

# De-stigmatizing relationship statuses: The benefits of being raised by a village

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## **Abstract**

As relationships move away from the hetero-normative styles, an increase in consensual, non-monogamous (CNM) relationships is emerging (Hauptert et al., 2017). Despite having unique relational benefits not seen in monogamous, dyadic couples, such as increased need fulfillment, variety in new activities and increased self-growth, individuals in CNM relationships often experience relational stigmatization (being viewed less favorably based on their relationship style). Individuals in CNM relationships, as well as their children, are negatively impacted by the prejudice and discrimination they endure based on their family dynamic. Children experience anxiety and social development problems similar to children facing “coming-out” anxiety about their sexual identity. Drawbacks that are seen in CNM largely affect those who genuinely enjoy monogamy and are not suited for multi-partner relationships. Aside from societal prejudice, there seems to be very little evidence suggesting that children's development is hindered by their parents' CNM relationship, so long as their emotional and physical needs are being met. As diversity inclusion is increasingly being addressed in the classrooms, it is important to recognize relational diversity as well, bringing forth the reality of these relationships rather than permit their negative stigmas to continue. Through education and growing acceptance of various relationship styles the stigma that CNM individuals and their children face could be alleviated. Ultimately, CNM may provide benefits for those who choose it, thus bolstering the statement – it takes a village.

Keywords: consensual non-monogamy, polyamory, relational stigmatization, children's development

## Introduction

The most traditional and common form of romantic relationships are those of monogamous, heterosexual dyadic couples; a man, a woman and their children (Hauptert et al., 2017). Over time traditional forms of romantic relationships have evolved and we now see various relationship types and family dynamics emerging, ranging from step-families, single individuals and same-sex partnerships. Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM) is a form of relationship that has gained in popularity over the last few decades (Moors, 2017). CNM is a type of relationship where all individuals involved agree to allow other romantic or sexual relationships outside of the “dyad”. Although this is becoming a more common form of relationship status, there is still a great deal of negative stigma surrounding relationships that do not fit into the “nuclear family” mold, regardless of the evidence suggesting that CNM relationships are just as beneficial, if not more than monogamous coupling (Moors et al., 2017). Negative implications from stigmatization have a trickle-down effect, impacting not only those within the CNM relationship but also their children. In non-dyadic and non-monogamous families, one prominent detrimental difference which has the potential of impacting the development of children from CNM families, is the stigmatization surrounding their family’s relationship status. Like many other minority groups affected by negative stigmas, relational stigmatization (being viewed less favorably based on their relationship style) can have adverse effects on those who are targeted such as mental health problems (Meyer, 2003) and economic disadvantages (DePaula & Morris, 2005). Evidence suggests that children in CNM families have shown increased levels of anxiety and social development issues in relation to their stigma (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006). These sequels ensue the question of the impact of relationship stigma on children, and how this issue can begin to be addressed. As presented by Rush and colleagues (2005), it seems that education and contact with minority groups have seen positive effects for changing individuals’ perceptions of those groups. As such, education on various relationship statuses could help mitigate the negative impacts that children from CNM families experience. Thus, education on the inclusivity of various relationship statuses may help mitigate the prejudice children of CNM families experience from their peers and help reduce their anxiety about their family dynamic.

### Negative Effects of Stigmatization

Individuals from minority groups suffer increased economic and health disadvantages due to the negative societal stigmas they experience, including those in CNM relationships. The Minority Stress Model is a theory which explains that increased stress can result in chronic psychological problems due to the alienation and ostracization from one’s community, leaving individuals with more anxiety and mental health problems (Meyer, 2003). For example, Meyer (1995) found that gay

men who experience stigmatization and prejudice were three times more likely to suffer psychological distress, leading to feelings of guilt, suicidal ideation, and demoralization. Additionally, clinicians who held stigmas about CNM were more likely to impair their relationship with CNM clients as well as the quality of therapy CNM clients received (Schechinger et al., 2018). Stigmatization of single individuals can also be seen, as these individuals face negative attitudes associated with their relationship status (DePaula & Morris, 2005) and can be viewed unfavorably in comparison to their married counterparts (DePaula & Morris, 2005). Further, economic disadvantages such as tax breaks are offered to married couples but are not available to single individuals. Highlighting that stigmatization can expand beyond non-dyadic relationships such as singlehood.

Likewise, similar effects can be noted in unmarried CNM relationships, since CNM marriage is not seen as legally binding, individuals are often legally considered single, and therefore succumb to the same legal regulations as any other single person would. In addition to the economic disadvantages that non-married CNM relationships face, they are also subjected to societal stigmatization, prejudices, and discrimination for having “different” relationship agreements than the prevalent monogamous duo (Conley et al, 2013) and therefore experience similar distress that other minority groups face such as racial, gender identity, and sexual orientation minority groups.

Moreover, the relational stigmatization towards individuals in CNM relationships not only impacts their own lives but also their children’s. Children of CNM families experience anxiety and social development problems, such as the inability to make meaningful connections or to trust others, similar to children facing “coming-out” anxiety when wanting to tell their peers about their sexual identity (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006). The root of these anxieties may be as a result of their perception of whether or not they will be accepted within their community or peer circle. Children in CNM families who perceive their social environment as not accepting of their family dynamic may have increased anxiety and trust issues in “coming-out” to others about their family (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006). As aforementioned, negative self-perceptions of the sense of belonging in one’s social environment can ensue feelings of guilt, suicidal ideation, and demoralization (Meyer, 1995).

Therefore, individuals from minority groups, including those in CNM relationships and their children, are more likely to have negative prejudices towards them and are viewed as being “different” than monogamous dyadic families. According to the Minority Stress Model, being a target of negative stigmas can have many health disadvantages in addition to economic ones. The importance of encouraging the education and inclusion of individuals in minority groups, including those in CNM families, may help reduce these negative outcomes.

### **Benefits of Consensual Non-Monogamy**

In addition to the relational benefits that dyadic monogamous couples have, individuals in CNM relationships have unique benefits not seen in monogamous couples that can increase individuals' well-being and relationship satisfaction (Moors et al., 2017). Benefits seen in both monogamous and CNM relationships include trust, sex, and broader family/community whereas those unique to CNM include diversified need fulfillment, nonsexual activity variety, and personal growth or development.

People in CNM relationships can satisfy all of their emotional and physical needs through multiple partners whereas monogamous couples rely solely on each other. In dyadic monogamous couples, one person is often unable to satisfy all of their partner's needs, usually leading to increased stress and anxiety (Moors et al., 2017). In contrast, those in CNM relationships satisfy all of their emotional and physical needs by having multiple partners, each meeting different needs. They also have the benefit of experiencing reduced anxiety or pressure in being the only person satisfying all of their partner's needs. Additionally, the reciprocity of having one's needs met not only helps in attaining feelings of security, but also allows for the pursuit of goals with greater ease subsequently increasing an individuals' well-being and relationship satisfaction (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Together, having multiple avenues by which to have one's needs met could be quite beneficial for all partners.

Activities of daily living, and pass-times can present another avenue by which CNM may benefit the individual. By expanding the network of individuals with which you engage in extracurricular activities, it subsequently expands the range of activities that are available. Since CNM individuals have a variety of partners to enjoy new activities with, they have multiple individuals to reach out to if one person does not want to join them (Moors et al., 2017). Finally, the benefit of personal growth or development refers to the freedom to explore sexual and emotional experiences without "restrictions" usually found within a monogamous couple. CNM can promote sexual fluidity which allows one to explore sexual/romantic experiences beyond the gender binary (male/female), it also allows for self-growth in overcoming jealousy, a feeling which can often be associated to the possession and control of others. This helps strengthen trust, honest communication, and equality of power (Moors et al., 2017) that is often lost within dyadic couples.

Not only do CNM relationships have many of the same benefits as monogamous couples, they also have three unique benefits that are not seen in monogamous couples, yet CNM individuals still face prejudice, discrimination, and stigmatization, and are generally perceived as less favorable (Conley et al., 2013). Education on the more beneficial aspects of CNM relationships will help others better understand how these relationships work and are less likely to hold negative prejudices towards them. This will aid in "normalizing" various relationship styles

and allow children of these families to feel less anxiety around their peers when “coming out” about their family dynamic.

### **Disadvantages of Consensual Non-Monogamy**

Despite many of the benefits seen in CNM relationships, it can be argued that they could be more detrimental than beneficial to individuals within the relationship and their children. For example, Jankowiak and Gerth (2012) found that people in non-dyadic relationships are more unstable and short-lived. They also tend to have increased feelings of guilt and confusion coming from the inability to love two or more people at once. Moreover, it seems the pressure behind managing multiple romantic relationships becomes too stressful and not pleasurable for some individuals. It can be difficult to balance time and affection when there are more than one person to care for, developing into feelings of “spreading oneself thin”. Demonstrating that being in a CNM relationship can induce many negative and stressful feelings.

Additionally, children need consistency and stability to form a secure attachment and have an adaptive development. However, as a result of having multiple partners and for the child, multiple caregivers, children in CNM families could experience a maladaptive development due to their unstable and transient environment (Jankowiak & Gerth, 2012). Since the child is unsure of whom to seek guidance from and whether those individuals will be around for a long time, they are more likely to experience increased levels of stress and anxiety from parental uncertainty than those of dyadic-monogamous families.

However, Mogilski et al. (2020) found evolutionary evidence suggesting that relationship preference is related to life-history strategies, either slow (two-person monogamy) with delayed sexual development and reproduction strategies or fast (CNM) with earlier sexual development and more overall reproduction. According to life-history strategies, some individuals prefer one strategy over the other and these preferences are related to certain behaviours which make CNM more or less appealing. Individuals with fast mating strategies are comfortable with CNM relationships and are happy with multiple partners, whereas those in happy monogamous couples tend to view CNM relationships more negatively and thus would have a harder time being in one. Conclusively, perhaps CNM relationships are simply not meant for everyone.

Furthermore, according to attachment theory, children’s adaptive development and well-being rely on their caregivers’ ability to adapt their goals when fulfilling their child’s needs of “protection, affection, and security” in response to proximity seeking behaviours (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). If we look at children’s development through the attachment perspective, we can see that as long as the child has at least one consistent primary caregiver who is satisfying all of their needs, the parent-child bond will be strong enough to ensure an adaptive development and a secure attachment, regardless of the caregivers’ other intimate

relationships. Therefore, although some may find CNM detrimental, it is not necessarily the relationship style itself that is problematic but rather those who prefer monogamy are simply not benefitting from being in a CNM relationship. Furthermore, as long as children in CNM families have at least one consistent caregiver in their life who can fulfill their needs of “protection, affection and security” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012), they can have an equally adaptive development within their families than any dyadic monogamous household.

### **Education**

Providing education on various relationship styles and their benefits such as those in CNM may help reduce the stigmatization and negative implications individuals in non-dyadic relationships face. By educating society on the negative effects of stigmas and prejudice on minority groups as well as the importance of acceptance of all races, ethnicities, sexualities, psychological disorders, and relationship statuses, we may see an overall decrease in psychological distress that minority groups face. A review examining the implications of stigmatization around mental illness found that in addition to social movements and positive intergroup contact with minority groups, education on individuals with mental illness helped reduce negative prejudice towards them (Rüsch et al., 2005). Furthermore, programs developed to decrease prejudice against Aboriginal Australians found that shortly after participating, individuals who took the program had more knowledge and less negative stereotypes than before taking the program (Hill & Augoustinos, 2001). Additionally, Schechinger and colleagues (2018) found that individuals in CNM relationships found therapy more helpful when their clinician was educated about CNM in contrast to clinicians who were uneducated and consequently unhelpful to their therapy goals, often ending therapy relatively early. Demonstrating that education on the inclusivity and acceptance of various cultures, psychological disorders, or other “differences” such as relationship status, can help reduce the negative prejudice others have towards these minority groups. This in turn helps diminish the psychological distress those in CNM relationships and their children experience for being part of a minority group. Therefore, education on the inclusivity of various relationship styles would have positive impacts on parents in CNM relationships as well as for their children.

### **Conclusion**

Currently, the traditional family household usually includes two heterosexual individuals in a monogamous relationship who are parenting their children. However, there are various types of families, from stepfamilies, same-sex parents, single parents, and plural parenting. Similar to other minority groups, individuals in non-dyadic, non-monogamous relationships such as those in CNM relationships suffer stigmatization, prejudice and, discrimination for being “different” (Conley et al., 2013). The negative implications from being part of a minority group include

increased stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues (Meyer, 2003), these outcomes not only affect those within the relationship but also their children. How children are perceived by their peers is crucial to their adaptive development and mental health outcomes, therefore we must help educate individuals on the benefits and inclusion of non-monogamous, non-dyadic families.

In addition to the benefits seen in monogamous relationships (trust, sexual health and, family/community), CNM relationships provide unique benefits of increased need fulfillment, variety in new activities, and increased self-growth/development not seen in dyadic monogamous couples (Moors et al., 2017). Although there may be some disadvantages to being in CNM relationships (Jankowiak & Gerth, 2012), it seems these drawbacks largely affect individuals that genuinely enjoy monogamy and are not suited for multi-partner relationships. Furthermore, aside from societal prejudice, there seems to be very little evidence suggesting that children's development is hindered by their parents' relationship status, so long as their emotional and physical needs are being met. By educating others on various types of relationship statuses such as in a school program, we can introduce children to alternative family dynamics along with their benefits. This in turn will help reduce the negative stigmas attached to children of minority groups such as those in CNM families (Rüsch et al., 2005; Hill & Augoustinos, 2001), help normalize "different" family dynamics and lessen the discrimination and prejudice that CNM families experience.

To summarize, education on the acceptance of various relationship statuses such as CNM will help destigmatize these groups and mitigate the negative impacts they and their children currently experience, such as an increase in depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. This will help children of CNM families have a more adaptive development and increased well-being. Further research should investigate whether programs such as those implemented by Rüsch et al. (2005) and Hill and Augoustinos (2001), could adequately translate to the destigmatization of relationship statuses or whether a new method would be required.

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