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How long-term, non-monogamous romantic relationships maintain sexual satisfaction

Anna Kessler

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HOW LONG-TERM, NON-MONOGAMOUS ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS MAINTAIN
SEXUAL SATISFACTION

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of the requirements for the

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Abstract

Eroticism is an important element of couple's relationships. Sexual intimacy has the power to bring couples closer together, as higher levels of sexual intimacy results in higher relationship satisfaction, or hinder relationships if either or both partners aren't sexually satisfied in their relationship. The current study's purpose is to understand how long-term, non-monogamous relationships have successfully maintained "eroticism" throughout the course of their relationship. In this study, 24 couples who are in a committed, romantic relationship of at least 7 years were interviewed. The interviews were conducted individually over a video call platform, and each was completed withing approximately 60 minutes. The couple received an incentive in the form of a gift card for their time. Nine themes emerged from the interviews: novelty, cultivating life-long learning, conjoint learning, love languages, communication, acceptance of partner, partner match, sex positivity and reinforcing/reteaching messages for future generations. We found incorporation of erotica, maintaining a sex-positive outlook and showing love to one's partner in the ways in which they receive love were vital in the maintenance of sexual satisfaction.

Keywords: long-term, relationship, sexuality, love, affection, eroticism, sex-positivity, satisfaction

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Chapter I: Introduction

As long as sexual and romantic relationships have existed, sexual intimacy has existed. The Oxford dictionary defines intimacy in a few different ways, the most relevant being “the state of having a close personal relationship with someone” and “sexual activity, especially an act of sexual intercourse” (“Intimacy,” 2020). Sexual intimacy is a dominant aspect of romantic relationships, therefore, plays a significant role in overall relationship satisfaction. This is a common belief, as Byers, S. (p. 113, 2010) states, “both therapists and the general public see the quality of a couple's romantic relationship and the quality of their sex life as linked.” Research has supported this idea, finding that both partners in a relationship reported higher levels of romantic fulfillment when there were higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Byers, 2010). Another study found similar results with a couple's sexual fulfillment heavily influencing the overall satisfaction of the relationship, even having a strong impact on non-sexual aspects of the relationship (Young et al., 1998).

These findings are pivotal in understanding the importance of sexual gratification and its role in romantic success. Moreover, Debrot et al. (2017) conducted a four-part study that found people who engage in intercourse regularly, reported higher levels of general life satisfaction. This exemplifies that not only is sexual satisfaction important to relationships but continues to impact areas of life outside of that relationship as well; meaning human’s sexual satisfaction is a major feature in a person’s overall happiness.

When one thinks of sex, they may think of the act itself rather than the additional behaviors and emotions that come with it. As we know from Oxford’s definition of intimacy, sexual intimacy is much more than just the act of penetration. In fact, a previous study found any

sexual encounter in couples increased the likelihood of affection the following day (Birnbaum et al., 2006), as well as another study which found that emotional intimacy with a partner often is a leading factor to participating in sexual intercourse (Muise et al., 2013). This allows us to explore the idea that not all sexual satisfaction comes from the act of penetration itself, but potentially sexual satisfaction could be experienced through erotic interactions that leave out sexual intercourse, or that being romantic, such as general affection, could potentially enhance sexual satisfaction.

While most research on sexual satisfaction is conducted on straight, monogamous couples (Byers, 2010; Mark et al., 2013; Mark & Jozkowski, 2013; Mark et al., 2013; Noland, 2020; Schoenfeld, et al., 2016; Vowels & Mark, 2018; Vowels & Mark, 2020), other relationship orientations exist, such as, ethical non-monogamy. Non-monogamy is when both partners in a relationship consensually agree to see other people (either in relationships of a sexual, romantic and/or emotional nature) while continuing to see each other (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Conley et al., 2013; Matsick et al., 2014;). Examples of non-monogamy include open relationships, swingers, polyamory (Stephens & Emmers-Sommer, 2019). While little data exists on these non-traditional relationships, preliminary evidence shows that non-monogamous couples have high levels of communication and honesty (McLean, 2004), negotiate to lessen interpersonal conflict (Mogilski et al., 2015), and report being in love, happy and satisfied in their relationship (de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Jenks, 1985; Ritchie & Barker, 2006).

Regardless of non-monogamous experiences, there is a lack of understanding and a perpetuation of stigma surrounding non-monogamy in the north American culture (Conley, Perry, et al., 2018). This dearth of comprehension and familiarity can potentially lead to the viewing non-monogamy as an “other” to which research has found that stigma often originates from the

fear of the “other” (Hays, 2013; Liamputtong, 2013). This could support the idea that the continuation of misinformation and misunderstandings concerning non-monogamy could be perpetuating the stigma behind non-monogamous relationships. One stigmatized view of non-monogamous relationships related to monogamous relationships being viewed more positively in both relationship (e.g. trust, passion) and non-relationship (e.g. completing taxes on time, dental hygiene) aspects (Conley et al., 2013), another stigma of non-monogamy is the dehumanization of these relationships in comparison to monogamous relationships (Rodrigues et al., 2017). In contrast to these beliefs and ideas, preliminary research shows non-monogamous relationships have just as high, if not higher, levels of sexual satisfaction than their monogamous counterparts (Conley, Piemonte, et al., 2018). It is important to understand non-monogamous individuals for many reasons, such as their high levels of sexual satisfaction, in order to apply the methods that build these levels of satisfaction into additional areas that could benefit society, such as therapy techniques.

Why should we study nm in couples? Why should we study sexual satisfaction in non-monogamous couples? One important factor relates to preliminary research showing that non-monogamous couples tend to have higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Conley, Piemonte, et al., 2018). Sexual satisfaction is important in relationships for many reasons - intimacy is a natural part of romantic relationships not just for pleasure, but to reproduce. It is important to procreate, and connection is often a major factor contributing to sexual activity (Muise et al., 2013). This implied that connection could be necessary to continue the human race. Another reason to further understand contributions to sexual satisfaction in non-monogamous couples is how those with higher sexual satisfaction often have greater levels of life satisfaction (Debrot et al., 2017) and health (Brody, 2010; Brody & Costa, 2009; Higgins et al., 2011). This is fundamental in our

culture because having healthy physical and mental states helps general society, therefore studying and understanding these satisfaction levels along with applying them to general relationships, benefits society. Additionally, while the research covered thus far has supported the effects of sexual satisfaction within relationships, in particular, less research has focused on how non-monogamous couples retain such sexual chemistry. In an attempt to bridge the gap in literature, this study aims to interview couples in long term, non-monogamous relationships in order to uncover how they have successfully maintained satisfaction in sexual interactions.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Sexual Satisfaction

What is Sexual Satisfaction. Hinchliff and Goff (2004) found that throughout long-term romantic relationships, sexual activity is constantly an important aspect of the couple's life, and according to Noland (2020), individuals who aim to sexually please their partner have more satisfied and committed partners. When defining sexual satisfaction, Pascoal et al. (2013) looked at the public to hear their thoughts. Generally, sexual satisfaction was defined in terms of one's sexual experience regarding positive emotions, orgasm, sexual arousal, pleasure and desire, however there were other interesting definitions. For some people, frequency of sexual activity may play a role in their sexual satisfaction, for others it may come from mutual pleasure. Some defined sexual satisfaction in terms of a romantic relationship, including the closeness of participants in a romantic relationship, frequency of sexual activity, and playful aspects of the sexual/romantic relationship (Pascoal et al., 2013).

Some people view pleasure in terms of committed relationships when it seems to be common knowledge that people have casual sex for fun and pleasure (Garcia et al., 2012). This is supported by data Mark et al. (2015) who found concerning how in casual sex scenarios, such as hookups or one-night stands, sexual satisfaction levels were higher than emotional satisfaction levels compared to committed romantic relationships, potentially because both parties are in it for the sexual enjoyment rather than emotional benefits. Vowels and Mark (2020) found that sexual desire (defined by Mark et al. (2014) as the sexual drive, wish or motive to achieve sexual intimacy) is the primary reason individuals partake in sexual activity, being an even stronger predictor for sexual activity than love is, which could support that people may have sexual relations outside of romantic relationships for the pleasure alone.

Vowels and Mark (2020) also found that sexual activity (which can be motivated by desire) can lead to increases in love and desire in committed relationships. This supports the idea that even though some may have sex for fun and casual pleasure, in relationships, sex, desire and love are all interconnected. Research has supported that relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction are inherently linked and many researchers have studied this association in some capacity (Byers, 2010; Mark et al., 2013; Mark & Jozkowski, 2013; Vowels & Mark, 2018). For instance, Mark and Jozkowski (2013) found that communication - both sexual and nonsexual forms - affect the link between relationship and sexual satisfaction, suggesting that communication plays a key role in overall relationship and sexual satisfaction. Another correlation studied was the connection of perceived sexual compatibility and sexual satisfaction, finding that perceived sexual compatibility is not only a noteworthy predictor of relationship satisfaction, but also influences and predicts sexual satisfaction (Mark et al., 2013). In fact, even if a couple isn't completely compatible in specific turn-ons and turns-offs yet both parties perceive themselves to be compatible, this does not impact the relationship's sexual satisfaction levels (Mark et al., 2013).

Couples sharing a sexual experience with one another is a beautiful display of love. When one is in a satisfying romantic relationship, it will often lead to an increased satisfaction in the sexual relationship they share (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013) and often when one partner in the relationship is satisfied sexually and romantically, so is the other partner (Mark et al., 2013). These findings suggest how powerful the bond of sexual and relationship satisfaction can be and how vital sexual relations are in terms of romantic and committed relationships and reinforce the importance of sexual connections in romance and love.

Pleasure in Sexuality. Another critical element to sexual satisfaction is the role of pleasure in a sexual relationship. Sexual pleasure is not solely tied to orgasms, however that can often be an important aspect of it and is often an expectation of sexual interactions (Goldey et al., 2016; Opperman et al., 2014). With this expectation comes pressure to perform or experience pleasure in a particular way. Watson, Séguin et al. (2016) found that when incorporating a vibrator into sex, men reported increased pleasure for both partners as well as a release of pressure on the men to perform or provide their partners with orgasms. On the other side, often women may feel pressure to have orgasms during sexual intercourse and often relieved this stress through faking orgasms (Opperman et al., 2014), and women reported feeling pressure to perform a certain way during sexual interactions which often took away from pleasure they could have experienced with less stress (Elmerstig et al., 2012). These studies support that not only are pressures and expectations present for individuals regardless of the genitalia their bodies have, but also the idea of orgasms being essential for sexual pleasure as a harmful ideology and therefore could be limiting the sexual experiences of many.

Pleasure is much more than the presence of orgasms and penetration, though. Additionally, pleasure in sexual interactions is multifaceted, it encompasses the physical, emotional and cognitive experiences of those involved as well as contextual factors that may impact pleasure (Goldey et al., 2016). For instance, in partnered sex, having control over someone else's pleasure seems to be a turn on for both men and women, and often one partners sexual enjoyment depends on the sexual enjoyment of the other partner, exemplifying that sexual pleasure can extend further than one's own pleasure and one's own potential orgasm (Goldy et al., 2016; Opperman et al., 2014; Watson et al., 2016). Additionally, pleasure can be found through foreplay including, but not limited to, oral sex, "talking dirty" to one another, and

manual genital stimulation which includes location of touch, pressure, pattern and shape of touch - all of which can be altered for different needs (Frederick et al., 2017; Herbenick et al., 2017). Herbenick et al. (2017) found that women report higher levels of sexual satisfaction during intercourse when the clitoris is stimulated simultaneously, further exemplifying that sexual exploration, creativity, and purposeful touch can enhance sexual experiences. In terms of emotional and contextual aspects of pleasure, research has shown that commitment and length of relationship directly correlate with higher levels of sexual pleasure and satisfaction (Milstein et al., 2019), the use of water and silicone-based lubricant resulting in high levels of sexual pleasure and satisfaction (Herbenick et al., 2011), well as sexual communication having a direct influence on sexual satisfaction (Babin, 2013). Pleasure is achieved through a variety of ways, and is often high priority for partners, however the stigma and shame that encompasses sexuality may impact one's ability to receive pleasure.

Stigma Around Sexuality, Limiting Pleasure

Sexuality is a taboo topic and has been shamed one way or another by society for centuries (Grossman et al., 2016; Jackson, 2016; Robertson, 2019). For example, Corn Flakes and Graham Crackers were created by Reverend Sylvester Graham and John Harvey Kellogg to decrease sex drive (Butler, 2018). Both Americans believed that fatty foods, meat and flavorful foods increased a person's sex drive and therefore should be avoided (Butler, 2018). Kellogg believed that masturbation was an incredible sin, however if a person indulged in plain, flavorless food and less food with spices, etc. that their sex drive would decrease therefore leading to less of an urge to masturbate. Kellogg believed this so whole-heartedly, he even advertised the food as a "healthy, ready-to-eat anti-masturbatory morning meal" (Foster, 2019, p. 1). There are many stereotypes concerning sexuality that differ from Kellogg's views, such as the

stereotype that women have lower libido than men, and that women who have high libido or men who have low libido are atypical (Mark & Lasslo, 2018). However, it has been shown that these assumptions cannot be made based on gender. In fact, research has shown that there are more libido differences within each gender (i.e., females compared to females, males compared to males) than between the binary genders (i.e., males compared to females) (Ferreira et al., 2014; Mark 2015). The stigma around women's sexuality still prevails and negatively impacts women.

Slut-shaming, described as “the stigmatization of an individual based on of his or her appearance, sexual availability, and actual or perceived sexual behavior and is primarily aimed at women and girls” (Goblet & Glowacz, 2021, p. 1), is considered a form of violence primarily used against women that impacts the victim's health (e.g. depressive affects) (Goblet & Glowacz, 2021). Due to the repercussions of being slut-shamed, female-identifying people may often avoid certain behaviors or activities, even relating to sexual health, to prevent such violence. For example, girls and women are often afraid to have condoms in their possession due to the fear of being slut-shamed for participating in such behaviors (Bell, 2009). This fear and stigma around condoms are not just for women, though. Reeves et al. (2016) found that the shame and stigma surrounding sex has prevented or impacted male and female individuals' need for condoms to participate in safe sex, however attaining condoms can lead to such embarrassment that some may not do it at all. This is especially true in small towns where it is hard to purchase such items while feeling this interaction is confidential, or without seeing someone who they have connections with one way or another (Bell, 2009).

Not only are condoms stigmatized and the topic of sex taboo, but Kunter et al. (2020) found that many men who have sex with men (MSM) feel stigma and shame around their sexual behaviors, which often leads to the feeling of isolation from the stigma (feeling like they are the

only one who feels this way). Stigma and shame can be perpetuated from many sources- from medical professionals when they are uncomfortable with the discussion of anal sex (as this can be picked up from the patient) (Kunter et al., 2020), to heterosexist discrimination within families (Rosenkrantz et al., 2018). There is even shame within these communities themselves, for instance there is often bottom shaming within the MSM community, using slurs such as ““used goods,” “trash,” “such a bottom,” whore” and someone to “watch your man around.”” (Kunter et al., 2020, p. 5). These comments perpetuate stigma and shame men may feel around their sexual behaviors, as well as feeling as though they are alone in these feelings (Kunter et al., 2020). These are some of many examples that portray the shame and stigma around sexuality built inherently into and perpetuated by the American culture.

Sociocultural Factors. Sociocultural factors play a role in stigma around sex as well as culture. Rosenkrantz et al. (2018) studied the impact of sociocultural factors on women’s sexual desire, sampling women from different races and sexual orientations. They found that many sociocultural factors, including pressure to conform to heterosexuality, gender role expectations, religion and sexuality as taboo, all decreased a women’s sexual desire, whereas having a safe space to express desires and being exposed to openness to sexual diversity over time increased sexual desire. Along with these findings, they also uncovered how discrimination and invalidation of sexuality negatively impacted women, particularly those who identify as bisexual and racial minorities. The findings of this study suggest that this group of women especially struggle with sexual desires due to sociocultural factors. Supporting this, Newton-Levinson et al. (2014) found through their study, which focused on widowed/divorced women in Ethiopia, that participants were afraid of being seen as hyper-sexualized beings, afraid to interact with men in public, and the sexualities of these women were often policed and judged by the other women in

their community. This continues to show the cultural impacts on how sexuality is perceived and managed. In another, cross-cultural study, Schalet (2010) compared Dutch and American girls' relationships regarding their experiences of sexuality. The study found that while American girls often keep their roles as sexual beings separate from their roles as daughters, Dutch girls were able to reconcile the two. It also discussed the role of adults and culture in the girls' lives, finding that American girls experience more doubt in whether they were secure enough in their relationship to legitimate sexual activity whereas Dutch girls are believed to be able to fall in love and hold solid sexual relationships. This is important to note when looking at the American culture surrounding sexuality and how adults view teen's sexuality, particularly in terms of females.

Formal Sex Education: One Arena Where the Stigma Emerges

Much of the stigma around sexuality emerges with our formal education. Sexual education has varied throughout history moving from a beautiful depiction of sexuality through art as displayed in museums, such as the Erotic Heritage Museum in Las Vegas or the Museum of Sex in New York, and in books such as the *Kama Sutra* (Vātsyāyana, 1963) and *Bonk* (Roach, 2008), towards a more formalized, modern version we see in schools today. The art displayed in museums and books worldwide exemplifies that for centuries there has been more than one way of engaging in intercourse. These perceptions of sexuality identify the beauty of the body, the enjoyment of sex, the 'fun' side of sexuality and helps the audience receive messages that sex is not just for reproduction.

American Sex Education. The formal sexual education we see in American schools today tend to vary within three different approaches: Abstinence Only Until Marriage (AOUM), Abstinence-Plus Education (APE) and Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE). AOUM has

multiple names depending on who is providing the program; it could be called sexual risk avoidance (SRA), abstinence only education (AOE), or abstinence-centered education (ACE) (Planned Parenthood, 2020); however, they all teach the same concept funded by the government: abstinence is the way to manage one's sexuality (Clark & Stitzlein, 2016; Duffy et al., 2008). The majority of Americans do not support AOUM programs; however, politicians heavily support and promote these courses (Clark & Stitzlein, 2016). In attempt to persuade youth to postpone intercourse until marriage, AOUM programs often make note of the idea that women in particular are "used up" if they have participated in sex outside of marriage. This approach is extremely harmful in many ways, but especially towards people who have been sexually assaulted who did not choose when or how their first sexual relationship happened (Mintz, 2019). Not only does AOUM have the potential to harm individuals through the way certain topics are discussed (Culp-Ressler, 2014; Lamb et al., 2011), but they also largely omit topics that would include sexual minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, pregnant and/or parenting youth, as well as survivors of sexual assault/violence (Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, 2017). This results in many curricula being heterosexist and omitting discussion around non-heterosexual pleasures (Lamb, et al., 2013).

Lack of discussion around different forms of sex and sexual minorities results in many individuals looking for information from other sources. There is a lack of discourse surrounding anal sexual behaviors in sexual education, which, combined with stigma, makes it extremely difficult for students to ask questions about anal behavior (Kutner et al., 2020). Mark et al. (2018) supports this idea finding that gay men are more influenced by peers than straight men, perhaps because of the often heteronormative sexual education which forces some individuals to find the information they need elsewhere, which may in turn lead to misinformation (Kunter et

al., 2020). American leaders have begun to intervene with the sexual education today's youth receives, however this is done through funding AOUM programs which has been shown to be significantly less effective than CSE (Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, 2017). While the United States government is trying to engage in sexual education, we still have more work to do, potentially beginning with passing federal legislation to dictate how sexual education is taught in schools.

The level of stigma and discomfort around sex and pleasure is widely present in formal sex education programs, so much so that even on the Department of Education site there is no mention of sexual education (Department of Education, 2020), perhaps because there are no federal laws dictating how sex education should be taught. Decisions about sex education in public schools are made at a state and local level instead of federal - meaning no federal laws dictate what sex education should look like (Stidham Hall et al., 2016). The result of this legislation being developed at state levels is an inconsistent formal education across America.

Laws Surrounding Sex Education. Currently, 29 states and the District of Columbia require sex education to be taught in public schools. Additionally, a different set of twenty-nine states require abstinence-only to be heavily stressed and only twenty states and the District of Columbia mandate sex education to include forms of contraception. Seventeen states out of 50 and the District of Columbia require that any sexual education taught must be medically accurate - to simplify, this alludes to the fact that thirty-three states and the District of Columbia likely provide sexual education that is all together not accurate (Rowe, 2020). Schools have done a great job of working with their limited budgets and mandates to provide a certain curriculum. Still, there is a dearth in the discourse around pleasure and sex positivity in formal sex education in the United States and a dearth in research surrounding how the lack of sexual pleasure and sex

positivity in formal education may impact how people experience pleasure later in life. While sexual pleasure is a significant reason why people partake in sexual activity, and to leave this out is doing a disservice to today's youth, AOE excludes pleasure and desire from education completely, using other tactics to deter youth from sexual behaviors (Hirst, 2013), leading to often unintended consequences for leaving out sex positive information.

Pleasure in Sex Education. A common fear of discussing pleasure is giving youth the idea and incentive to partake in such activities, or some argue that pleasure and desire need not be included in sex education because they will find out sex is pleasurable for themselves eventually, while others argue that pleasure is apparent enough in today's media that it doesn't need to be discussed in sex education (Lamb et al., 2013). However, research has shown sex education that discusses sexual desire allows for adolescents to learn and develop strong, healthy values surrounding their sexuality which can impact their future relationships for decades to come and stresses importance of comprehensive sex education as an influence of sexual functioning later in life, while inaccurate forms of sex education could potentially impact a person's ability to have a sexually satisfied relationship with their partner later in life (Mark et al., 2018).

Lamb et al. (2013) found that this discourse isn't fully missing from sex education, noting that both CSE and AOUM programs discuss it in one way or another. Lamb et al. (2013) also found there are three distinct methods of discussing pleasure in sexual education: health and knowing one's body, problematic pleasure, and positive pleasure. Most of this discourse links pleasure and desire to danger/risk and negative outcomes through means of describing it as uncontrollable, causing emotional and physical risks and desire as peer pressure, for instance. This method of linking harm to sexuality reinforces the stigma and shame that the American

culture links to sexuality - “if one gets carried away, enjoys sex with abandon, or seeks out sexual pleasure, harm will come” (Lamb et al., 2013, p. 316).

Regardless of incorporating pleasure in sex education, adolescents are likely to partake in said behavior nonetheless, with most US individuals having sex for the first time at age 18 (Rowe, 2020). It is important to discuss consent and negotiation in formal sex education in a positive way to bridge the gap between the positive and negative aspects of desire and pleasure while raising awareness of possible sexual assault/abuse as well (Cameron-Lewis et al., 2013). Additionally, if pleasure as part of a sexual experience is left out of the conversation surrounding sex and risk avoidance, a key aspect of how to delay sex and avoid STIs is left out - non-penetrative sexual activities. Solo masturbation and mutual masturbation are ways to attain sexual pleasure without risking STIs and pregnancy (Ingham, 2005). Philpott et al. (2006) discovered that discussing sexual risk reduction methods such as condoms in terms of sexual pleasure would in turn increase an individual’s probability at practicing safe sex. Condoms are inherently thought to reduce pleasure, but if it was taught how to use condoms properly while increasing pleasure (i.e., incorporating water-based lubricant), there would likely be more use. Bell (2009) found many barriers to condom use and condom retention additional to pleasure, such as embarrassment. Embarrassment has many levels when it comes to condoms: one being the embarrassment that comes with purchasing condoms and the belief that you are being judged while checking out, another being the fear of discussing condom use with partners and lastly the fear of not using it correctly (Bell, 2009). It is likely that CSE, which includes condom demonstrations and discussions on how to talk to partners about condoms (Planned Parenthood, 2014), would empower and give students confidence in these identified forms of embarrassment and barriers.

Sex Positivity. These topics could be discussed in a sex positive way; however, this is lacking in formal education. Sex positivity is defined in a different manner depending on who you ask (Kaplan, 2014), however, Williams et al. (2013) defined it as normalizing the exploration of sexual desire. Sex positivity is often conceptualized as a normal experience with an outlook that incorporates openness, nonjudgment, and exclusive of negative sexual attitudes (Cruz et al., 2017; Donaghue, 2015) as well as including an understanding of sexual diversity that focuses not only sexual orientation but also the vast variety of sexual behaviors and identities (Burnes et al., 2017).

Research has shown that incorporating sex positivity in sexual education allows for individuals to not only express their sexuality to their partner, but also become more accepting of it themselves (Mark et al., 2018). Many believe that if sex positive education were to be more present in schools, the quality of sexual education would increase, communities would better be able to prevent child sexual abuse, and marriages would improve (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017; Cameron-Lewis, 2013). Alfred Kinsey and Robert Latou Dickenson support the latter, believing that bad sex led to a marriage's failure (Gathorne-Hardy, 2000; Roach, 2008;). Sex positive education is beneficial to those who receive it, and contrary to common belief, includes abstinence as a legitimate and respectable choice, while still informing students on other choices.

Informal Sex Education: Another Arena Where Stigma around Pleasure Emerges

Discussions of Sex at Home. Like formal education, informal education around sex may also predispose someone to negative beliefs about sex. Informal methods of sexual education are plentiful, ranging from discussions with peers to portrayals in media. Another example of informal education is parental figures talking about sexuality with their children. Not all parents discuss sexuality with their children, citing that such a discussion may be uncomfortable and

awkward (Grossman et al., 2016). Research has shown if the parent never received informal sex education from their own parents as a child, they may not have the experience to know how to do so with their kids and therefore may not have the talk themselves or may struggle to do so. On the other hand, such an experience may inspire the parent to change and not handle it the way their parents did (Eastman et al., 2005; Grossman et al., 2016). Not only can this conversation be uncomfortable for the parent but also for the children present, however, often times the parent's demeanor can positively (or the less ideal, negatively) impact their child's experience discussing sex with them. Afifi et al. (2008) found that the children of parents who were causal, receptive and composed during conversations about sex were less anxious and less avoidant of these types of conversations. Topics discussed informally at home could vary from the topics discussed formally. For example, Abrego (2011) found that religion impacts which sexuality topics parents are willing to discuss at home with their teens. Additionally, parents who had children when they were adolescents use their own personal experiences to aid them while having the sex talk with their kids more than parents who had children when they were older. These individuals who became parents as adolescents also encourage waiting until certain milestones are achieved (finishing school, getting married, etc.) while the older parents tend to focus more on emotional readiness and relational development (Grossman et al., 2016). Another study found that parents are more likely to discuss particular sexual topics (e.g., desire, satisfaction, pornography, masturbation, etc.) if they believed their child would engage in sexual behaviors at a younger age (Abrego, 2011).

Media's Role in Sexual Pleasure. A potential cause for how and why some may believe sexuality should be suppressed perhaps stems from media (music videos, television shows, movies, etc.) and the influence it has on adolescents' sexual values and behavior. The messages

around sex configured by the media are formulated through a societal lens of culture, religion, racism and sexism and often depict unrealistic expectations of romance and sexuality (McGoldrick et al., 2007). An adolescent who observes sexual behaviors in the media has an increased likelihood of participating in such acts and have increased intentions to partake in the future (Fisher et al., 2009). Mark et al. (2018) found that the media plays a large role in adolescent's development of sexual values, particularly in males, which continues to impact their sexual satisfaction for decades.

Along with this, there is an increase in amounts of sexuality being portrayed and a continued popularity of these depictions being shown in media, all the while it is rare to find examples of responsible sexuality and in turn reinforces a particular set of sexual and relationship societal norms (Brown, 2002; McGoldrick et al., 2007). In fact, there are consistencies with television portraying sex in a particular way, most of which includes positive gains from participating in sexual behaviors, while any negatives shown tend to focus on the long-lasting emotional pain that sexual activity can cause (Eyal et al., 2009).

As mentioned above, sexuality is portrayed on many media platforms, including music videos, access to particular Internet content, and social media. Most of these portrayals display sex in a heterosexist and sexist way (Dines, 2010). This is through various means, such as sexually objectifying women with, for instance, female artists being held to higher appearance standards and demonstrating more sexually alluring behavior than males (Aubrey et al., 2011). This feeds into the mixed information American society provides women with, perhaps they are to be sexual in nature while not being sexually active. On one hand we have women being sexualized all over the media, and on the other hand we have AOUM programs who often preach what can be taken as slut-shaming content (Culp-Ressler, 2014).

Benefits of Sex Positive Education

Sex and sexuality may sometimes be shown as normal and natural human behavior, but occasionally when this is the case in America, it is framed in terms of needing to be held moderation and controlled (Stephens, 2010). The interpretation of sexuality stems from one's individual experiences, as one's view of sexuality is heavily influenced by sociocultural factors and often these interpretations and attitudes surrounding sexuality differ between various sociocultural groups (Hall & Graham, 2012).

Normalization of Sexuality. The normalization of sex and incorporation of pleasure, however, is important in addressing dysfunction in relationships. It can promote healthy sexual functioning by normalizing and supporting attaining sexual health services and can allow for those to continually manage their sexual health throughout their life (Ford et al., 2013). The study at hand, for example, could incorporate discussions of normalizing sexuality by the researchers could ask couples to describe what it was like to be in this study, potentially helping the topic be less taboo.

One way of normalizing pleasure in sexuality is through making the conversations around it less taboo and creating positive interactions and underlying tones, as it can be very obvious when a person holds negative attitudes/perceptions of sexuality compared to sex positive approaches, particularly due to the language a person uses (Cruz et al., 2017). De-pathologizing certain sexual behaviors in education settings could remove the stigma and abnormalities that surround sexuality. Coleman et al. (2018) suggest pathologizing sexual activity not by the behavior itself, but rather by the consequences that come from it. This ideology could open up conversations in formal and informal settings to be less intimidating.

Benefits of Sex Positive Trainings. Additionally, sex education could promote sex positivity and normalize sexuality through sex positive trainings (Burnes, Singh & Witherspoon, 2017). Incorporating sex-positivity in mindfulness models and biopsychosocial assessments could be extremely beneficial and improve the comfort people have surrounding the discussion of sexuality (Dodd & Katz, 2020; Kimmes et al., 2015). Not only could mindfulness aid in the comfort level of discussions, but potentially could have positive repercussions on the act itself. The ability to stay focused on the present moment and perceived pleasure is an important aspect of sexual well-being (L'Abate & Hewitt, 2013; Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013).

Sex positive trainings in collaboration with mindfulness could look like the inclusion of education on understanding one's own body and what is pleasurable for them and where they feel pleasure. Additionally, research has shown that sex positive messages in education settings are more believable and taken more seriously than sex negative information, potentially due to lack of judgment/opinion-based statements (Brickman & Willoughby, 2017).

May Highlight the Use of Erotica as a Tool for Communicating Positivity. Erotica is one manner of communicating sex positivity in relationships rather than formal education and could also be used to normalize sexual experiences and sexuality. Erotica has existed for centuries and serves as a function for people who utilize it. For instance, erotica is *fun*. Sex is more than just a method of procreation, it is a way for people to get enjoyment from something that is natural, as sexual pleasure is a major factor in human sexuality (Georgiadis et al., 2012). This is heavily supported in literature, for instance, in terms of masturbation. Many people achieve sexual pleasure through means of solo sex, with Fahs et al. (2013) finding 90% of the women in their study used sex toys either during masturbation or partnered sex, or both. Erotica is not just fun in terms of solo sex, but also could be used to enhance sexual satisfaction in

couples through visual stimulation. While research has suggested that women are less easily aroused by sexual stimuli than men (Mark et al., 2013), Maddox et al. (2011) found that couples who only watched sexually explicit material together had higher satisfaction and dedication in their relationship than a couple who viewed this material alone, without their partner. However, Staley and Prause (2012) support the idea that watching sexually explicit material with a partner, or alone, may not always have purely positive outcomes or may result in mixed feelings. It heavily depends on the person and their own life experiences (someone who experienced sexual trauma may have mixed feelings of positive emotions towards their partner while having negative emotions associated with the film).

Erotica is considered by many to be *educational*. While pornography is not the best education tool due to the often lack of conversation around consent, teaching relationship and negotiation skills and the performative nature of pornography, many people might look to porn as to learn how to have sex (Hancock et al., 2018). Erotic literature can open the eyes of readers of how to communicate their needs to their partner and new acts they want to try out all the while fulfilling fantasies (Noland, 2020).

Erotica can be *advantageous* to couples' relationships. Hertlein et al. (2020) support this idea through finding that couples who watch pornography together had "overwhelmingly positive" (p. 5) effects on the relationship, including the following six aspects: a) provided practice for negotiation, b) aided to a natural segue in continued conversation and activities, c) made a taboo topic more comfortable to participate in, d) higher levels of communication, e) cultivated an environment that was more lighthearted around this topic, and finally f) initiated a new bonding experience with the couple. Participants of this study reported an improvement in the communication in the relationship as well as higher levels of sexual satisfaction. Kohut et al.

(2018) also published research that exemplifies the use of erotica, particularly pornography, as a positive aspect in romantic relationships finding that a couples' frequency of watching porn together was positively associated with both the openness of sexual communication and closeness in the relationship. Further research has contributed to this phenomenon of erotica inspiring positivity in romantic relationships through various means (Kohut et al., 2017a; 2017b).

Ethical Non-Monogamy

Consensual non-monogamy – those words strung together can make many people feel uncomfortable. Consensual non-monogamy, also known as ethical non-monogamy (ENM) is defined as a “broad range of relationships in which all individuals in the relationship agree to engage in multiple sexual, romantic, and/or emotional relationships with others” (Matsick et al., 2014, p. 1). Ethical non-monogamy and people who are part of this culture are often viewed in a less positive light compared to monogamous people (Conley et al., 2012; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Matsick et al., 2014), perhaps this is due to the societal norms that press monogamy as the only valid relationship orientation between two people who are in love, or due to the fact that ENM relationships are considered to be less committal (Barker, 2005), trustworthy (Ritchie & Barker, 2006) and of less sexual satisfaction (Conley et al., 2013) than their monogamous counterparts, even though research has shown that ENM individuals report their relationship as containing more happiness (Fleckenstein & Cox, 2015), higher levels of intimacy and higher levels of trust (Morrison et al., 2013) than monogamous couples who also participated in these studies.

Monogamy is still the most common relationship orientation among North Americans and is often thought to ensure more satisfaction in romantic relationships than ENM relationships. Meanwhile, ENM is becoming more common in American society (Hauptert et al.,

2017) with roughly 4-5% of Americans participating in some form of ENM relationship. Research has found that there is no significant difference in relationship and sexual satisfaction among monogamous and non-monogamous relationships (Conley, Piemonte et al., 2018; Conley et al., 2012), however, one study found that monogamous individuals report slightly lower sexual satisfaction and lower rates of orgasms than ENM individuals (Conley, Piemonte, et al., 2018). Regardless of these studies reporting little to no difference in sexual satisfaction between relationship orientations, it is commonly thought that couples who are non-monogamous are partaking in such behaviors due to being unsatisfied with their current relationship, whether that be sexually or otherwise, or due to no longer being attracted to their partner (Conley et al., 2012; Easton & Hardy, 2011; Moors et al., 2012). Rather than participating in ENM for the reasons commonly assumed by society, research has shown that ENM individuals report a significant advantage in opening up the relationship is to actually improve upon their sexual fulfillment, and allowing the partners to partake in sexual behaviors and exploration that perhaps the partner they are with is not interested in exploring (de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Kimberly & Hans, 2015). Through these studies, it may be presumed that couples explore ENM to enhance both romantic and sexual satisfaction.

Systems Theory

In marriage and family therapy, the idea of systems theory plays an important role in the way in which a marriage and family therapist (MFT) may approach their work with a client. Becvar and Becvar (2018) describe the notion of a system as “an invention which is used to describe regularities or redundant patterns we observe between people and other phenomena” (p. 4). In terms of conceptualizing clients in a therapy setting, the systems perspective allows the therapist to analyze not just the individual sitting in front of the therapist, but this person in terms

of their networks and systems they surround themselves with (i.e., family, friends, roommates, work setting, etc.) and the relationship between the systems. Through this lens, the therapist shifts from a linear perspective (A causes B) to a circular notion of both mutually impacting each other (A causes B, which causes A, which causes B, etc.), which allows MFT's to treat the system rather than merely the individual sitting in front of them (Becvar & Becvar, 2018).

Systems theory is complex and intricate with many moving parts. The idea of homeostasis – “the construct that describes a system’s tendency toward stability or steady state” (Becvar and Becvar, 2018, p. 18) – plays an important role in conceptualizing a case, as systems tend to veer towards their “normal” regardless of how efficient or healthy that is, they tend to stay towards what is comfortable (Becvar & Becvar, 2018). This leads into the idea of morphostasis (a system’s ability to return to a stable state after any disturbance) and morphogenesis (a system’s ability to change and grow along rather than return to homeostasis), as well as open systems (the acceptance of input from members within the system or from the outside, allowing for change) and closed systems (being closed off to the input from members of the system or outside the system, not accepting change) which are all essential terms within the systems world. While the discussion surrounding terms within systems theory could continue, it is relevant to the current study in terms of application in the therapy room. An MFT is looking not just to change the behavior of one individual within a system, rather they are looking to alter the system itself to create an equal balance between concepts such as morphostasis and morphogenesis, as well as being open and closed systems, allowing for the system to change and grow in a health manner. “A basic rule, from the systems perspective, is that as long as the relationship system keeps interacting around a problem, the problem will be maintained” (Becvar & Becvar, 2018, p. 76).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand what sexual and romantic behaviors contribute to the sexual satisfaction in long-term, non-monogamous partners within a couple. Specifically, we are interested in the contribution of the use of erotic material, ways in which a couple show love with one another outside of sexual interaction as well as a couple's perspective on the valence of sexuality (whether it is viewed positively or negatively) as a way to understand their level of sexual satisfaction. As noted, research has been done showing how vital sexuality is in romantic relationships and some have even suggested particular behaviors to partake in, however no studies have researched how long-term relationships keep high levels of sexual satisfaction, particularly in non-monogamous couples. The author met with individuals in non-monogamous relationships to discuss the most intimate part of their lives and relationships to gather such information.

Chapter III: Method

Participants

We conducted interviews with 24 couples who are in a committed, non-monogamous romantic relationship of at least 7 years, are at least 25 years of age and are healthy (i.e., of sound mind) individuals. The majority of participants were white, heterosexual and in their 30's. For additional demographic information, please see Appendix D, Table 1 and Table 2.

Participants were recruited through convenience by use of flyers shared online via social media and email, and by use of the snowball method in which participants are asked to pass along potential couples who may be interested. All participants were North American residents.

Philosophy, Design and Procedure

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the qualitative design of the study allowed for individual interviews of participants aimed at gaining insight into sexual satisfaction and sexual behavior of the participants to further understand how long-term sexual satisfaction in non-monogamous relationships is achieved. To examine the phenomena of long-term sexual satisfaction in these relationships the author has employed a phenomenology philosophy to this research. Cohen et al. (2007) depicted phenomenology as a conception that focuses on the individual human experience, as reality is subjective and formed individually throughout our lived experiences, and views this subjective experience as vital to understanding human behavior and individual realities, apart from the objective physical view of the world that is externally happening around people. Van Manen (1990) discusses how this philosophy focuses on a researcher's desire to understand what particular experiences are like for individuals through obtaining in depth descriptions of participant's experiences. Through this, researchers are able to gain information of each participant's construction of their reality and thus their perception of

lived experiences- regardless of whether this is tangibly quantifiable or subjectivity experienced, it is of importance when following the philosophy of phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990). Aligning with Cohen et al. and van Manen's views of phenomenology guiding this research, this study was designed to gain insight into the subjective experience of sexual satisfaction among couples who have been together for seven or more years and identify as non-monogamous. To achieve this understanding, the author determined phenomenology is the most efficient and holistic way to get participant's perspectives in these interviews.

The author chose qualitative individuals interviews as the primary methodology to gather data due to the holistic manner in which data can be obtained through participants sharing personal experiences unrestricted. This method allows the researcher to obtain in-depth information from participants that otherwise would not be provided and capture the participants' viewpoint through their understanding and experience rather than through the author's lens. Virginia Tech (2018) supports this idea and states that interviews are best used to collect in-depth information to allow for the interviewer to understand the participant's experiences, behavior, opinions, etc. Along with gathering information, the author kept a research journal to, for instance, write down thoughts after interviews, etc. The author chose qualitative data collection to form a comfortable space for the participants to share and a professional relationship with the participants versus the participants working in their own environment without having spoken to the researcher. This may have allowed for the participants to feel more comfortable sharing more intimate parts of their relationship. The interviews were conducted with both partners in the couple together, talking with both individuals at the same time to compare data between couples. Prior to the interviews, each participant within the couple completed a demographic form

(Appendix B) individually. The couples each received a ten-dollar incentive in the form of a gift card for their time.

Interviews. Participants were recruited to participate in interviews through flyers shared electronically through social media, email, and word of mouth. The interviews were held over a HIPAA compliant Zoom® video call. Archibald et al. (2019) experienced high satisfaction levels with utilizing Zoom indicating that this is a valid method to collect qualitative data. This study also found that overcoming technical difficulties together, as in researcher and participant working together, likely facilitates rapport building. This is supported by Deakin and Wakefield (2014) and Tuttas (2015) who found that participants responding via online video platforms similar to zoom have been found to be more responsive and build rapport quicker than face to face participants. Archibald et al. (2019) suggested researchers create an instruction sheet to send to participants to help decrease levels of technical difficulties, even though they have supported Zoom as a user-friendly platform, therefore appropriate for a wide range of participants. These interviews, with both partners present at the time of the interviews, were conducted by the author, a graduate student in the Couple and Family Therapy Program at UNLV with approximately 60 minutes dedicated to each couple. As stated, demographic data was collected prior to the interviews.

Instrumentation

We utilized a demographic survey which each participant in the couple completed prior to the interview and in the interviews, we asked open-ended questions. In order to achieve rigor, the researchers triangulated the data through having multiple researchers, therefore multiple perspectives, interpret data. We achieved transferability through use of thick, rich descriptions of data. Dependability was reached through use of triangulation, code-recode strategies, through

interviews being recorded and transcribed by researchers and a third party. Credibility is attained through member checks with of 3 couples (both partners in each couple) participating. We are currently in the process of attaining these member checks, however they have yet to be finalized.

In analyzing data, we utilized thematic analysis' six phases of analysis as discussed in Braun and Clark (2006). First, the data was transcribed by a graduate student and both authors then familiarized themselves with the data through reading and re-reading the interviews. Second, the initial coding of the data began - the term coding refers to the researcher identifying stand-out points that emerged in the interviews. Third, codes were combined allowing for the emergence of themes in the data. In the fourth phase, the data was reanalyzed and compared by each researcher to confirm each identified theme. Fifth, the researchers defined the themes and compare each to the other, making sure that none are similar enough to create overlap, as well as identifying subthemes (a theme within a theme). Finally, researchers wrote a report on the findings of the study.

Chapter IV: Findings

The goal of this study was to understand what sexual and romantic behaviors contribute to the sexual satisfaction in long-term, non-monogamous couples. Specifically, we were interested in the contribution of the use of erotic material, ways in which a couple show love with one another outside of sexual interactions, as well as a couple's perspective on the valence of sexuality (whether it is viewed positively or negatively) to understand contributors to sexual satisfaction. Results will be presenting through the three research questions: (1) use of erotic material, (2) showing love, and (3) valence of sexuality.

Use of Erotic Material

Novelty. One of the most common themes reported by participants was an appreciation for new experiences and novelty. Many couples introduced novelty with their partner¹, while others seek out new experiences with additional partners instead, and other couples reported a desire for novelty in both types of relationships. Through participant's responses, we have found that novelty encompasses a wide range of experiences, including erotic material such as: video pornography, erotic literature (written by participants and/or others), sharing of sexually explicit/suggesting images taken of themselves or others, social media (reddit/twitter/etc. as a way to find sexually stimulating material) sex toys and restraints, and non-monogamy. The aspects of non-monogamy which were reported as erotica for participants often related to the

¹ *When using the term "partner" without further information, researcher is discussing the partner in which participant came to the interview with. Not all participants identified having primary partners, and for those who do use that language, not every couple who participated identified the partner they participated with to be their primary. Each participant has different terms they use to describe their relationship with each other and others. In effort to respect their unique relationships, we will refer to partners outside of relationship presented at the interview as "additional partners" or "companion" – which may be referring to a casual or serious relationship.*

novelty of the experiences, such as telling their partner about an experience with a companion, sharing sexual stories from previous partners, dating new people, utilizing dating apps together as well as separate, having sex with additional partners and exploring kink with additional partners. Of these behaviors that contribute to NM as being viewed as novel and erotic, being able to have interactions with new people was a large aspect of pleasure. One participant concluded “I found that a lot of the fun of it is not the sex at all. A lot of the fun of it is, like, picking up the person at the bar.” Another participant reported:

“I look at girls like Christmas presents. Meaning, like, you get to undress them once and open that present and if you rewrap the present and open it again, you know what it is. So, like a new experience of opening a new Christmas gift is very exciting.”

To which the participant’s partner agreed, but also expressed why continuing to be with a particular person may be beneficial:

“You can open these gifts that you know are going to be okay or you can play with this toy that’s your favorite. That you know is going to satisfy you. I feel like sometimes it’s nice to be with the same person because they know what you like or, you know, because it’s always a good experience.”

Many participants reported a similar experience, as many individuals prefer to have set additional partners rather than finding new companions each time, often reporting that finding new additional partners can be exhausting or emotionally draining, whereas having a consistent companion fits more into what they are looking for. Other couples reported a mixture of new and consistent companions, often stating that the most important part was to have their partner with them. As one participant put it:

“I like new experiences and the newness is exciting, and so trying new things together, having new adventures together, that’s kind of how I see this whole nonmonogamy thing - as just being a new adventure to try together.”

Not only is novelty important to most participants sexually, but also in general, day to day aspects of life. As one participant explained, “I definitely think it's an important framework to be open to life in general but also in sex.” Novelty in their daily life, such as participating in new adventures or hobbies with their partner, often aided in their sexual and romantic connection according to participants. Many reported that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their ability to experience novelty or even just entertainment in general, both with additional companions and within their relationship with their partner. Participants who reported this shift often claimed that at times it impacted their ability to connect with their partner sexually as well as emotionally whether it be a lack of personal/alone time or a lack of opportunity for novelty.

With novelty comes a form of acceptance and self-exploration. Through NM or other life experiences, many participants learned that their initial sexual education was limited and that there was more to sexuality than what they grew up having learned. One participant explained how a NM relationship aided in his exploration:

“It allowed me to go through a process to understanding that legitimately no matter what you’re like or anything like that, there’s someone out there that kind of fits into that in some way.”

This is a common experience among participants, with several individuals and couples using NM to explore new sexual interests or behaviors that their partner isn’t quite as interested in. Through this exploration, a shared experience was finding behaviors, circumstances, conditions, etc., that the individual is not a fan of, but a willingness to try it again in a new environment. For instance, one participant shared:

“If you try something new and don’t like it, it might not be because you don’t like that thing, you just didn’t like that situation. So being open to trying it again to see if it was the situation, or the people, or whatever, is important to being open to new things.”

While being open to new experiences, and an appreciation for novelty is often reported, so is the idea of having personal limits. For instance, some individuals know that they are uncomfortable with partaking in sexual activity with a companion in the same room as their partner, some may not want to know detailed descriptions of what happened with their partner’s companions, or others have certain kinks or behaviors that they are uninterested in exploring with any partner - BDSM or pain play being two of the more common behaviors mentioned by participants.

Cultivating Life-long Learning. In considering the importance of self-exploration in congruence with limited knowledge on sex and sexuality, participants recognized the significance of life-long learning within their sexuality. Participants reported an overwhelming experience of education from childhood, particularly formal education, not positively impacting their sexual growth and discovery, if having any impact at all. Several participants shared their experience similar to that of one participant stating, “stunted growth is the result of my sexual education,” and “formal education didn’t really do much for me as far as forming my own sexuality” and another stating, “I think all the formal stuff did nothing but just contribute to like fear and misunderstanding, and shame in my case. Definitely did nothing positive in regard to shaping how to do things in a safe way.” While several participants did have more positive educational experiences surrounding sex, this did not impact their desire to continue learning about their sexuality throughout life.

Participants reported continuous sex education throughout their sexual journey - particularly later in life and/or when they began their journey with NM - and an openness to

continue to learn. Through learning and developing sexually, personal growth is a common outcome that members of the study have experienced. One participant spoke of their partner's experience within NM, stating:

I mean you're really coming into your own I feel like, just even as a person in general. That's another reason why we wanted to do this, you know, personal growth is really cool to see.

Participants who reported not having inherently positive experiences with sexual education growing up, tend to report higher levels of positive outcomes as they have sought out their own informal education, whether that be through books, workshops, lived experiences or communal discussions. A participant who has shared this experience claimed, "growing up it was more sex negative, but it has only gotten more sex positive as I get older and learn." Many participants reported continuing their education formally as well as informally as they moved through their adult years. One of the most common and helpful methods of informal education reported by members of the study was experiential learning, learning through doing. Participants often described how their understanding of sexuality, both concerning their own development and sexual knowledge in general, was furthered by their sexual/romantic partners. One member of the study shared how her current partner played a role in her general understanding of sexuality, "[partner] taught me, you know we've been together since we were seventeen and eighteen and [partner] taught me more about my menstrual cycle and ovulation and the different phases." Another participant described how learning through different communities within sexuality - such as non-monogamy, kink based, etc. - has furthered their knowledge and understanding of sexuality:

That's been very helpful in terms of being okay with who I am and like a lot of the urges that I have like sexual or kinky and, you know, combined as well. That's probably been much better for me in terms of shaping sex in like a more natural, positive way.

The understanding that sexuality can be explored and developed at any stage in life appears to have a substantial impact on participant's sexual satisfaction by allowing them to create an ever-changing narrative surrounding their sexual pleasure as well as what their sexual and romantic needs entail.

Conjoint Learning. Throughout the exploration of ethical non-monogamy (ENM), a large portion of participants reported continuing to learn about sexuality not only on their own but learning with their partner or additional partners. This includes the exploration of sexual education as well as discovering individual wants, needs and desires, and how these connect to their partner's experience. Some participants shared how through joining communities and attending events, workshops or lectures together allowed them to not only further their individual knowledge, but to encourage that mutual growth and the evolution of the sexual/romantic journey they are on to develop together. A participant disclosed that with their partner, they attend a drinking/running group that often has educational conversations surrounding topics such as consent to further their education together, "you get a lot of those discussions when you go to [event] there is a huge element of that in any place where there is sex play going on." Another participant shares how they were able to grow in their own sexuality within their presenting relationships through learning and holding conversations with their partner:

I would say I don't think I really started to truly enjoy sexual interactions that I had until I probably started being with [partner]. You know there were a few here and there but I still felt like I was wrong or naughty or dirty for just, yeah bad for enjoying any, any aspect of it. I think

since I started just like reading about non-monogamy and reading about, I don't know just relationship dynamics and then also experiencing them and talking with other people and reading blogs and what not I've just kind of like given myself space to acknowledge that part of me. Like, you know just room to like no that's actually pretty fucking normal and it's okay. Then there's just been this shift over to like no this is actually, this is actually where I want to be. And I don't feel quite as ashamed.

An additional couple within the study discussed how they sought out education as a unit:

Together we've done some really cool classes in [location], not that long ago ... there this group called [organization] that does really neat in person classes about eroticism and a little bit about kink and a little bit about BDSM.

This participant's partner added how they explore sexual education together even when it isn't a direct aspect of their relationship:

The [organization] they do workshops on kink and bondage and powerplay and those kinds of things. We did a session that was just a talk about powerplay about dom/sub relationships and we don't consider ourselves a dom/sub relationship it was something we were just curious about and then we went to one that was a very intro discussion about rope bondage which was really fun.

Even through individual learning, sharing these experiences with your partner allows them to understand and grow with you. One participant supported this idea through sharing that she had been working through sexual stigmas while in a relationship with her partner, "even after we met, I was still struggling with some of the internalized slut shaming." Another participant shared a similar experience and explained how personal growth shared with their partner positively impacts their relationship and allows for an environment to continue growing together:

We've been together a really long time, so we grew up together sexually ... but that shame that you know you would think, "oh you grew up with, you know, sexually with someone, you would get rid of that shame," but I really held onto it. So, I think that and now, now that everything's out and we're both very, very open with each other. I think it's strengthened our relationship like you could never break it.

Whether the education originates individually or conjointly, the sharing of this experience with their partner, the willingness and interest to learn as a team is plays an apparent role in participants' sexual satisfaction. The

Showing Love

Love Languages. When asked how participants show love to their partner, day to day outside of sex, a common theme arose surrounding love languages (i.e., physical touch, acts of service, quality time, words of affirmation, and gift giving). The researcher found the discussion of love languages to be interesting, particularly because the researcher did not explicitly ask about love languages but rather displays of love. Participants frequently reported meeting their partner's needs for love through purposefully reaching their love languages, even when each partner receives and shows love differently. For example, one participant stated how two of her partner's love languages are different than hers, and how she purposefully seeks out opportunities to show affection in those ways:

We're very active considering each other's love languages, trying to give and receive both appropriately within those love languages. So, you know, for you I try to do the words of affirmation and quality time.

In respect to how they show love, one participant stated, "we really try to focus on understanding each other's love languages and helping each other out with that." Another participant declared

how important love languages are in their relationship, stating, “we explore things like love languages and try to keep them in mind.” This has been shown to be an extremely important display of love for relationships in the current study. Participants report meeting the love languages of their partner through methods such as cuddling, hugging, kissing, helping each other with chores such as dishes or laundry, getting a meaningful and individualized gift for their partner, spending purposeful time together where they are each other’s only focus, complimenting each other, saying “I love you,” and many more. For example, one participant shared how he helps around the house purely for his partner, not for his own needs:

I do chores almost exclusively because I love you and I want to show you that I love you.

laughs I do not care at all if half these things are done.

Another participant shared how they incorporate various displays of love, such as quality time, conversation, physical touch and acts of service:

We hug all the time. We kiss all the time. We touch all the time. We massage each other. We spend time in the hot tub together, probably 3 times a week we are in the hot tub and we are talking that entire time. We hold each other at night to go to bed. We, I take care of her every time she has a migraine... I hold her hair back when she throws up.

In addition to love languages, a common display of love was through conversation and communication. Communicating appreciation commonly reported and was utilized in ways to express appreciation for the work a partner does, for the purposeful displays of love, and through verbally supporting one another as they navigate life – “I find it’s important to recognize and show gratitude for the chores and stuff around the house, because it’s a lot” said a participant describing how communicating that appreciation plays a role in receiving purposeful love.

Many participants testified that the combination of these displays of love correlate with their sexual satisfaction, many reporting that without these demonstrations of love from their partner, they would be less eager to partake in sexual activity. For example, this participant shares how the impact of feeling loved leaves her more inclined to share sexual interactions with her partner for several days after particularly loving interactions:

We curled up on the cuddle couch and [partner] didn't have his phone or anything and probably spent like at least 15-20 minutes of like stroking my hair, and rubbing my back, sort of, me curled up like on him or against him while he was "loving on me" kind of thing. I think I might have been falling asleep at some point. But without any sort of expectation of anything it was just very nice and I was definitely more in a sexual mood for several days afterwards.

Another participant shared how displays of love, particularly acts of service in her case, allow for a clearer mind which in turn makes space for sexual interactions:

I'm much more up to have sex if I'm not staring at a big sink full of dirty dishes because I have that kind of brain that if I have a to do list 10 miles long, I'm not in the mood. You can't put me in the mood. All I'm thinking about is my anxiety about that. So, it does impact it because if he wouldn't do things for me to make my life easier, to make my brain calm down, I would be definitely less open to sex.

Other participants experienced similar experiences with feeling loved through various means, with one explaining how even when they are unable to have sexual interactions, displays of love still impact their sex life in the long haul:

We stay so busy a lot of times there's not even - you know we just fall in bed at the end of the day. Even if the desire is there, we don't have the energy, so just maintaining that connection and communicating that we still have that desire and still love each other and still just try to stay

connected as much as possible. So that way when opportunities do arise there's nothing we have to really work through in order to engage sexually I would say.

Another participant shared how not only connected these displays of love are for sexual satisfaction, but how it is necessary:

I think without those things there is no sexual satisfaction. I think we're both kind of the same in the sense that sex without feelings and connection and intimacy is just not worth it, so if I'm feeling disconnected with [partner] because there's no touch or no quality time or we're not communicating, we're not going to be sexually active with each other or if we are then it's not necessarily going to be enjoyable, so it effects it a lot, like those things have to be there for me.

Several members of the study disagreed with the participants who viewed a connection between displays of love, believing that they were two separate aspects of the relationship rather than intertwined entities. In support of this view, one participant shared, "I don't know that the ways we show that we love each other necessarily directly correlate to sexual satisfaction."

Another participant shared her experience in more depth:

I think that sexual satisfaction, that is separate from the love, to me at least. I think a lot of people can't separate it. Can't or maybe it just isn't separate to them. Like for me they're two different feelings. Like to me, that's like being like "well how does drinking water affect how hungry you are?" but it's like I'm hungry not thirsty. You know what I mean, like they're two different things. They go together a little bit, sure, but no matter how much water you drink, if you haven't eaten in a week, you're hungry. So, like yeah sure one feeds the other a little bit, they go together, but I feel like to me sex and love are two, two very separate things.

Overall, in terms of the study's findings, the relationship between sexual satisfaction and displays of love seem to vary person to person in accordance with their sexual needs.

Communication. Communication appears to be the fundamental groundwork for all participants in this study, particularly in showing love to partners. The ability and commitment to healthy and inclusive communication often results in participants of this study exploring what NM looks like in their relationship and how to keep their partner feeling secure and loved throughout the process. Holding space for difficult conversations has been shown in this study to be indispensable in showing love and commitment to your partner. These conversations include boundaries within NM, relationship pitfalls, expressing sexual/romantic needs and talking about sexual lulls. Creating a space where each partner feels secure in discussing something that is upsetting or challenging is, at times, how they entered non-monogamy to begin with. One participant in my study reported that full honesty and openness in the face of discomfort was what led them as a couple to explore their sexual and romantic needs through new means:

We were on our road trip for our anniversary, our nineteenth anniversary and [partner] was like “hey I kind of want to have an adult conversation” and I said “okay”, and she said, “I kind of want to have sex with other people.” That’s what she said ... so we talked about it for like an hour in the car and it was a very difficult, erotic conversation ... I went like you know a hundred miles an hour like, “this is scary as shit.” I don’t really think about that, but let’s make it happen and how do we make that happen safely.

Throughout their sexual exploration with one another as well as people outside of their relationship, they were able to keep this level of disclosure as a staple in their routine discourse.

The other partner in that same couple later claimed:

There’s nothing we don’t talk about, and I think part of the way we show each other that we love each other is just being willing to talk about anything that's difficult. And we’re good at it, so it

makes it pleasurable and bonding to talk about hard things whether it's a painful break up with another couple or whatever it is, whatever.

Part of having clear communication is also plainly expressing needs, letting your partner know your desires whether it has to do with the relationship or outside of the relationship.

Another member of the study clarified that communication and expressing needs is an important part, particularly during a pandemic when they are both working from home:

I think a lot of it is just kind of checking in. Especially over the last year, right? We're in close quarters, we're working, we have the kid, and the work life, other people in our life. It's been bananas. And so, I think that the check-ins are probably the most important piece. And I guess to kind of define out what that means, it's a little bit more than just saying "hey how are you doing?" but, you know, checking in on "hey, so and so is going to be in town a couple days. Do you mind if I go hang out? I need a weekend away", you know? Talking through that like "hey are you cool with that?" or "do you mind if so and so comes over for dinner?" That kind of thing.

Another participant discussed how being able to check in with one another about their current needs and additional partners is a fundamental part of communication that then leads them to address other content:

We are really open with each other and have a really consistent stream of communication back and forth of what's going on, and, you know, who we are talking to, and what we're interested in doing.

In addition to talking with each other as methods of meeting each other's needs, couples in the study reported having open conversations around boundaries within the relationship. Discussion of boundaries in participants often included sexual limits, boundaries within NM (commonly how additional partners are incorporated into their lives) and romantic limits. The most popular

experience among members of the study around boundaries was the evolution of their comfort zones over time. One participant shares how the relationship has shifted recently and they came up with a new rule, what they call the “Cinderella rule” explaining their boundary around sleepovers with additional partners:

Some of our rules have changed throughout the years like we used to have a pretty hard and fast rule about not having other partners in like our home space. Just so like, you know, our apartment was our space. But since [partner] is gone until October we have somewhat relaxed that. So we still have the rule, you know, no sex in the apartment with other partners. But like I can have my boyfriend over until like, what is it? 2 am, he turns into a pumpkin.

Often times, participants reported one of their most prevalent boundaries while in a NM relationship was specifically to talk everything through, as one participant speaking about relationship dynamics and boundaries states, “Excessive communication for sure” and another sharing, “I don’t think we have many specific rules I think the main thing is that we have to be open in communication.” This seemed to be a constant in the study, not only as a way to fully understand each other but mainly as a way to protect the relationship at hand, to preserve the feelings of safety, security, respect and love.

Acceptance of Partner. Furthermore, the acceptance of their partner is an important aspect in showing love. Participants reported intentionality within their relationship in terms of dating and sexual interaction. Essentially, intentionality appeared in the current study as creating purpose and deliberately being with their partner to convey love and dedication within the relationship; intentionality as a display of the conscious desire for their partner and the conscious decision to have them be a part of their life. As for dating their partner, several participants

reported the importance of choosing their partner and carving out time for them, even when it can be a challenge. A participant who has been together with her partner for 20+ years stated: We have always dated each other intentionally - even when, you know, I was pregnant every two years for eleven years, like we have always prioritized our marriage and our relationship and being friends, and that doesn't mean that there hasn't been super hard stuff to navigate.

Another participant shared how they create time for their relationship:

We have a date night every Friday night, every Friday after work we have a date and we go out and have lunch together and drink, so we do a lot together.

Participants who reported intentionality within dating discussed how this positively impacted their relationship satisfaction and feeling loved within the relationship. Intentionality in terms of finding time for sexual activities was also a common experience among members of the study.

Numerous participants reported scheduling sex as extremely helpful. The following participant explains the role planning for sex has had in their relationship, particularly after having to navigate spending so much time together due to COVID-19:

One of the things we had to work through as we've lived together and especially through a pandemic is intentionally carving out and being like "we're going to do sex now". Like we're going to do - here is the time where we will be taking a date at home or whatever and we're going to make space and a time for it.

Similarly, another participant discussed how clarifying romantic attention from sexual attention has had a positive impact on their sexual relationship:

I do think that we need to sometimes like be explicit about when we're giving each other sexual attention vs. romantic attention... I do think that we give each other affection like a lot throughout the day or whatever that, like, if it becomes, if it goes into like a sexual attention type

of thing then sometimes, we need to signal it so that it's clear. Because we are so affectionate with each other.

Most participants reported showing love through flirting, as well. Each couple exemplified similar behavior, all with the intent of showing affection in a playful way to their partner. Flirtation often looked like teasing their partner, making jokes, touching their partner in a playful manner, etc. For example, one participant shared how they will playfully bet against each other for a sexual reward, "in terms of fantasy football, [we will] place bets on who will win: "like I'll go down on you if you win." Another individual in the study shared how she uses flirting to offer security to her primary partner:

I joke that he should write the manual on how to operate my body when it comes to other partners which I think is another way of affirming him too in the face of non-monogamy, as like, letting him know that with him being my primary partner, he's got it figured out, and other people are just trying to figure it out.

There was a lot of playfulness present in the interviews as well, often shown through methods such as physical touch, laughter, facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, verbal teasing, etc. For example, one member of a couple shared ways in which they flirt with each other, "he might come up behind me and like bump and grind on me or something" to which her partner responded playfully with "I don't know what you're talking about" and the two laughed together. This type of teasing and flirtation was common in the interviews which demonstrates how important of a role it plays in participant's daily lives.

Valence of Sexuality

Partner Match. In entering into their current NM relationship, participants typically tend to fit into one of four categories: (1) they came into this relationship having already had practiced

ethical non-monogamy and continued that relationship orientation, (2) they thoroughly discussed the possibility of a non-monogamous relationship at the start of their time together, (3) after being together for years the couple discussed the possibility of opening the relationship, or (4) the couple became ENM without an in-depth conversation. Regardless of how they became ethically non-monogamous, an important factor was finding a partner who was willing to go on this journey with them and support each other in this relationship. A participant discussed how her and her partner differ on the erotic aspect of ENM, but how well it works for them. Their journey into ENM began years into their relationship after having many discussions:

I'm different than [partner] in it, like for him it is erotic for him to think about me with somebody else. That's not erotic for me to think about [partner] with somebody else. What is erotic is that I have zero distrust, where I'm like "dude I think that's awesome you go do it," I don't want to know about it, I definitely don't want to hear it, I don't want to be any part of it, but the part that's arousing to me is that I'm like my husband is like with another woman, two doors down, and I don't care at all... Of course, I want to know about it, I want to know that's happening, but it's not erotic to me to think about you with another women. The erotic part is that my marriage, like, I'm so loved, and I'm so trusted, and that's reciprocal and that's the part that's like "what, what!" It's like to me it's as scary as if [partner] went and got an ice cream cone where I'm like "okay cool man you do you."

Another participant shared how NM works in their relationship:

A lot of my experiences with non-monogamy have been going out exploring different aspects of kink, bondage, different types of pain play. That's mostly what my interactions outside of our marriage have been. Basically exploring things that he's not interested in because if I just wanted casual sex I can get that from my husband. We're open to explore things that we can't provide,

well I'm in so I can explore things that he can't provide for me and may not necessarily be something that he's into or it may be something that he's not comfortable with that I can engage in that with somebody else.

Each participant has a unique background, however one constant in the relationships presented in the study is their ability to partake in and desire for new experiences and their partner desiring the same thing not just for themselves, but for the other person in the relationship. One participant stated, "one of the reasons [long term relationships] didn't work for me in the past was because I felt the need to try the other thing that I could see out there and now I have the freedom to do that." Finding a partner who is comfortable and interested in experiencing NM plays arguably the biggest role in sexual satisfaction for individuals who wish to partake in ENM.

Sex Positivity. When the topic of whether participants hold a sex positive outlook was questioned, there was an overwhelmingly positive belief system shared across the study. Many members of the study stated a similar idea to one participant expressing sex positivity as evidenced by their responses and willingness to participate in the interview: "Exhibit A is the last hour." Every participant reported having an overall sex positive outlook, supported by their mentality that sex is viewed as a good thing and how it is natural rather than something to be ashamed of. In a display of normalizing and destigmatizing sex, one participant related sexual needs to the basic needs and human instincts of food and water, stating "you shouldn't feel guilty for wanting to eat or drink, or have sex." When asked whether they were sex positive and why or why not, another participant declared:

Yes. Why? Sex is great. I personally enjoy sex, I want other people to enjoy sex if that is what they want. I feel like our culture is more sex negative and puritanical. It's hard to shake the sex

shaming and the traditional value in American society so I just kind of, in general, wish that everyone felt free to do the things that they are interested in or to even know the things that they are interested in because they haven't been narrowed down.

Along with this participant above stating that they view the culture surrounding sex as sex negative, another participant stated a similar opinion. They believe that the way the culture, particularly advertising and marketing, portrays sex has a negative impact on individuals, leading this member of the study to share “[there are] some domains where I would call myself sex-negative, yeah” regarding the influence of negative or manipulative ways marketing has utilized sex to sell. However, this same participant reported that he is sex positive in terms of viewing sex as a positive experience, stating, “sex is great makes your life better, it’s a great way to connect with people.”

The idea of wanting everyone to feel free in exploring their sexuality is common among participants, the desire for people to feel at liberty to look into their sexuality without fear of judgment or shame. Another participant discussed his outlook on the valence of sexuality in terms of cultural stigma:

I certainly consider myself to be sex positive. I think that that phrase only has to exist because the culture is overwhelmingly sex negative. No one asks me if I’m a burrito positive person, I like eating burritos... there’s no movement how to eat, or that eating too many burritos is... if you eat a burrito, you’re a bad person. But because that exists [with sexuality], you have to have a counterbalance of, “I am not that type, I’m sex positive.” So yeah, I don’t, I don’t agree with any of the reasons somebody would be sex negative. I think what you do with your body is your business and if you’re doing it with another person, their business at the time. Yeah, if everyone

is consenting and enjoying themselves... I think playing video games with friends is fun and I'm for that, and I think having sex with other partners is fun and I'm for that.

Another shared perspective among participants is how versatile sex is, how it is more than penetrative sex and how the benefits far surpass that of sexual satisfaction. Participants often believed sex is not defined or limited to penis in vagina penetration, sex can be anything to anyone, ranging from a massage to oral sex, for example. A participant advocated for this, stating:

I love remind people that like sex is not just [penis] to [vagina] penetration, sex is not just orgasm, sex is not just a thing, like if a massage is sex to you then it's sex. I don't know, I like destigmatizing sex.

Sex also has a larger impact than just sexual satisfaction, it's benefits bleed into other aspects of participant's lives, both in the relationship and external circumstances. Participants often shared the view of sex as impacting other areas of their relationship such as increasing displays of love and feeling love and excitement in the relationship. Many participants also reported seeing sex having an impact on their general, day to day lives outside of the relationship through, for example, an increase in mood, tolerance, etc. One participant worded it as: "I've seen how sex can improve your mood, your whole week, your day, and then that can spread out into other aspects of your life."

Reenforcing/Reteaching Messages for Future Generations. Participants mostly agreed upon the concept of improving the quality of sex education for future generations, both at home and education in schools. Reflecting on participant's history of formal education and the messages they received surrounding sexuality in this area of learning, members of the study tend to have hope for future generations receiving better formal sexual education than they, in hopes

that it decreases stigma, judgment, and shame. One participant supports this idea and shared in regard to her own experience, “if I had a better sexual education early on, I just think that would have been better.” Another participant disclosed her experience with formal sex education vs what she learned later in life, sharing:

[I learned] the purpose of sex is to two-fold. It’s either unitive, brings you closer together, or it’s procreative, it’s meant to bring life and you have children. We have six children, so we got that part down and the unitive part down. Nowhere is it taught that it’s three-fold and the third fold would be for pleasure. Like for your own joy and pleasure and because it’s a gift, right, so which I’m like now wait a minute because that is my faith system, it is a gift from God. I am very much a sexual being, that is a super important part of who I am, but it really went completely, not just unexplored, but almost unaccepted in my mind for a long time and I think it’s really only been the last three years maybe, that I’m like, “wait I think sex can just be awesome because sex is awesome.” Like, and I don’t feel ashamed about it at all.

The idea of learning about sex from a pleasure aspect, such as what the participant above shared, is a value held by many participants. Several members of the study were raised through a religious lens that often left pleasure out of the discourse surrounding sex. In learning that sex is multifaceted and that pleasure is an important part in self-discovery, one participant shared in terms of informal education:

That’s been very helpful in terms of being okay with who I am and like a lot of the urges that I have, like sexual or kinky and, you know, combined as well. That’s probably been much better for me in terms of shaping sex in like a more natural, positive way

Informal education through the media is a method in which some participants shared a desire for better modeling with relationships and sex. More often than not, participants reported

that a less stigmatized approach to sexuality in the media would further youth's interpretation of sex as a natural human desire rather than a behavior/act that is hyper-sexualized and judged. A participant described his view on how sexuality is manipulated by the media through the following assertion:

There's a pathology in how a lot of people interface with sex and sexuality and I think there is a really bad combination of a low level of education and maunders who know how to exploit people's behavior with sexual stimuli, and that creates a storm of pathological sex behaviors that people say, this is okay.

The culture surrounding sex was reported to be a large influence on participant's personal growth, understanding, and acceptance of sexuality. One member of the study who reported growing up with a lot of shame and stigma surrounding sex, including a lot of "slut shaming," discussed how, not only sex education impacted her ability to explore herself as a sexual being, but how the culture of shame surrounding sex had a larger influence on her:

I think sex ed is just a part of the bigger cultural piece. Like, I don't know that the sex ed was the most responsible part, I think it was more just like all of the cultural conditioning that kept me from really understanding myself as a sexual being and from not attaching shame with that for a while.

Another common theme within culture was participants' discussion on the lack of representation of healthy relationships, what different relationships can look like (ethical non-monogamy vs monogamy), LGBTQ+ persons, etc. Some members of the study reported the impact this had on them, such as prolonging shame, lack of exploration, lack of accepting their sexuality, and a likely increased length of time to understand their own sexuality. One participant argued:

It took a lot longer to figure myself out. I mean, my bisexuality and my sexuality. It took, you know, it takes time for that. And it takes time for that normally, but it takes much more time when it's something that you don't have an avenue to explore it, to talk to anybody about it. Any examples, any healthy examples.

In terms of informal education received through family and parents, regardless of whether participants hold positive memories of conversations surrounding sex with their family, whether they did not view conversations (or lack thereof) as positive or negative, or whether participants reported having negative experiences within these conversations, the majority of participants reported a desire for future generation to have a comfortable atmosphere to discuss sexuality at home. Participants who have or anticipate having children tended to speak more towards how they want to create a sex positive environment for their children. These parents also accredit their sex positive attitude to improving their parenting abilities, believing they are better and more capable parents for their children than they would be if they didn't share this notion. In terms of how one participant is not only hoping to hold space for her children, but also how she has navigated informal education as an adult, one participant shared, "it's a conscious undoing of the messages we were given." Another participant communicated, "I think being sex positive is also being feminist" continuing to add, how his sex positive approach "makes us much better parents because we have teenagers too, you know, so our language has changed so much" which he believed continuously helps him be a better father and better support system for his children.

Another participant explained:

We want his girls to see what a good, solid relationship looks like and that it's perfectly okay to show your partner how much you care about them in little ways, even if it's just, you know, a touch of the arm. So part of that, besides just being us, is we are trying to instill that into her. So

that she will not accept less in her relationships, whatever they may be. ...Every month just to take care of us, and that's what we've taught our daughters. We do this to take care of us, because without us, there's no big us.

Many parents in the study report a similar desire of wanting to be a positive example of love and healthy relationships for their children. This was reportedly done in various ways, such as showing affection, respecting boundaries, etc., and was a very important in terms of teaching future generations a better, more wholistic view of sex and relationship education. A sense of learning through observing was a common outlook for parents in this study.

Chapter V: Discussion

In accordance with other studies, the current study found that the maintenance of sexual satisfaction in long-term relationships far exceeds sexuality and sexual touch. Previous research has sought to understand what influences sexual satisfaction, but they do not examine these factors within a non-monogamous relationship. Ultimately, it was my hope to contribute to the current literature on the clinical conceptualization of non-monogamous relationships. The aim of this discussion is to examine the findings of the current research. Subsequently, implications and recommendations for future research will be delineated. Participants in this study reported an incorporation of erotica, purposeful displays of love outside of sexual interactions, and high levels of sex positivity. The majority of participants attributed these experiences and views to maintaining sexual satisfaction.

Incorporation of erotica is very broad, stemming from visual stimulation, to toys, to additional partners. In this study, novelty was found to be a primary motivator in the utilization of erotica, whether that be within the relationship or with additional partners. Research has found that individuals who utilize erotica are impacted by the material, may learn from it and may incorporate new behaviors that they have seen in the sexually explicit material into their own sexual experiences (Kimberly et al., 2018; Wright, 2011; Wright et al., 2018). In support of previous studies, such as Kimberly et al. (2018) who found that erotica can be used as a tool to understand sexual and romantic relationships as well as personal sexual exploration, this study found that erotica was often reported as a way for individuals to learn more about their sexuality either with their partner or by sharing the experience with their partner after learning/exploring more. For instance, many couples reported exploring erotica together, or knowing boundaries

and being able to safely state they would not like to explore this interest, in which case often the partner would explore this aspect of their sexuality with additional partners.

Learning about new erotica and a desire to explore novelty often was a catalyst in the mindset of prolonged learning and curiosity to last a lifetime. Many participants reported a desire for life-long learning, not only about sexuality in general but also about their personal sexual development and the sexual development of their partner(s). Research supports the concept of life long sexual exploration, for example Kimberly et al. (2018) explored concept of erotic literature and the ways in which it impacts participants; these participants ranged from 20 to 78 years old, telling how age does not impact one's desire to explore sexuality, and Rendina et al. (2019) finding that sexual development and acceptance is often spanned over the course of a lifetime. With life-long exploration comes the concept of learning alongside one's partner. The sharing of experiences as a way to not only include each other along their individual journeys but also to spread knowledge and discuss sexual interests. Codes that contributed to this theme included experimentation, novelty, pictures, safety, dating, pornography, sharing personal experiences, and others. Erotica, particularly in terms of novel experiences, played an important role in this exploration. Participants commonly reported sharing sexually explicit material with their partner as a way to instigate the conversation of potentially exploring this new scene, leading the couple to explore via research (reading up on the topic, learning through classes, podcasts, etc.) or experimentation with this new experience. Regardless of whether they implemented the behavior, couples in the current study generally reported conversations would be held surrounding the concept to educate one another and discuss sexual boundaries.

Participants reported showing love through purposeful means, often referencing to "Love Languages" (i.e., acts of service, physical touch, gift giving, words of affirmation and quality

time). Most participants identified their partner's methods of receiving love without being prompted, and these participants also conveyed a mindset that purposefully took into account their partners love languages and made effort to show love in those ways even if they were different from their own identified love languages. For instance, helping with chores, time with each other without phones (distraction free time), non-sexual physical touch, flowers, etc. Another recurrent experience was that of communicating with one another to show love and commitment to one's partner. Communication concerning boundaries, needs, desires and more casual topics such as catching up on their days or intellectual conversation were very important to members of this study, and was recognized as a way to portray love. Acceptance of partner was another commonly shared experience. Intentionality within the relationships, particularly in purposeful displays of love to meet partner's needs, played a large role in members of the study's expression of love. This involves meeting partner's love languages, accepting and feeding their curiosity for learning, playfulness, scheduling sex at times and intentionally dating one another. Codes that contributed to the displays of love theme comprised of love languages, support, acceptance of one another, boundaries, conversations, balance, messages from partner, time together, friendship, connection, kissing and commitment.

Valence of sexuality presents in various ways throughout the relationship. To start, participants revealed another important role within their partner; finding a partner who fits with them is a crucial aspect in continuing into the journey of NM. Being able to feel accepted and secure with one's partner allows for safety in the exploration of sexuality and sexual needs. Having a partner who shares a similar outlook on sexuality and sexual exploration is imperative in the exploration of ethical non-monogamy. All participants in the study reporting being generally sex positive, often referring to their willingness to participate in the study and sharing

their values surrounding sex which usually encompassed a desire for de-stigmatization and acceptance of sexuality as a natural aspect of human behaviors. Sex positivity was communicated within the relationship through all the findings we have explored in this paper. Allowing for discussions concerning erotica and novelty, a willingness and desire to incorporate life-long learning and share this experience with their partner and accepting their partner and meeting their partners needs in various ways. Supporting current research stating that sex positivity is communicated through particular means such as language, open attitudes and conversations (Cruz et al., 2017, Donaghue, 2015), the current study found sex positive mindsets among participants are communicated through actions and discussions about sexuality, it is present in the relationship through the safe environment created allowing for partners to express needs and interests without fear of judgment. Holding sex positive beliefs in this study resulted in the principle that sex is a positive aspect of life that should be explored without shame. With this idea of not holding onto shame comes the desire to change the messages surrounding sex for future generations. Many participants shared how sex education and the culture surrounding sex influenced their mindset surrounding sexuality, often in a negative sense such as internalized slut shaming and expressed the desire for future generations to learn in a more accepting and factual environment. This can be done through formal education in schools but also through informal methods such as portrayals of sex in the media and holding conversations surrounding sex at home. Many participants who have children or even those who do not expressed wanting to create a safe environment in their home for their kids to explore and ask about sexuality without shame. Codes that contributed to the development of the valence of sexuality theme include perspective, sex positive, influencing kids, language, good fit for us, what is important for us, playful attitude towards sex, trauma and assertive.

Through the explorations of these results, a significant influence concerns the essential role of education. Several participants had similar experiences surrounding their sexual education, these experiences often being limited knowledge and negative takeaways. At some point during self-exploration, these participants gained insight into how limited their initial sexual knowledge/education had been – for some this was due to religious influences, the topic of sex being taboo, experiencing abstinence only education, etc. This awareness then sparked curiosity within the participants: now that I know my perspective is limited what else is out there? What else have I not learned? This inspired participants, who were often adults at the time of this recognition, to explore sexuality both formally through workshops, lectures and classes, and informally through podcasts, pleasure reading and experimentation. Members of the study would then be inspired to find additional opportunities to explore together with their partner. This allowed for participants to continue their sexual journey and self-acceptance in a safe environment with a partner who accepts this journey and wants to share the experience with them.

The exploration of sexuality often resulted in the exploration of oneself, which sparks the conversation on boundaries and negotiation. A portion of participants not only were on a journey to explore what sexuality presented as for them, but also how to navigate this exploration within a committed relationship. In doing so, participants needed to further their education not just on sexuality, but learning about negotiation, boundaries and relationships. Numerous members of the study listened to podcasts and read books on these topics to become more capable of exploring this new aspect of themselves safely and within a committed relationship, these educational tools and new insights were then shared with their partner. Education plays a role of

the utmost importance among participants exploration into ethical non-monogamy and their ability to maintain sexual (and relationship) satisfaction.

Clinical Implications.

The findings of this study offer important insights for the marriage and family therapy (MFT) community who may work with ENM relationships. The topic of sexuality is taboo in western society, and often therapists may have discomfort around these conversations as well. When a person is already uncomfortable with the conversation of sex, the conversation of ENM relationships can be very intimidating. Results of this study hopefully allow for a foundational understanding to how ENM relationships maintain sexual satisfaction and common themes among ENM relationships, such as communication levels, impact of education, importance of partner match and displays of love.

An MFT theory that clinicians may incorporate with the findings of this study and with ENM relationships in their practice is Contextual Family Therapy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Ulrich, 2016). Boszormenyi-Nagy, the founder of said theory, presented four dimensions of relationships: facts, psychology, transactions/power alignments and relationship ethics. Facts are undeniable aspects of relationships/individuals – e.g., ethnicity would be a fact. Psychology is the individual experience within a person – e.g., personal feelings and emotions. Transactions or power alignments are patterns, interactions held, rules in place, etc. Relationship ethics is the fairness between the parties involved (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Ulrich, 2016).

Implications from the current study are drawn from these four dimensions of contextual family therapy. Facts present as the impact of the current pandemic on relationships. Nearly all participants in the study discussed at one time or another how their life and relationships have shifted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this is something they all learned to cope with or

manage in individual ways, however it is something universal that all participants had to endure or manage. Therapists who work with ENM couples, particularly at this time when having to work with the consequences of world-wide coronavirus, must consider not just facts they consider regardless (culture, family of origin, etc.), but must consider how the present pandemic influences the relationship and disallows particular behaviors that ENM couples typically seek out – such as playing with multiple partners, attending sex clubs or sex parties, etc.

Psychology appears in the study through the individual experiences that each partner brings with them into this relationship – for instance shame. Each partner within participating couples brought their own experiences of shame and acceptance into their current relationship(s), and together the couple had to examine and work with how this potentially impacted their relationship, particularly in terms of participating in ENM behaviors. Many participants in the current study reported being raised in a religious environment which often led participants to have a unique barrier to sexual acceptance – previous research supports this idea through findings stating developmental context, such as religiosity or parenting styles, can add to sexual shame or negate it (Kirkpatrick, 1997; Limke & Mayfield, 2011; McDonald et al., 2005; Regnerus et al., 2004; Volk et al., 2016). Viewing sexuality through a sex positive lens is another example of how psychology presents in the current study. Some participants stated that while they consider themselves to be sex positive currently, they have developed this outlook overtime through education, experiences, conversations and critical thinking. For those that developed this outlook throughout the relationship, this was a hurdle they had to overcome individually, but with support from their partner as well. The individual experience is important to draw attention to and being able to recognize that individual experiences and hurdles influence not only the one

who brings these concerns into the relationship, but the partner who must inherently face these realities with their companion.

Transactions emerge through the communicational environment each couple has been able to cultivate. Being able to negotiate rules, boundaries, desires and needs in a space that feels safe and non-judgmental is one of the most significant findings in this study in terms of implementation into counseling practices, and therapists who work with ENM must be aware of the level of importance this carries in order to assist couples in executing this groundwork. Transactions and power alignment also play a role in terms of partner match – discovering a partner who will partake in these types of transactions, conversations, novelty, and pleasure. An additional aspect for MFTs to consider in terms of transactions and partner match is the sexual transaction between potential partners in ENM relationships, taking into consideration the research done by Meston & Buss (2009) which explores why women choose to partake in sex. This can be used as a tool in helping therapists understand sexual motivation and behaviors within any relationship, ENM or not. Particularly for therapists who may struggle with understanding the motivation for the non-monogamous relationship at hand, this research can be used to recognize the complexity of sexual desire and the importance in finding a potential partner that aligns with their beliefs and communication style, as well as meeting their sexual needs (Smith & Lynn, 2010).

Relational ethics encompasses ethically non-monogamous behaviors and relationships. Such as with any relationship, couples strive to reach equality within the relationship (Gerson, 2010) however equitable fairness is determined on an individual basis considering all other factors of the relationship – needs, desires, lived experiences, psychology, facts, etc. While research has yet to thoroughly study equity in ENM relationships, the research on negotiation

and fairness in other aspects of relationships can nevertheless be conceptualized in terms of ENM. Hatfield et al. (2011) reported relationships in which one or both partners view equity within their partnership as unequal (e.g., household chore distribution (Charbonneau et al., 2019)), often attempt to restore equity – this approach also varies in method according to the individual relationship. Additional studies have investigated the negotiation tactics used in romantic relationships, particularly in the sense of restoring equity, and found that equity-restoring behaviors and the partners acknowledgment of said behaviors are tied to relationship satisfaction (Charbonneau et al., 2019), also showing that the partner who feels they are on the lower end of the equity scale (whether that be the feeling of equity or actual equity within the relationship) often attempt to coax their partner into restoring equity and rewarding the behavior (Riforgiate & Boren, 2015). Applying this information to the current study may present as conversations surrounding boundaries, rules and desires from their ENM relationship.

An important aspect of relational ethics in terms of contextual therapy is the idea that entitlement and indebtedness are inherent and bound to exist within relationships. The accumulation of these debts/entitlements and how they are handled, acknowledged and paid off directly correspond to the trustworthiness, health and satisfaction in the relationship. In terms of ENM, this is particularly important when it comes to additional partners and building trust within your own relationship. The therapist can utilize these four dimensions of contextual family therapy in order to assist ENM clients in maintaining stability as they explore these new avenues together

Limitations and Future Research.

Given the exploratory nature of this study there are inherent limitations to the results and implications the findings hold. Limitations of the present study primarily include the participant

selection. Participants who express a willingness to participate in a study concerning sexual satisfaction are likely going to be individuals who feel comfortable discussing sexuality and their personal sex lives, which likely results in individuals who hold sex positive beliefs being the volunteers to participate. This could result in biased results due to the lack of diversity in the valence of sexuality, which sexuality research tends to have as a common limitation (Hertlein et al., 2020). Another limitation included the current COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly the entire population sample discussed in one way or another how the pandemic has influenced their relationship, including their sex life with each other, their ability to partake in non-monogamous behaviors that they otherwise would be exploring, their romantic displays of affection, intentionally dating each other, and even perhaps influencing their friendship.

The study also had one couple participate who stood out against the other couples. Based off of the responses each member of the couple gave the researcher in the interview, it appeared as though the decision to participate in non-monogamous behaviors was less out of both individuals' cumulative desire for this sort of sexual exploration and needs, but more to please one partner who desired this type of relationship. This was a heterosexual relationship where the male identifying person requested to open their relationship and the female identifying partner was not necessarily interested in participating, nor had ever had an interest in exploring ENM, yet did this to please her partner and keep their relationship going. Throughout the interview, the female partner would discuss the pressure she has felt and still feels to satisfy her partner and be okay with him getting his needs met from other people. For instance, the female partner stated at one point in the interview how she decided to allow her partner to participate in NM purely to save the relationship rather than her interests and how she has crossed her own boundaries to please her partner. The male partner consistently stated how he is not fully satisfied with the level

of NM they have incorporated in their relationship, but with female partner's current limits, this is what it has to be. For example, male partner desired a concept he called "kitchen table polyamory" which is, as he described, "having partners that are around all the time and hanging out everybody interacts with each other as in like when we're having dinner everybody comes around the kitchen table". This is a concept his wife is strongly uncomfortable with, she prefers "parallel poly" described as the male participant as "it's 'I have a relationship that's over here and a relationship that's over here' and they don't mesh that often." Based off of the observation of the researcher, it appears this NM relationship is not the healthiest example of an ENM relationship, as it is being pursued to meet one partner's needs while almost dismissing the other partner's boundaries along the way. This relationship was an outlier in the sense that both partners were not enthusiastically consenting to the ENM process, whereas in all other relationships interviewed the partners made sure to move at a pace that respected each partners boundaries and limitations, without applying pressure to "be okay" with all the desires of one partner, and both partners desired to incorporate ENM into their relationship.

There is still limited research investigating ENM relationships and this impacts the understanding and normalization of this relationship orientation. Many participants explained a large reason why they participated in this study was to normalize and have more conversations concerning alternatives to monogamous relationships, displaying a desire within the community to be more understood and accepted. Moving forward, research could continue to explore ENM relationships through several avenues of research. Continuing from these results, a follow up study may further investigate the comparison between education and understanding self-sexuality, or perhaps examine the sexual side of the relationship and how non-monogamy presents in relation to sexual behaviors – what does your sexual activity look like with your

partner vs additional partners. Additionally, to understand ENM and relationship/sexual satisfaction, perhaps future research could compare non-monogamous relationships to monogamous relationships in terms of communication styles, comfortability having difficult conversations, level of safety/comfort in discussing new sexual desires or comparing displays of affection.

Conclusion

The intention of this study was to examine methods in which long-term, non-monogamous relationships maintain sexual satisfaction. This was accomplished through 60-minute interviews with couples who have been together for a minimum of 7 years and are currently non-monogamous. Findings of this study provide themes which clinicians, researchers and individuals who are interested in NM can reference when looking to understand healthy habits that aid in maintaining a ENM relationship. Through the understanding of the process ENM relationships typically go through to maintain a balanced and healthy relationship with one another as well as additional partners, marriage and family therapists are benefited with the information from the current study and may use this as a tool to assist the therapeutic process. The results of this study add to the research on non-monogamous romantic relationships and may assist in furthering the study of non-monogamous relationships.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your formal experience with sex education?
2. Tell me about any informal sex education you received, this can be through parents, pornography, friends, internet, etc.
3. How has sex education shaped you as a sexual being?
4. In what ways do you and your partner show love and affection to each other day to day, outside of sex?
5. How do these methods of affection impact your sexual satisfaction?
6. Besides penetration, what are forms of sexual behaviors/activities you and your partner partake in that contribute to your sexual satisfaction, if any?
7. What forms of erotica (defined as anything used to enhance sex life, so this could be videos, books, toys, perhaps even non-monogamy could be considered), if any, have you and your partner incorporated that aided in maintaining or enhancing your sexual satisfaction throughout the years?
8. What does non-monogamy look like in your relationship (includes boundaries, communication regarding monogamy, any rules)?
9. Tell me about your decision to be non-monogamous and please share your experiences in a non-monogamous relationship.
10. Explain how openness to new experiences contributes to your sexual satisfaction, if at all.
11. If you and your partner found yourselves in a sexual lull, what did you do to pull yourselves out of it?
12. Would you say your outlook on sexuality is sex positive? Why or why not?

Appendix B: Demographics Survey

Please highlight selected answer

1. What is your age?

- A. 25-30
- B. 31-35
- C. 36-40
- D. 41-45
- E. 46-50
- F. 51-55
- G. 56-60
- H. 61+

2. What is your gender?

- A. Male
- B. Female
- C. Transgender
- D. Non-Binary
- E. Genderqueer
- F. Other (please specify) _____
- G. Prefer not to say

3. What is your ethnicity?

- A. White
- B. Hispanic/Latino
- C. Black/African American
- D. Native American/American Indian
- E. Asian/Pacific Islander
- F. Other

4. How long have you been in your current relationship?

- A. 7-9 years
- B. 10-12 years
- C. 13-15 years
- D. 15-20 years
- E. 20+ years

5. What is your sexual orientation?

- A. Straight/Heterosexual
- B. Gay/Lesbian
- C. Bisexual
- D. Other (please specify) _____

6. What is your relationship orientation? Select all that apply:

- A. Swinger
- B. Open relationship
- C. Polyamorous
- D. Other (please specify) _____

7. What is your marital status?

- A. Single (never married)
- B. Married
- C. In a domestic partnership
- D. Divorced
- E. Widowed

8. Do you have children? Select all that apply:

- A. Yes, within current relationship
- B. Yes, outside of current relationship
- C. No
- D. If yes, what is/are the child(ren)'s age(s) _____

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

Participants Needed for a Research Study on Sexual Satisfaction on Non- Monogamous Relationships

The purpose of this research study is to learn the sexual and romantic behaviors that contribute to the sexual satisfaction in long-term, non-monogamous couples.

Participants will be asked to: (1) individually complete a brief demographic questionnaire, and (2) participate in a interview together with their partner via Zoom with the researcher. Interviews will occur online at the couple's preferred location where they have access to Zoom. The interview will take no more than 60 minutes. Participants will be compensated \$10 Amazon Gift Card as a couple.

Study eligibility/inclusion criteria: Healthy adults, 25 years or older, who are in a non-monogamous couple relationship of at least 7 years. Both members of the couple must participate in the study.

Please contact Ms. Anna Kessler or Dr. Katherine Hertlein to learn more.

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Dr. Hertlein: katherine.hertlein@unlv.edu; 702-895-2310

Appendix D: Tables

Table 1

Demographic Information Pt. 1

P #	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Length of Relation	Sexual Orientation
1a	36-40	Male	White	15-20	Bisexual
1b	31-35	Female	White	15-20	Bisexual
2a	41-45	Female	White	20+	Heterosexual
2b	41-45	Male	White	20+	Heterosexual
3a	25-30	Male	White	10-12	Heterosexual
3b	25-30	Female	White	10-12	Bisexual
4a	36-40	Male	White	10-12	Pansexual
4b	36-40	Female	White	10-12	Bisexual
5a	41-45	Male	White	15-20	Heterosexual
5b	36-40	Female	White	15-20	Bisexual
6a	25-30	Female	White	7-9	Demisexual & Bisexual
6b	25-30	Male	Hispanic/Latino	7-9	Heterosexual
7a	36-40	Male	White	15-20	Heterosexual
7b	41-45	Female	White	15-20	Heteroflexible
8a	36-40	Male	White	7-9	Bisexual
8b	31-35	Female	White	7-9	Bisexual
9a	25-30	Male	White	10-12	Heterosexual
9b	25-30	Female	White	10-12	Bisexual
10a	31-35	Female	White	10-12	Bisexual
10b	36-40	Male	White	10-12	Bisexual
11a	25-30	Female	White	7-9	Heterosexual
11b	31-35	Male	White	7-9	Heterosexual
12a	61+	Female	White	20+	Heterosexual
12b	61+	Male	White	20+	Heterosexual
13a	31-35	Female	Hispanic/Latino	13-15	Bisexual
13b	36-40	Male	White	13-15	Heterosexual
14a	41-45	Female	White	10-12	Bisexual
14b	46-50	Male	White	10-12	Heterosexual
15a	31-35	Male	White	7-9	Heteroflexible
15b	31-35	Female	White	7-9	Bisexual
16a	31-35	Male	White	7-9	Heterosexual
16b	36-40	Female	White	7-9	Heterosexual
17a	31-35	Female	White	10-12	Heterosexual
17b	36-40	Male	White	10-12	Heterosexual
18a	51-55	Female	White	13-15	Heterosexual
18b	51-55	Male	White	13-15	Bi-curious
19a	41-45	Female	White	7-9	Bi-curious

19b	31-35	Male	Native American/ American Indian	7-9	Pansexual
20a	31-35	Male	White	13-15	Heterosexual
20b	25-30	Female	Asian/Pacific Islander	13-15	Heterosexual
21a	31-35	Female	White	7-9	Heteroromantic with interest in women
21b	31-35	Male	White	7-9	Heterosexual
22a	46-50	Male	White	7-9	Bisexual
22b	41-45	Female	White	7-9	Pansexual
23a	36-40	Male	White	7-9	Heterosexual
23b	41-45	Female	White	7-9	Bisexual
24a	25-30	Female	Asian/Pacific Islander	7-9	Bisexual
24b	25-30	Male	White	7-9	Heterosexual

Table 2

Demographic Information Pt. 2

P #	Marital Status	Children	Age of Children
1a	Married	Yes within	10,12
1b	Married	Yes within	10,12
2a	Married	Yes within	7,10,13,15,17,18
2b	Married	Yes within	7,10,13,15,17,18
3a	Married	No	
3b	Married	No	
4a	Married	Yes within	5
4b	Married	Yes within	5
5a	Married	Yes within	10,12
5b	Married	Yes within	10,12
6a	Married	No	
6b	Married	No	
7a	Married	Yes within	10
7b	Married	Yes within	10
8a	Married	No	
8b	Married	No	
9a	Married	Yes within	1,4,6
9b	Married	Yes within	1,4,6
10a	Single	No	
10b	Single	No	
11a	Married	No	
11b	Married	No	
12a	Married	Yes within	36,40
12b	Married	Yes within	36,40
13a	Married	No	
13b	Married	No	
14a	Married	Yes outside	18
14b	Married	No	
15a	Married	No	
15b	Married	No	
16a	Single	No	
16b	Single	No	
17a	Married	No	
17b	Married	No	
18a	Married	Yes outside	29,31
18b	Married	Yes outside	17,19,21
19a	Married	No	
19b	Married	No	

20a	Married	No	
20b	Married	No	
21a	DP	No	
21b	DP	No	
22a	Married	Yes outside	20,21,22
22b	Married	Yes outside	13,17
23a	Married	Yes within	3,7
23b	Married	Yes within	3,7
24a	Married	No	
24b	Married	No	

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Curriculum Vitae

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Las Vegas, NV 89154

Phone: (702) 895-3011

EDUCATION

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

August 2019 – Current

Couple and Family Therapy (Master of Science)

Expected Graduation, December 2021

Current GPA | 4.0

University of Cincinnati

2018

Psychology (Bachelor of Science)

Psychology (Bachelor of Arts)

Minor: Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies

GPA | 3.228 | Financed 100% of college degree through work experiences

CLINICAL EXPERIENCE

Student Therapist Intern

January 2021-Current

Maternal Minds Counseling, Las Vegas, NV

Provided therapy to couples, individuals and adolescents in the Las Vegas community.

Maternal Minds specializes in providing mental health support to new or current mothers, fathers and parents who are facing this transition.

Therapist-In-Training

May 2020-January 2021

Center for Individual, Couple and Family Counseling, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Provided therapy at a low cost (sliding scale) to the Las Vegas Community using different therapy models to assist clients in reaching their goals in therapy. Through talk therapy, to either couples or individuals, concerns such as depression, anxiety, adjustment, identity developments, trauma, and communication are addressed. In

working with clients, diagnoses would be made according to the criterion of the DSM-V.

I prepare treatment plans, case reports and notes concerning my experiences with my clients in therapy, as well as conducting assessments. I attend weekly supervision and participate in case presentations.

PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

Graduate Assistantship – University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Academic Success Coach and Support Specialist

October 2020-August 2021

Met with undergraduate students virtually or via phone in peer-to-peer coaching sessions to assist with development of soft skills (e.g., goal setting, test anxiety, motivation, and

balancing personal, work and school life) and resourcing. Presented online workshops and conducted online presentations to university departments and undergraduate students. Attended professional development and gained experience in managing online work settings.

Nanny

September 2019 – April 2020

I worked part-time as a nanny for a seven-month-old baby. I helped with household work, went on walks with the baby, put the baby to bed and challenged his cognitive development through play time while the parents were working.

Planned Parenthood Southwest Ohio Region

Health Educator

May 2018-August 2019

Planned Parenthood

Responsible for community programming outreach, program development, grant coordination, social media posts and various additional duties. Prepared and presented human sexuality education programs and material that are medically accurate, culturally competent and up to date to communities, groups and/or individuals of all and any age, socioeconomic status, gender identity, race, religion, etc. Built upon people and service skills.

Planned Parenthood Southwest Ohio Region

Education Intern

January 2018-May 2018

Planned Parenthood

I conducted research on various topics including sexual education programs in various schools, brain activity and sexual activity, sexual education for the developmentally disabled etc. I built kits used for sex education in schools as well as shadowing these events, helped set up for and attend tabling events and trainings. I attended Human Sexuality courses focused on History of Pleasure and Sex Positivity; Sexuality, Gender and Sexual Education; Relationships and Sexual Behavior; Sexual Violence and Consent; Sexually Transmitted Infections; etc.

Bogart's Concert Venue

Premium Seating On-Site Sales Coordinator

September 2017-May 2018

Live Nation Entertainment

I assisted with managing daily operations concerning the sales of premium (VIP) seating (i.e., engaging with clients' night of show, ticket sales, answering phone calls, resolving customer service issues), ticketing event setup and maintenance, training night of show hosts, accounting and reporting for ticket sales, handling money during and after events, and managed a small group of employees.

Express**Sales Associate**

October 2014 – September 2017

Through my job as a retail sales associate, I learned basic customer service skills as my focus was on customer satisfaction. Additional responsibilities included taking inventory, handled money organized the store, and assisted with floor changes.

Bob Evans**Server, Trainer**

June 2015 – March 2017

As a server, I provided service to customers, trained new servers, partook in cleaning the restaurant, and built upon my customer service skills.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Completed EMDRIA Approved Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

Training by EMDR Consulting

Las Vegas, NV

August 2021-September 2021

Attended Emotional Eating, Chronic Dieting, Bingeing and Body Image by Judith Matz,
LCSW

Online Workshop: PESI

April 2021

Attended the AAMFT Conference – MFTs Changing the World

Online Conference

November 2020

Completed Diversity Training – UNLV

Online Training

October 2020

Completed “At-Risk for Faculty and Staff” Training – UNLV – Kognito

Online Training

October 2020

Completed Cybersecurity Awareness Training – UNLV

Online Training

October 2020

Attended Therasoft Training – University of Las Vegas, Couple and Family Therapy
Program

Online Training

July 2020

Attended Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) Training – William Arndt, LMFT
Online Training
May 2020

Attended Working with Couples in Telehealth – AAMFT
Online Training
April 2020

Attended How to Start a Telehealth Program – Telehealth Certification Institute
Online Training
April 2020

Attended Telehealth: Legal and Ethical Issues – Simple Practice Learning
Online Training
April 2020

Attended COVID-19 and Telebehavioral Health: Ethical Considerations During a Public Health Emergency – ACA
Online Training
April 2020

Attended Telehealth: California Social Work Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic – NASW
Online Training
April 2020

Attended Telepsychology Best Practice 101 Series – APA
Online Training
April 2020

Attended Telehealth with Queer and Trans Clients – AAMFT
Online Training
April 2020

Attended an Introduction to TBH – Katherine Hertlein, AAMFT
Online Training
April 2020

Attended EFT Emotionally Focused Therapy Pioneered by Sue Johnson – Dr. Anabelle Bugatti Workshop
Las Vegas, Nevada
February 2020

Attended Autism Workshop – Brie Tums
Las Vegas, Nevada
September 2019

Attended How to Know They Are Ready For The Talk
Webinar
July 2019

Attended Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence Conference
Dublin, Ohio
June 2019

Attended What Do You Mean? Unblurring the Lines between Consent, Assault, & So
Much More
Webinar
June 2019

Attended Let's Talk about Managing Stress – Autism Society
Cincinnati, Ohio
May 2019

Attended the Center for Closing the Health Gap 16th Annual Health Expo
Cincinnati, Ohio
April 2019

Attended Working Together to Achieve Health Equity
Cincinnati, Ohio
April 2019

Attended the CSE's National Sex Ed Conference
Newark, New Jersey
April 2019

Attended Shining a Light: Effective Sex Ed for Youth with Physical Disabilities
Webinar
March 2019

Attended Making Proud Choices Training
Ohio Department of Youth Services
Columbus, Ohio
February 2018

Attended Reducing the Risk Training

Ohio Department of Youth Services
Columbus, Ohio
November 2018

Attended Transforming Care Conference
The Equitas Health Institute
Columbus, OH
October 2018

Attended “The Ohio Sex Ed Summit: Healthier Communities through Sexuality Health Education”
Planned Parenthood
Columbus, OH
October 2018

Attended “Training of the Educator – Making Proud Choices” Curriculum Training
ETR Associates
Columbus, OH
October 2018

Attended Caracole Conference focused on HIV and Harm Reduction
Caracole
Cincinnati, OH
September 2018

Attended “Ready, Set, Go! Foundations of Prevention” Training
Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence
Columbus, OH
August 2018

Attended “Think This Is Easy?” Disability Awareness Training
Access Center for Independent Living
Dayton, OH
August 2018

Attended Women’s Liberation Workshop
Cincinnati, OH
July 2018

Attended Building Healthy Futures – How to Effectively Engage with Youth and Reduce Health Disparities in Ohio Training
Columbus, Ohio
June 2018

Attended and presented at the University of Cincinnati Undergraduate Scholarly Showcase
Cincinnati, OH
April 2018

Attended and presented at the University of Cincinnati 10th Annual Equity and Inclusion Conference
Cincinnati, OH
April 2018

Attended “Women Blazing Trails” Cincinnati Women in Leadership Symposium
Ohio Diversity Council
Cincinnati, OH
March 2018

Attended and presented at the 50th Association for Behavioral & Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) Conference
New York, NY
October 2016

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Sexual Satisfaction in Long-Term, Non-Monogamous Relationships

Primary Researcher, Master’s Thesis

October 2019 – Current

Couple and Family Therapy, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Supervisor: Katherine M. Hertlein, Ph.D., LMFT

In accordance with program requirements, I have chosen to fulfill my capstone through a thesis route. The purpose of this study is to understand what sexual and romantic behaviors contribute to the sexual satisfaction in long-term, non-monogamous couples. Specifically, we are interested in the contribution of the use of erotic material, ways in which a couple show love with one another outside of sexual interactions, as well as a couple’s perspective on the valence of sexuality (whether it is viewed positively or negatively) as a way to understand their level of sexual satisfaction.

Sexual Satisfaction in the LDS Couples.

Graduate Research Assistant

May 2020 – August 2020

Couple and Family Therapy, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Supervisor: Brandon Eddy, Ph.D., LMFT

This particular research is conducted by two graduate students and is being completed in order to fulfill a research capstone requirement. The intent of this qualitative study is to better understand sexual satisfaction and factors leading to sexual awareness in LDS couples. My role was to transcribe interviews held by the primary researchers.

Center for Organizational Leadership Laboratory (COL)

Undergraduate Research Assistant

January 2017- January 2019

Department of Psychology, University of Cincinnati

Supervisor: Donna Chrobot-Mason, Ph.D.

The COL Lab is recognized regionally and nationally for their leadership research, education, and service. COL researchers investigate how leaders can bridge boundaries (i.e. the challenge of leading those who differ into culture, gender, ethnicity, organizational identity, etc.) to foster individual, group, and organizational performance. As a COL undergraduate research assistant, I had many duties in this lab including analyzing data from research surveys, leading projects such as the diversity training project for UC faculty and staff, assisting with IRB proposals and creating a methodology for our studies. Additional responsibilities include literature reviews and dissemination of research findings through journal abstract submissions, posters, and conference presentations.

Perceptual Motor Dynamics Laboratory (PMD)

Undergraduate Research Assistant

April 2017 – December 2018

Department of Psychology, University of Cincinnati

Supervisor: Kevin Shockley, Ph.D.

I assisted with projects examining affordance actualization, such as data entry, literature reviews, and running participants through study protocols. I coordinated a research study analyzing beat perception and rhythm with an electroencephalography (EEG) machine, requiring the knowledge of reading EEG signals as well as how to run EEG on participants. Other obligations include creating a methodology for the study, analyzing the data and dissemination of research findings.

Child and Adolescent Health Research Laboratory (CAHRL)

Undergraduate Research Assistant

May 2016 – April 2018

Department of Psychology, University of Cincinnati

Supervisor: Kristen Jastrowski Mano, Ph.D.

CAHRL's research is focused on the cognitive and emotional mechanisms associated with the development and maintenance of pediatric chronic pain. As an undergraduate research assistant in CAHRL, I assisted with several grant-funded research projects examining psychological and social-emotional functioning among healthy emerging adults as well as children and adolescents with complex health-related difficulties, projects aimed at measuring school-related anxiety among emerging adults and attentional processes involved in the maintenance of pediatric chronic pain. Additional responsibilities as a research assistant in CAHRL included running study participants, creating databases for study data, as well as conducting literature searches.

Health Anxiety and Psychopathology Laboratory (HAPL)

Undergraduate Research Assistant

October 2015- August 2016

Department of Psychology, University of Cincinnati

Supervisor: Alison C. McLeish, Ph.D.

The HAPL focuses on systematically identifying and evaluating anxiety-related cognitive risk factors and their effects on chronic medical conditions as well as comorbid substance use and chronic medical conditions. As an HAPL research assistant, I was responsible for data entry and management in SPSS, running participants through study protocols, assisting with the formation of scientific posters and manuscripts.

PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

Published Abstracts:

Kessler, A. G., Moore, D. M., Chrobot-Mason, D. (2018, April). Discrimination and sexuality – research for diversity training development. University of Cincinnati Undergraduate Scholarly Showcase, Cincinnati, OH.

Kessler, A. G., Roshong, K., O'Bryan, E. M., Kraemer, K. M., & McLeish, A. C. (2016, April). Examining the role of mindfulness skills in terms of drinking motives among socially anxious individuals. 50th annual meeting of the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, New York, NY.

Roshong, K., **Kessler, A. G.,** O'Bryan, E. M., & McLeish, A. C. (2016, March). Attentional control as a predictor of anxiety-related risk factors. 50th annual meeting of the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, New York, NY.

Workshops:

Kessler, A.G., Brandt, C., Moore, D. M., (2018, April). Using Critical Incidents to Foster Inclusion at UC. Professional Development Workshop given at the 10th Annual Equity and Inclusion Conference, Cincinnati, OH.

MEMBERSHIPS AND AFFILIATIONS

American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists, student member (2020)

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, student member (2020)

Delta Kappa Zeta, student member, Secretary of UNLV branch (2020)

Sex Education Network, member (2018-2019)

Ohio Adolescent Health Partnership, member (2018-2019)

Human Trafficking Coalition, affiliate (2018-2019)

Take Back the Night, committee member (2018-2019)

Boone County Alliance for Youth, affiliate (2018-2019)

Greater Cincinnati Latino Coalition, affiliate (2018-2019)

Campbell Co Drug Free Alliance, affiliate (2018-2019)

Immigrant Survivors of Partner Violence, affiliate (2018-2019)

Down Syndrome Association of Greater Cincinnati, affiliate (2018-2019)

Academy of Management (AOM), student member (2018)

Psychology Club, student member (2014-2018)

Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT), student member (2016)

PROFESSIONAL HONORS AND DISTINCTIONS

Spring 2016 - 2018 **Dean's List**, University of Cincinnati – McMicken College of Arts and Sciences

2014 - 2022 **Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Certification (CITI)** – CITI Certified

2019 – 2024 **Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Certification (CITI)** – Human Research Group, 2. Social/Behavioral IRB, 1. Basic Course

2019 – NA **Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Certification (CITI)** – Responsible Conduct of Research, Humanities Responsible Conduct of Research Course, 1 - RCR

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Sexual, Relationship and Reproductive Health topics – May 2018-August 2019; consent, birth control, STI's, anatomy, healthy vs unhealthy relationships, boundary setting, parenting classes, how to talk to kids about sexual health and sex, etc.

C3/C4 presentations / mandatory reporting trainings – May 2018-August 2019

Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) – May 2018-August 2019; trainings, education sessions, coalition meetings

Boot Camps – May 2018-August 2019; professional development on topics listed under sexual, relationship and reproductive health topics

Get Real – May 2018-August 2019; kindergarten, elementary school, junior high school, high school

Reducing the Risk – May 2018-August 2019; trained others, taught in schools

Developmentally Disabled Clients – May 2018-August 2019; one on one, utilizing curricula

Educate within community – May 2018-August 2019; (girls clubs, after school programs, community clubs, schools, adult housing) ages of participants range from 5-65.

Peer Education Program – May 2018-August 2019; trainings, supervisor of 5 college-aged peer educators

NEO Trainings – May 2018-August 2019; trainings for new members of the Planned Parenthood team

Tabling events – May 2018-August 2019; educating the public on sexual and reproductive health

Conflict Resolution and Management

Teaching Assistant

January 2018-May 2018

Department of Psychology, University of Cincinnati

Professor: Seth Schwartz, Esq.

Throughout this position, my job was to grade term papers, presentations and grades, attend class regularly and have the knowledge and technology skills allowing me to present class information via excel. Through knowing the course content thoroughly and being able to convey that to the students, I taught the class on multiple occasions teaching me useful skills concerning how to convey important information in comprehensible and concise lectures.

Child Development

Teaching Assistant

May 2017-December 2017

Department of Psychology, University of Cincinnati

Professor: Carol Wissman

My responsibilities included grading term papers and presentations, attending class regularly, presenting material to the class, overseeing the online course management (Blackboard) site and tutoring students outside of regular class hours.

Personality

Teaching Assistant

May 2017-August 2017

Department of Psychology, University of Cincinnati

Professor: Nancy Rogers, Ph.D.

Position consisted of grading student's work, conducting class meetings virtually with students via WEBEX online video chat, handling the online presence of the classroom work and assignments and managing/grading student's assignments.

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

UC Early Learning Center

Classroom Assistant

May 2017 – November 2017

Assisted teachers with recreational activities for the students, managing classrooms, led class activities for children in preschool/kindergarten.

4 Paws 4 Ability

Socialization and Skills Trainer for Service Dogs

January 2017 – August 2018

Trained a four-month golden lab mix to have proper manners, know how to perform tricks, stay well-behaved in public, and meet the social requirements of the program to become a certified service animal.

References

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Sara Jordan, Ph.D., LMFT
Associate Professor
Graduate Coordinator and Program Director of Couple and Family Therapy
Department of Couple and Family Therapy
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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University of Nevada, Las Vegas
William Arndt, LMFT, LCADC
Practicum Supervisor
Head to Heart Private Practice
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Planned Parenthood
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