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# Are Times A-Changin'? Exploring Current Perceptions of Individuals Based on Sexual and Relationship Orientations

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**ABSTRACT.** As perceptions held by individuals influence collective perceptions when they are largely held in common, there is value in capturing culturally current perceptions of individuals to assess if social shifts may be on the horizon. The purpose of this study was to explore if there were any significant differences in perceptions of couples based on their sexual orientation (heterosexual or homosexual) and their relationship orientation (monogamous or consensually nonmonogamous). To measure the perceptions of individuals with regards to sexual and relationship orientation, a sample of 37 college students were instructed to read narrative paragraphs about four couples. Participants were then asked to rate their perceptions of the couples on ten statements, with higher ratings indicating a more positive perception of the couple. There were significant main effects for both sexual orientation and relationship orientation, with the monogamous couples rated more positively regardless of sexual orientation and the homosexual couples rated more positively regardless of relationship orientation. These findings indicate that the perceptions people have of others in relationships are influenced by the sexual orientation and the relationship orientation of the people who form the relationship. Future work should examine this line of inquiry using more diverse samples to better understand associations between sexual and relationship orientations and person perception.

## Introduction

There are human relationships where ethical opportunities for meaningful romantic and sexual connections outside of a dyadic bond abound even after marriage vows have been exchanged or a commitment to forever together has been pledged. Commonly referred to as consensual nonmonogamy (CNM), such relationships are differentiated from polygamy or infidelity by a few characteristics: all parties and all genders are allowed additional partners, all involved parties give their consent regarding the exploration of romantic and/or sexual connections with other partners, and those involved engage in honest conversations and open negotiations relating to boundaries, rules, and expectations (Sheff, 2020). These relationships, though consensual, violate established principles of romantic relationship exclusivity—usually known as monogamy—which research shows remains the most widely accepted way of participating in romantic relationships (Séguin, 2019) throughout much of the world. Legal, social, and religious conventions often uphold the presumption of monogamy as both the ideal and only option available for respectable consenting adults (Emens, 2004), and research reveals that monogamy continues to be viewed as the relationship structure most likely to facilitate healthy achievement of sexual satisfaction and wellness, meaningful commitment, financial stability, and procreation (Valadez et al., 2020).

Though there is research to suggest an increasing openness to monogamy alternatives (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016), research also reveals CNM continues to be stigmatized in mononormative cultures. According to a thematic analysis of qualitative data gleaned through 482 comments on three articles related to aspects of CNM, Séguin (2019) discovered that many individuals viewed CNM as unsustainable, deficient, perverse, amoral, and unappealing even

when the CNM individuals featured in the articles made a point to declare they were happy and satisfied in their relationships. Such negative perceptions of CNM individuals are not limited to judgments about the romantic relationships shared by such couples. Four studies by Conley et al. (2013) revealed that even on arbitrary traits such as paying taxes or taking care of others, CNM couples were rated more poorly than monogamous couples. And Moors et al. (2013) discovered that even when it was explicitly stated that CNM couples were as happy as monogamous couples, participants still rated CNM couples as less acceptable than monogamous couples and less satisfied and lonelier than those in monogamous relationships. Such research brings to light the fact that even in the presence of information which contradicts one's notions about CNM, stigma against CNM still influences the perceptions of those in a CNM relationship.

There is empirical evidence suggesting that perceptions are beginning to shift, though, as younger generations show increasing levels of comfort with non-normative gender identities and relationship compositions (Stephens & Emmers-Sommer, 2020). Recent research indicates that 4-5% of Americans identify as CNM (TED, 2016), and emerging adults are already beginning to customize their relationships in ways which would have been considered taboo even twenty years ago. In fact, this shift towards people beginning to feel more comfortable identifying as CNM and increased social acceptance of CNM practices can be seen in the way that dating sites like OKCupid have modified available preferences to accommodate those seeking a CNM relationship (Stephens & Emmers-Sommer, 2020). At the individual level, then, are people becoming more accepting of CNM in a way that might eventually expand our cultural constructions of healthy, happy relationships to include those involving more than just two people? Research must continue to explore this possibility. Thus, the goal of this study was to explore how the sexual orientation and relationship orientation influenced the perceptions participants had of each particular couple presented to them.

In this study, we formulated the following hypotheses: 1) Regardless of sexual orientation, the monogamous couples would be rated the highest in perceptions, and the heterosexual couple would be the most well-perceived couple because they fit all dominant cultural norms. 2) The CNM couples would be rated less highly than the monogamous couples, and the CNM heterosexual couple would have the lowest perception rating out of all four couples. Heterosexual and homosexual monogamous couples would be perceived better on both relevant and arbitrary characteristics than the CNM couples.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were students at USC Upstate enrolled in the psychology subject pool through the SONA system as required by certain psychology classes. All participants voluntarily signed up for the study through the SONA system and received class credit for showing up to the study. Before the study began, all participants signed an informed consent form detailing their right to participate or not participate without adverse consequence for nonparticipation. As this study was completed as part of the research methods in psychology course, IRB approval was not required. Of the 37 participants who self-selected to be part of the study, 27 identified as female and 10 identified as male. The age range of participants was 17-49 years old with a mean age of 20.83 years. Identified races and/or ethnicities included 16 Black/African-American, 13 White/Caucasian, three Asian, one Arabic, and three Two or More participants. Twenty-three participants indicated they were not at all familiar with CNM, 12 indicated they were somewhat familiar with CNM, and two indicated they were very familiar with CNM. Twenty-eight participants identified as heterosexual and nine identified as non-heterosexual.

## Materials

Each participant received a survey packet containing definitions of monogamy and consensual nonmonogamy, individual narrative paragraphs about four different couples—monogamous and heterosexual, monogamous and homosexual, CNM and heterosexual, and CNM and homosexual—and a rating scale of perceptions for each of the four couples in the narrative paragraphs (see Appendix). The rating scale was modified from Conley et al. (2013) and included statements such as, “[Name of couple]’s relationship prevents jealousy,” “[Name of couple]’s relationship promotes self-acceptance,” “[Name of couple] likely follow traffic rules,” and “[Name of couple]’s relationship promotes self-acceptance” (see Appendix). Higher scores indicated a stronger positive perception that the named couple possessed the quality described in the statement.

## Procedure

Participants filled out the demographic information and signed the informed consent forms. Each participant was given a packet of four narrative paragraphs to read, with each paragraph on a separate page in the packet. One paragraph described a couple who was monogamous and heterosexual. One paragraph described a couple who was monogamous and homosexual. One paragraph described a couple who was CNM and heterosexual. And one paragraph described a couple who was CNM and homosexual. Since this was a within-subjects study design, the order of narrative paragraphs was counterbalanced between packets. Below each narrative paragraph were ten statements about the particular couple in the above paragraph. The participants were asked to rate each statement on the likelihood that the statement was true. The ratings were on a 1-6 Likert scale, with 1 indicating “It is very unlikely this statement is true,” and 6 indicating “It is very likely this statement is true.”

## Results

A 2x2 repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted to compare the overall perceptions of each couple based on their sexual orientation and relationship orientations (see Table 1). Results indicated that there was a highly significant main effect of relationship orientation,  $F(1,36) = 50.40$ ,  $p < .001$ , on overall scores with monogamous couples ( $M = 45.78$ ,  $SD = .91$ ) rated higher than CNM couples ( $M = 38.39$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) on the perception scale. Results also indicated that there was a significant main effect of sexual orientation,  $F(1,36) = 7.081$ ,  $p = .012$ , on overall scores with homosexual couples ( $M = 43.31$ ,  $SD = .85$ ) rated higher than heterosexual couples ( $M = 40.87$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) on the perception scale. There was no significant interaction between relationship orientation and sexual orientation on perceptions.

## Discussion

Consistent with findings by Moors et al. (2013), the results of this study indicate that participants had a poorer overall perception of CNM couples, regardless of sexual orientation. This finding was particularly interesting given that there was nothing in the narrative paragraphs of CNM couples that would indicate why they should be less satisfied, less committed, or less

likely to follow laws than monogamous couples. This finding seems to support assertions that the social construct of mononormativity and constraints against relationships that include more than two people strongly influence perceptions of others (Stephens & Emmers-Sommer, 2020).

While the hypothesis that monogamous couples would be rated more highly than CNM couples was supported by the data gathered, the homosexual monogamous couple was rated more highly than the heterosexual couple, indicating that participants had the overall most positive perception of the homosexual monogamous couple. Thus, the hypotheses regarding the ranked order of couples based on positive perceptions were not entirely supported. The monogamous homosexual couple was most positively perceived and the monogamous heterosexual couple was second most positively perceived. As hypothesized, the homosexual CNM couple was more positively perceived than the heterosexual CNM couple. The heterosexual CNM couple had the lowest overall positive perception according to the ratings.

A significant main effect of relationship orientation indicated that monogamous couples were rated more highly than CNM couples, regardless of sexual orientation. This result is consistent with the assertion that monogamy is the established cultural norm and CNM is viewed as deviant from that norm (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016). An unexpectedly significant main effect of sexual orientation indicated that homosexual couples were viewed more positively than heterosexual couples when relationship orientation was not a factor in perception. No significant interaction between relationship orientation and sexual orientation was discovered.

The implications of this study include the possibility that established cultural norms on sexual orientation impact perceptions less than they have in the past. While these results seem to indicate that younger generations are more accepting of sexual orientations outside of heterosexuality and thus do not perceive homosexual people less positively than heterosexual people, they also indicate that the cultural norm of monogamy still influences perceptions of people in a significant way.

Limitations of this study include the fact that study participants were limited to students recruited from the psychology department of one southeastern university. There is also the possibility that results were confounded by something in the narrative paragraphs which the researcher did not identify as a potential problem. Future studies would benefit from more experienced researchers reviewing the narrative paragraphs to ensure the identification and elimination of as many potential confounds as possible. Further studies could explore the impact of sexual and relationship orientations on perceptions with a larger sample taken from a population of adults with a wide range of ages and occupations to see if these factors influence differences in perception.

As stigma of any kind has consequences for those it touches, there is value in continuing to research the perceptions of others with regard to CNM relationships. CNM individuals often look to the history of other sexual minorities to assess the risk of being open about their CNM identity. In much the same way as LGBTQ individuals were once at even greater risk for adverse social consequences, work and housing discrimination, and legal ramifications, CNM individuals often fear they will face catastrophic sanctions should their identity as CNM be made common knowledge (Valadez et al., 2020). These fears are heightened in CNM individuals who also have children and are bolstered by incidents where children have been questioned by social workers or even removed from the home during a custody battle due to a parent's engagement in a CNM lifestyle (Sheff, 2015). Understanding how these individuals are perceived and if general perceptions are shifting towards a more accepting attitude may help researchers identify strongholds of stigma and could help guide interventions aimed at reducing stigma and negative sanctions directed at those in CNM relationships. Such interventions could help make society a more welcoming place for individuals who do not conform to mononormative culture.

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Table 1

*Perceptions of Couples Based on Sexual and Relationship Orientations*

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Heterosexual Monogamous	44.22	7.16
Heterosexual CNM	37.51	6.81
Homosexual Monogamous	47.35	6.70
Homosexual CNM	39.27	6.74



## Appendix

### Vignettes for Participants

#### Definitions:

**Monogamy:** A couple is emotionally, romantically, and sexually exclusive with each other.

**Consensual nonmonogamy:** A couple knowingly agrees that either member can have emotional, romantic, and/or sexual relationship with other people.

Tony and Melissa met in their junior of college, moved in with each other a month after graduation, and have been together for eight years. Tony says he fell in love with Melissa's insatiable sense of adventure, and Melissa appreciates Tony's out-of-the-box thinking when it comes to almost everything but the right way to load the dishwasher. Although they've never really discussed it beyond deciding to be exclusive with each other after four dates, Tony and Melissa are monogamous. A high school English teacher, Tony's coworkers are primarily women, but he only really socializes with two of the women from his department outside of work. Melissa is a CPA and owns an accounting firm with Marvin, her best friend from high school. Although Tony and Melissa have discussed the possibility of getting married, neither currently feels any strong desire to do so. They believe they will be together for the rest of their lives with or without a marriage certificate. With their busy schedules, they do not always have as much time together as they would like, but they share an interest in volunteering at the animal shelter, wine-tasting, and whitewater rafting.

**Given what you have read about Tony and Melissa, please read each of the following statements and then rate the likelihood that the statement is true. The rating scale is 1-6, with 1 indicating "It is very unlikely this statement is true," and 6 indicating "It is very likely this statement is true."**

Tony and Melissa's relationship prevents the spread of STIs/STDs.    1 2 3 4 5 6  
 Tony and Melissa's relationship prevents jealousy.    1 2 3 4 5 6  
 Tony and Melissa's relationship is something one can rely on.    1 2 3 4 5 6  
 Tony and Melissa's relationship is socially acceptable in society.    1 2 3 4 5 6  
 Tony and Melissa's relationship promotes communication.    1 2 3 4 5 6  
 Tony and Melissa likely follow traffic rules.    1 2 3 4 5 6  
 Tony and Melissa's relationship promotes trust.    1 2 3 4 5 6  
 Tony and Melissa's relationship promotes self-acceptance.    1 2 3 4 5 6  
 Tony and Melissa's relationship promotes honesty.    1 2 3 4 5 6  
 Tony and Melissa likely pay their taxes on time.    1 2 3 4 5 6

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 Are Times A-Changin'?
 

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## Definitions:

Monogamy: A couple is emotionally, romantically, and sexually exclusive with each other.

Consensual nonmonogamy: A couple knowingly agrees that either member can have emotional, romantic, and/or sexual relationship with other people.

Travis, a librarian, and Mike, a freelance writer, began dating after meeting at auditions for the Greenville Gay Men's Chorus. Although they are familiar with many ways that people choose to be in relationships, Travis and Mike are monogamous. They dated for two years before marrying and recently celebrated their sixth wedding anniversary. Their close-knit group of friends include men they dated before meeting each other, and it is through some of these friends that Travis and Mike became interested in hiking and backpacking. Travis is outdoors doing something with their friends almost every weekend in the summer, and Mike likes to tag along on the adventures about once a month. In addition to their love of all things musical, Travis and Mike share a hope to visit all the national parks in the United States and a fascination with classic movies from the 1930s to the 1960s. Travis is quick to say that he appreciates the way Mike is always open to a new perspective, and Mike says his favorite thing about Travis is his ability find solutions for even the most difficult of problems including whose family gets which holiday celebration every year.

**Given what you have read about Travis and Mike, please read each of the following statements and then rate the likelihood that the statement is true. The rating scale is 1-6, with 1 indicating "It is very unlikely this statement is true," and 6 indicating "It is very likely this statement is true."**

- Travis and Mike's relationship prevents jealousy.    1 2 3 4 5 6
- Travis and Mike's relationship prevents the spread of STIs/STDs.    1 2 3 4 5 6
- Travis and Mike's relationship is something one can rely on.    1 2 3 4 5 6
- Travis and Mike's relationship promotes communication.    1 2 3 4 5 6
- Travis and Mike's relationship promotes self-acceptance.    1 2 3 4 5 6
- Travis and Mike's relationship is socially acceptable in society.    1 2 3 4 5 6
- Travis and Mike likely pay their taxes on time.    1 2 3 4 5 6
- Travis and Mike's relationship promotes trust.    1 2 3 4 5 6
- Travis and Mike likely follow traffic rules.    1 2 3 4 5 6
- Travis and Mike's relationship promotes honesty.    1 2 3 4 5 6



**Definitions:**

**Monogamy:** A couple is emotionally, romantically, and sexually exclusive with each other.

**Consensual nonmonogamy:** A couple knowingly agrees that either member can have emotional, romantic, and/or sexual relationship with other people.

Chloe, an RN, and Dan, a vet tech, met during a psychology class during their freshman year at college almost eight years ago. What drew Chloe to Dan was his curiosity about life, and Dan was quick to appreciate Chloe's excellent communication skills, especially when it comes to navigating relationships of all sorts. Throughout the rest of their time in college, they were primarily together but also dated other people on and off. From the beginning of their relationship, Chloe and Dan have been consensually nonmonogamous. Although they legally married each other four years ago and intend to be together for the rest of their lives, they each continue to enjoy other relationships. In fact, Chloe's boyfriend Sam stays in their home whenever he visits the area and helps run the administrative side of the animal rescue Chloe and Dan started three years ago. And Amy, Dan's girlfriend of two years, often housesits for Chloe and Dan when they go out of town. Though they have busy schedules, Chloe and Dan make time to travel together every few months, and when they are at home, they enjoy gardening and being part of a neighborhood book club.

**Given what you have read about Chloe and Dan, please read each of the following statements and then rate the likelihood that the statement is true. The rating scale is 1-6, with 1 indicating "It is very unlikely this statement is true," and 6 indicating "It is very likely this statement is true."**

Chloe and Dan's relationship promotes honesty.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Chloe and Dan's relationship prevents the spread of STIs/STDs.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Chloe and Dan's relationship prevents jealousy.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Chloe and Dan's relationship is something one can rely on.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Chloe and Dan's relationship is socially acceptable in society.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Chloe and Dan likely pay their taxes on time.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Chloe and Dan's relationship promotes communication.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Chloe and Dan likely follow traffic rules.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Chloe and Dan's relationship promotes trust.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Chloe and Dan's relationship promotes self-acceptance.    1 2 3 4 5 6

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## Definitions:

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Cooper and Grayson were one of the first couples in their state to get married after gay marriage was legalized in the USA in 2015. They first met 10 years ago at a conference for new real estate professionals but did not begin dating until they connected over a real estate deal two years after that first meeting. Before establishing that they wanted a committed relationship, they decided they wanted to be consensually nonmonogamous. Recently Cooper, a real estate broker, and Grayson, a real estate agent, have opened their own firm in the Upstate. Establishing a business keeps them busy, but they make time for enjoying their shared interests together including experimenting with making all kinds of cheeses and then running off the calories from that hobby in 5Ks and half-marathons. Neither Cooper or Grayson have other committed relationships outside of each other right now, but both date as they want to and have had boyfriends in the past. Cooper appreciates Grayson's ability to logically solve even the stickiest of real estate problems, and Grayson says he appreciates Cooper's search for new experiences since it keeps their lives interesting.

**Given what you have read about Cooper and Grayson, please read each of the following statements and then rate the likelihood that the statement is true. The rating scale is 1-6, with 1 indicating "It is very unlikely this statement is true," and 6 indicating "It is very likely this statement is true."**

Cooper and Grayson's relationship prevents the spread of STIs/STDs.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Cooper and Grayson's relationship promotes self-acceptance.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Cooper and Grayson's relationship prevents jealousy.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Cooper and Grayson's relationship is something one can rely on.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Cooper and Grayson's relationship promotes communication.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Cooper and Grayson likely pay their taxes on time.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Cooper and Grayson likely follow traffic rules.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Cooper and Grayson's relationship promotes trust.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Cooper and Grayson's relationship promotes honesty.    1 2 3 4 5 6

Cooper and Grayson's relationship is socially acceptable in society.    1 2 3 4 5 6