

A Prospective Investigation of the Decision to Open Up a Romantic Relationship

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Abstract

Consensual nonmonogamy (CNM) is an increasingly popular relationship option and a burgeoning topic within relationship science. However, retrospective designs have limited our ability to draw conclusions about the consequences of opening up a romantic relationship to other partners. In a longitudinal study, 233 individuals who were planning to engage in CNM, but who had not done so yet, were tracked over 2 months. We compared participants' relational, sexual, and personal well-being before versus after opening up and between participants who did ($n = 155$) versus did not ($n = 78$) open up their relationships over the course of the study. Those who engaged in CNM experienced significant increases in sexual satisfaction, particularly if they did so with the explicit goal of addressing sexual incompatibilities within their relationships. We found no evidence that engaging in CNM impacted either life satisfaction or relationship quality with the primary partner.

Keywords

romantic relationships, decision-making, consensual nonmonogamy, sexuality

Modern romantic relationships are expected to meet a broad range of psychological needs. Partners typically rely on each other as their primary source of emotional intimacy (Coontz, 2007) and only source of sexual intimacy (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013). People hope for their partners to both understand them deeply and accept them fully (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Reis & Gable, 2015). Couples must strive to support each other in the context of both negative (Collins & Feeney, 2004) and positive events (Gable et al., 2006) while also pushing each other to meet personal goals (Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010) and achieve personal growth (Drigotas et al., 1999). All of this must be accomplished while also working together to meet the practical, day-to-day challenges of managing a household, which often includes comanaging finances and co-parenting children.

Some relationships may suffocate under the weight of these demands, as couples find it difficult to meet such a broad range of needs for each other simultaneously (Finkel et al., 2014). Sexual intimacy can be a particularly thorny issue for monogamous couples. Not only are partners prohibited from outsourcing their sexual needs to anyone else, but sexual desire and sexual activity tend to wane over the course of a relationship (Muise et al., 2012; Sprecher & Regan, 1998). Indeed, sexual difficulties are a common reason why couples seek relationship therapy (Péloquin et al., 2019). Many people in long-term relationships struggle to remain sexually faithful. For example, in a nationally representative U.S. survey (the General Social Survey), extramarital sex was reported by 17%, 18%, and 16% of the 2014, 2016, and 2018 samples, respectively

(Smith et al., 2018). Infidelity, in turn, is one of the most commonly listed reasons for divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003).

When a relationship is flagging in terms of passion or sexual fulfillment, one option for spicing the relationship up is to intentionally open it up to other partners (Conley & Moors, 2014), that is, to engage in consensual nonmonogamy (CNM; see Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013, for review). Common forms of CNM include swinging, in which couples seek extradyadic sex together in social settings; open relationships, in which partners seek extradyadic sex independently from one another; and polyamory, in which partners seek extradyadic relationships that are both sexually and emotionally intimate (Matsick et al., 2014). Google searches for words related to nonmonogamous relationships increased significantly from 2006 to 2015 (Moors, 2017), and in two recent nationally representative samples, approximately 21% of single Americans reported having practiced some form of CNM at some point in their lives (Haupt et al., 2017).

People who engage in CNM tend to enjoy levels of relationship satisfaction that are on par with their monogamous

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counterparts (Conley et al., 2017; Mogilski et al., 2017; Séguin et al., 2017). For example, in one large Canadian sample, participants in monogamous ($n = 2,758$), open ($n = 468$), and polyamorous relationships ($n = 237$) reported relatively high levels of relationship quality that did not significantly differ between groups (Séguin et al., 2017). CNM relationships have even been found to outperform monogamous relationships on certain dimensions, with partners reporting better open communication (Mogilski et al., 2017), higher trust, and lower jealousy (Conley et al., 2017).

Couples who are considering practicing CNM might be tempted to conclude from this work that CNM offers a panacea for marital difficulties. In contrast, members of the general public generally perceive CNM relationships to be of lower quality than monogamous ones (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013) and may thus assume that opening up a relationship would have deleterious effects on the quality of that relationship. Existing studies cannot resolve this debate one way or another because they are cross-sectional and include people already practicing CNM. No previous research has directly compared people's experiences before versus after opening up their relationships.

The current study examines the decision to open up a relationship prospectively. That is, rather than recruit people who are already in open relationships, we recruited people who were thinking about opening up their relationships but had not done so yet. We followed this unique sample of individuals over a 2-month period and compared their relational, sexual, and personal well-being (a) before versus after opening up, (b) between people who did versus did not choose to open up, and (c) as a function of the motives people had for opening up at the outset of the study. Because participants' decision to open up was not randomly assigned, this design cannot rule out third variables, which may have impacted both their decision and their well-being (e.g., career, health, or other life events). However, the longitudinal nature of the design, particularly when combined with the comparison group of individuals who thought about opening up but did not end up doing so, offers the strongest empirical test to date of how opening a relationship may impact the quality of that relationship.

Method

The study was preregistered on July 17, 2017. The research design, sample size, and stopping rules adhered to the preregistration. However, most of the analyses reported in the present article were not part of the preregistered analysis plan and can thus be considered exploratory.¹ Materials, data, and syntax can be accessed at <https://osf.io/an73v/>

Participants

Participants were recruited online through a variety of forums and social media platforms, including CNM-related websites and podcasts. Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age, currently in a romantic relationship, and planning to open their relationship, which we defined as including

swinging, open relationships, and polyamory. At minimum, we planned to recruit until at least 150 participants reported in a follow-up survey that they had opened their relationship. We would then close the study once either a total of 500 participants completed both surveys or once we reached the date of July 1, 2018.

Time 1 survey completion. A total of 1,048 individuals attempted to participate in the study. Of those, 7 were not permitted to complete the survey because they indicated in prescreening that they were not yet 18 years old, 137 were not currently thinking about opening up their romantic relationships, and 56 indicated that they were unwilling to be contacted for the follow-up survey. An additional 13 participants did not consent to participate, and 231 participants exited the survey partway through. In total, 383 participants completed the initial survey.

Time 2 survey completion. Participants who completed the initial survey were contacted approximately 2 months later to complete the follow-up survey. A total of 278 participants started the follow-up survey. Of these, 30 participants did not respond to the crucial "did you open up your relationship?" item, 18 because they had experienced a breakup between the first and second wave and 12 because they exited the survey before completion. The remaining sample was 248 participants, of whom 165 reported that they had opened up their relationships since completing the last survey and 83 reported that they had not. As 165 participants are above our stated threshold of 150 open participants, we closed the study on July 1, 2018, as planned.

Exclusion criteria. All 248 participants who completed both surveys were at least 18 years old, appeared to be in a romantic relationship, and were interested in CNM at the time of participation. However, 15 participants indicated at Time 2 that their relationship had already been open at Time 1, either by saying so in their open-ended responses ($n = 5$) or by providing a date for when they opened their relationship that was well outside their study participation dates ($n = 10$). We have flagged these participants in the Open Science Framework data file with the variable "alreadyopen." They are excluded from the analyses reported in this article; however, the pattern of results holds with them included.

Final sample. The final sample consisted of 233 individuals (80 men, 143 women, and 10 nonbinary), including 155 participants who opened up between Time 1 and Time 2. This sample provides 90% power to detect changes in well-being before versus after opening up, assuming a small effect size ($d = .20$), and assuming a dependent measure with a within-subject correlation of .7 and a standard deviation (SD) of 1 (calculated as a paired sample t test; Rosner, 1995).

Participants completed the two surveys an average of 70 days apart (range = 20–265 days, $SD = 33$ days). At Time 1, they had been in their primary romantic relationships for an average of 8.4 years (range = 2–375 months). The sample was

Table 1. Well-Being of Openers and Nonopeners at Each Time Point.

Variable	Time Point	Nonopeners (<i>n</i> = 78)		Openers (<i>n</i> = 155)		Group Differences (<i>t</i> Tests)		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% Confidence Interval	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>
Relationship quality (4-point scale)	Time 1	4.06	0.68	4.34	0.49	[.05, .28]	.43	.004
	Time 2	3.99	0.74	4.34	0.62	[.04, .30]	.38	.008
Sexual satisfaction (7-point scale)	Time 1	5.74	1.04	5.90	1.18	[−.10, .49]	.17	.19
	Time 2	5.48	1.27	6.19	0.99	[.40, 1.09]	.68	<.001
Life satisfaction (7-point scale)	Time 1	4.79	1.10	4.98	1.21	[−.12, .49]	.16	.24
	Time 2	4.77	1.18	5.10	1.25	[−.03, .65]	.26	.07

55% married, 27% seriously dating, 9% common law, 6% engaged, and 3% casually dating. Approximately, 45% of the sample identified as heterosexual, 31% as bisexual, 6% queer, 6% questioning, 4% pansexual, 4% gay or lesbian, 4% other, and 1 participant chose not to answer. At Time 1, 21% of participants planned to engage in swinging, 36% said that they planned to engage in an open relationship, and 67% said that they planned to engage in polyamory (some participants chose more than one category).

Time 1 Measures

Relationship quality was measured with the 7-item Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988; e.g., “How well does your partner meet your needs?”) on a 1–5 scale ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.58$, $\alpha = .83$).

Life satisfaction was measured with the 5-item Satisfaction With Life Scale (e.g., “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”; Diener et al., 1985) on a 1–7 scale ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.18$, $\alpha = .88$).

Sexual satisfaction was measured with the Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction Scale (Lawrance & Byers, 1995), which uses the prompt “Please rate your sex life on the following dimensions,” followed by 5 bipolar items (e.g., bad–good, unpleasant–pleasant) on a 1–7 scale ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 1.14$, $\alpha = .92$).

CNM motives. A total of 22 items were initially included to capture motives for engaging in CNM, all measured on a 1–5 scale. These items were grouped into subscales based on exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (see Supplementary File A). Six items captured the degree to which people were motivated to engage in CNM for *intrinsic reasons* (“Monogamy is not natural for me,” “Monogamy is not realistic for me,” “I feel like sexual nonmonogamy is part of my sexual orientation,” “Nonmonogamy is part of my identity,” “I don’t want to have to hide or lie about my interests in other people,” and “I want to explore my sexuality without the limits of monogamy,” $M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.74$, $\alpha = .79$), and 3 items captured the degree to which people were motivated to engage in CNM for *sexual incompatibility reasons* (“My partner and I have different sexual interests,” “My partner and I have different sexual needs and desires,” and “My partner and I have sexual incompatibilities,” $M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.07$, $\alpha = .83$). The

remaining two emergent subscales did not have satisfactory reliability and thus are not included in the present analyses.

Time 2 Measures

Two months after initial survey completion, participants were invited to complete a follow-up survey. Participants were first asked about current relationship status: “At the time you completed our last survey, you were in a romantic relationship. Are you and that romantic partner still together?” A total of 18 participants indicated that they had experienced a breakup; participants who indicated still being with their partner proceeded to the rest of the survey. Participants were then asked if they had chosen to practice CNM: “Have you and your partner opened up your relationship since the last survey?”; 67% of the sample had ($n = 155$). Finally, participants were asked to report on a series of relational and personal measures, including *relationship quality* ($M = 4.22$ on a 5-point scale, $SD = 0.68$, $\alpha = .88$), *sexual satisfaction* ($M = 5.97$ on a 7-point scale, $SD = 1.13$, $\alpha = .92$), and *life satisfaction* ($M = 5.00$ on a 7-point scale, $SD = 1.23$, $\alpha = .88$).

We also measured a variety of other constructs not analyzed or reported in the current article. Other constructs that could reasonably have been used as outcome measures include dissolution consideration, commitment, feelings of authenticity, boredom, and perceptions about how the relationship changed over time. All measures collected can be found at <https://osf.io/an73v/>

Results

See Table 1 for descriptive information about participants’ relational, sexual, and personal well-being at each time point. Independent *t* tests were used to examine group differences between participants who had chosen to open their relationships by Time 2 (“openers”) and those who had not (“nonopeners”). Openers did not differ from nonopeners at Time 1 in terms of sexual satisfaction or life satisfaction. However, they did report higher relationship quality. By Time 2, openers had higher relationship quality, higher sexual satisfaction, and marginally higher life satisfaction compared to nonopeners.

Table 2. Multilevel Models Examining Differences Between Openers and Nonopeners Over Time.

Predictor	Relationship Quality					Sexual Satisfaction					Life Satisfaction				
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²
CNM decision (yes/no)	.16	[.08, .24]	.04	<.001	.07	.21	[.08, .35]	.07	.002	.04	.14	[-.01, .29]	.08	.08	.01
Time point	-.02	[-.06, .01]	.02	.23	.007	.01	[-.07, .09]	.04	.80	.0003	.01	[-.06, .08]	.04	.68	.0008
Time Point × Decision	.03	[-.01, .06]	.02	.17	.009	.14	[.06, .22]	.04	<.001	.05	.05	[-.02, .12]	.04	.14	.01

Note. CNM = consensual nonmonogamy; CI = confidence interval.

Did Openers and Nonopeners Differ Over Time?

We next used multilevel modeling to more formally compare differences in relational and personal well-being across time for participants who chose to open their relationships versus those who did not. The data were restructured such that each participant had two rows in the data set, and participant ID was included as a random effect to account for the fact that time points were nested within participants. We conducted three models in which CNM decision (yes or no), time point (Time 1 or Time 2), and their interaction were entered as predictors. Relationship quality, sexual satisfaction, and life satisfaction were entered as the respective dependent variables. Partial effect sizes were obtained by calculating the R^2 for each predictor (Edwards et al., 2008).

Results can be seen in Table 2. Across time points, participants who opened their relationships had significantly higher relationship quality and sexual satisfaction, and marginally higher life satisfaction, compared to those who did not open up their relationships. However, for relationship quality and life satisfaction, there was neither main effect of time point nor was there an interaction between CNM decision and time point. These interaction terms each explained approximately 1% of the variance in their respective well-being measures, with confidence intervals (CIs) for the coefficients ranging from $-.02$ to $.12$. Thus, although we can effectively rule out the possibility that opening up led to *lower* relational or personal well-being, opening does not appear to have resulted in meaningfully *higher* well-being either. Insofar as these measures differ between groups, those differences appear to have existed from the beginning of the study, rather than having emerged as a result of the groups' divergent choices.

In contrast, a significant interaction emerged for sexual satisfaction (5% variance explained), which we deconstructed with simple slopes tests (Aiken & West, 1991). Among participants who did not open up, time was negatively associated with sexual satisfaction, $b = -.13$, $SE = .06$, $p = .05$. That is, participants who did not open their relationships tended to experience declines in sexual satisfaction between time points. Among participants who did open up, time was positively associated with sexual satisfaction, $b = .15$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$, suggesting that they reported greater sexual satisfaction after opening up their relationship compared to Time 1. These results provide initial evidence that opening up a relationship may lead to greater satisfaction with one's sex life, at least in the initial time period after opening up.

Were the Consequences of Engaging in CNM Moderated by Motives?

Results thus far suggest that engaging in CNM is associated with either neutral or positive outcomes. However, the consequences of engaging in CNM may depend on a person's reasons for doing so. Specifically, we had predicted that people who strongly endorsed more intrinsic motives for opening up may enjoy higher relationship quality, sexual satisfaction, and life satisfaction at Time 2 controlling for the equivalent outcome measure at Time 1, but only if they opened up their relationships between time points. Further, we expected that those who endorsed more extrinsic motives (e.g., sexual incompatibility) would experience either no change or negative changes in these outcomes at Time 2, again specifically for those who opened up between time points.

We next tested six linear regression models examining whether people's reasons for wanting to open their relationships at Time 1 predicted changes in relationship quality, sexual satisfaction, and life satisfaction at Time 2. We conducted separate models looking at intrinsic motives (Model 1) versus sexual incompatibility motives (Model 2). The relevant well-being variable at Time 1, decision to open (effects-coded, $-1 = no$, $1 = yes$), and the Relevant Motives subscale were entered in the first block, and a two-way interaction term between motives and decision was entered in the second block. The dependent variable was the relevant well-being variable at Time 2. Each model was tested on each of the three well-being variables (relationship quality, sexual satisfaction, and life satisfaction).

Results can be seen in Table 3. Contrary to hypotheses, intrinsic motives for opening up did not generally predict well-being outcomes, regardless of whether the participant actually opened their relationship between the first and second time point. No interactions emerged between intrinsic motives and CNM decision predicting changes in any of the three indicators of well-being over time. However, sexual incompatibility motives did interact with opening to predict changes in sexual satisfaction. We next probed this interaction using the interactive application (McCabe et al., 2018).

As shown in Figure 1, sexual incompatibility motives were associated with lower sexual satisfaction at Time 2 for nonopeners, $b = -.32$, 95% CI $[-.53, -.11]$, but not for openers, $b = -.01$, 95% CI $[-.20, .17]$. Put differently, the impact of CNM decision on sexual satisfaction at Time 2 was more pronounced among people who had higher rather than lower sexual

Table 3. Motives Predicting Changes in Personal and Relational Well-Being in Study 2.

Predictor	Relationship Quality				Sexual Satisfaction				Life Satisfaction			
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	95% CI	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	95% CI	SE	<i>p</i>
Model 1												
Intrinsic motives	-.004	[-.07, .06]	.03	.90	.06	[-.08, .20]	.07	.39	-.15	[-.29, -.02]	.07	.03
Well-being variable at T1	.46	[.39, .52]	.03	<.001	.59	[.47, .73]	.06	<.001	.84	[.73, .97]	.06	<.001
CNM decision (yes/no)	.07	[.001, .14]	.04	.05	.31	[.18, .45]	.07	<.001	.13	[.0005, .26]	.07	.05
Intrinsic × Decision	-.005	[-.07, .06]	.04	.90	.06	[-.08, .20]	.07	.43	-.01	[-.15, .12]	.07	.86
Model 2												
Sexual incompatibility	-.05	[-.12, .02]	.04	.17	-.22	[-.37, -.06]	.08	.006	-.08	[-.22, .06]	.07	.24
Well-being variable at T1	.44	[.38, .51]	.03	<.001	.51	[.37, .65]	.07	<.001	.82	[.70, .95]	.06	<.001
CNM decision (yes/no)	.07	[-.002, .14]	.04	.06	.30	[.17, .43]	.07	<.001	.13	[-.005, .26]	.06	.06
Sexual Incompatibility × Decision	.02	[-.05, .10]	.04	.50	.15	[.01, .29]	.07	.03	-.03	[-.17, .11]	.07	.67

Note. CNM = consensual nonmonogamy; CI = confidence interval.

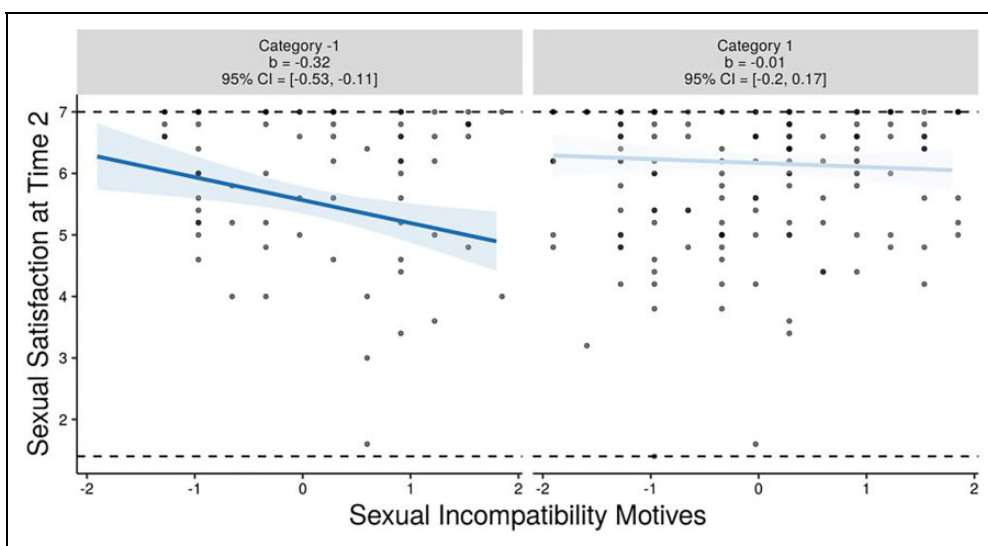


Figure 1. Association between sexual incompatibility motives and sexual satisfaction at Time 2 for nonopeners (left) versus openers (right), controlling for sexual satisfaction at Time 1.

incompatibility motives. Among people with sexual compatibility motives 1 SD below the mean, sexual satisfaction at Time 2 did not differ based on whether they had opened up their relationship or not since Time 1, $b = .14$, 95% CI [-.05, .33]. However, among people whose sexual compatibility motives were 1 SD above the mean, sexual satisfaction was significantly higher for those who opened up their relationship compared to those who did not, $b = .43$, 95% CI [.25, .61]. That is, among people who were motivated to open up their relationship because of sexual incompatibilities with their partner, people who did, in fact, open up their relationship reported more sexual satisfaction compared to people who did not open up their relationship.

When interpreting these findings, it is important to consider the number of analyses that were performed. With six interaction effects tested, one can reasonably expect a 30% chance (0.05×6) of at least one false-positive emerging. The one interaction effect that emerged was not predicted, and the CIs

for the coefficient [.01, .29] narrowly avoided the inclusion of 0. Thus, this effect of sexual incompatibility should be considered tentative until it is replicated.

Possible Consequences for the Relationship

These results suggest that opening up a relationship may have a positive impact on sexual satisfaction, even when (and potentially especially when) people choose to engage in CNM in part due to sexual incompatibilities with their primary partner. But do these benefits come at the cost of relationship satisfaction with the primary partner? As shown in Tables 1 and 2, any uncovered associations between CNM decision and relationship quality were in the positive direction. Thus, we did not find evidence that choosing to engage in CNM resulted in lower relationship quality with the primary partner, at least from the perspective of the participants in the sample.

Discussion

The present findings challenge conventional wisdom about the impact of the decision to open up a relationship. CNM relationships and those who practice them are currently stigmatized (e.g., Rodrigues et al., 2017). Monogamous relationships are generally assumed to be of higher quality (e.g., more loving, committed, and honest) than monogamous ones, even among CNM individuals (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013). It is also not uncommon for therapists to hold anti-CNM views such that they may attribute their CNM clients' symptoms or problems to their nonmonogamous lifestyle (e.g., Graham, 2014; Schechinger et al., 2018).

In the current research, we prospectively examined the decision to open a relationship to other partners, thus providing the most direct comparison to date between these relationship options. Participants who were interested in opening up, but who had not done so yet, were recruited and followed over a 2-month period. We compared relationship quality, sexual satisfaction, and life satisfaction between the first and last time point for participants who did ($n = 155$) versus did not ($n = 78$) open up their romantic relationships over the course of the study. We found no evidence that engaging in CNM had a negative impact on relational or personal well-being in this sample; any associations uncovered were in the positive direction. Although these results contradict lay beliefs about monogamy, they are consistent with research showing similar relationship quality levels among monogamous versus CNM individuals (e.g., Conley et al., 2017; Mogilski et al., 2017; Séguin et al., 2017).

The current findings offer cautious optimism for couples who are considering CNM in pursuit of greater sexual satisfaction. Participants who opened their relationships experienced positive changes in sexual satisfaction, whereas nonopeners experienced negative changes in sexual satisfaction over the course of the study. This work extends previous work suggesting that people in CNM relationships enjoy higher sexual satisfaction than those in monogamous relationships, particularly those engaged in polyamory and swinging (Conley et al., 2018). However, whereas these cross-sectional findings could be attributed to pre-existing group differences (e.g., CNM people have better sex lives because they are more sexually open-minded), the current within-subjects effects provide more direct evidence that engaging in CNM may help improve one's sex life.

Why might practicing CNM lead to higher sexual satisfaction? One straightforward explanation is that opening up a relationship provides opportunities for novel and exciting sexual experiences. Sexual desire and frequency tend to be particularly high at the beginning of a relationship, when romantic partners are still getting to know each other (e.g., Muise et al., 2012; Sprecher & Regan, 1998). This pattern appears to extend to new CNM relationships as well. For example, in one recent study, polyamorous individuals ($N = 3,530$) reported that sexual activities took up a larger proportion of time spent with their secondary partner compared to their primary partner (Balzarini et al., 2017). In the present study, it may be that participants who opened their relationships subsequently had opportunities to engage in sexual experiences with novel partners, leading to a

boost in their overall satisfaction with their sex lives. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, opening up may lead couples to communicate better about their sex lives. A large body of research shows that sexual communication is important for sexual satisfaction (e.g., Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Davis et al., 2006). Meanwhile, good communication is strongly emphasized by CNM advocates (e.g., Easton & Hardy, 2009), and those in CNM relationships report particularly high levels of open communication with their partners (Mogilski et al., 2017).

The current study also probed people's motives for engaging in CNM. Intuitively, opening a relationship with other partners seems likely to be unhelpful and even detrimental for couples who are already struggling to maintain their primary relationships. However, results of the current study suggested that participants were particularly likely to enjoy positive changes in sexual satisfaction when their reasons for wanting to open their relationships included concerns on sexual incompatibility. Although we did not predict this effect, it is consistent with the idea that CNM offers people a way to diversify their relationship needs fulfillment (e.g., Moors et al., 2017). That is, when a person has multiple romantic relationships, needs that would normally go unfulfilled in one relationship may be supplemented by another. It follows that people who are experiencing unmet sexual needs—which are particularly difficult to supplement in the context of monogamy (e.g., Péloquin et al., 2019)—may be particularly likely to benefit from practicing CNM. These findings may also be explained in part by the fact that the participants experiencing sexual incompatibility had lower sexual satisfaction to begin with (see Figure 1) and therefore had more room for improvement in this relationship domain.

There are also several alternative causal mechanisms for the current findings that the study's nonexperimental design cannot rule out. One such mechanism is that merely discussing CNM as a potential option may have impacted the relationship in a myriad of ways, positive or negative, while also impacting the couple's decision to open. For example, couples for whom discussing CNM revealed existing problems in their relationships may have experienced negative personal, sexual, and relational outcomes as a result while also being less likely to choose to pursue CNM. This possibility is arguably supported by the fact that the participants who enjoyed higher relationship quality at Time 1 were more likely to open up by Time 2. Other third variables include circumstances that have nothing to do with CNM. Experiencing a negative life event between Time 1 and Time 2, such as an employment or health problem, may have resulted in lower relational and personal well-being while also motivating the couple to put their CNM plans on hold. Future research should explore these and other potential mechanisms for associations between CNM decisions and well-being, particularly the positive association with sexual satisfaction that was uncovered in the present study.

The current study has several additional limitations that will hopefully be improved upon in future work. First, by recruiting via CNM-related websites and forums, we likely obtained a sample of individuals who were already considerably familiar with, and perhaps invested in, the idea of practicing CNM.

Given this selection bias, the current findings seem likely to extend to people who already hold positive attitudes toward CNM and who are seriously considering it as a relationship option. We are less confident that the effects would extend to individuals who hold negative attitudes toward CNM and are thus likely to be underrepresented in this sample (e.g., those with low sociosexuality, low openness to experience, strong traditional values). It is further unknown whether these effects would generalize to individuals in non-Western cultures.

Only one member of each couple was surveyed in this study, and we likely oversampled the relatively more enthusiastic member of each couple. Future work should recruit both couple members and include more partner-related measures, so that dyadic effects can be explored. It remains possible that opening up a relationship could have detrimental effects on the relational or personal well-being of the partner, particularly if they are not fully onboard with the decision to open up. The current study also does not inform us of the long-term effects of engaging in CNM. Proponents of CNM often discuss the unique excitement that new relationships bring about (new relationship energy; e.g., Easton & Hardy, 2009; Taormino, 2008). The positive effects uncovered in the present study (i.e., boosts in sexual satisfaction) may be tied to this particular relationship phase. Future work should test how sustainable these benefits are by following CNM couples over a longer period of time. Finally, the current study measured global sexual satisfaction (i.e., satisfaction with one's sex life as a whole). To better pinpoint the source of the boosted satisfaction, future work should measure sexual satisfaction with specific partners.

In conclusion, the current study is the first to prospectively track people, as they opened up their relationships to other partners. Comparing individuals before versus after they opened up and individuals who did versus did not open up, we found no differences in relationship quality or life satisfaction and positive differences in sexual satisfaction for those who opened up. These findings contribute to a growing body of research suggesting that CNM can be a healthy, viable relationship option.


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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

Note

1. The preregistered hypotheses focused primarily on the role of people's motives for engaging in consensual nonmonogamy. However, many of these hypotheses could not be tested as planned because the motives items did not cluster as we expected based on pilot data (see Supplementary File A for more details).

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