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Open relationships – challenges and dilemmas

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Summary

Introduction and purpose: Consensual non-monogamy (CNM) refers to various relationship types in which at least one partner, with the other's consent, forms sexual and/or emotional connections with other people. CNM includes open relationships, polyamory, polyfidelity, and swinging. In open relationships, partners are allowed to engage sexually with others, but emotional intimacy is reserved for the primary relationship, which takes precedence. Interest in open relationships has increased in recent years, with more people expressing curiosity about them than those actively participating. Men, individuals with high cognitive empathy, those less prone to jealousy, and those capable of experiencing compersion—the joy from a partner's involvement with others—are particularly interested in open relationships. The aim of this article is to gather the most up-to-date information on open relationships.

Material and methods: A review of studies available on the PubMed platform (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>) was conducted, including articles with free full-text access that used the keywords: "open relationship", "CNM" and "Consensual non-monogamy."

Conclusions: Research suggests potential benefits of CNM, including greater relationship and sexual satisfaction compared to monogamous arrangements. However, open relationships can also pose challenges such as social stigma, the potential breakdown of the primary relationship, or complications in parenting for those involved. Despite growing interest, CNM and phenomena like compersion remain under-researched, providing an open field for further investigation into their dynamics and impact on individual and relational well-being.

Keywords: open relationship; interpersonal relationships; sexual partners

Introduction

Monogamy, typically defined as a relationship between two people characterized by sexual and emotional exclusivity, appears to be the most desirable relationship model in many societies [1]. However, there is growing interest worldwide in consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships [2].

Consensual non-monogamy (CNM) refers to various types of relationships where at least one partner engages in sexual and/or emotional relationships with others with the consent of the other partner [3]. Types of CNM include open relationships, polyamory, polyfidelity, ménage à trois, swinging, cuckoldry, relationship anarchy, “don’t ask, don’t tell” (D.A.D.T), solo-poly, mono-poly, and others [3,4,5]. A brief description of each type of CNM is presented below.

1. Open Relationship – A relationship where partners agree to sexual interactions with third parties, but emotional bonds are reserved for the primary relationship, which is considered the most important [3].

2. Polyamory – A relationship in which partners agree to form both sexual and emotional connections with others. None of the relationships are prioritized over the others [3]. Polyamory differs from open relationships by allowing emotional connections with third parties and not hierarchizing the relationships.

3. Polyfidelity – A relationship where there is a mutual emotional/sexual bond between more than two people. The people involved are specific, and changes to the group are only possible with the consent of all participants [4]. Polyfidelity differs from open relationships by allowing emotional connections with others and limiting additional partners to those accepted by all involved.

4. Ménage à trois – A relationship similar to polyfidelity but always involves three people. Some researchers equate ménage à trois with triolism – simultaneous sexual interaction among three people [3,5].

5. Swinging – A relationship where sexual interactions with third parties are allowed, but only in strictly defined circumstances approved by the primary partner [3]. Swinging closely resembles an open relationship, but with less restrictiveness, as in open relationships, additional partners do not need approval from the primary partner, and sexual activity with others is generally permitted without specific circumstances.

6. Cuckoldry – A concept associated with “controlled cheating,” often with a fetishistic background. One partner engages in sexual activity with a third party, with the consent of the primary partner, who derives sexual arousal from the situation (in some cases, the primary partner observes the sexual act) [3,6].

7. Relationship Anarchy – A perspective where the boundaries between friendship, romantic relationships, and sexual relationships are fluid. People who identify with this philosophy form relationships on their terms, often in opposition to societal norms [3]. It is worth noting that CNM can include not only specific types of relationships but also elements of an individual’s identity [5].

8. Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (D.A.D.T.) – A relationship where partners agree to form sexual and/or emotional connections with others but commit to not sharing details of these experiences with the primary partner [5].

9. Solo-poly – A term used to describe a polyamorous person who leads a highly independent life or is single [5].

10. Mono-poly (semi-open relationship) – A relationship in which one partner identifies as monogamous, while the other identifies as polyamorous [5].

Consensual non-monogamous relationships are associated with the feeling of compersion, which is essentially the opposite of jealousy [7,8]. Compersion refers to the positive emotions experienced when a partner is involved in an emotional and/or sexual relationship with another person [7,8]. Some researchers describe compersion as a mix of joy (happiness from the partner's satisfaction in their emotional/sexual relationship with another person), contentment (e.g., from feeling secure knowing that the partner won't be alone if something happens to them), excitement, love, and pride (e.g., in the attractiveness of the partner, which draws others' interest) [7,8]. The existence of compersion among people is fascinating from a psychological perspective, and it has become the subject of numerous scientific studies in recent years [7,8,9,10,11].

The topic of open relationships was chosen by the authors due to the limited number of scientific publications, especially regarding the Polish population, on this subject. The aim of this paper is to analyze various aspects of open relationships, including their prevalence, characteristics that predispose individuals to engage in such relationships, comparisons between open and monogamous relationships, and an examination of the positive and negative aspects of these relationships from the perspective of those involved. In discussing each aspect, the authors aimed to reference data from the most recent literature. However, due to the limited number of studies in this field, this was not always possible. It should also be noted that there is no consensus in the literature on the definition of an open relationship [12]. A "narrower" definition, as described above [3,13], and a "broader" one, equating it with CNM [14,15], are both in use. The authors primarily use the "narrower" definition, consistent with Polish publications [3,5], but in some parts of the article, data from studies using the "broader" definition are cited, due to a lack of other available data.

Objective

The aim of this article is to gather the most up-to-date information on open relationships, referring to both global data and data collected from the Polish population.

Methods

A review of studies available on the PubMed platform (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>) was conducted, including articles with free full-text access that used the keywords: "open relationships", "CNM" and "Consensual non-monogamy". The authors aimed to use articles no older than 10 years; however, in some cases, this was not possible.

Prevalence of open relationships

Estimating the frequency of open relationships within the population is challenging due to the limited number of studies addressing this topic and the various definitions used by researchers [12]. As a result, studies on the prevalence of open relationships typically adopt broader definitions, and given the lack of other data, their results are summarized below.

A study conducted on a representative Canadian population by Fairbrother et al. [12] found that 4% of individuals in a relationship were involved in an open relationship at the time of the study, while 20% reported having been in one at some point. These results align with findings from U.S. populations, where the figures were around 2-4% and 21%, respectively [16,17,18]. Additionally, about 12% of Canadian respondents [12] (both those in relationships and singles) considered an open relationship to be the ideal type of relationship. Since the number of people interested in open relationships is significantly higher than those actively engaged in them, it is expected that their prevalence may increase in the coming years.

The topic of consensual non-monogamy (CNM) has been explored by Polish researchers much later than in other countries, and there are currently no studies assessing the frequency of such relationships in Poland [8]. Due to the relatively conservative societal views in Poland on sexuality and the social taboo surrounding non-monogamous relationships, it is likely that the prevalence of these relationships will be lower than in American or Canadian populations. Researchers who choose to study this topic in Poland may face challenges related to negative public perceptions of the study, similar to issues encountered in past research on "friends with benefits" relationships (friendships with regular sexual interactions but without romantic feelings) [19].

Who engages in open relationships?

1. Demographic Data

Men are more likely than women to engage in open relationships [12], probably due to their generally higher sexual activity, more liberal views on their own sexuality, societal permissiveness toward male sexuality, and a greater tendency among men toward polyamorous relationships [16,17].

Younger individuals are more inclined to participate in open relationships [12]. This can be partly explained by younger generations having more liberal views on sexuality, shaped by growing up in a different societal context than their parents.

Non-heterosexual individuals are more likely to engage in open relationships than heterosexual individuals [12]. However, the growing interest in non-monogamous relationships among the general population may reduce these differences over time [20].

Education, income, and religious affiliation appear to have little influence on the likelihood of engaging in open relationships [12,17,18].

2. Personal Characteristics

Individuals less prone to jealousy are more likely to engage in open relationships [8,21], which makes sense, as intense jealousy would hinder participation in CNM.

People with higher levels of cognitive empathy (the ability to perceive the world from another's perspective) are more inclined toward open relationships [8,22], as such relationships require a high capacity to consider the partner's feelings, needs, and perspectives.

It is unclear which attachment styles predispose individuals to open relationships [8]. Some researchers [23] hypothesized that those with an anxious attachment style (characterized by low self-esteem and high dependence on others) might be more inclined toward CNM, seeking more attention and affection through multiple partners. Other researchers [24] expected that both secure and anxious attachment styles would predispose individuals to open relationships.

However, a Polish study [8] found that anxious attachment was less common in open relationships than in monogamous ones, while secure and avoidant attachment styles occurred at similar rates in both.

Comparison of various aspects of monogamous and open relationships

1. Relationship Satisfaction

Comparing relationship satisfaction between monogamous and open relationships is problematic due to conflicting study results [12].

Several non-representative studies include:

- Fleckenstein et al. [25] found greater satisfaction in open relationships. This study involved 502 U.S. adults over 55 in CNM relationships, compared with 723 in monogamous relationships.
- Morrison et al. [26] reported higher satisfaction in open relationships, based on a study of 284 North American adults in CNM or monogamous relationships.
- Conley et al. [13] found no significant difference in relationship satisfaction between the two types of relationships, based on a study of 1507 monogamous adults and 617 in CNM, recruited via online forums.
- Mogilski et al. [27] found no significant differences in satisfaction, based on a study of 173 adults, mostly women, in CNM or monogamous relationships.
- Séguin et al. [28] found no significant differences in satisfaction, based on a study of 3463 Canadian adults in CNM (13.5%) or monogamous relationships.

Several representative studies include:

- Levine et al. [17] found lower satisfaction in open relationships, based on a study of 2270 U.S. adults using data from the 2012 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior (NSSHB).
- Fairbrother et al. [12] found no significant differences in satisfaction between the two types of relationships, based on a national sample of 2003 Canadian adults in CNM or monogamous relationships.
- A study by Buczel et al. [8] on the Polish population found higher satisfaction in open relationships, based on a sample of 211 adults in CNM and 169 in monogamous relationships.
- A prospective two-month study by Murphy et al. [29] found higher satisfaction in open relationships, based on 155 adults who opened their relationships and 78 who did not.

Discrepancies in study results may arise from different categorizations of monogamous relationships. Some researchers distinguish between monogamous relationships with and without infidelity, while others group them together, resulting in varied findings [12]. Given the above information, it is currently impossible to definitively determine which type of relationship leads to greater satisfaction, leaving room for further research.

2. Sexual Satisfaction

People in open relationships report greater sexual satisfaction than those in monogamous relationships [29,30], likely because open relationships allow individuals to fulfill a broader range of sexual desires and better understand their own sexuality [29].

It is also worth noting that some researchers [31] suggest that sexual desire and frequency are highest at the beginning of a relationship.

Open relationship participants report [32] that sexual activities constitute the majority of time spent with additional partners. The continuous possibility of meeting new sexual partners seems to contribute directly to sexual satisfaction in open relationships [29,30].

3. Motivation for Sexual Activity

A study by Kelberg et al. [33] found that people in both monogamous and open relationships primarily engage in sexual activity for physical pleasure and desire for their partner. Another common reason for both types of relationships was the need to express love and commitment, although for open relationship participants, this was only applicable to their primary partner [33]. Additionally, those in open relationships were more likely to engage in sexual activity for new experiences and to boost self-esteem [33], consistent with the principles of open relationships and observations by other researchers [29,34,35].

4. Communication in Relationships

Those who engage in open relationships typically exhibit higher cognitive empathy [8,22,36], which translates into better communication between partners.

5. Jealousy

People in open relationships tend to experience less jealousy overall [8,21], a finding supported by studies [8] showing higher jealousy levels among those in monogamous relationships compared to those in open relationships. Low levels of jealousy in open relationships are linked to higher cognitive empathy and the ability to experience compersion (joy at a partner's happiness with another) [7,8]. It's important to note that jealousy negatively impacts satisfaction in open relationships (due to the nature of the relationship) but positively affects satisfaction in monogamous relationships (due to jealousy's role in protecting exclusivity) [8,21,37].

Positive and negative aspects of open relationships

Below is an analysis of various aspects of open relationships from the perspective of individuals involved in such relationships. The system of categorizing these aspects as positive or negative follows the narrative adopted in other publications on the subject.

Positive aspects

1. Potentially Greater Satisfaction in the Relationship compared to those in monogamous relationships [8,25,26,29]. This is primarily linked to the ability to compensate for deficiencies in the primary relationship through additional relationships. Due to discrepancies in the literature, this comparison requires further research.
2. Greater Sexual Satisfaction and Better Understanding of One's Sexuality [29,30,31,32,36,38]. This is mainly the result of having the opportunity to engage in sexual activities with multiple partners and fulfilling sexual fantasies (it becomes possible to seek out an additional partner who agrees to a particular fantasy).
3. According to some researchers [8], open relationships foster the development of empathy and better communication in interpersonal relationships. This is an outcome of the assumptions underlying open relationships, as discussed earlier in the article.

At this point, it is worth mentioning the results of a prospective study conducted by Murphy et al. [29], which assessed the consequences of opening a monogamous relationship. The authors observed that the decision to open the relationship had a mostly positive impact on relationship satisfaction, especially when the partners were dissatisfied with their sexual life [29]. Taking this step can also positively influence the relationship by allowing for the compensation of deficits in the primary relationship through additional ones [29]. However, the authors of the cited study [29] note that opening the relationship can be detrimental if partners struggle with communication or if there are numerous conflicts in the primary relationship. It is important to mention that this study lasted only two months, meaning the effects of opening the relationship were examined over a relatively short period.

Negative aspects

1. Negative Social Perception [36]. People involved in open relationships are often discriminated against by their immediate environment and society at large [36]. According to a study by Fleckenstein et al. [39], one in four people in open relationships experiences discrimination.
2. Legal Aspects of CNM Relationships. The Polish legal system addresses CNM relationships mainly by prohibiting marriage between individuals in such relationships [40]. Therefore, it should be noted that people involved in CNM relationships in Poland can only formalize their relationship with one partner, which excludes the additional partner(s) from certain aspects of life (e.g., they will not have parental rights over children who are not their biological offspring) [36]. It's also worth noting that CNM relationships are legal in some countries, but in most cases, legal systems limit the number of people who can be involved in such relationships or impose other restrictions, such as religious or financial limitations [41].
3. Challenges in Leading a Typical Family Life [36] – this primarily relates to the topic of having and raising children. A parent's open relationship may affect a child's psyche in various ways and lead to stigmatization among peers [36].
4. Possibility of the Primary Relationship Breaking Down due to its opening – this is highly likely in cases where there are numerous conflicts between partners [29].
5. Difficulty Accessing Professional Help in Case of Conflict, resulting from the negative attitude many therapists have towards open relationships, which leads them to view non-monogamy as the source of all relationship issues [9,15].
6. Risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). Having multiple sexual partners is a significant risk factor for contracting STIs [42]. However, a study by Lehmilller [43] showed that individuals in open relationships are more likely to use condoms than those in monogamous relationships (regardless of whether they are unfaithful to their partners). As such, the predisposition of individuals in open relationships to contract STIs appears ambiguous and requires further research.

Summary

Interest in open relationships, as well as other forms of consensual non-monogamy, has noticeably increased in recent years, both among the public and researchers. It is worth noting that the number of people interested in engaging in an open relationship is much larger than the number of people currently in such relationships – thus, we can expect their greater prevalence in the population in the future, which justifies the need to deepen knowledge on the topic.

Open relationships attract interest because of their potential advantages. The main ones include greater satisfaction in the relationship and sexual life. The growing interest in this type of relationship may also be a societal response to the increasing frequency of infidelity in monogamous relationships [20].

However, individuals involved in open relationships and other CNM arrangements face significant challenges, including societal stigmatization and legal issues (both the lack of legal regulations and the presence of specific laws can discriminate against people in such relationships) [36,40,41]. It is also crucial to encourage therapists to adopt a more objective approach to the problems of individuals in open relationships, as numerous studies have shown that due to their own biases, many struggle to provide professional help to such people [7,13].

In conclusion, despite the unique nature of open relationships, consensual non-monogamous arrangements, and the concept of compersion, there is still a lack of extensive scientific publications addressing these topics. This opens the field for further research, especially studies evaluating the prevalence of these relationships, their long-term course, their impact on participants' mental health, and comparisons between various aspects of CNM and monogamous relationships. It would also be beneficial to increase the number of publications evaluating the personal traits and motivations of individuals involved in CNM, the reasons for opening relationships, and the consequences of such decisions. The authors also emphasize the need for research on open relationships and other CNM arrangements within the Polish population, as no comprehensive publications on the subject have been produced so far.

Author's contribution:

Conceptualization: K.W., A.M.; methodology: K.W., A.M.; software: K.W., A.M., J.W., A.W.; formal analysis: K.W., A.M., J.W., A.W.; investigation: K.W., A.M., J.W., A.W., W.C, P.S.; resources: K.W., A.M., J.W., A.W., P.S., E.G.; data curation: K.W., A.M., J.W., A.W., E.G.; writing - rough preparation: K.W., A.M., J.W., A.W., W.C, P.S., E.G.; writing - review and editing: K.W., A.M., J.W., A.W., W.C, P.S., E.G.; visualization: K.W., A.M., A.W.; supervision: K.W., A.M.; project administration: K.W., A.M.

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Conflicts of interest:

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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