‘Non-monogamy is the hardest thing to disclose’: Expressions of gender, sexuality, and relationships on the university campus

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Abstract

Gender and sexuality ‘campus climate’ research primarily considers how welcoming (or not) a university campus is for staff and students who are not cisgender and heterosexual. Despite their focus on diverse genders and sexualities, campus climate research does not usually report the experiences of staff and students with diverse relationship styles. In this article, I analyse some of the data gathered for a larger campus climate project, which was conducted at an Aotearoa/New Zealand university campus. While this project reviewed gender, sex and sexuality more broadly, I focus here on staff and student experiences of being non-monogamous and/or polyamorous in the university context. I base my analysis on data drawn from one interview, as well as 13 qualitative survey responses from staff and students who identified as non-monogamous and/or polyamorous. Many, but not all, participants had intersecting identities and used multiple labels to describe their genders and sexualities. Primarily, participants reported that being non-monogamous and/or polyamorous was the hardest identity label to discuss, due to the higher potential for negative repercussions from other staff and students. The experiences shared in this article reinforce the hugely prevalent discourse that insists long-term (heterosexual) monogamy is the ideal for all relationships.

Keywords

Consensual non-monogamy, polyamory, relationships, sexuality, university campus

Introduction

Heterosexual monogamy between cisgender people is incessantly portrayed as the epitome of relationships in the western world. In her influential 1980s work on sexuality, Gayle Rubin posits that (monogamously) married heterosexual people sit at the top of the sexual hierarchy ([1984] 1999), while all ‘other’ individuals sit at varying levels beneath this societal ideal. ‘Other’ individuals can include, but are not limited to, people who are gender diverse, people who are sexuality diverse, and people who practice consensual non-monogamy (CNM).[1] In more recent times, there has been a noticeably amplified level of critique for the normalising discourse of monogamous, heterosexual relationships (e.g. Ferrer, 2018; Hammack et al., 2019; Sizemore & Olmstead, 2017). Researchers such as Hammack et al. (2018), Klesse (2018) and Van Anders (2015) theorise broader conceptualisations of genders, sexualities and types of relationships (e.g. CNM), amongst other elements. As with most gender and sexuality diversity studies, the research I mention here has the intention of legitimising and normalising alternative understandings of people’s identities and relationships.

Nevertheless, Rubin’s sexual hierarchy theory still remains relevant in current times, as monogamous, cisgender and heterosexual people continue to be privileged in western society over other expressions of gender and sexuality (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012; Riggs et al., 2015;

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Schmidt, 2017; Tan et al., 2019). This privileging extends to western university settings, where policies and practices often fail to recognise staff and students with diverse genders and sexualities (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). Consequently, gender- and sexuality-diverse staff and students often experience discrimination and marginalisation in university settings (e.g. Magnus & Lundin, 2016; Rankin et al., 2010; Stotzer, 2010; Warren & Grime, 2016). There is also emerging literature that emphasises the discrimination that CNM people experience due to the perpetuation of the monogamous norm (mononormativity), although this is not specific to the university setting (Ferrer, 2018; Moors et al., 2013; Séguin, 2019). Emerging CNM literature notes that future research should aim to understand the stigma experienced by CNM people in different social spaces (Levine et al., 2018). In line with previous university campus research, the research discussed in this article explores experiences of staff and students in the university setting specific to their gender and sexuality. However, this research focuses particularly on CNM staff and student experiences in the university setting, and how this is a relevant issue that needs to be included in future gender and sexuality campus research.

Present study

This research is drawn from on a mixed methods doctoral study I conducted at the University of Waikato, Aotearoa/New Zealand, which explored how discourses that normalise heterosexual and cisgender identities impact gender-, sex- and sexuality-diverse staff and students in the university setting. The article draws on data from two stages of the larger research project: focus groups and a campus climate survey. Initially, focus groups were conducted with gender-, sex- and sexuality-diverse staff and students on campus to gain an understanding of their experiences at the University of Waikato and to inform the campus climate survey. The campus climate survey was then conducted with the intention of gaining a broad range of views from a large sample of staff and students of all genders, sexes and sexualities across the university campus. This article presents findings from staff and student participants who identified as CNM in both stages of the research.[2]

Method

Focus groups allow researchers to gain a wide range of marginalised perspectives on topics that have not yet been researched (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Because no prior large-scale research had been conducted on the experiences of gender-, sex- and sexuality-diverse staff at the University of Waikato, I began by organising focus groups with these cohorts. Due to the lack of relevant, empirical knowledge of our campus, I did not want to assume the potential genders, sexes, and sexualities of participants. Thus, the demographic sheet I asked participants to fill in used open ended-questions, rather than predetermined tick boxes. For example, one question asked, 'How would you describe your sexuality/sexual orientation?', followed by a blank space for participants to write a response. Prior campus climate research on gender-, sex- and sexuality-diversity that I reviewed during my PhD did not mention CNM people. So, admittedly, I was not expecting a participant to note 'poly' in response to the aforementioned question. It is worth noting that I ended up interviewing this participant alone, as the other members of their focus group cancelled at the last moment. I gave the participant the option of either joining an alternative focus group or being interviewed, and they chose the latter option. During their interview, the participant shared their experiences of being poly, so I have included their interview transcript as part of the data for this article.

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The demographic information shared in the focus groups was used to inform potential demographic questions for the campus climate survey, as I wanted the survey to reflect participants' lived experiences on campus. Therefore, after consultation with my supervisors, I decided to include 'polyamorous and/or non-monogamous' as an option for the survey question, 'What is your sexuality? Tick all that apply'. The online survey was distributed through university outlets between September and November of 2018. Participants had to be at least 16-years old to participate, as well as studying and/or working at the University of Waikato at the time of the survey. The survey was anonymous, all questions had a 'prefer not to answer' option, and participants could exit the survey at any point if they felt uncomfortable. A total of 343 eligible staff and students completed the survey – with 13 (3.8%) of them noting that they were 'polyamorous or non-mongamous'. The open text responses from these 13 participants, alongside the one interview with a poly participant, form the data that is discussed in this article.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted for the purpose of the larger research project. Thematic analysis is used by qualitative researchers to analyse data with the intention of conceptualising themes that show shared patterns of meaning across participant experiences (Clarke et al., 2019). However, Braun and Clarke have also noted that 'an alternative use of thematic analysis is to provide a more detailed and nuanced account of one particular theme … within the data. This might relate to a specific question or area of interest' (2006, p. 83). With this in mind, I decided to further analyse responses from the 14 CNM participants specifically. My interest in this area was due to the scarcity of literature that considers the experiences of CNM people within the university setting. Further demographic breakdowns of the participants are not given, due to the potential for deductive disclosure.

I analysed the data using a constructionist paradigm, as this paradigm gives the researcher the ability to understand how participant experiences intertwine with specific socio-cultural environments – in this case, the university campus setting. I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase method of thematic analysis to analyse the data from the 13 survey participants and one interview participant who identified as CNM. I also applied an inductive approach by reviewing all open-response text data that I gathered from these participants' surveys (quantitative data was excluded), as well as the transcript of the interview participant. Initial codes were identified and then collated into latent themes, which are all discussed in detail in the 'Findings' section below.

Findings

Four overarching themes were identified in the analysis process: perpetuation (by others) of mononormativity; stereotypes about CNM; sexual hierarchy; and chosen disclosure.

Perpetuation (by others) of mononormativity

Because of the ubiquitous social discourse that people are usually monogamous, a student participant noted that 'being poly/non-monogamous has never made me feel unwelcome, because it isn't obvious unless I am open about it'. This sentiment was echoed by other participants. University students' failure to recognise relationships outside the monogamous norm is not a new phenomenon. In two research studies exploring university students'

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understandings of relationships, participants did not consider the possibility of CNM being a type of relationship until it was mentioned by the researchers (Anderson, 2010; Wilkins & Dalessandro, 2013). When researchers did raise the issue of CNM, participants predominantly dismissed it as a non-legitimate form of relationship, or as inferior to monogamy (Anderson, 2010; Sizemore & Olmstead, 2017; Wilkins & Dalessandro, 2013). This mononormative discourse aligns with our participants' experiences, with more than half the staff participants also mentioning that they have felt marginalised on the university campus. One of them responded: 'If I have to work with someone, and coming out to them isn't necessary, then I wouldn't do it, to save myself any potential discrimination, prejudice'. For participants, mononormativity on campus often meant that their CNM status was invisible to others, unless they openly chose to mention it. For example, the following participant mentioned speaking about it in a counselling context:

> A few of the counsellors have made assumptions about me because of my sexuality. When my sexuality has come up in sessions (like when I purely introduced both my partners in conversation) they wanted to talk about it quite a bit when I want to talk about other things that I had come to talk about.

The counsellors' interests in the participant's partners may suggest that either the counsellors assume that CNM is impacting the participant's wellbeing, or they believe that this issue needs further discussion because they do not fully understand this relationship type. In either case, the counsellors' seeming prioritisation of the mononormative discourse impacts the participant in a way that is not conducive to their wellbeing.

By not conforming to the mononorm of the university campus, participants encountered a range of responses: from 'strange looks when … with both my partners' to more explicit hostility:

> Since my fairly recent change of expression of sexuality I have felt excluded from work teams and judged, i.e. now I am no longer perceived as heterosexual and monogamous, I feel I am treated as deviant, mentally unwell and unreliable.

Previous research has identified that CNM people may experience prejudice for being CNM. Ferrer (2018) explains how monogamy is considered morally correct and enduring within society, whereas CNM is classed as irresponsible, sinful, and psychologically immature. Stigma is experienced by CNM people from multiple sources, including co-workers; some people keep their CNM relationships hidden from their co-workers, for fear that it will impact both their treatment in the workplace and their future career prospects (Kisler & Lock, 2019). Stigma in relation to CNM stereotypes was another theme in my research findings, and is discussed in more detail in the following section.

Stereotypes about CNM

Overarchingly, participants said that stereotypes about CNM were the biggest barrier to acceptance by others in the university setting. Participants often talked about it in general terms. For example, one participant stated:

> It's also my story, and I don't want it being spread as gossip without my input to correct any misrepresentations, so if I don't have time to really explain myself, I tend to not come out. At times, the explaining is also exhausting, even with the most well-meaning of people, because the way I am can challenge a lot of their assumptions about sexuality and relationships.

Participants in previous research (Kisler & Lock, 2019) have also reported how 'exhausting' it is to keep having to explain their CNM relationships to others. There are many stereotypes that people have about CNM; thus participants who identify as CNM have to expend time and

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emotional energy trying to rectify stereotypes and assumptions that are held by monogamous people. One example brought up by a participant is the stereotype that anything beyond monogamy is equivalent to cheating:

> I am in more than one relationship. I feel that my colleagues see the long-term one as the 'real' one, and the other people I have dated/am dating as people I am 'cheating with', not as legitimate relationships on their own terms.

Research focusing on men who had cheated in monogamous relationships showed that participants still regarded monogamy as being 'better' or 'more privileged' than CNM; this is illustrated in a key quote from one research participant: 'At least with cheating there is an attempt at monogamy' (Anderson, 2010, p. 864). Despite the assumption that monogamy is 'better', Ferrer's (2018) literature review shows that people engaging in forms of CNM have similar secure attachment styles and levels of relationship satisfaction, commitment, and relationship quality as people in monogamous relationships. Thus, there is no empirical reason for common discourse to assume that CNM relationships are inferior compared to monogamous relationships. Nonetheless, people in monogamous relationships still often assume that people in CNM relationships are just waiting to find true love, at which point they will then become monogamous with that person (Ferrer, 2018).

While the primary stereotypes about CNM are related to sexuality and relationships, one participant also noted that a person's age can impact on how accepting people are of CNM within the university setting. The participant, who was in their forties, noted that 'it's an age thing too. Like "surely it's okay to be dating when you're younger" but there's the assumption that by my age you should have settled down'. Here, I assume that 'settled down' refers to being in a long-term monogamous relationship, which implies that there is less expectation for younger people to be in a long-term monogamous relationship. This is confirmed by Wilkins and Dalessandro (2013), whose university student participants viewed the enactment of collegiate monogamy as a grey area (exempt from all the rules of adult sexuality), and 'full' (long term) monogamy as something to be assumed further into adulthood (2013).

Sexual hierarchy

Participants also emphasised a similar sexual hierarchy to that put forward by Rubin (1999), but their hierarchy was specific to how accepting people at the university campus were about their identities – including their being non-monogamous. At the top of the CNM hierarchy were people who are heterosexual and non-monogamous, with one participant explaining, 'I'm straight – I have no problem with people knowing that. [But] I find being open about being poly/non-monogamous quite difficult'. Given how normalised heterosexuality is, it is not surprising that the participant found it easier to share this aspect of their identity. Staying with the sexuality binary, participants expressed that homosexual CNM relationships came lower in the sexual hierarchy than heterosexual relationships. For example, one participant shared that 'my sexuality, homosexual, is easier for people to come to terms with than other components of my sexuality, specifically that I'm polyamorous'. Underscored here is a clear order of hierarchy for social acceptance, with CNM coming lower in the hierarchy than expressions of sexuality. Gender- and sexuality-diverse people are more likely than heterosexual people to be in CNM relationships (Klesse, 2013; Levine et al., 2018; Rubin et al., 2014). It is noteworthy, however, that participants in this research described binary sexualities as ranking higher than fluid sexualities (bisexual, pansexual, etc.). The fluid CNM participants who were placed at the bottom of the hierarchy shared some of the difficulties they had faced with disclosures about

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bottom of the hierarchy shared some of the difficulties they had faced with disclosures about both their sexuality and their non-monogamy. For example, one participant shared the following:

> There tends to be some mainstream understanding of what it is to be gay, lesbian or bi. When I explain my pansexuality … it takes more time and effort because the concepts are not as mainstream/well-represented in the media. If they get the pansexuality, I may talk to them about polyamory, but I'm very careful with this one because it is confronting to a lot of people who might assume monogamy is the only option.

Another participant agreed that it was hard having to explain to people about having a fluid sexuality, but they supported the notion that 'non-monogamy is the hardest thing to disclose'. Rambukkana (2004) described CNM and fluid sexualities as being liminal mantles that society perceives as mutually exclusive – that is, gay/straight and radical/ mainstream (e.g. monogamous/single) dichotomies. Thus, people within these liminal mantles– fluid sexualities and CNM relationships – are placed outside societies' normalised understandings of sexuality and relationships. It is worth noting, however, that one participant said that 'being trans is much more difficult to talk about' than other aspects of their identity; other gender- diverse participants did not explicitly comment on this topic, so it is unclear if this was also the case for them. Given cisgender participants' complete lack of commentary about gender in this research, alongside the lower hierarchical ranking of participants with attraction to people outside the cisgender binary, it could be argued that cisgender people likely inhabit a more privileged tier on this sexual hierarchy than gender diverse people.

Akin to gender, there were scarce findings on how ethnicity intersects with participants' lived experiences of CNM. One participant, however, commented that it would be beneficial if people made fewer normative assumptions, including about ethnicity:

> I would like it if [staff and students at the university] didn't assume that I was white, straight and monogamous, and I would like it if all the [university] service providers were more educated in what it means to be non-white, non-straight and non-monogamous, so that I would feel more safe in coming out when I need to.

The safety and benefit of coming out when needed is discussed in more detail in the next theme.

Chosen disclosure

Participants were clearly cautious about when they chose to disclose their CNM identity. For example, one participant commented that they 'haven't really had many bad experiences in recent years, but I think that's because I am really careful who I come out to now'. This participant was not the only one who was strategic about disclosing their CNM to others because of potential repercussions. People do report having to expend significant emotional effort validating their CNM identity when they come out to others (Kisler & Lock, 2019). The benefits of disclosing to people who are supportive, however, is very clear. For example, one participant shared an affirmative experience with student services on the university campus:

> I went to my doctor on campus needing an STI test for some group sex that my partner and I had engaged in and she didn't even bat an eye, her whole vibe was still just about taking care of me to the best of her ability. She asked questions about terms and acts, but never with any tone of judgement in her voice. I actually thanked her at the end of the consult for being so normal about it, and she seemed surprised that I did. She said, 'Of course, well we're not here to judge!' and that has always stuck with me.

Multiple participants mentioned that they found it affirming and supportive when people were 'so normal' about CNM in the campus space. These people could be from student services, fellow staff members or even students. There was also a clear underlying message expressed by most participants that they just wanted to be treated as normal by others, without their

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CNM identity being viewed as the definition of who they are as a person. For example, one participant noted that they can be supported on campus by 'students or teachers that accept my sexuality without making it a massive component of who I am. Supported by not making my sexuality a feature'.

Conclusion

The original purpose of my research was to review how discourses of normative gender and sexuality impacted on the experiences of diverse staff and students on the University of Waikato campus. With respect to this article, the main limitation of the research was that I did not ask participants about CNM explicitly in the research process, beyond its use as a demographic marker. Participants opted to mention CNM in their open-text survey responses to general questions about their experiences on campus, yet I did not have the opportunity to get more in-depth detail from them that was specific to CNM. However, the findings from my research emphasise that gender and sexuality campus climate research needs to include staff and students with CNM identities. CNM staff and student participants reported being marginalised on campus because they do not conform to mononormative ideals. Strongly held stereotypes are reinforced in the university campus setting by staff and students who consider monogamy to be the only legitimate form of relationship. The normalisation of monogamy forced participants either to not explicitly disclose their CNM identity to others or to disclose it with the risk of negative repercussions.

There is a plethora of quantitative research considering gender and sexuality in relation to being CNM (e.g. Klesse, 2013; Levine et al., 2018; Rubin et al., 2014). However, there is often a lack of qualitative perspectives. Qualitative findings from my research support Rubin's sexual hierarchy theory (1999), with heterosexual monogamy being viewed as the ideal relationship type. My findings expand on this hierarchy by noting how CNM people sit in different positions on the sexual hierarchy based on other intersecting identity markers, such as their sexuality and gender, with participants positing that CNM is one of the hardest identities to disclose to other people.

Overall, the CNM participants in this study just wanted to be treated as 'normal'. According to Conley et al. (2013, p. 136), 'we would rather conceptualize our conclusions as raising the possibility that … consensual non-monogamy may be equally as beneficial as monogamy. We hope that future research will further address this'. I suggest that my research has helped to do this, but not in a straightforward sense. Participant responses highlight that they are comfortable and positive about their CNM identity; it is the repercussion from others that makes being CNM less than beneficial compared to monogamy. Thus, it can be argued that people who are CNM would likely gain more benefit from their relationship style if others understood it to be just as normal and natural as monogamy.

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Notes

1. Consensual non-monogamy is used in this article as an umbrella term to describe people who are in relationships where partners consent to emotional and/or sexual relationships with others – whether that be polyamory, swinging or another type of consensually non-monogamous relationship.
2. Ethical approval given by the University of Waikato Psychology Research and Ethics Committee, approval numbers #17:58 (focus groups) and #18:23 (survey).

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