. Not because it would legitimize our relationship. Not because we were madly in love with each other and couldn't wait to say those vows. It was a really practical thing...

Cameron and Amy had many reasons for getting married. Certainly they cared about each other, but Amy says the couple's main motivation was for Amy to have access to Cameron's health insurance to help her deal with "boatloads of medical bills." Amy is not the only person to have found herself in this situation; unfortunately, the lack of affordable universal healthcare in the United States exerts strong pressure on many people to marry as a way to obtain access to medical care (Beisner, 2012). Other pressures also made marriage appealing. Cameron's and Amy's parents wanted them to marry and found it strange that a young couple who lived together for several years had no desire to tie the knot. Combined with other financial concerns and the promise of certain legal privileges, marriage presented itself as

a smart choice, rather than one determined primarily by romance. Amy's last comments that she married Cameron "not because we were madly in love" makes it sound as though the decision to get married was completely cynical, as though the couple didn't love one another. However, what Amy means is that though she and Cameron were in a loving, committed partnership, the desire to be with one another was separate from any desire to legally formalize their relationship.

As with many marriages, Amy and Cameron were motivated by a mix of instrumentality and affection. What is different is that Amy had no desire for marriage per se. The couple underwent the unfussy secular ritual of being married at city hall. Unlike many of their contemporaries, who spend tens of thousands of dollars on wedding (and pre-wedding) celebrations, Amy and Cameron did not have a wedding shower, bachelor or bachelorette parties, or even invite family members to the ceremony. According to Amy, after their marriage, their relationship remained the same as before. Nevertheless, I was interested in finding out how Amy thought about her future with Cameron, and if being married, and now legally obligated to one another in a number of ways, influenced her understanding of her non-monogamous relationship.

B: So the marriage may have been a practical decision but tell me more about your commitment to one another. Had you, between yourselves, before the marriage, formally decided to be together long term?

A: Well, we didn't make any formal agreements and we're still under the impression that this is not going to last... Long term relationships, marriage, however you want to call it. So we never put ourselves above that statistic. We are really aware that like, we live a long time and we're not going to be the same people we were when we got married or first met. And if we both change and we don't like each other? Then we had a really good run. So it wasn't a matter of "We're going to be together forever. I love you." That is fantastic. And would we like that to happen? Of course. But we're more – I hate to use the word realistic – but we're more, um, attuned to the fact that this may not be 50+ year relationship. And honestly, we think that we're actually giving

ourselves better odds by being in a non-traditional relationship... Our desire to stay together is so strong that we're willing to do whatever that takes in order for us to be together for 50 years. That means that we're going to reframe the way we think about our primary relationship and we're going to see other people and we're going to do all that stuff and we think that's totally worthwhile.

At first, Amy is dispassionately pessimistic: "We're still under the impression that this [marriage] is not going to last." Given that approximately half of marriages end in divorce, Amy says that neither she nor Cameron pretends to be "above that statistic," though Cameron's and her parents are both still in their first marriages. Amy offers a perfectly rational reason for why their partnership might not persist until death-do-them-part. Many Americans can expect to live into their late 70s and beyond, and Amy and Cameron could change so much over the course of their lives that they are no longer compatible. Like many non-monogamists, Amy prioritizes pleasure in her intimate life. She assumes that if there is not enough pleasure in the relationship, it only makes sense that she and Cameron would acknowledge their "good run" and part ways as friends. In other words, Amy and Cameron believe they would end their marriage before sacrificing personal happiness. Amy says that neither she nor Cameron believed that getting married meant they were "going to be together forever." According to Amy, they only got married because she needed her future-husband's health insurance.

Despite the Amy's initial nonchalance about divorce, however, her account quickly becomes dualistic. Amy contends that when she married Cameron, "it wasn't a matter of 'We're going to be together forever. I love you.'" Yet, this statement is immediately followed by "That is fantastic. Would we like that to happen? Of course." From one sentence to the next, Amy's blasé prediction of divorce is banished with the declaration that staying married would be "fantastic." Amy is attempting to balance her acceptance of the precarity of her relationship –

“we’re more... attuned to the fact that this may not be 50+ year relationship” – with the reality of her love for Cameron.

Amy’s understanding of her marriage is riven with ambivalence. Her stated expectations about her marriage veer from one extreme to another, from cynicism to optimism, because Amy is trying to tell two stories about her relationship. In one version, she and Cameron are hard-nosed realists who accept that their marriage could be another grim statistic: “we’re still under the impression that this is not going to last.” In the other, Amy and her husband are idealistic and romantic, committed to being “together for 50 years.” Significantly, if Amy and Cameron do divorce, Amy believes that this would be in spite of, rather than because of, non-monogamy. Amy believes that non-monogamy, far from hurting her relationships with Cameron, is an important contributor to their relationship’s longevity. Non-monogamy doesn’t increase the precarity of their bond, it lessens precarity’s threat: “we think we’re actually giving ourselves better odds by being in a non-traditional relationship.” For Amy, a happy marriage that lasts a lifetime does not preclude other intimate relationships and it just might demand them.

CNM gives Amy a strategy for dealing with tensions already present in her marriage – tensions between the reality of sacrifice and obligation on the one hand, and pleasure and independence on the other. Rather than banishing one half of the dichotomy – divorce versus life-long marriage, the complete loss of a primary partner versus an exclusive dedication to him – the couple’s non-monogamy positions them to face this dualism head on. CNM provides the couple with a way to actualize and live out the centripetal and centrifugal tensions of their marriage. In other words, the selfishness, and desire for novelty and autonomy that pushes lovers apart, and the affection, obligation, and commitment that keeps them together, are

successfully balanced for some people via non-monogamy. Instead of suppressing these tensions, consensual non-monogamy becomes a strategy for working with their discursive, affective, and practical ramifications. This is why Amy can say that CNM gives her and Cameron “better odds.” Amy and Cameron “reframe their primary relationship” and “see other people” not because they don’t care about each other; they have other lovers to bolster their own bond. Secondary partnerships force them to live in the midst of this tension and precarity, working and hoping for the best.

Amy’s dualistic narrative of her marriage illustrates how consensual non-monogamy holds commitment and independence in continual tension. As opposed to the traditional model of “settling down,” non-monogamists like Amy dedicate their energy to nurturing fulfilling primary partnerships while also accepting the precarity introduced by outside relationships. Though people in CNM partnerships expect their marriages to be lifelong, the specter of precarity intimated by non-monogamy makes them especially attuned to the fragility of love and attraction. In some ways, this pessimism and awareness of precarity can benefit a relationship, if it encourages both partners to not take one another for granted.

Some individuals who are strongly committed to the principle and practice of CNM strike a balance between the pleasures and dangers of non-monogamy by occasionally “taking a break” from seeing other people. Making one’s relationship monogamous, or going on “hiatus,” as David phrased it earlier in this chapter, is both similar to and different from a trial separation for monogamous couples. Like a trial separation, taking a break from CNM is experiment. Taking a break gives a couple the opportunity to spend more energy on their primary relationship, and come to a mutual decision about if and when they will be

non-monogamous in the future. Unlike a trial separation, the primary couple spends much more time together; they separate themselves from their secondary romantic and sexual relationships. For those who have been practicing non-monogamy, a hiatus is a chance to sort through both individuals' feelings and thoughts without the distractions of other lovers. David and Becca's irreconcilable feelings about non-monogamy forced David to give up pursuing other partners for an indefinite time into the future. Lisa and Paige are another couple whose troubles with CNM convinced them that monogamy was the best choice for their relationship. Like David, Lisa and Paige were not necessarily turning their back on non-monogamy forever. CNM was an option that the couple remained open to, though Lisa and Paige both agreed that secondary relationships were not appropriate at the present time.

Lisa and Paige: Returning to monogamy

Love, attraction, and shared interests and goals bring two people together, but libido, a desire for novelty, or the need for something their partner can't give, motivates them to seek others. Directing sexual and emotional energy outward in this way introduces certain stresses into the primary relationship. For some CNM couples, the best way to take a break from the stresses introduced by non-monogamy is to end their secondary relationships and be monogamous for a period of time. This means leaving behind the more anxiety-producing aspects of precarity, but also saying goodbye to the fun and excitement of outside relationships. Lisa and Paige are one couple who tried CNM for a time, but eventually decided to return to monogamy because, for them, CNM introduced more problems than it solved. The couple didn't write off CNM entirely, however, and believed they might have a sexually open relationship again at some point in the future.

I met Lisa and Paige at a neighborhood park on a fall afternoon. Both in their mid-20s, Lisa is a petite blonde with an [happy] disposition. Paige, her partner, is taller, with glasses and short, dark hair and a more reserved demeanor. When Lisa first contacted me about doing an interview, she explained that she and Paige had been non-monogamous in the past but were currently monogamous. Though I had planned to only meet with people currently involved in CNM relationships, it seemed like a good idea to hear from a couple who experimented with non-monogamy but ultimately decided to return to sexual exclusivity. Perhaps their experiences could shed some light on benefits and costs of CNM that other, continuously non-monogamous partnerships could not.

Lisa and Paige met in college, at age 19, and had been together ever since. During the interview, they held hands and conveyed strong support and affection for one another. Lisa was more talkative than Paige, and it was she that recounted a discussion about CNM the couple had early on in their relationship. Even as college students, Lisa and Paige recognized how difficult it would be to maintain lifelong monogamy, particularly given their youth. Lisa explained:

L: I think a lot of people come to [non-monogamy] because they have experiences where they cheat or something and they realize, "Oh, I can't really do monogamy very well," but I think for us, at least the way that we talk about it least for me is, we got together when we were really young, and I think we were often talking about how do you build having a life-long relationship if you get together when you're 19 years old?

B: Um hm. And people can change.

L: Yeah, and so I think that we had talked about us not wanting to break up just because we were attracted to somebody else. And it seemed like an unreasonable expectation to say, "Ok, we're 19, we want to be together 'til we're, you know, 90, and we're never going to sleep with someone else or be interested in someone else." And I think even having had those preliminary conversations though it didn't go well – didn't go well later – made it possible to say, "This is an option" because I think when people

don't feel like there are options, they cheat, because there's not any other way – because it's hard....

Lisa, like Amy, recognized the precarity of intimate relationships. Just because she and Paige were in love now didn't mean that they would never be attracted to other people: “[I]t seemed like an unreasonable expectation to say, ‘... We’re never going to sleep with someone else or be interested in someone else.’” Lisa and Paige thought it was better to address this issue before it became a problem, before a lack of “options” made either one of them feel that they needed to “cheat, because there’s not any other way...” to have the happiness of their primary relationship and the thrill of a new lover.

Towards the end of the excerpt above, Lisa comments, “it didn’t go well – didn’t go well later.” What Lisa is referring to is that the difficulties caused by the couple’s eventual experimentation with CNM. A few years previous to the time of our interview, Lisa decided to start seeing a young man named Nick. Paige worried about the distance that she felt Lisa’s secondary relationship introduced into her and Lisa’s partnership. She felt lonely and hurt during this time: “I was really falling apart.” However, Paige also said that, “at a certain point, that started to change.” Because Lisa’s relationship took up so much of her time, Paige was pushed to become much more independent. If Paige was going to thrive – rather than merely survive – the precarity CNM had introduced into her life, she had to adapt to the norms of casualized intimacy. To do this, Paige looked at her negative emotions as something she could analyze, learn from, and, at least to a certain extent, change. She also used the feminist and psychotherapeutic rhetoric of autonomy and control over one’s life to explain how she overcame her jealousy and fear:

I sort of had to deal with issues around jealousy and all the stuff that comes up when you're in an open relationship... I think I was finally like, "Ok, whatever, I'm just going to figure this out on my own." And I think it was at that point where I stopped kind of looking to you for everything... I felt like I was able to be like, "Ok, I'm my own person." Like, kind of do my own thing and stop counting the minutes until you get home and just see what happens.

Instead of indulging or defending her jealousy, Paige did what she could to overcome it. Paige also took up a CNM understanding of sexual fairness and began to think about dating. After a year of on-again, off-again dating, Lisa broke up with Nick, but by then, Paige had started casually seeing another woman. When Lisa found out, she "dealt with it horribly," according to her. Lisa explained that "Right at the same time as this guy and I were breaking up.... Paige started dating... And I totally lost my shit, was really upset and horribly jealous." Lisa's distress prompted the couple to reexamine their relationship and return to monogamy. Lisa was the first to acknowledge her hypocrisy in being so jealous, and both members of the couple had a sense of humor about time as non-monogamists. Lisa and Paige ultimately rejected the precarity that CNM introduced into their partnership. In effect, they resolved the precarity of a more casualized relationship by removing it, but this doesn't mean they didn't learn anything valuable from the experience. For instance, Paige believed she became much more self-reliant because of Lisa's outside relationship.

All relationships are precarious in the sense that they can end. CNM simply throws this precarity into relief, making it impossible to avoid. But non-monogamy not only highlights the precarity inherent in every relationship, it introduces even of more it, as some of one or both partners' energy, desire, resources, and time are directed towards other lovers. Lisa and Paige chose to dial down the precarity in their relationship; they shifted the balance back towards

mutual obligation and away from the enjoyment of other, if not necessarily greener, pastures. In contrast, Amy welcomed certain aspects of precarity, particularly her sexual independence, though (discursively, at least) she struggled to reconcile this independence with the realities of her marriage. The stories of these three individuals show two different strategies for dealing with precarity – the delicate balance of self and other, commitment and autonomy – a challenge that, more so than prejudice and jealousy, resides at the very heart of CNM.

A map for navigating the challenges

The stories featured in this chapter showcase how non-monogamists struggle with the difficulties that CNM can bring. In their intimate lives, non-monogamists must face the limitations of themselves, their partners, and of CNM itself. Ageism and sexism, jealousy, and the need to mediate between the dichotomy of commitment and independence, to manage the precarity intrinsic to non-monogamy, all pose significant challenges. My interview participants' ability to navigate these challenges while continuing to hold to an egalitarian and individualist ethical sensibility testifies to the versatility and flexibility of the discourse of CNM.

The discourse of CNM is accommodating rather than rigid, elastic rather than fixed. Instead of being so absolutist that a serious challenge would shatter its coherence, the discourse of non-monogamy is able to adapt to the changing dynamics of intimate life. Though my interview participants had a hard time addressing the problem of prejudice and a lack of sexual choice as anything other than the breakdown of the freedom and pleasure proffered by CNM, they were better equipped to deal with jealousy and the tension between commitment and independence. This chapter examined several different strategies non-monogamists had for

dealing with jealousy. Liam and Carathea avoided jealousy by distancing themselves rhetorically from secondary partners. They also brought the erotic energy of outside relationships back into their primary partnership by sharing the details of their sexual encounters with other lovers, reinvigorating and strengthening their bond. Ian was able to handle his jealousy of his wife's greater success in finding partners by waxing philosophical. Reflecting on the situation was, in and of itself, a means of processing and mitigating his jealousy. As someone who was conscientious about the ethical norms of non-monogamy, Ian recognized that he needed to work through his emotions; the jealousy he felt was not a justification for being angry at his wife or a sign of monogamy's superiority as a lifestyle. Lastly, in the case of David and his wife, Becca, took a "break" from non-monogamy, and David stopped pursuing other partners for an indefinite time. Giving up CNM temporarily is not entirely satisfactory to David, but it allows him to maintain his understanding of himself as someone who believes in non-monogamy while also giving him and his wife time to reexamine the terms of their relationship.

Non-monogamists also found ways to negotiate the balance between mutual obligation and personal pleasure that is present in all relationships, but amplified by non-monogamy. Outside partners can enhance a primary relationship, as Liam and Carathea show, but they may introduce new anxieties as well. Secondary relationships can also make the couple more continuously aware of the tenuity of any romantic bond. Moreover, the discourse of non-monogamy privileges freedom in ways that makes long-term commitment to another more difficult to integrate into one's self-definition. Amy's dualistic narrative of her marriage is caught between recognizing and rejecting precarity, between a portrayal of herself as an independent woman cynical of fairy-tale endings and the ideal of a romantic committed to doing whatever's necessary to stay with her husband. Lisa and Paige provide a very different perspective on the

precarious balance of self and other in CNM partnerships. When Lisa proved unable to cope with the jealousy and precarity introduced by Paige's new partner, the couple returned to monogamy. They recognized CNM's heightened precarity and chose greater security and commitment over the excitement and anxiety of CNM. What merits their inclusion in project on non-monogamy is their continued openness to non-monogamy after returning to sexual fidelity. Lisa and Paige's flexibility, and their decision to value their subjective, unique bond over a shared social norm of strict monogamy, are typical of many close relationships in an era of casualized intimacy.

The non-monogamists I spoke with for this research embraced an egalitarian and individualist ethics as a set of guidelines for how to behave in a non-monogamous relationship. Their advocacy of fairness, consent, honesty, and personal freedom, however, did not mean that they never came up against situations that contradicted such principles. In dealing with the violation of choice and equality, struggling to overcome the jealous desire to possess a partner, and working to find balance between the security of a long-term partnership and the exciting unpredictability of independence, they did what they could to reconcile their principles with messy realities. Thus, the point of this chapter has not been to suggest that non-monogamy is an untenable lifestyle or that there is anything necessarily lacking in the ethics of CNM. My goal has been to consider how non-monogamists deal with problems that are often internal to the lifestyle itself, i.e. not difficulties imposed by monogamous majority, such as legal discrimination (see Emens, 2004 for examples of some non-monogamists' struggle against mono-normative laws regarding marriage and child custody). The challenges of a lifestyle should not necessarily be the basis for rejecting it, but the resourcefulness and resilience of a way of life can be a recommendation in its favor. Both the product of casualization and its facilitator, insofar as it

further cultivates flexibility, individualism, and a penchant for disclosing intimacy, consensual non-monogamy is reasonably well-equipped to deal with many of the troubles it creates. The acceptance of precarity, and the privileging of flexibility and effort in the discourse of CNM, means that non-monogamists are often open-minded and willing to experiment to find solutions to thorny problems in their intimate relationships. Such principled malleability is likely to be increasingly necessary as the ideological and economic forces behind casualization grow stronger.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have explored non-monogamists' ambivalent identification with their sexual lifestyle; outlined the ethics of CNM; analyzed some non-monogamous men's construction of a polyhegemonic masculinity that embraces sexual equality and the feminized communication norms of disclosing intimacy, but in some ways perpetuates traditional male privilege; and provided an account of obstacles that challenge the ideals of CNM and shown how some of my interview participants deal with these problems. Throughout, I have shown how non-monogamy can be understood as a paradigmatic relationship style in an era of casualized intimacy. The discourse of CNM privileges flexibility, effort, disclosing intimacy, and the acceptance of precarity. In these ways, it reflects, and is a product of, a neoliberal lifeworld.

In the current social-temporal matrix of Anglo-American neoliberalism, economic insecurity, the gutting of social welfare, and women's relative economic and social empowerment vis-à-vis men, combine to promote individualistic ways of life that make the heteronormative nuclear family a less tenable unit for some (Coontz, 2005; Cott, 2005; Hochschild, 2003a, 2003b, 2009; Stacey, 2011) and an undesirable way of life for many others (Klinenberg, 2012; Kurutz, 2012; Porter and McDonnell, 2006; Swarns, 2012). As public life changes, so do our understandings of private relationships. Individual feelings and desires increasingly trump adherence to long-standing traditions. Greater sexual opportunities and more liberal attitudes about sexual diversity promote tolerance and experimentation among many populations, particularly younger people (Lavie-Ajayi, 2010; Lyons, 2003; Paul, 2011). Certainly, not everyone is affected in the same ways by casualization. Class status, race, religion, and region can mitigate casualization's influence. Many people resist the effects of

neoliberalism, including the encroaching affective regime of casualization, with its preference for flexibility and precarity over stability and predictability. All monogamous relationships defy the casualization of intimacy insofar as they put a clear limit to how far the demand for autonomy, personal pleasure, and precarity will intrude upon their relationship. CNM relationships, in contrast, take the casualization of intimacy perhaps as far as it can go.

My research is necessarily limited in the evidence it can offer because it focuses on discourse rather than practice. This dissertation does not claim to know for a fact how non-monogamists actually conduct their relationships; it only shares and analyzes their descriptions, giving my interlocutors the benefit of the doubt that they answered my questions in good faith. Yet, even at the level of language, the definition of what CNM is and the narratives told about it, certain elisions or obfuscations may occur. My analysis relies upon reports from participants, many of whom spoke with me without the presence of their primary partner. They may have put forward a partial account of CNM, attempting to leave out the messier or less appealing aspects of this lifestyle. The possibility of receiving only expurgated accounts of my interviewees' experiences is one reason I included a chapter examining challenges to an idealistic, and perhaps idealized, account of non-monogamous partnerships. I wanted to feature a rich and complex discussion of the rhetoric of CNM, one that would place it in cultural context without offering a one-dimensional picture of non-monogamists. A precept at the foundation of this research is that discourse is an important factor in understanding how people make sense of their lives. In gathering non-monogamists' stories, this dissertation gives us greater insight into what non-monogamists believe they are achieving by practicing CNM.

I would like to highlight two contributions that this dissertation makes to scholarly research on non-normative sexualities, especially the body of work on non-monogamy. First, I have not only provided an analysis of non-monogamists' ethical perspective, I have connected that perspective to broader developments in Anglo-American culture. Legal scholar Elizabeth Emens (2004) has provided one outline of the ethics of CNM and Sheff (2005, 2006) has analyzed gender norms among polyamorists; numerous popular books proffer advice on how to conscientiously engage in this challenging and unfamiliar form of intimacy. The significance of my contribution is that it shows not only that non-monogamists espouse an ethical schema for their relationships, but that this schema is legible within the larger context of Anglo-American neoliberalism.

The emphasis on greater effort and fewer returns, the need to be flexible, and the growing precarity of millions of working people, are inescapable – and often undesired, even ugly – facts of American public life (Allen and Henry, 1997; Barley and Kunda, 2004; Kalleberg, 2009). I argue that such contingencies affect our private lives by creating the conditions available for intimate relationships: how many hours per day we have free from work, how rooted we are in any one physical and social community, what kind of resources our work gives us to materially support ourselves and others, and what language and attitudes we learn in our social worlds, workplaces, and through our media use. As a discourse of intimate relationships, consensual non-monogamy is encouraged by, reflects, and can further facilitate the hegemony of neoliberalism. Neoliberal labor conditions put incredible strain on the heteronormative nuclear family (Hochschild, 2009). Individualism and selfishness suffuses our mediated popular culture; pleasure – in goods, food, sex, intoxication – is put on a pedestal (Campbell, 2005; Illouz, 1997a). In the midst of all this, human beings continue to desire and benefit from

supportive, loving relationships. What is distinctive about the rhetoric of CNM is that it purports to be able to accommodate all of these facets of our complicated culture. You can have pleasure and commitment. You can have freedom and intimacy. To help people achieve these objectives, the discourse of non-monogamy puts forth a richer and sophisticated moral schema than is easily found in the values of corporations or mass media. However, whatever its positive characteristics, the rhetoric of precarity, flexibility, and individualism at work in my interviewees' discussion of non-monogamy points to the downsides of CNM. As I have stated previously, both monogamy and CNM have virtues and drawbacks; it is not the goal of this research to say one way of life is better than another. It has been my aim, however, to provide new insights into consensual non-monogamy as a way of conceptualizing relationships and to refute unfounded stereotypes about non-monogamists. My desire to showcase the coherence of CNM as a way of thinking about intimacy, and to demonstrate the relationship between this particular form of non-monogamy and what I have called casualization, means that I have not paid as much attention to the shortcomings of non-monogamy as I might have.

As with any other kind of intimate relationship, CNM can bring pain as well as pleasure. This dissertation focuses on individuals who carried out primary CNM partnerships more or less successfully; however, the longest-running relationships in my sample were ten years (Colin), seven years (Amy and Cameron; David and Becca), and six years (Paige and Lisa). The other 20 people I interviewed were either currently single or in relationships much shorter duration on average, typically about one to three years. Whether CNM is helpful, hurtful, or not much of a factor in the endurance of my research participants' relationships is a complicated question. Most monogamous relationships do not last a lifetime (and a large minority of relationships solemnized by marriage end in divorce), so that many CNM relationships, married or not, would

eventually end is hardly a strong demerit against the lifestyle. Yet, many of my research subjects believed that CNM helped make their partnerships more stable, rewarding, and, therefore, more long-lasting. This is an empirically testable hypothesis, though it would still be difficult to answer conclusively even with longitudinal data. Following non-monogamous partnerships over time and comparing their longevity and resilience with monogamous relationships could shed light on the degree to which CNM is a burden or a boon for relationships. But, just as monogamous partnerships end because of factors unrelated to monogamy, CNM relationships may fall apart for reasons that have little or nothing to do with non-monogamy. Non-monogamists could simply decide they are no longer compatibly matched. Or, it may be that the kinds of people drawn to CNM are, overall, less interested in maintaining life-long unions (though many people in my sample stated this was a goal for them). The open-mindedness and comfort with precarity and the unknown that characterizes many of the people drawn to CNM may also make them less willing or able to maintain a partnership for 10, 15, or 20 years or longer. They may want more excitement and change, or they may be unwilling to put in the difficult emotional work and make the sacrifices that are so often necessary for a relationship to survive for many years. Another possibility, though no one in my sample stated such a belief explicitly, is that some non-monogamists, like some involved in monogamous relationships, doubt the feasibility of lifetime romantic and sexual commitments; they would not be especially interested in CNM's potential to help relationships endure over time. Even if it is the case that CNM often helps non-monogamous partnerships last, if a couple has children living at home, this raises additional challenges to the construction of CNM as a way to sustain intimate relationships over time.

Some couples may find that CNM becomes much more difficult, or even impossible, when they have children; kids make significant demands on one's energy, resources, time, and emotions. Of course, not all non-monogamists give up having multiple sexual and romantic relationships when they have children. For example, Sheff (2010) and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010) have explored how parents involved in CNM relationships talk about non-monogamy with their kids and negotiate being "closeted" or "out" to teachers and other school officials. Being non-monogamous with young children raises questions about whether, and then, how and when, to begin talking to kids about the parents' other partners. Adults committed to CNM often argue that living non-monogamously provides children with more caretakers and role models (Sheff 2010). Self-identified "poly parents" also believe that kids are more accepting and appreciative of diverse family forms (ibid). Nevertheless, a segment of the CNM population may find that they cannot, or do not, want to focus their emotional energy and resources on secondary partners when they have children to raise. It might be that trying to balance non-monogamy with parenthood is a stumbling block in some relationships, with partners disagreeing about the path forward; conflicts between partners over such issues or between competing emotional loyalties may even end some primary CNM partnerships. This is a topic ripe for research by other scholars interested in understanding the construction and understanding of non-monogamy.

In addition to the difficulties internal to primary CNM relationships, future research could investigate the range of attitudes toward non-monogamy expressed by secondary partners. Along with positive experiences, researchers may find jealousy, betrayal, loneliness, and heartbreak to be rampant among secondary partners, particularly those who are not part of a more established dyad. Also, only two of the 25 people interviewed for this research had

returned to monogamy after finding the emotional toll of CNM to be too great. A broader study of people who have chosen monogamy after experiencing CNM would shed light on why some people may find non-monogamy unworkable. It is quite possible that consensual non-monogamy is most tenable for people like those I interviewed: younger, childless, more educated individuals who have the time, cultural training, and personal inclination to, essentially, give themselves up to talking through –“processing” – the challenges of CNM. Even among my interview participants, some reported having significant problems with the lifestyle. Ian and his wife, Jennifer, had serious disagreements about how to conduct their relationship. David and Becca were taking a break from non-monogamy for the foreseeable future, and Becca was clearly unhappy with her husband’s strong desire for CNM. The stories of partners like Becca also need to be told to get a more complete understanding of consensual non-monogamy. Becca’s perspective, told to me only through her husband, could shed light on the possible discrepancies between the rhetoric of non-monogamy, as well as the limitations of a casualized model of intimacy.

To the degree casualized intimacy is neoliberal, consensual non-monogamy carries with it the same serious problems: a demand for effort that is beyond the ability of many; the retreat from participation in publics in favor of private relationships; and an expectation of flexibility and emotional compartmentalization that runs counter to how many prefer to experience their close relationships. If free-lovers of eras past were utopian in their belief that “love is all you need,” many contemporary non-monogamists may fail to acknowledge the limitations of autonomy, pleasure, and disclosing intimacy as the basis of ongoing partnerships. Committed relationships that persist over the long-term typically necessitate sacrifice and patience. A high threshold for routine doesn’t hurt, either. The discourse of CNM can have a hard time

accommodating these realities; its focus on pleasure and the self means that it may be more unstable than monogamy, and is imperfectly designed to provide a safe haven from the hardships fostered by neoliberalism in the economic and political sectors. Neoliberalism's emphasis on flexibility, individual hard work, and the need to accept precarity are more likely to appeal to and benefit those who are relatively resource-rich, who have the economic, social, and cultural capital that will help them succeed in a world with fewer safety nets. Similarly, the flexibility, individual effort, and acceptance of precarity demanded by CNM may only be possible for or appealing to youthful people with unusually generous allotments of free time and personal energy, people who aren't otherwise distracted by the responsibilities of young children, health problems, or working two jobs to make ends meet. The casualized intimacy practiced by many non-monogamists is similar to the neoliberalism that characterizes so many aspects of Anglo-American society, and it can have many of the same failings.

In addition to situating non-monogamists' ethos in relation to neoliberal economic realities, this dissertation has also traced the intellectual genealogy of the principles valued by non-monogamists and demonstrated the origin of such principles in the discourse and logic of feminism and psychotherapy. In a milieu of neoliberalism, commercialism, and the diminished influence of many Christian precepts, feminism and psychotherapeutic discourse provide an accessible ethical framework that promotes fair treatment, honest communication, and respect for other's personal freedom. These bodies of discourse are so prevalent and influential in part because they overlap with hegemonic "American values" (independence, "straight-shooting", a belief in equality before the law), and in part because they complement and supplement the particular strain of individualism at work in neoliberalism. This is one reason why the individualistic, egalitarian, pleasure-oriented, flexible, hard-working, independent, self-

disclosing, and precarious subjects of CNM offer one blueprint for surviving in an era of casualization.

The second significant finding of this research concerns the intersection of sexual relationships and communication. My study of CNM proposes that verbal communication, in the form of disclosing intimacy, is an important strategy for maintaining close relationships in an era of casualized intimacy. In a casualized world, there is reduced institutional and community support of committed adult relationships. This is occurring in combination with the cultural and ideological factors (e.g. commercialism) mentioned above. Language, a medium that can be practiced privately and which is open to highly idiosyncratic use and interpretation, is particularly useful for making people feel connected, and keeping them connected, when social structures work against or offer only lackluster support for long-term partnerships.

Consensual non-monogamy as a practice of casualized intimacy privileges language, practice, and affect, rather than fixed statuses. My interview participants stressed flexibility, fluidity, change, personal freedom, and unique self-definition. In drawing attention to the flexibility and freedom claimed by the non-monogamists I interviewed, I do not mean to say that they, or anyone, enjoys the near-infinite powers of self-creation such terminology suggests. Rather, I am tying the cultural and material realities of neoliberalism to the discourse of one of its emergent lifestyles. I want to emphasize non-monogamists' thoroughly individualistic, modern take on intimacy, to show how far such individualism and accommodation of precarity extends, and to contrast it with long-standing patriarchal constructions of marriage.

Traditionally, heteronormative, monogamous³⁶ marriage could rely on communities and institutions to prop up the wedded couple. Given the reduced power of legal, economic, religious, and social norms to bind a married couple together irrevocably, there is less reason for intimate relationships to be about settling, whether settling refers to the choice of one's partner or a relationship's fixed routine. In place of binding public rituals and esoteric languages, like law and religious texts, often jealously controlled by a small elite, the feminist and psychotherapeutically-influenced disclosing intimacy of CNM is the everyday technology of regular people, who frequently use it to upend inherited norms, including the shibboleth of monogamy.

Disclosing intimacy is an essential component of non-monogamous relationships. The practices and norms of verbal disclosure underscore the centrality of communication to CNM and the casualization of intimacy more generally. The ability to clarify one's desires, identify and articulate troubling emotions, and to listen to one's partner, comprise a key skill set for all non-monogamists, and for an increasing number of people in successful long-term monogamous partnerships (Benjamin, 1998; Illouz 1997a; 2008). Profoundly influenced by feminist and psychotherapeutic discourse, disclosing intimacy, done well, enacts the values of CNM. Hearing and honoring the desires of one's partner demonstrates egalitarianism; it is only by consent that non-monogamists achieve mutual agreement on the idiosyncratic norms for their relationship.

³⁶ In this instance, by monogamous I mean dyadic, heterosexual marriage, i.e. not polygynous marriage or some other form of matrimony. From distant to recent history, heteronormative marriage in Anglo-American culture typically allowed for a sexual double standard, with men being able to have outside partners as long as they maintained appearances, e.g. "social monogamy" (Barash and Lipton, 2002). Married women, in contrast, were condemned for affairs. In many cases, though either sex could seek divorce for adultery, women had little reason to do so because of social pressure, their economic dependence on their husbands, and the possibility of losing access to their children.

Honesty is at the core of disclosure as an enterprise and freedom is experienced in the liberty to express oneself and to follow one's desires.

Non-monogamists rely upon language, usually intimate topics discussed in private spaces, rather than rituals enacted in public places, to construct their primary partnerships, an observation that ties together the discipline of communication, the discourse of consensual non-monogamy, and the casualization of intimacy. Language is a useful tool that enables people to mediate difficulties in their relationships and to engage in a private micro-ritual, long conversations about their relationship, or what some of my interview participants called "processing," that puts verbal communication at the heart of CNM. This dissertation has explored non-monogamists' use of language in two capacities. First, my research examines the discourse of non-monogamy, in other words, what non-monogamists themselves say about CNM. It accomplished this in two ways. This study focused on naming and identification, the ethical justification for non-monogamy, polyhegemonic masculinity, and ways non-monogamists use different rhetorical techniques and narratives to reconcile challenges to non-monogamy with the ideals of CNM. Second, I considered the centrality of disclosing intimacy to the cultivation and maintenance of non-monogamous partnerships. Disclosing intimacy, a process of reflection and revelation, analysis and empathy, speaking and listening, is especially important for non-monogamists because of the intense emotions and difficulties – like jealousy or a consciousness of precarity – their lifestyle pushes to the forefront of their relationship.

Language is by its nature decentralized and creative. Language is also, of course, shaped by broad cultural forces and limited in various ways by inherent structural constraints; nevertheless, it is malleable, open to interpretation and evolution, and able to transmit itself

across boundaries, particularly via mass and new media. The discourse of non-monogamy and the practice of disclosing intimacy provide examples of language being used to forge connections between individuals and to give them guidance in a cultural context where institutional norms and public rituals like marriage – if the divorce rate is any indication – have lost a good deal of their efficacy for many people, and prevailing hegemonic norms and beliefs are found wanting. But this is only one reason why communication scholars should find consensually non-monogamous relationships worthy of study. I have laid out above two of the major findings of my research – the relationship of the discourse and ethics of CNM to neoliberalism, and the ways disclosing intimacy and the discourse of non-monogamy demonstrate the enhanced role of verbal communication in maintaining intimate relationships. Before drawing this dissertation to a close, I would like to briefly consider one area of study communication scholars could explore should they carry out other research projects concerning CNM.

My project focused on language, but my interview participants' engagement in verbal communication, particularly the practice of disclosing intimacy, points to the cultivation of a particular set of affective norms consonant with casualization. In contrast to the prescribed affective norms of traditional patriarchal marriage – harmony, dutifulness, and selflessness - non-monogamy privileges sexual pleasure, emotional openness, honesty, autonomy, and precarity. These are often intense affects brought about or encouraged by disclosing intimacy. For example, erotic communication about other lovers often has the effect of intensifying the sexual bond of primary partners. Instead of jealousy, or anger at the transgression of selfishness, sex with outside partners is supposed give an individual renewed sexual energy for her primary relationship, to generate an affect of excitement that brings partners closer together.

Communication about difficult topics also gives an intimate relationship a sense of energy, which alleviates the dullness or boredom that some monogamous partners complain of, while still allowing CNM couples to enjoy the benefits of long-term commitment. Talking with one's primary about other lovers, or about the primary relationship itself, particularly expressing unhappiness with its failings and working to find solutions, injects a sense of the unknown into established partnerships: "Can we overcome this crisis?" "What can I do to fix this?" "What does she really want?" and so on. This dynamic is likely to sound unappealing, even perverse to some, but for non-monogamists, verbal communication, intensified affect, and the pleasures of sexuality are intertwined. Thus, though this research has dealt largely with language, it also raises many questions about affect, or regimes of affect, in neoliberal societies. Affect is much harder to "get at" in research than language, since affect is subjective and personal; however, I hope other researchers bring the necessary intellectual tools to the task of understanding the unique interplay of affect, language, and sexuality in consensually non-monogamous relationships.

Communication is a word that made its way into English in the late 14th century. It carried with it myriad associations from its Latin roots, including "to share, divide out; impart, inform; join, unite, participate in." The importance of sharing and uniting is clear from its prefix, derived from the Latin *communis*, which means "to make common." The modern meaning of communication has less to do with this sense of participation and commonality, and usually refers to the expression or interchange of ideas. More atomistically, communication can mean the "transmission" of thoughts, a definition that emphasizes the difference and distance between

two separate individuals. Yet, the archaic meaning of communication comes closer to what many non-monogamists are trying to engage in, the linking and connection of two people.

CNM is one strategy for sustaining committed intimate relationships in a culture that frequently works against them. In a habitus characterized by precarity, and the privileging of pleasure, flexibility, and the self, non-monogamists rely in large part on communication to navigate their personal lives and establish long-term partnerships. What distinguishes non-monogamists from those who choose sexual exclusivity is the decision to accept the precarity, flexibility, and individualism of casualization in their most intimate relationships. It is my hope that this dissertation has provided important insights into how non-monogamists accommodate and exemplify the effects of casualization, as well as offer a unique vision of how to find balance in the age-old conflict of self and other that affects every intimate relationship.

APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH SUBJECT DEMOGRAPHICS

Name	Gender	SO	Age	Race	Education	Upbringing	Job	Kids	Marital	Religion
Luke	M	S	44	W	graduate	M	academic	Y	D	na
Carson	M	B	28	W	graduate	M	education	N	Si	N/J
Ian	M	S	41	W	college	W	IT	Y	M	N/Ca
David	M	S	38	W	graduate	M	academic	Y	M	Y/J
Austin	F	Q	26	W	college	M	media	N	Si	Y/J
Kelly	F	Q	22	W	college	na	student	N	Si	na
Lisa	F	Q	25	W	college	na	retail	N	Si	na
Paige	F	Q	25	W	college	na	N/A	N	Si	na
Rowan	G	Q	24	W	college	W	student	N	Si	Y/U
Erica	F	S/B	35	B	college	UM	non-profit	N	M	N/C
Janice	F	S	41	W	college	na	corporate	N	D	na
Carathea	F	S/B	27	W	graduate	M	student	N	Si	N/C
Liam	M	S	28	W	graduate	UM	student	N	Si	N/J
Pearl	G	Q	25	W	college	na	retail	N	Si	N/Ca
Rob	M	S	36	W	college	W	media	N	Si	N/C
Theresa	F	Q	31	W	college	na	unemployed	N	Si	N/C
Maria	F	Q	30	A	college	W	retail	N	Si	N/Ca
Autumn	F	Q	33	W	s.college	W	health	N	Si	N/C
Ryan	M	S	33	W	college	W	IT	N	Si	N/C
Leah	F	S/B	28	W	college	UM	IT	N	Si	N/Ca

Amy	F	B	26	W	graduate	W	student	N	M	N/Ca
Zadie	F	S	32	W	college	na	teacher	N	Si	N/J
Hank	M	S	41	W	graduate	na	teacher	N	Si	na
Colin	M	S	38	W	college	M	media	Y	M	N/C
Henry	T	Q	27	W	N/A	na	activist	N	Si	na

APPENDIX 1 KEY

Gender	S.O. = Sexual Orientation	Race	Marital	Upbringing	Religion
M = Male	S = Straight	W = White	Si = Single	um = Upper Middle Class	N = Not practicing
F = Female	Q = Queer	B = Black	M = Married	m = Middle Class	Y = Practicing
G = Genderqueer	B = Bisexual	A = Asian	D = Divorced	w = Working Class	J = Jewish
T = Transgender	S/B = Identified as straight but bisexual experiences in past				C = Christian (Either Catholic or Protestant)
					Ca = Catholic
					P = Protestant
					U = Unitarian
					na = No information

APPENDIX 1 KEY

In the “Religion” category, there are two variables divided by a slash mark (/). The variable on the left refers to whether the person is currently practicing a religion. The variable on the right refers to religion the person was raised in as a child. The two observant individuals in my sample practiced the same religion in adulthood as they did when they were young; no one in the sample convert to and practiced a religion different from the one they were raised in (if any).

In all categories, “na” refers to “no information.” This means two things. First, I do not know if the person identified with or participated in any religion during their youth. Second, none of these people mentioned any religious involvement or identification in their adult life. It is possible they were religious, but given that CNM is very unlikely to fit within the moral norms of most religions, it would be surprising that they would not choose to discuss how they squared their sexual practices with their spiritual beliefs. Additionally, it is reasonable to assume that if religion is an important aspect of a person’s identity, it would probably come up, even incidentally, in an hour-long interview exploring that person’s intimate relationships, history, and beliefs.

APPENDIX 2: LONGEVITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

Single at the time of the interview, 7 individuals: 28% of sample

Kelly (22): Single

Pearl (25): Single

Austin (26), Single

Henry (27): Single

Zadie (32), Single

Hank (41): Single

Luke (44): Divorced, single

Involved with a partner, 7 individuals: 28% of sample

Rowan (24): Involved off-again-on-again partner known since adolescence

Carathea (27) & Liam (28): More than a year

Carson (28): Less than a year

Maria (30) & Autumn (33): One year

Janice (41): Less than a year; previously divorced

Married, engaged, and living together, 11 individuals: 44% of sample

Lisa (25) & Paige (25): Six years

Amy (26): Together with partner seven years, married for three

Ryan (33) & Leah (32): About two years; Leah is divorced

Erika (35): Engaged to partner of two years; previously divorced

Rob (36) & Theresa (31): Together three years, engaged; Rob is divorced

Colin (38): Married, ten years

David (38): Married seven years

Ian (41): Married, two years; previously divorced

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