

## **The Fewer the Merrier?: Assessing Stigma Surrounding Consensually Non-monogamous Romantic Relationships**

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*In the context of recent debates about same-sex marriage, consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships have recently begun making their way into media discussions. In the current research, we investigated whether stigma is attached to these nonnormative romantic relationships and, conversely, whether halo effects surround monogamous relationships. In Study 1 we analyzed open-ended responses to the question “what are the benefits of monogamy?”. The most commonly mentioned benefits included the promotion of commitment and health (especially the prevention of sexually transmitted infections [STIs]). In Study 2, descriptions of CNM relationships were strongly stigmatized and a substantial halo effect surrounded monogamous relationships. Specifically, monogamous relationships were rated more positively than CNM relationships on every dimension (both relationship-relevant and arbitrary relationship-irrelevant factors) that we examined and across diverse social groups, including CNM individuals themselves. In Study 3, we conducted a person perception study in which participants provided their impressions of a monogamous or a CNM relationship. The monogamous couple was rated overwhelmingly more favorably than the CNM relationship. Finally, in Study 4, we replicated the findings with a set of traits that were generated with regard to relationships in general (rather than monogamous relationships, specifically) and with a broader set of arbitrary traits. Across all studies, the results consistently demonstrated stigma surrounding CNM and a halo effect surrounding monogamy. Implications for future research examining similarities and differences between monogamous and CNM relationships are discussed.*

One man and one woman, united in lifelong and faithful love, leading to new life in children—whenever and wherever it was in danger. . . And now we ring the steeple bell

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again at this latest dilution of the authentic understanding of marriage, worried that the next step will be another redefinition to justify multiple partners and infidelity. If you think I'm exaggerating, within days of the passage of this bill, one major newspaper ran a flattering profile of a proponent of what was called "nonmonogamy." Apparently, "nonmonogamy" is the idea that society is unrealistic to think that one man and one woman should remain faithful in marriage, and that openness to some infidelity should be the norm! Dolan (2011)

Two weeks after the New York State Senate voted to legalize same-sex marriage, Timothy Dolan, the state's Roman Catholic archbishop, warned that the ongoing redefinition of marriage will eventually lead to the acceptance of concurrent marriages (which he considers to be synonymous with infidelity), and fears that nonmonogamy may eventually become a societal norm. The proponent of nonmonogamy Dolan is referring to is the *New York Times* profile of long time sex-advice columnist, Dan Savage. Savage recently critiqued what he considers to be our society's obsession with romantic ideals of fidelity (Oppenheimer, 2011). According to Savage, our society's discourse on monogamy is problematic, because it inhibits honest discussions about sexual needs (Oppenheimer, 2011). The ability of romantic partners to have an open conversation about their needs and desires without fear of societal ramifications (i.e., avoiding affairs completely or having a mutual agreement to have nonsecret extradyadic relations), Savage argued, may help to foster honest communication to avoid actual "infidelity."

For the purposes of the current research, we refer to any relationship arrangement in which the partners agree to have extradyadic sexual or romantic relationships (such as those described by columnist Dan Savage) as consensually nonmonogamous (CNM) relationships. We contrast consensual nonmonogamy with monogamy. Monogamy is a more standard relationship agreement, in which both partners commit to the idea of being sexually and relationally exclusive. Note that our discussion focuses on relationship agreements rather than actual monogamy or nonmonogamy, which may or may not be upheld in a particular relationship. Thus, CNM is also distinct from infidelity—which is nonconsensual nonmonogamy—a situation in which partners have an agreement to be monogamous but one or both partners are breaking the monogamy agreement.

But, one might wonder, is monogamy universal? Evidence suggests that not only do relational configurations vary across species (e.g., departures from monogamy are found in bonobo monkeys, chimpanzees, and several other non-human animals), but also across cultures (see Ryan & Jethå, 2010, for further discussion). According to Schmitt (2005), women and men embody inconsistent mating styles across cultures, suggesting that human beings are not built strictly for long-term mating. One need to look no further than to the historical records of infidelity, divorce, and use of mistresses and prostitutes to conclude that humans are not always true monogamists and may not universally favor monogamy. Nevertheless, monogamy is generally understood to be optimal and natural within Western cultures (Kipnis, 2003; Perel, 2007), whereas nonmonogamous behaviors

are deemed taboo. For instance, among issues of legality and consent, prostitution is punishable because it violates our monogamous ideals and highlights people's willingness to engage in noncommitted relationships that do not revolve around family, fidelity, love, romance, and marriage (Abramson, Pinkerton, & Huppin, 2003). Because we can expect perceptions of monogamy and the degree to which nonmonogamous behaviors are punished to vary cross culturally, we note that our findings here are limited to a North American sample and that other cultures might yield different findings in the context of their own societal and cultural norms surrounding relationship configurations.

Consistent with the cross-cultural findings of Schmitt (2005), CNM does not seem to be as rare as some might expect. Although we know of no representative research that has addressed the question of the prevalence of CNM in the population, it appears from samples that we have recruited generally (i.e., cases in which recruitment was not targeted for CNM individuals), that approximately 4% of participants identify themselves as CNM<sup>1</sup> (Conley et al., unpublished data). This percentage is comparable to the percentage of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals estimated in the population (Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005) and also equivalent to the percentage of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in those same samples. Thus, to the extent that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals are afforded rights in part because of their statistical presence in the population, there is no reason that CNM individuals should not be afforded similar rights.

Moreover, the sheer numerical size of this minority group further suggests the potential to start a social movement for civil rights. Thus, understanding public perceptions of this social group could soon have practical political considerations and may also provide social scientists with insight into the development and rise of social groups into cultural and political prominence.

### *Media Portrayals of CNM*

Reactions to CNM relationships, based on media presentations, seem to be polarized; it seems possible that debates surrounding legal recognition for multiple marriages (or civil unions) and the morality of these types of relationships may

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<sup>1</sup> Participants were asked "Are you currently in a romantic relationship?" Those who selected "yes" were asked to identify which type of romantic relationship, options included: "monogamous (exclusively dating one person)," "casual dating (dating one or more people)," and "consensual non-monogamous relationship (dating one or more people and your romantic partners agree/know about it; for example, open relationship, polyamorous relationship)." A total of 47 individuals (4.3% of the total sample) of participants identified as currently engaging in a consensual nonmonogamous relationship (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, unpublished data). In addition, some of our other research that provided romantic relationships options (and also did not specifically recruit for anyone in a romantic relationship) found similar percentages (e.g., 4.5% identified as part of a CNM relationship; Moors, Conley, Edelstein, & Chopik, manuscript in preparation).

be in our society's future. We next consider some of the positive and negative reactions to CNM.

*Negative portrayals of CNM.* Many media sources have suggested that CNM relationships are psychologically damaging, immature, and selfish (Salmansohn, 2009; Slick, 2010). Most recently, Republican Presidential candidate, Newt Gingrich was vilified by the media after his ex-wife told the public that Gingrich wanted their marriage to become open (Duke, 2012; Ross & Schwartz, 2012). Therapists routinely suggest that sex outside of a primary relationship is a sign that the relationship is troubled (Charny, 1992; see Perel, 2007, for further discussion) and, more broadly, romantic relationship ideals encourage coupling to promote happiness and espouse long-term monogamous relationships as standard and normal (Carl, 1990). Moreover, the traditionalist wing of the American right has often warned that legalizing same-sex marriage will lead to plural marriages and many who speak on behalf of this movement have equated same-sex marriage and plural marriages with abominable sex acts, such as incest and bestiality (Associated Press, 2003; Lawrence v. Texas, 2004). Further, words such as "infidelity" and "adultery" are frequently used to describe CNM relationships; these terms, of course, discount the possibility that extradyadic relationships may have been agreed upon by both members of a couple (Finch, 2009; Young & Wang, 2004). Many more have argued that CNM is linked to the risk of HIV infection (Crossley, 2004) and monogamy is key to halting the AIDS pandemic (Shelton et al., 2004), a point which is not supported by careful analysis of monogamy practices (Misovich, Fisher, & Fisher, 1997; Pinkerton & Abramson, 1993).

*Positive portrayals of CNM.* Although CNM is gaining some positive attention in some popular press sources (e.g., Haag, 2011a, b in CNN; Oppenheimer, 2011 in *The New York Times*) and among some therapists (e.g., Hudak & Giannattai, 2010; Kort, 2008; LaSala, 2001), little empirical research has focused on these types of relationships. Within the small, but growing body of qualitative research on CNM relationships, research shows that those in CNM relationships report high degrees of honesty, closeness, happiness, and communication and low degrees of jealousy (Barker, 2005; Bonello & Cross, 2010; Klesse, 2006; Visser & McDonald, 2007), but to our knowledge, no research has examined the perceptions of consensual nonmonogamy, a point of more central relevance to issues of stigma and social justice.

Thus, attitudes toward CNM seem to be strong and varied. Contentious issues such as these often motivate social scientists to pursue controversial topics with aims of addressing potential prejudicial attitudes and, as necessary, ameliorating these biases. Given that CNM may become a part of the next moral and legal debate about sexuality and relationships, in the current research we ask, what are people's perceptions of CNM relationships and those who engage in CNM?

*Theoretical Perspectives: Do Stigma and Halo Effects Support and Reinforce Norms of Monogamy?*

We seek to determine whether a pervasive stigma exists toward individuals who engage in CNM. By the same token, we question whether the reverse effect of stigmatization, a halo effect, surrounds individuals who engage in monogamous relationships.

*Stigma toward CNM.* A contemporary perspective of stigma defines stigma as a social construction, such that society recognizes some distinguishing attribute of an individual and, consequently, devalues an individual for possessing this norm-violating characteristic (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). Stigma is often examined at the group and individual levels (see Dovidio et al., 2000; Major & O'Brien, 2005, for reviews) as well as within the context of specific behaviors (e.g., abortion, smoking; Major & Gramzow, 1999; Swanson, Swanson, & Greenwald, 2001). That is, stigma can manifest itself as a byproduct of minority group membership (e.g., stigma against African Americans; Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999) and of an individual's devalued attribute or characteristic (e.g., a birthmark; Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001). Of course, some traits are deserving of stigmatization (e.g., truly criminal behaviors). Notably, the current research does not address whether, to the extent that CNM relationships are stigmatized, the stigmatization is legitimate or illegitimate. However, we consider this topic in the General Discussion.

Well-established findings indicate that stigma can play an integral role in structural reactions toward social groups, including legal domains. This happens not only at the jury level (e.g., Johnson, 1985; Sherrod & Nardi, 1998) and throughout the hierarchical legal ranks (e.g., Peresie, 2005; Ray, Dollar, & Thames, 2011), but also via legal rulings. That is, legal precedents have the ability to mark a certain class or group of people as immoral or unworthy, by fact of unequal protection. We seek to understand whether stigma plays an important role in society's attitudes about CNM, as it has among a number of other social groups.

*Halo effects and monogamy.* Whereas some groups and individuals are devalued and stigmatized in society, other groups and individuals are considered superior, dominant, and exceptional. Ultimately, these favorable attributes and characteristics belonging to certain individuals are seen as the standard (or the norm) in society, to which all others are compared. In other words, adhering to society's implicit milestones, for example, by getting married monogamously, would not generate stigma. However, getting married and also having other romantic partners would.

Ample research suggests that a trait that is socially extolled or desired (e.g., attractive physical traits, good citizen behaviors) imparts an (often unwarranted)

overall positive impression of a person who possesses that trait (e.g., Bagozzi, 1996; Cooper, 1981; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Specifically, a “halo effect” (as originally conceptualized by Thorndike, 1920), is a heuristic whereby a person evaluates an individual (or object) positively based on a single, obvious attribute, such as attractiveness or intelligence. It is generally difficult for people to separately identify distinct features; therefore, people tend to group features together based on a single attribute or a general perception of the whole (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977); once positive or negative impressions have been formed from observing a person on one dimension, the ratings or evaluations of the person spread to other domains or dimensions (Thorndike, 1920). For example, halo effects surround gendered appearance appraisals. When a woman possesses thinness or when a man possesses muscularity, a halo effect forms around her or his appearance, such that she or he is connected to a whole host of desirable qualities that are not directly related to appearance (e.g., intelligence, kindness; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Notably, halo effects are rarely absolute (cf. Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991), but do extend to a variety of important traits.

Thus, traits or behaviors that are socially desired and culturally prized promote halo effects. We seek to determine whether halo effects surround monogamy. That is, do people have a general feeling of positivity for monogamy that extends to not only a general definition of monogamy, but also to perceptions of individuals who engage in monogamous relationships?

### *Why Examine Perceptions of CNM and Monogamy?*

Preliminary evidence from small qualitative studies suggests that prejudice against people involved in CNM may be very severe and pervasive (see Barker & Langdrige, 2010, for further discussion). In other research related to stigma and prejudice (e.g., toward African Americans or sexual minorities), it is well documented that when substantial stigma emerges toward a group, there are negative ramifications for both psychological and physical health (see Major & O’Brien, 2005, for a review). Moreover, although CNM relationships are concealable, concealable stigmas are also well documented to be a source of negative health outcomes (e.g., Meyer, 2003; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). In addition, similar to the recently well-documented discrimination against singles (see DePaulo, 2007; DePaulo & Morris, 2005, for a review), current legislation at the state and federal levels do not have laws protecting CNM individuals from discrimination. Thus, there is no legal recourse for discrimination against CNM individuals. Job termination based on one’s status as CNM, for example, would be perfectly legal.

Understanding the content of monogamy beliefs and questioning whether stigma is associated with CNM provides us with a starting point to determine whether the perceived benefits of monogamy and the level of stigma toward CNM relationships are accurate. Given that debates surrounding the morality and legality

of multiple romantic partnerships may be in our society's future, we suggest that documenting the presence or absence and magnitude of stigma toward CNM relationships (and the reverse for monogamous relationships) could help social scientists critically analyze these issues and determine if there is a need for further investigation. Doing so could also help social scientists determine whether they should take a stand on the quality and outcomes of CNM relationships and, by extension, whether these groups are legitimate sociopolitical groups deserving of civil rights.

For example, supporters of the Defense of Marriage Act commonly use the possibility of legalizing polyamorous marriages (a particular form of CNM in which participants have multiple loving and romantic—rather than merely sexual—relationships, see Barker, 2005) as a scare tactic to keep marriage legally defined as “union between one man and one woman”:

Under section 3 of S. 598, any polyamorous union recognized as a marriage under state law would have to be recognized by the federal government as a marriage for purposes of federal law. Thus, the foreseeable effect of S. 598 would be to have the federal government validate any state's adoption of polyamory and to require taxpayers throughout the country to subsidize polygamous and other polyamorous unions... Whelan (2011).

The fact that CNM is used to frighten individuals into voting against civil rights measures for a group already known to be stigmatized (viz., lesbian, gay, and bisexual people) suggests an extremely high level of antipathy toward CNM. Exploring perceptions of monogamy can thus help us address political issues that (we would argue) seem, based on rhetoric surrounding same-sex marriage and increased media attention, poised to become more central to mainstream political debates in the near future.

### *The Current Research*

We drew upon theoretical perspectives of stigma and halo effects to determine whether CNM relationships are devalued in society, and by the same token, whether monogamy is perceived to be superior. The first step in this process was to examine the perceived benefits that monogamous relationships offer individuals and society so that we could identify dimensions on which CNM relationships might be stigmatized. Therefore, we used qualitative methodology in Study 1 to facilitate the creation of items addressing halo effects of monogamy and stigma surrounding CNM. Then, using the results from Study 1, we created close-ended items for Studies 2 and 3 and also assessed reactions to arbitrary traits (i.e., traits for which a person's relational status should be irrelevant). Finally, in Study 4, an independent set of traits addressing relationships in general (i.e., not specifically monogamous relationships) were utilized and a more extensive set of arbitrary traits were generated to better understand perceptions of CNM.

## Study 1

To the best of our knowledge, researchers have not empirically addressed monogamy, thus, we took an exploratory approach to facilitate scale creation. We asked participants, in an open-ended format, to state their opinions to the question, “What are the benefits of monogamy?” Note that pilot testing suggested that asking the parallel question (i.e., what are your perceptions of consensual nonmonogamy) would be too confusing to participants who are not familiar with this terminology or these concepts. Thus, the main purpose of Study 1 was to explore the benefits of monogamy to gain a sense of the dimensions on which monogamous (and, hence, CNM) relationships are likely to be judged.

## Method

### *Participants*

The original sample was very large ( $N = 3,780$ ), a number that proved intractable for open-ended coding; thus, we randomly selected the responses of 5% of the original sample ( $N = 189$ ) to thematically analyze the data, consistent with Braun and Clark (2006). This sample size was more in line with typical sample sizes when qualitative data analysis methods are utilized<sup>2</sup>.

Participants were recruited for an online study by a group of more than 100 student researchers. The researchers posted links to the survey on social networking sites and emailed the link to friends. The randomly selected sample of 189 participants was 66% female and 34% male, with a mean age of 25 ( $SD = 10.5$ ). The participants were 63% European American/White, 6% Asian American, 5% African American, 3% Latina/o and 2% Middle Eastern/Arabic. Sixty-nine percent of the participants were undergraduate students.

### *Procedure*

*Thematic coding.* The data were thematically coded, consistent with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic coding analyses, to identify the benefits of monogamy. Multiple readings of the participants’ data were undertaken by the authors to identify common themes. These initial coding categories were then reviewed and discussed, followed by further refinement of the coding and analysis. The authors trained two research assistants on the coding schemes and the coders independently

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<sup>2</sup> Benefits were also content coded for only the older participants in the sample ( $Age = 60.82$ ,  $SD = 6.87$ ) to forestall concerns that the benefits generated are those of only young adult participants. A similar pattern of results were found among older participants. The top ranking benefits of monogamy were commitment, health, trust, meaningfulness, and family benefits, which also emerged as themes in the random sample of participants in Study 1.

reviewed the open-ended responses. The coders thematically coded the participants' responses into the coding scheme of eight major themes that emerged (see Table 1). In addition, minor themes (within each major theme) were also coded, but were mentioned relatively infrequently (as would be expected given their level of specificity). Each of the coders read the participants' responses and coded the themes as "1" if the theme was present in and "0" if the theme was absent from an individual participant's response. The data were analyzed by the two independent coders with 96% agreement. For the few discrepancies that arose, the third coder resolved discrepancies between the two coders.

## Results and Discussion

Results are presented in Table 1. The most commonly-mentioned theme was the idea that monogamous relationships foster commitment between relationship partners (*commitment*). The majority of participants (61%) mentioned this theme, suggesting that it is perceived to be a very prominent benefit of monogamy. Among those who mentioned commitment, more than a third specifically mentioned emotional security and dependability (38% each) and approximately one third (29%) mentioned the ease of the relationships (i.e., having someone around that you are comfortable with, having someone on hand to spend time with) were benefits of monogamy.

The next most common major theme, mentioned by 59% of the sample was the idea that monogamy promotes physical health (*health*). In particular, of those who mentioned health benefits, 69% of the participants specifically mentioned that monogamy provides practical sexual benefits such as not having to use condoms, being comfortable with your partner, and having a source of steady sex (*sex benefits*). Interestingly, 19% of those in the sample who mentioned health benefits listed avoidance of physical violence and promotion of physical safety as benefits of monogamy.

Fifty-six percent of the sample mentioned that monogamy promotes trust within a relationship (*trust*) and 46% mentioned that monogamy helps to establish meaning within the relationship (*meaningfulness*). The romantic, passionate, or erotic (*passion*) nature of monogamous relationships was mentioned by 28% of respondents and sex benefits were mentioned by 22%. Morality, or the notion that monogamous relationships are morally superior and the socially acceptable or correct thing to do (*morality*) was mentioned in 12% of responses, and family benefits, which includes providing structural benefits in terms of family finances and relationships (*family benefits*), in 10% of the responses.

These results from qualitative data allowed us to determine the thoughts of participants in absence of any questions generated by researchers (i.e., questions that may prime the participants to think in a certain way). Without any prompting, the participants spontaneously revealed their belief that monogamy provides

**Table 1.** Study 1: Percentage Mentioned of Major and Minor Themes for Qualitative Data

| Major themes    | % Of major theme mentioned | Example responses  | Minor themes  | % Of minor theme mentioned      |
|-----------------|----------------------------|--|---|---------------------------------|
| Commitment      | 61%                        | “You can commit yourself fully to someone.”<br>“Makes you feel special and certain.”                               | Emotional security<br>Dependability<br>Ease<br>Exclusivity<br>Long term | 38%<br>38%<br>29%<br>12%<br>11% |
| Health          | 59%                        | “Safety from STDs.”<br>“Physical safety.”  | No disease (STIs)<br>No physical violence<br>Mental health<br>Happiness | 69%<br>19%<br>11%<br>9%         |
| Trust           | 56%                        | “There are no jealousy issues.”<br>“There is honesty and trust in that relationship.”                              | Faithfulness<br>Jealousy<br>Honesty<br>Confidence in relationship       | 18%<br>11%<br>6%<br>5%          |
| Meaningfulness  | 46%                        | “Availability of partner when you need them.”<br>“Ultimately feel better about yourself.”                          | Deepness<br>Respect<br>Not lonely<br>Good communication                 | 43%<br>19%<br>17%<br>2%         |
| Passion         | 28%                        | “More emotionally involved.”<br>“Encourages true love.”  | True love<br>Passion<br>Romance   | 50%<br>8%<br>2%                 |
| Sex benefits    | 22%                        | “Reliable access to sex.”<br>“Sexually adventurous.”   | Comfort<br>Consistent<br>No worries<br>Exciting sex                     | 59%<br>20%<br>12%<br>12%        |
| Morality        | 12%                        | “Fulfilling God’s design for the world.”<br>“Maintaining a higher moral standard and adhering to values.”          | Social acceptance<br>Moral<br>God/religious                             | 45%<br>23%<br>18%               |
| Family benefits | 10%                        | “Having a family, home, and commitment for life.”<br>“Stable family structure for children.”<br>“Secure finances.” | Family environment<br>Financial support<br>Equality                     | 63%<br>32%<br>16%               |

wide-ranging benefits to relationships (i.e., commitment, trust, meaningfulness, and passion), to the individual (i.e., sex benefits and health), to the family, and to society, suggesting the existence of a halo effect surrounding monogamy and monogamous relationships. In the next study, we developed close-ended items

based on these major themes to examine people's perceptions of monogamy and nonmonogamy and to explicitly determine whether a halo effect surrounds monogamy and stigma is directed toward CNM.

## Study 2

We had three aims for Study 2. First, we assessed whether CNM relationships are stigmatized (and, conversely, whether a halo effect surrounds monogamy) by examining participants' perceptions of the extent to which romantic relationship-relevant traits (i.e., items generated from Study 1) were related to either monogamous relationships or CNM relationships. Specifically, we experimentally manipulated the relationship type (CNM or monogamy) that participants were asked to address.

Second, we examined whether a halo effect surrounds monogamy through participants' ratings of nonrelevant romantic relationship traits (i.e., arbitrary traits). In other words, we attempted to identify traits that should not be affected by a person's relational status as monogamous or CNM to identify, not only if there is a halo effect (a point addressed by the traits specifically generated by the participants about monogamy) but also to assess the strength of the halo effect surrounding monogamy. For the purposes of these studies, we focused on a cluster of irrelevant traits, which we term arbitrary traits (e.g., is reliable at daily dog walking) as a beginning point for examining the extent of the halo effect.

Lastly, we examined the existence and prevalence of stigma toward nonmonogamy and the halo surrounding monogamy through endorsement of attitudes toward these relationships as held by individuals in CNM relationships. That is, we considered the perspectives of individuals currently in CNM relationships, specifically whether they demonstrate a halo effect for monogamy and if they display stigma toward CNM. These individuals were fortuitously included in our survey (i.e., no recruitment strategies or advertising procedures were utilized that specifically elicited responses of CNM individuals) and can address if individuals in CNM relationship configurations endorse the bias toward monogamy. According to Jost and Banaji (1994), system justification (i.e., upholding norms and the status quo) can promote perceptions of dominant group superiority, even among members of marginalized groups (see Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004, for a review). In other words, members of marginalized groups, according to system justification theory, find reasons to support the very social structures that oppress them. More recently, system justification theory has been used in the context of relationship ideologies by highlighting the ways in which people defend the importance and value of romantic relationships to maintain the status quo (Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier, 2011). Thus, system justification theory would predict that CNM individuals, rather than lauding the qualities of their own relationships, would actually glorify monogamous relationships in the same way that monogamous individuals

do. Moreover, this should be especially true on important relational traits, because positive ratings on those traits justify the monogamous status quo.

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were recruited for an online study by posting links to the survey on volunteer sections of classified advertisement sites (e.g., craigslist.org).

This recruitment procedure resulted in a sample of 1,101 participants who completed the entire study. The participants were 65% female; 72% European American/White, 2% Asian American, 4% African American, 5% Latina/o, and 6% multiracial. College students comprised 31% percent of the sample. The mean age was 24 years ( $SD = 12.5$ ). In addition, a total of 4.3% of the sample indicated that they were currently in a CNM relationship.

### *Measures and Materials*

*Romantic relationship definitions.* Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two following relationship description conditions: “Monogamy means that two people agree to have a sexual and romantic relationship only with one another” (monogamy condition) or “Consensual nonmonogamy means that people agree to have sexual and/or romantic relationships with more than one person, and that the partners involved are aware that multiple relationships are occurring” (CNM condition).

*Relationship relevant traits.* Participants rated the relationship that they read about (i.e., monogamous or CNM) on the extent to which they believed the relationship possessed the following benefits: *provides stability to those involved in the relationship, provides companionship, is socially acceptable in society, helps to combat loneliness, prevents jealousy, provides closeness, increases physical safety, is romantic, prevents the spread of sexually transmitted diseases/infections, fosters intimacy, is comforting, is convenient, is financially beneficial, is morally superior to other types of relationships, promotes trust, is something one can rely on, prevents communication issues, promotes self acceptance, prevents possessiveness, promotes respect, prevents boredom, allows independence, and promotes honesty.* All ratings were made on 7-point scales on which higher numbers indicated greater amounts of a given quality.

*Arbitrary traits.* The following four arbitrary items were included: encourages taking a daily multivitamin, promotes paying taxes on time, promotes flossing teeth daily, and is reliable at daily dog walking. All ratings were made on 7-point scales, on which higher numbers indicated greater amounts of that relationship dimension.

## Results and Discussion

First, we compared reactions to the monogamous or CNM relationships for the entire sample. Then to demonstrate the pervasiveness of monogamy beliefs, we examined the extent to which these beliefs are evidenced among college and noncollege participants, women and men, people of different ethnicities, and people of different sexual orientations. In addition, we were able to assess differences between monogamous individuals and CNM individuals. Notably, this study was not explicitly targeted toward CNM individuals; thus, we have no reason to suspect a selection bias in their recruitment. Lastly, we examined the extent to which the halo effect surrounding monogamy extends to arbitrary qualities, that is, traits that would not normally be associated with either monogamous or CNM relationships (such as “is reliable at daily dog walking”).

### *Entire Sample*

Because of the large sample size it was possible that even small differences would yield significance. Thus, to assure that the findings we discuss are meaningful, not merely statistically significant, we interpreted any difference of less than 1 point on the 7-point scales cautiously.

A MANOVA was used to compare impressions of monogamous and CNM relationships. Participants clearly believed the monogamous relationships were superior to the CNM relationships. This was a large effect,  $F(14, 1085) = 207.39$ ,  $p = .00005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .74$ . Each individual dependent variable contributed significantly to this effect. The  $\eta^2$ s for each of the items were greater than .15, with a mean  $\eta^2$  of .38. See Table 2 for means and standard deviations of the relevant traits.

Note also that there were two reversals to the general traits of negativity toward CNM: CNM relationships were rated as more likely to prevent boredom and allow independence. Therefore, the halo effect surrounding monogamy is not absolute, consistent with other halo effect findings (Eagly et al., 1991).

### *Specific Populations*

The large sample size of this study allowed us to examine whether major population subgroups shared these perceptions of monogamy. The findings generalized across college students and noncollege adults, women and men, all ethnic groups, and among heterosexual, lesbian and gay, and bisexual participants. That is, each of these groups had similar beliefs about the monogamous and CNM relationships.

In addition, the preference for monogamous relationships is present both among people in monogamous relationships,  $F(14, 826) = 190.79$ ,  $p = .0005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .76$  and people in CNM relationships  $F(14, 32) = 5.31$ ,  $p = .0005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .70$ .

**Table 2.** Study 2: Means (Standard Deviations) for Perceptions of Monogamous and CNM Relationships on Relevant and Arbitrary Qualities

| Quality/characteristic                                   | Relationship definition |             |
|--|-------------------------|-------------|
|  | Monogamous              | CNM         |
| Relationship   |                         |             |
| Prevents the spread of STDs/STIs                         | 6.10 (1.31)             | 2.12 (1.68) |
| Is comforting  | 5.97 (1.12)             | 3.35 (1.83) |
| Provides stability to those involved in the relationship | 5.95 (1.21)             | 2.54 (1.72) |
| Is socially acceptable in society                        | 6.19 (1.12)             | 2.90 (1.74) |
| Provides closeness                                       | 6.03 (1.11)             | 2.95 (1.84) |
| Is something one can rely on                             | 5.47 (1.44)             | 2.76 (1.70) |
| Promotes respect   | 5.74 (1.28)             | 2.78 (1.80) |
| Promotes trust   | 5.91 (1.24)             | 3.00 (1.92) |
| Increases physical safety                                | 5.34 (1.49)             | 2.58 (1.65) |
| Is romantic  | 5.68 (1.27)             | 3.17 (1.89) |
| Fosters intimacy   | 5.65 (1.35)             | 3.18 (1.94) |
| Is morally superior to other types of relationships      | 4.56 (1.98)             | 2.30 (1.58) |
| Provides companionship                                   | 6.28 (0.88)             | 4.37 (1.94) |
| Is financially beneficial                                | 5.05 (1.49)             | 3.20 (1.66) |
| Promotes honesty   | 5.43 (1.55)             | 3.70 (2.07) |
| Promotes self-acceptance                                 | 5.22 (1.44)             | 3.52 (1.92) |
| Prevents jealousy  | 4.17 (1.96)             | 2.53 (1.66) |
| Helps to combat loneliness                               | 5.67 (1.28)             | 4.27 (1.97) |
| Prevents communication issues                            | 4.11 (1.77)             | 3.13 (1.82) |
| Prevents possessiveness                                  | 3.76 (1.77)             | 3.20 (1.81) |
| Prevents boredom   | 4.39 (1.65)             | 4.76 (1.84) |
| Allows independence                                      | 4.40 (1.65)             | 4.71 (1.88) |
| Arbitrary  |                         |             |
| Promotes paying taxes on time                            | 3.68 (1.64)             | 2.81 (1.53) |
| Is reliable at daily dog walking                         | 3.65 (1.58)             | 3.00 (1.52) |
| Encourages taking a daily multivitamin                   | 3.57 (1.61)             | 2.99 (1.60) |
| Promotes flossing teeth daily                            | 3.60 (1.65)             | 3.06 (1.66) |

*Note.* The items are ordered by mean differences between the monogamous and CNM conditions, beginning with the item with the greatest mean difference.

Thus, these findings are consistent with a system justification perspective (Jost & Banaji, 1994), such that even participants who were involved in CNM relationships themselves actually supported the institution of monogamy. Moreover, we replicated the current findings both among college students,  $F(22, 257) = 65.75$ ,  $p = .0005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .85$  and among noncollege adults,  $F(22, 583) = 93.02$ ,  $p = .0005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .78$ .

#### *Arbitrary Traits*

To determine the breadth of the halo effect surrounding monogamy, we included dimensions that are clearly irrelevant to the monogamy dimension. Monogamous relationships were perceived more positively than CNM on these arbitrary dimensions,  $F(5, 1095) = 22.42$ ,  $p = .0005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ . However, given the small

effect sizes and the fact that the differences all dipped below a 1-point margin, we are not confident these findings are especially meaningful in the absence of any replication. It is of note that all the means indicated a more favorable view of monogamous relationships, suggesting, if anything, a small bias in favor of monogamy on arbitrary traits. See Table 2 for means and standard deviations of the arbitrary traits.

To further test the system justification hypothesis, we also conducted a MANOVA separately for monogamous and CNM participants. According to a system justification framework, people have a motivation to bolster the status quo, even when they do not hold majority group membership or are disadvantaged by the system (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994; Kay, Czapliński, & Jost, 2009). Thus, CNM participants should not endorse arbitrary or irrelevant traits as favored for monogamy, because these characteristics and traits do not defend or promote the status quo. As expected, CNM participants' positive perceptions of monogamous relationships did not extend to the arbitrary traits,  $F(4, 42) = .41$ , n.s., whereas monogamous participants clearly favored monogamy even on the arbitrary traits, (consistent with findings for the general sample),  $F(4, 836) = 26.25$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ . System justification should work more strongly for traits that maintain the status quo—and the items in this analysis (addressing, for example, dog-walking) do not particularly encourage the status quo. Thus, it is not surprising that CNM participants did not favor monogamous relationships on arbitrary traits, and it also is not inconsistent with system justification theory, because viewing these relationships positively on *arbitrary* dimensions does not overtly provide support for the status quo.

### Study 3

Study 3 utilized a person perception paradigm to examine perceptions of (fictional) individuals in either a monogamous relationship or a CNM relationship. In Study 2, we found that a halo effect surrounded the definition of monogamy; however, it is still unclear how pervasive this halo effect is or whether it will surround depictions of *particular* romantic relationships. In this study, we were interested in how participants would perceive a couple involved in a monogamous relationship compared to a CNM relationship on the dimensions identified in the previous studies (e.g., traits, personality characteristics, and qualities related to romantic relationships).

#### *Participants*

Participants were recruited for an online survey via links to the survey on classified advertisement sites (e.g., craigslist.org) and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook.com). The different recruitment procedure resulted in a smaller

sample of 132 participants who completed the entire survey. However, the study still provided ample statistical power to detect potential differences of interest in this study. The participants were 68% female and 32% male; 60% European American/White, 4% Latina/o, 3% African American, 2% Asian American, and 2% Middle Eastern/Arabic. The mean age was 35 years ( $SD = 13.8$ ).

### *Materials and Measures*

*Relationship vignette.* Each participant was randomly assigned to read one of two descriptions of a heterosexual couple (Sara and Dan) in the context of a dating relationship, with brief information provided about the partners and their romantic relationship. Both descriptions were identical, except for the type of romantic relationship (monogamous or CNM) in which Sara and Dan were involved.

The stem of both relationship vignettes (i.e., the portion that was the same across monogamous and CNM conditions) was:

Sara and Dan have been together for 5 years. They are in their mid 20s and began dating when they attended the same small college. Now they both work full-time. They enjoy each other's company. They especially like to go out to eat together and enjoy seeing movies together. They hope to get married some day.

In the monogamous condition, the partners were presented as having been monogamous for their entire relationship and as being happy with this arrangement. In the CNM condition, the partners were presented as having agreed to engage in sexual relations with other partners and as being happy with this arrangement. The partners were presented as having been CNM for 1 year (of the 5 years they have been dating), given qualitative and informal research suggesting that most CNM couples start out as monogamous (Anapol, 1997; Sheff, 2005). The vignettes differed between the monogamous and CNM conditions in the following ways:

... Sara and Dan have been monogamous for their entire relationship. They are finding themselves to be happy with this arrangement and plan to continue to be monogamous [Monogamous condition].

... They were monogamous for the first four years of their relationship. A year ago, Sara and Dan both mutually agreed that it would be fine if they saw other people. They have agreed that it is okay if they have other sexual partners. For about a year, they have been engaging in relationships with other partners. They are finding themselves to be happy with this arrangement and plan to continue to be nonmonogamous [CNM condition].

The participants then rated the protagonists' relationship on a variety of relationship-related characteristics (both those previously employed in the prior studies and additional sexuality-related items).

*Ratings of partners and the relationship.* Participants rated the partners' relationship as a whole on several romantic relationship-specific traits, values, and characteristics in comparison to the average romantic relationship (e.g., "compared to most couples, Sara and Dan's relationship is. . ."). Participants rated the extent to which they believed that the dimensions (used in Study 2) were benefits of the relationship (or characteristic of the individuals within the relationship) they had just read about. All ratings were made using 6-point semantic differential scales on which higher numbers indicated greater amounts of a given quality.

In this study, we created six conceptually predetermined scales so that we would have multiple items to reflect each of the themes of the relationship characteristics: relationship quality, acceptability of the relationship, loneliness of relationship, sexual riskiness, arbitrary benefits, and sexual satisfaction. The overall quality of the couple's relationship was assessed by 18 items that measured characteristics and qualities that were related to how successful the relationship was perceived, compared to most couples (items included, "Sara and Dan's relationship is:" *less trusting – more trusting, less reliable – more reliable, less comfortable – more comfortable, less mature – more mature, less dependable – more dependable, less meaningful – more meaningful, and less safe – more safe*; and "Sara and Dan are:" *less honest – more honest, less committed – more committed, less trusting – more trusting, less emotionally secure – more emotionally secure, less faithful – more faithful, less loyal – more loyal, likely to have a successful marriage – unlikely to have a successful marriage, unhappy with their relationship – happy with their relationship, less likely to be soul mates – more likely to be soul mates, less in love – more in love, and less romantic – more romantic*). Items were reverse scored where appropriate to indicate more desirable qualities and characteristics. The 18 items were combined to create the *relationship quality* scale ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

The acceptability of Sara and Dan's relationship (compared to most couples) was assessed by three semantic differential items: *less moral – more moral, less natural – more natural, and less socially acceptable – more social acceptable* participants perceived the relationship. Those three items were combined to create the *acceptability* scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Next, loneliness was assessed in two ways: one item assessed the loneliness of the overall relationship and the second item assessed how lonely the partners were. These items created the *loneliness* scale ( $\alpha = .95$ ). Sexual riskiness was measured by two items that addressed perceptions of *likely to spread STDs to each other – unlikely to spread STDs to each other* and *likely to have concerns about STDs – unlikely to have concerns about STDs*. These two items were combined to create the *sexual riskiness* scale ( $\alpha = .77$ ). The arbitrary benefits from Study 2 were combined to create the *arbitrary benefits* scale ( $\alpha = .88$ ; items included: *encourages taking a daily multivitamin – does not encourage taking a daily multivitamin, promotes paying taxes on time – does not promote paying taxes on time, promotes flossing teeth daily – does not promote flossing teeth daily, and not reliable at daily dog walking – is reliable at daily*

*dog walking*). Lastly, new sexual satisfaction items were added to Study 3, which were developed from open-ended results from Study 1. *Sexual satisfaction* ( $\alpha = .94$ ) was evaluated with seven items related to the partners' sexual lives and sexual satisfaction, "...compared to most couples, Sara and Dan have..." *sex less frequently – sex more frequently, less exciting sex – more exciting sex, more intimate sex – less intimate sex, sex that is less mind-blowing – sex that is more mind-blowing, not meaningful sex – deeply meaningful sex, low sexual desire for one another – high sexual desire for one another, and more sexual passion in their relationship – less sexual passion in their relationship*. In addition, we assessed how likely the individuals in the relationship were to use condoms during sex through one item (i.e., "compared to most couples, Sara and Dan are..." *less likely to use condoms – more likely to use condoms*). This variable was added to examine people's perceptions of sexual safety within different types of romantic relationships, given associations between monogamy and the absence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

## Results and Discussion

A MANOVA was used to compare participants' perceptions of the couple in the monogamous relationship and the couple in the CNM relationship on relationship qualities. Consistent with our previous results, participants indicated that the individuals in the monogamous relationship were superior to the individuals in the CNM relationship. This was a large effect,  $F(13, 116) = 207.39, p = .00005, \eta^2 = .78$ . Each individual dependent variable contributed significantly to this effect (see Table 3 for individual effects and for means and standard deviations of the items and scales).

### *Relationship Scales*

The largest effects were for perceived sexual riskiness. Participants viewed the individuals in the monogamous relationship as having less sexual risk compared to the individuals in the CNM relationship,  $F(1, 129) = 243.13, p = .0005, \eta^2 = .65$ . The second largest effect was for the acceptability of the romantic relationship, such that the monogamous relationship was viewed as more acceptable (i.e., more moral, more natural, and socially acceptable) than the CNM relationship,  $F(1, 129) = 134.04, p = .0005, \eta^2 = .51$ . The third largest effect was for overall relationship quality. In terms of relationship quality and success (e.g., the relationship as trusting, reliable, comfortable, meaningful), participants viewed the monogamous relationship as higher in relationship quality than the CNM relationship,  $F(1, 129) = 109.86, p = .0005, \eta^2 = .46$ .

Although the loneliness, sexual satisfaction, and arbitrary benefits scales had smaller effect sizes, the results of these scales are still noteworthy, especially

**Table 3.** Study 3: MANOVA for the Effects of Relationship Style on Dependent Variables. Means (Standard Deviations) for Targets in Monogamous and Nonmonogamous Relationships on Scales and Items

| Factor                       | <i>F</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | $\eta^2$ | Relationship type |             |
|------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|-------------------|-------------|
|                              |          |           |          |          | Monogamous        | CNM         |
| Overall effect               | 207.39   | 13, 116   | <.001    | 0.78     | –                 | –           |
| Sexual riskiness scale       | 243.13   | 1, 129    | <.001    | 0.65     | 5.02 (1.21)       | 2.06 (0.94) |
| Acceptability scale          | 134.04   | 1, 129    | <.001    | 0.51     | 4.64 (0.69)       | 2.59 (1.25) |
| Relationship quality scale   | 109.86   | 1, 129    | <.001    | 0.46     | 4.82 (0.84)       | 2.86 (1.25) |
| Likely to use condoms (item) | 34.24    | 1, 129    | <.001    | 0.21     | 2.83 (1.59)       | 4.43 (1.55) |
| Loneliness scale             | 29.35    | 1, 129    | <.001    | 0.19     | 4.61 (1.32)       | 3.28 (1.48) |
| Sexual satisfaction scale    | 23.23    | 1, 129    | <.001    | 0.15     | 4.08 (1.12)       | 3.06 (1.28) |
| Arbitrary benefits scale     | 11.72    | 1, 129    | <.001    | 0.10     | 4.28 (0.90)       | 3.68 (0.87) |

*Note.*  $N = 131$ , MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance. The items are ordered by effect size and by mean differences between the monogamous and CNM conditions, beginning with the item with the greatest mean difference.

given the smaller sample size (in comparison to the sample sizes of the previous studies). Compared to the monogamous couple, the CNM relationship was viewed as more lonely,  $F(1, 129) = 29.35$ ,  $p = .0005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .19$ . In Study 1, participants overwhelmingly viewed monogamy as full of sex benefits, such that monogamous relationships provide the couple with frequent, exciting, and satisfying sex. Based on the sexual satisfaction scale, participants viewed the monogamous relationship as overall more sexually satisfying than the CNM relationship,  $F(1, 129) = 23.23$ ,  $p = .0005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .15$ . Each individual effect was also significant.

One item deserves some additional explanation. The couple in the CNM relationship was perceived as being more likely to use condoms than the couple in the monogamous relationship. Although this may at first seem to favor the CNM relationship (i.e., for being responsible), this finding is consistent with the other (negative) perceptions of CNM relationships. That is, couples that use condoms are perceived to have lower-quality relationships than couples that do not (Conley & Rabinowitz, 2009).

Lastly, consistent with the results of Study 2, participants viewed the monogamous relationship more positively on arbitrary qualities compared to the CNM relationship,  $F(1, 129) = 11.72$ ,  $p = .0005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ . Because this effect was consistent with the prior study and slightly larger in magnitude, even in this smaller sample, we conclude that the halo effect in favor of monogamous couples modestly extends to arbitrary traits. Of course, as mentioned previously, this is a limited set of arbitrary traits. It would be useful to extend the effects to other irrelevant traits such as being kind, reasonable, or charming; we addressed this issue in a final study.

## Study 4

Two potential concerns remain from the prior studies. First, as previously mentioned, to fully understand the magnitude of halo effects, it would be useful to assess a wider variety of traits than we did in the prior studies. A second potential problem with prior studies is that the items on which participants rated the relationships were generated based on perceived characteristics of monogamy, which could mean a bias toward favorable perceptions monogamy. Therefore, it would be useful to evaluate relationships on traits associated with relationships in general, rather than with monogamous relationships specifically. In this final study, we examined traits associated with relationships in general and a broader set of arbitrary traits to provide a more direct assessment of perceptions of monogamous and CNM relationships.

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were recruited for an online survey consistent with methods employed in Studies 2 and 3. A total of 269 participants were recruited and the sample was 75% female; 70% European American/White, 3% Asian American, 3% African American, 9% Latina/o, and 3% multiracial. The mean age was 34 years ( $SD = 13.8$ ).

### *Measures and Materials*

*Romantic relationship definitions.* Participants were randomly assigned to read one of the two descriptions of a couple that were provided in Study 3.

*Relationship-relevant traits.* For this study, eight undergraduates generated positive and negative traits that could potentially apply to relationships in general (rather than monogamous relationships specifically). These traits were formed into the following semantic differential items: *are dishonest with each other – are honest with each other, do not trust one another – trust one another, have little in common – have many shared interests, are uncomfortable with one another – are comfortable with one another, have bad communication skills with each other – have good communication skills with each other, do not show kindness to one another – show kindness to one another, disrespect one another – respect one another, do not love each other – love each other, do not have similar values – have similar values, are not equals – are equals, are not jealous – are jealous, have sex with each other infrequently – have sex with each other frequently, and argue frequently – argue infrequently.* Items were reverse scored where appropriate to indicate more desirable qualities and characteristics. Participants rated the degree to which they believed that each of these traits were characteristics of the

relationship they had just read about on 6-point semantic differential scales where higher numbers indicate greater amounts of the specific quality or characteristic.

*Arbitrary traits.* A new set of arbitrary traits was generated to examine a wider range of arbitrary characteristics than in the prior studies. We specifically generated traits that would not be directly related to relational processes and, thus, should not logically differ depending on whether a romantic relationship is CNM or monogamous. The arbitrary traits that we included were: *invested in taking care of others – invested in themselves only, warm – cold, satisfied with life – unsatisfied with life, caring people – uncaring people, law-abiding – law breakers, kind people – unkind people, well-educated – uneducated, consistent about recycling – not consistent about recycling, likely to volunteer in their communities – unlikely to volunteer in their communities, reasonable – unreasonable, charismatic – boring, successful in their careers – unsuccessful in their careers, likely to donate to charity – unlikely to donate to charity, likely to keep up with current events – unlikely to keep up with current events, and generous tippers – stingy tippers.*

All ratings were made on 6-point semantic differential scales, in which higher numbers indicated greater amounts of that arbitrary dimension. Items were reverse scored where appropriate to indicate higher value for the specific arbitrary quality or characteristic. In addition, participants completed a number of exploratory items that will not be considered further.

## Results and Discussion

We conducted two sets of MANOVAs comparing the responses of participants who had received the description of the monogamous relationship to the responses of participants who had received the description of the CNM relationship. The first analysis focused on the generic relationship-relevant traits, whereas the second focused on the arbitrary traits.

### *Relationship-Relevant Traits*

Participants perceived the monogamous couple to have a better relationship than the couple in the CNM relationship,  $F(13, 255) = 12.70, p < .001, \eta^2 = .39$ . Recall that in this study, these were traits that were developed about relationships in general rather than traits specifically associated with monogamy. Each individual item was significant; means and standard deviations for the items are presented in Table 4. However, one item “not jealous” was significant in the opposite direction. Thus, participants rated individuals in the CNM relationship as less jealous than the monogamous couple, suggesting that the halo effect surrounding monogamy is not absolute (consistent with research on limitations of other prominent halo effects; Eagly et al., 1991). However, the monogamous couple was perceived substantially

**Table 4.** Study 4: Means (Standard Deviations) for Targets in Monogamous and Nonmonogamous Relationships on Relevant General Relationship and Arbitrary Qualities

| Quality/characteristic                            | Relationship type |             |
|---|-------------------|-------------|
|   | Monogamous        | CNM         |
| General relationship                              |                   |             |
| Love each other                                   | 5.36 (0.83)       | 3.68 (1.75) |
| Respect one another                               | 5.35 (0.81)       | 3.74 (1.75) |
| Show kindness to one another                      | 5.23 (0.82)       | 4.16 (1.42) |
| Trust one another                                 | 5.33 (0.82)       | 4.31 (1.55) |
| Have many shared interests                        | 5.08 (0.99)       | 4.18 (1.33) |
| Are comfortable with one another                  | 5.49 (0.75)       | 4.62 (1.45) |
| Are equals  | 4.92 (0.95)       | 4.31 (1.53) |
| Having similar values                             | 5.28 (0.80)       | 4.69 (1.27) |
| Having good communication skills with one another | 5.14 (0.86)       | 4.57 (1.40) |
| Are honest with one another                       | 5.05 (0.96)       | 4.53 (1.62) |
| Have sex with each other frequently               | 4.30 (1.21)       | 3.86 (1.47) |
| Argue infrequently                                | 4.50 (1.11)       | 4.08 (1.13) |
| Are not jealous                                   | 4.36 (1.18)       | 4.75 (1.37) |
| Arbitrary   |                   |             |
| Invested in taking of others                      | 4.45 (1.10)       | 3.16 (1.45) |
| Satisfied with life                               | 5.05 (0.92)       | 3.84 (1.60) |
| Caring people                                     | 4.92 (0.97)       | 3.78 (1.32) |
| Law-abiding                                       | 4.84 (0.98)       | 3.79 (1.14) |
| Kind people                                       | 4.86 (0.88)       | 4.04 (1.09) |
| Reasonable  | 4.80 (0.84)       | 4.03 (1.27) |
| Consistent about recycling                        | 4.26 (1.13)       | 3.53 (1.15) |
| Warm  | 4.70 (0.94)       | 4.07 (1.24) |
| Likely to volunteer in their communities          | 3.89 (1.24)       | 3.30 (1.12) |
| Charismatic                                       | 3.93 (1.06)       | 4.42 (1.08) |
| Successful in their careers                       | 4.65 (0.93)       | 4.20 (1.02) |
| Likely to donate to charity                       | 3.89 (1.13)       | 3.55 (1.05) |
| Well educated                                     | 4.78 (0.92)       | 4.44 (1.07) |
| Likely to keep up with current events             | 4.31 (1.06)       | 3.97 (1.25) |
| Generous tippers                                  | 4.11 (0.99)       | 3.81 (0.98) |

*Note.* The items are ordered by mean differences between the monogamous and CNM condition, beginning with the item with the greatest mean difference.

more positively on a broad range of traits associated with good relationships in general, consistent with the existence of a halo effect surrounding monogamy and stigma associated with CNM.

### *Arbitrary Traits*

The second analysis included the arbitrary traits; these traits covered substantially greater ground than the arbitrary traits used in prior studies. As in prior studies, the monogamous couple was rated more positively on these arbitrary traits than the couple in the CNM relationship,  $F(15, 203) = 14.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .46$ . However, the magnitude of the effects was larger on many of the traits than

in prior studies, providing even stronger support for the notion that a halo effect surrounds monogamy. Each item was significant; means and standard deviations for the items are presented in Table 4.

In sum, preference for the monogamous relationship over the CNM relationship was evident even on measures related to relationships in general, rather than monogamous relationships specifically. Moreover, preferences for the monogamous couple versus those in the CNM relationship on traits that would seem to be irrelevant to relationships emerged once again; in this study those effects were of greater magnitude than in prior studies.

### General Discussion

The goal of the current research was to begin to ascertain the general public's attitudes toward monogamy and CNM. As the quote from Archbishop Dolan at the beginning of this article suggests, debates surrounding CNM (and, particularly, legislation that surrounds these issues) may occur in our society's near future. As a nonnormative sexuality, it is predictable that CNM is valued less than monogamy. But even still, the depth and pervasiveness of the bias and stigma toward monogamy is quite surprising. Consistent with the idea that a halo effect surrounds monogamous relationships, people perceived monogamous relationships to have wide-ranging benefits at the individual, family, and societal levels. The distinctions between monogamous and CNM relationships were similarly broad: participants assumed that people in monogamous relationships were happier in their relationships, sexually more satisfied, and simply better citizens than those in CNM relationships. Moreover, the belief that CNM people are lesser than monogamous people on a variety of traits held true among each social and cultural group that we studied, including people who were currently in CNM relationships. The halo was not absolute—CNM people were perceived more positively on a few traits—but monogamous relationships were favored pervasively and rather extremely over CNM relationships. Thus, consistent with the theoretical perspectives of halo effects and stigma, we concluded that a halo effect surrounds monogamy and extends to perceptions of people in monogamous relationships and stigma surrounds CNM relationships.

In addition, CNM relationships lack visibility within psychological theories and research. For example, most contemporary psychological theories of human development assume that a normal and healthy developmental transformation in one's life is to monogamous dyadic partnering (Bowlby, 1969; Erikson, 1982). Likewise, CNM individuals are also invisible within arguably the most popular conceptualization of close relationships, adult-attachment theory (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver & Hazan, 1988). Empirical research often relies on Western conceptualizations of romantic love, which place importance on monogamy (see Ryan & Jeth , 2010, for further discussion). Thus, monogamous relationships and

departures from monogamy (i.e., cheating) are a major focus of research within romantic relationship literature. Monogamy guides the development of theoretical frameworks addressing relationship processes.

Future research should investigate this phenomenon using representative samples. We suggest that the stigma may be even more pervasive with a random sample that includes people who, for example, do not have access to the internet and may have even less exposure to a variety of sexual mores (cf. Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004).

### **Future Directions: Is the Stigma Surrounding Consensual Nonmonogamy Warranted?**

A great deal of consensus emerged about the benefits of monogamy and the perceived superiority of monogamy over CNM across a wide variety of social groups. If it is true that monogamy does promote all the benefits suggested by the participants to a greater extent than CNM, it seems warranted that CNM relationships are stigmatized. Thus, we suggest that a next step for research on monogamy and CNM should assess whether the negative perceptions of CNM are accurate. We present some preliminary evidence concerning the presumed benefits of monogamy later.

#### *Relationship and Sexual Satisfaction*

Participants overwhelmingly believed that monogamous relationships would be more satisfying than CNM relationships. Prior research has addressed CNM behaviors of gay men, reporting results that contradict the expectations demonstrated by participants in the current studies. Specifically, gay men in sexually open relationships have been reported to be equally as happy and satisfied as those in monogamous relationships (Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Kurdek, 1991; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; LaSala, 2005). To the best of our knowledge, there is no research that examines satisfaction among heterosexuals. Similarly, assumptions that individuals in monogamous relationships have better sex lives than individuals in CNM relationships is neither currently supported nor refuted by empirical data.

#### *Sexual Health*

Participants also believed that engaging in monogamy prevents the spread of STIs. Although this would seem to be a foregone conclusion, given the ways in which monogamy is implemented, it is actually debatable whether monogamy effectively prevents STIs (Conley, Moors, Ziegler, & Karathanasis, in press). Thus, for monogamy to work, two individuals should postpone sexual activity until the STI symptoms from prior relationships have the opportunity to surface

(which can take several months) and then undergo STI testing. At that point, sexual activity can commence, but given that there are no tests for some STIs (i.e., human papillomavirus and herpes simplex virus) and that those same STIs can be asymptomatic, this process is not foolproof. However, monogamy is not typically implemented in even this imperfect way. Instead, serial monogamy—transitioning, sometimes rapidly, from one monogamous relationship to the next is the norm (Pinkerton & Abramson, 1993). Relationship partners often start by using condoms but switch to other forms of birth control (typically after the first month of dating) when they feel that they trust each other, often without any actual STI testing (Choi, Catania, & Dolcini, 1994; Civic, 2000; Critelli & Suire, 1998). Thus, these norms leave individuals vulnerable to STI transmission and infection. Moreover, cheating rates seem to be high (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2007), suggesting that even supposedly monogamous relationships may not be truly monogamous. Thus, though monogamy in theory provides substantial protection against STIs, it is not necessarily true that monogamy in practice is superior to CNM. Further research is needed to determine the rates of STI acquisition across CNM and monogamous individuals.

#### *Other Relevant and Arbitrary Dimensions*

Some of the other dimensions on which monogamy was perceived to be superior are not entirely logical. We have already established that monogamous relationships are thought to be slightly more positive on arbitrary dimensions, yet it seems wholly implausible that the sexual/romantic configuration of one's relationship could affect something as mundane as walking a dog. But even the more serious dimensions generated by the participants in Study 1 were not always logically consistent. For example, it is not clear why individuals with a greater number of partners would be lonelier. Likewise, one might assume that those who are engaging in CNM relationships would be *less* jealous and possessive of each other rather than more, given that they are openly allowing extradyadic relationships to occur. Moreover, traits related to parenting and financial stability seem similarly irrelevant. To the extent that CNM individuals do not introduce their children to their partners (or do not make the nature of their relationships known to their children), it is not clear that CNM parents would be different from parents that engage in other types of adult activity when children are not present.

### **Consensual Nonmonogamy and Civil Rights**

Of course, even if a relationship is less than optimal, it is not necessarily deserving of stigma and prejudice. Our work contributes to an ongoing discussion about alleviating relational stigma and affording privileges and rights to everyone to decide their own meanings and social scripts for love, romance, and relationships

(Abramson, 2007; Abramson et al., 2003). Psychologists have routinely involved themselves in a variety of movements to transform public perceptions of social groups. Ultimately, the goal of the current research is to start a conversation about monogamy and departures from monogamy, whether this is optimal or acceptable, and whether it is sensible to frame monogamy and departures from monogamy as a civil rights issue. We suggest that this conversation is long overdue, that these issues have been obscured by debates about whether monogamy is “natural” or not, and that those who practice consensual nonmonogamy are starting to be invoked in prominent political debates, which heightens the relevance of the current research. Whether the issues we address lead to solutions that are more focused on clinical issues (i.e., addressing problems related to consensual nonmonogamy) or social justice issues (providing a liberatory framework for understanding consensual nonmonogamy) remains to be seen. We would argue, however, that the very fact that we know so little about even this most basic question of whether consensual nonmonogamy is a problem or a legitimate relational approach is precisely the reason that this research needs to be done.

### Conclusion

In the current research, we set out to start a conversation about the functional utility of monogamous relationships in society, especially given the burgeoning number of portrayals of these relationships in moral and political debates. We ascertained that monogamy clearly seems to be privileged in contemporary U.S. culture and that this privilege extends across a broad range of domains. People assume that monogamy is beneficial for those involved in monogamous relationships, their families, and even society. We hope that researchers will empirically scrutinize the construct of monogamy and its relative benefits to assess whether this rosy perception is warranted.

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