

**A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Open Relationship  
Initiation and Maintenance**

**by**

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M.A., Simon Fraser University, 2020

B.A. (Hons.), Simon Fraser University, 2018

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in the

Department of Psychology  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Spring 2024

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## Abstract

Open relationships are a common form of consensual non-monogamy wherein partners consent to extra-dyadic sex with the expectation that outside experiences do not encroach upon the dyadic relationship. Although consensually non-monogamous relationships can be resilient and satisfying, people in open relationships tend to have lower relational quality compared to those in other types of relationships. This may be because individuals in open relationships enact unique or ineffective strategies for initiating and maintaining their relationships or face unique challenges in their relationships. I conducted semi-structured interviews ( $N = 10$ ) to examine how individuals initiate and maintain open relationships. Transcripts were coded using reflexive thematic analysis. Two themes were identified in relation to open relationship initiation: (1) Creating the Life I Want, and (2) It Made Sense Given the Circumstances. Three themes were identified in relation to relationship maintenance strategies: (1) Individual Effort, (2) Working Together, and (3) Community Support. Five themes were identified in relation to challenges faced in open relationships: (1) Stigmatization, (2) Difficult Dating Experiences, (3) Monogamy Hangover, (4) Managing Boundaries, and (5) Figuring Everything out From Scratch. Results indicate that individuals have diverse motives for initiating open relationships, most of which were internally motivated. Individuals reported many effective strategies for maintaining their relationship and that experiences of stigmatization and unlearning monogamous conditioning were the most challenging parts of being in an open relationship. However, many participants approached challenges willingly because of the opportunity to grow from them.

**Keywords:** open relationships; consensual non-monogamy; reflexive thematic analysis; relationship initiation; relationship maintenance

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the participants in this project who contributed their time and revealed such creativity, vulnerability, and strength in our interviews – none of this would have been possible without you.

I would also like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for supporting my work with a doctoral research fellowship.

To my supervisor, Dr. Rebecca Cobb, who has been with me from the beginning. Thank you for your guidance, honest feedback, and above all, your unfailing belief that I could do it. Thank you to my thesis committee and examiners for lending your time and expertise to this project. To my lab mates (Marissa, Jessica, Richard, Shuli, Nicole, Maron), thank you for being willing to share your experiences, opinions, and paper drafts with me over the years.

I must also acknowledge two professors from Langara College who helped me envision a future for myself beyond waiting tables. Thank you to Dr. Peter Babiak for teaching me how to write an essay and calling forth my appetite for chasing the hard work. Thank you also to Dr. Daniel Nykon who changed the next ten years of my life with one line of feedback: “This is excellent. Have you ever thought about graduate school?”

Thank you to my beloved friends - Cheyanne, Jess, Sara, Henri - for keeping my seat at the table all these years where conversations are warm and full of tenderness and belly aching laughter. Thank you also to my Mum, Caelea, Fran and Joe, who were always a phone call away to help recalibrate my perspective.

Finally, to my husband, Davie, and our sons Louis and Callum. Despite graduate school’s attempts to weary me, I have been sustained by the knowledge that I always have you to come home to. You remind me that the most intensive work deserves to be balanced by deep rest, joy, and playfulness. Thank you for sharing this life with me.

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# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

Open relationships are a common form of consensual non-monogamy (CNM) and have been defined as an arrangement in which individuals in a romantic dyad consent to independent sexual experiences with people outside the dyad with the expectation that outside experiences will not interfere with or encroach upon the dyadic relationship (Conley & Piemonte, 2021). Individuals in consensually non-monogamous relationships have complex sexual lives and are stigmatized (Conley et al., 2012; Conley et al., 2013), discriminated against (Cox et al., 2013), and dehumanized (Rodrigues et al., 2018) because of their relationships. Although individuals in consensually non-monogamous relationships can have resilient and satisfying relationships (e.g., Conley et al., 2017), people in open relationships tend to have lower relational quality compared to individuals in other types of consensually non-monogamous relationships (Conley et al., 2017; Hoff et al., 2010; Levine et al., 2018). There is a growing body of research that compares open relationships to monogamous, polyamorous, and swinging relationships (e.g., Conley & Piemonte, 2021; Hangen et al., 2020); much of which describes how individuals in open relationships score lower on traditional measures of relationship success (e.g., commitment, relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction). However, there is little research focused on why individuals in open relationships choose to engage in these relationships, or how they maintain satisfaction despite facing challenges.

Qualitative research may be especially helpful for elucidating how individuals in open relationships manage consensually non-monogamous experiences and may clarify some reasons for the lower relational functioning relative to other kinds of consensually non-monogamous relationships. Focusing on individuals' perspectives of their open relationships (i.e., in their own words) may provide a balanced view of strengths and weaknesses, which in turn may be used to improve researcher and clinician competency when working with such individuals. Thus, I used a qualitative design (i.e., reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews) to examine how individuals in open relationships initiate and maintain their relationship and their perceptions of primary challenges in their open relationships.

## 1.1. Consensually Non-Monogamous Relationships

CNM is an umbrella term that captures all types of consensually non-monogamous relationships in which at least one partner engages in extra-dyadic romantic or sexual relationships with the consent of the other partner(s) (Borgogna et al., 2021). A common type of CNM is an open relationship (Hauptert et al., 2017), which has been defined as a relationship in which at least one member of a couple engages in extra-dyadic sexual activity without their partner (e.g., Parsons et al., 2012). More specifically, open relationships are those in which individuals in a dyad seek outside sexual experiences independently, with the expectation that they will not allow the outside experiences to interfere with or encroach upon the dyadic relationship and will not fall in love with a partner outside the dyad (Conley & Piemonte, 2021). Open relationships are distinguished from other common forms of CNM such as polyamory, which involves partners maintaining multiple romantic, loving, or sexual long-term consensually non-monogamous relationships (Hauptert et al., 2017), or swinging, which involves mutual consensual involvement in extra-dyadic sex such as threesomes, group sex, or partner swapping (Conley & Piemonte, 2021; de Visser & McDonald, 2010). Although individuals in open relationships may engage in mutual extra-dyadic sex, they also tend to engage in extra-dyadic sex in the absence of their partner (e.g., dating in which their partner is not involved), whereas individuals in swinging relationships do not.

Open relationships are common, but inconsistent definitions of open relationships by researchers (see Rubel & Burleigh, 2018 for review) and stark differences in sample characteristics makes it difficult to know the exact prevalence of open relationships. For example, prevalence estimates of open relationships in Canada, the United States, and Norway range from 3-44.9% (Fairbrother et al., 2019; Hauptert et al., 2017; Rubel & Burleigh, 2018; Séguin et al., 2017; Starks et al., 2019; Træen & Thuen, 2022). This large range might be because some researchers have included polyamory and swinging in their definition of open relationship (e.g., Fairbrother et al., 2019; Starks et al., 2019), while others have defined open relationships as distinct from polyamory and swinging (e.g., Conley & Piemonte, 2021; Hauptert et al., 2017), which is consistent with my conceptualization. Another complication is that some researchers have conceptualized CNM as an identity, akin to how gender and sexuality are considered as part of a person's identity, while other researchers consider CNM to be a belief or preference

about how relationships should be, a relationship status, or a type of relationship agreement. Given the range of definitions and conceptualizations, it is hard to know exact prevalence rates. The best estimate might be from a nationally representative sample of Canadian adults in which 7.3% of participants identified as currently being in an open relationship defined as and having only one romantic or loving partner and an open sexual agreement (i.e., an explicit agreement that sex with outside partners was permitted) (Séguin et al., 2017).

Despite constituting a substantial minority of the Canadian population, individuals in open relationships tend to be stigmatized by the general population and by others within the CNM community. Experiences of stigmatization have significant negative implications for the personal and relational well-being of individuals in open relationships (Schmitt et al., 2014). Broadly speaking, consensually non-monogamous relationships are perceived by the public as less relationally and sexually satisfying, reliable, loving, and trusting than monogamous relationships (Cohen 2016; Conley et al., 2012). Individuals in consensually non-monogamous relationships are perceived as less human than monogamous individuals (Rodrigues et al., 2018) and consensually non-monogamous individuals seeking therapy are often faced with messages from therapists that CNM is bad, sick, and inferior to monogamous relationships (Schechinger et al., 2018). In addition to broad experiences of stigmatization, people in open relationships may also be disadvantaged and stigmatized within the CNM community. Conley and Piemonte (2021) suggest that there may be a hierarchy within CNM culture wherein polyamory is most privileged (i.e., perceived as the ideal form of CNM) and open relationships are devalued. As such, individuals in polyamorous relationships have the most access to community resources and support in the form of social media groups, meet ups, and relationships with metamours (i.e., one's partner's partner, with whom one is not directly sexually or romantically involved). In comparison, swinging and open relationships are viewed as less ethical because they prioritize a specific dyadic partnership over other relationships (Sheff, 2013).

Perceiving open relationships as less ideal might have some basis, given that compared to other types of CNM (i.e., polyamory), open relationships may be of lower quality. For example, individuals in open relationships are less relationally satisfied and less passionate than individuals in polyamorous and swinging relationships (Conley et al., 2017), and less satisfied (Conley et al., 2017; Levine et al., 2018), trusting,

committed, and intimate (Hoff et al., 2010) than those in monogamous partnerships. It is possible that open relationships are deficient in many ways compared to other types of consensually non-monogamous or monogamous relationships; however, it may be that other contextual factors not captured in existing research (e.g., experiences of stigmatization or isolation) are responsible for the differences in relational quality.

Much of the existing literature on open relationships focuses on basic differences between open relationships and monogamy and other types of CNM. Although understanding how open relationships function less effectively than other kinds of relationships is informative, there is little information about what individuals in open relationships might be doing well. This systematic devaluing of open relationships in published research might contribute to academic and clinical perceptions that open relationships are dysfunctional and might increase stigma of the group over time. Although individuals in open relationships may initiate and maintain their relationships in less effective ways than individuals in monogamous and other types of consensually non-monogamous relationships, there may also be ways in which individuals in open relationships are flourishing (i.e., initiating and maintaining their relationship successfully) that warrant investigation.

## **1.2. Relationship Initiation and Maintenance**

Examining why people decide to have open relationships might provide valuable information about the context in which open relationships are formed. Individuals in open relationships often report more extrinsic motivations for becoming non-monogamous (e.g., becoming long-distance, having incompatible sexual desires) than individuals in polyamorous or swinging relationships (Conley & Piemonte, 2021). However, self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggests that individuals will be most satisfied in their relationships when they are intrinsically motivated (i.e., driven by personal choice, values, and autonomy) as opposed to extrinsically motivated (i.e., driven by some external variable or environmental circumstance). Thus, types of motivations for initiating open relationship might help explain why individuals in open relationship report lower relational quality than those in polyamorous or swinging relationships. Additionally, it is unclear what (if any) intrinsic motivations individuals have for initiating open

relationships, an understanding of which could provide a more balanced view of open relationships.

In addition to understanding motivations for initiation, examining strategies that individuals in open relationships use for maintaining their relationship might provide a more balanced view of open relationships. Common relationship maintenance strategies in monogamous partnerships include expressing positivity, openness, offering assurances of commitment to one's partner (Canary & Stafford, 1992), having strong social networks, and sharing tasks (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2012). However, this research focuses on monogamous partnerships, and thus may not fully reflect strategies used by individuals in open relationships. Gay men in consensually non-monogamous relationships have reported the importance of egalitarianism, flexibility, and establishing boundaries for delineating safe sex behaviour (Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Philpot et al., 2018). Similarly, individuals in polyamorous relationships report that clear communication, processing difficult emotions, and having a mutual desire for variety helps them to maintain their relationship (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2018). However, not all individuals in open relationships are gay men, and there are salient differences between open relationships and polyamory, which suggests a gap in the current relationship maintenance literature.

Individuals in open relationships might also face unique challenges in maintaining relational quality. For example, individuals in open relationships are less likely than individuals in polyamorous relationships to seek their partner's explicit consent for specific acts of extra-dyadic sexual behaviour (Hangen et al., 2020), which may negatively affect trust and relationship satisfaction over time. Individuals in open relationships are also less likely to use effective communication strategies (e.g., expressing emotions, providing direct feedback) with their partners than those in polyamorous and swinging relationships (Conley & Piemonte, 2021), which might hamper their ability to maintain closeness and repair the relationship after conflict. Finally, individuals in open relationships have suggested that they do not feel a strong connectedness to the larger CNM community and have little contact with their partner's extra-dyadic sexual partners (Conley & Piemonte, 2021). This may result in an increased sense of isolation, increased jealousy, and lack of external support for their relationship (Easton & Hardy, 2009) and erode relationship quality over time.

### **1.3. Current Study**

I conducted a qualitative examination of how people in open relationships initiated and maintained their relationships with the specific goal of understanding how open relationships may be successful and to offer a balanced perspective of strengths and weaknesses. Given the dearth of information regarding how individuals in open relationships succeed in satisfying, supporting, and communicating with one another, a qualitative approach was ideal. Although there is some research that focuses on individuals' motives for participating in CNM broadly (e.g., Moors et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2021), it is unclear whether individuals in open relationships propound similar motivations. Similarly, there is some research that focuses on how consensually non-monogamous relationships are maintained, but it is largely focused on gay men in consensually non-monogamous relationships (e.g., Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Philpot et al., 2018) or on individuals in polyamorous relationships (e.g., Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2018; Rubinsky, 2019), which may not reflect the experiences of those in open relationships. To summarize, I aimed to better understand the strategies that individuals in open relationships employ to initiate and maintain their relationships and the challenges they face to provide a more balanced view of open relationships, and to provide useful information for future researchers and clinicians who work with individuals in open relationships.

## Chapter 2.

### Method

I used a semi-structured interview to gather qualitative data, and reflexive thematic analytic framework (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2017; 2021) to analyze the data. I chose semi-structured interviews as the data collection method to gather in-depth information about participants' experiences. In my prior research I have used quantitative (e.g., Likert-style questionnaires) and qualitative methods (e.g., open-ended questions where participants wrote a few sentences describing their experiences). Although these methods can be extremely useful for collecting large quantities of information, the information often lacks the richness that an interview can provide. I perceived RTA to be the best fit to answer my research questions because of the balance between structure and flexibility. RTA involves iterative, phase-based steps during the coding and thematic analysis process, and researchers' analysis is guided by their subjective interest, training, and curiosity.

#### 2.1. Participants

Participants ( $N = 10$ ) were in open relationships and fit the definition as being in a committed relationship that was consensually sexually non-monogamous (i.e., individuals had one committed romantic partner, they agreed that sexual interactions outside of the dyad were acceptable, but they were not in multiple emotionally committed relationships). Eligibility criteria included being aged 18 and older, in an open relationship of at least one year duration (to ensure some baseline level of relationship commitment among participants), English language fluency, access to the internet, and a Canadian bank account (for payment by e-transfer). I had no relationship with any of the participants prior to the onset of this project and maintained no relationships following study completion.

Participants ranged in age from 27.40 - 49.89 years old ( $M = 33.53$ ,  $SD = 6.73$ ), and lived in Canada (see Table 1). Participants identified as White ( $n = 8$ ), Latinx ( $n = 1$ ), and Bi/Multi-ethnic ( $n = 1$ ) and all held post-secondary degrees. Participants identified as cis-gendered men ( $n = 5$ ), cis-gendered women ( $n = 4$ ), and male/gender fluid ( $n = 1$ ).

Participants identified as bisexual/pansexual ( $n = 5$ ), queer ( $n = 1$ ), fluid (i.e., capacity for situation-dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness;  $n = 1$ ), gay ( $n = 1$ ), gynosexual (i.e., attraction to femininity, rather than an identified gender;  $n = 1$ ), and heterosexual ( $n = 1$ ). Relationship length ranged from 1-15 years ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 4.12$ ). Of the ten participants, six reported that their relationship had always been non-monogamous. The remaining four participants reported that their relationship began as monogamous and transitioned to consensual non-monogamy.

## 2.2. Procedure

All procedures were approved by the Simon Fraser University Research Ethics Board. The study was promoted on social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram), in department newsletter emails to students enrolled in psychology programs, on Craigslist, and on listservs related to CNM (e.g., [www.reddit.com/r/nonmonogamy](http://www.reddit.com/r/nonmonogamy)). Individuals who contacted the lab about another project on consensual non-monogamy (using the same recruitment methods) were also referred to this study if they fit the eligibility criteria. Participants were recruited from Facebook ( $n = 4$ ), word of mouth ( $n = 3$ ), Instagram ( $n = 2$ ), and Discord ( $n = 1$ ).

Interested individuals were asked to contact the lab by email, phone, or by scanning a QR code in the study advertisements and sharing their contact information in an online Qualtrics survey. Research assistants (RAs) then contacted the interested individuals to determine eligibility through a phone or Zoom screening call. At the start of the screening call, RAs asked for permission to ask questions to determine eligibility, to collect demographic information, and to maintain that information for future use. During phone screening, RAs defined open relationships as per the protocol (i.e., “We are defining an open relationship as being in one committed relationship that is sexually non-monogamous. This means that you have one primary committed partner, and you have agreed that sexual interactions outside of your relationship are ok, but you are not in multiple emotionally committed relationships”) and asked callers to confirm whether this described their current relationship. RAs also informed interested individuals that invitations to participate were in part determined by the need for sample diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation, and that if eligible, they would be notified within a few days of screening whether they would be invited to participate.

Based on demographic characteristics and the caller's description of their relationship, I confirmed eligibility and indicated a scheduling priority to ensure sample diversity. RAs scheduled Zoom interviews and sent participants an email with information about the study, their unique ID number, and a link to the consent form in a Qualtrics survey where they were asked to input their ID number and indicate their willingness to participate. No information other than ID number and confirmation of consent was collected in the Qualtrics survey.

Based on a review of studies that included thematic analysis, my goal was to complete 10 interviews to obtain a sample with some diversity in responses, age, ethnicity, and sexuality and to ensure a manageable commitment for a PhD project (i.e., in terms of time required to conduct and transcribe the interviews and to complete the thematic analysis). Data saturation (i.e., the point in data collection and analysis when no new themes emerge from the data) has been suggested by some qualitative researchers as a marker for estimating appropriate sample size (e.g., Guest et al., 2006), and has even been called “the flagship of validity for qualitative research” (Constantinou et al., 2017, p. 585). However, Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that the concept of data saturation is most applicable to qualitative projects that use top-down analyses, the use of a codebook, or reliability coding, and is less relevant for RTA. This is because top-down coding focuses on generalizability and replicability and assumes that themes are discrete entities that exist in a population awaiting discovery by the researcher. Also implicit in top-down coding is the assumption that there is a determinable and fixed point that is appropriate to stop data collection. Instead, Braun and Clarke suggest that the quality of the data (i.e., richness, depth, diversity, and complexity) should be considered instead of frequency and saturation of themes. RTA is an iterative process whereby the researcher engages with the data to produce themes that tell a compelling, coherent, and useful story. Thus, instead of estimating whether saturation has been reached, Braun and Clarke suggest that researchers ask whether their themes offer useful insights that speak to the topic in relation to the context and sample; if so, then data collection may be considered complete. Thus, once I had 10 usable interviews, I evaluated the raw data (i.e., recorded videos) to determine whether I had substantial richness to complete this project and I decided to end data collection and begin data analysis.

Of the 101 individuals who contacted the lab about the project, 21 were deemed eligible by research assistants, 15 interviews were scheduled, one participant did not show up to their interview, and 14 interviews were completed (12 by me and 2 by another graduate student). Interviews from three participants were excluded because during the interview it became clear that they were ineligible because they were in polyamorous (i.e., multiple committed relationships) rather than open relationships ( $n = 3$ ; 2 of these were interviews conducted by the graduate student research assistant), and one participant asked for their data to be deleted from the study.

### **2.3. Interview Procedure**

At the beginning of the Zoom interview, participants confirmed that they were in a private, quiet place. The interviewer reviewed the main points of the consent form (e.g., confidentiality, how data would be maintained) and answered any questions the participants had at the start of the interview. Once consent was given, recording (audio, video, and transcript) began, and the semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews were 45-90 minutes in duration. Following completion of the interview, the interviewer asked participants if they still felt comfortable having their interview used as a part of the study or if there was any part of the interview that they would like redacted. Participants were informed that once their interview was transcribed, they would have the opportunity to review their transcripts to ensure that it fairly represented their words and thoughts and to indicate any parts of the transcript they wished to be deleted. Upon completion of interviews, the participants received a \$50 email money transfer.

### **2.4. Transcription**

A team of three RAs conducted the initial transcription and checking of the transcripts. Interviews were assigned to an RA to transcribe by reviewing the Zoom transcript while listening to the audio or video recording and correcting errors and adding relevant information not captured by the Zoom transcription (e.g., crying or laughing). Any personally identifying information was redacted (e.g., if a participant said they worked as a weather announcer at a specific radio station, this would be redacted to indicate that they worked at a radio station), and names were changed to initials. A second RA reviewed all transcripts in the same manner to correct any errors. Completed

transcripts were shared as password protected word documents with the participant through a university cloud sharing service, to give them an opportunity to review the transcript to indicate any parts of the transcript they wished to be deleted or to add any additional thoughts. Participants either indicated that they had reviewed their transcript and had no requests for changes ( $n = 8$ ), or they did not reply to our offer to review their transcript within the two-week window ( $n = 2$ ). No participants requested any changes, additions, or deletions and therefore there were no changes to transcripts following completion of transcription.

## **2.5. Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

Transcripts were coded using NVivo coding software (Version 12) and RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2017; 2021). RTA is not bound by a particular theoretical approach (although it is not necessarily atheoretical), which makes it a versatile choice for understanding diverse data. This approach provides a systematic procedure for generating codes and themes from qualitative data. There are multiple ways to practice RTA, which means that two researchers who use RTA might engage in different processes (e.g., independent or collaborative, semantic or interpretive, realist or constructionist analyses) and make different decisions regarding the data. However, the underlying assumptions (i.e., regarding the subjectivity of the researcher, active engagement with data, construction of themes rather than discovering positivist truths about the data) and phases of RTA ideally remain consistent. RTA also requires that the researcher be truly reflexive. In other words, the researcher must act as an active agent in the production of knowledge. To adhere to this tenet, I present the following analytic section as a first-person account of how I engaged with and made decisions about how to interpret the data (Hill et al., 1997; Pillow, 2003). In the “Researcher Identity” section, I will also discuss how my personal identity, research interests, and education may have influenced my interpretations.

In RTA, codes are considered the smallest meaningful units of data that capture analytic observations with usually just one idea or facet. Themes are then constructed from codes and represent multifaceted ideas. In other words, themes have a core or an essence that is evident in all the codes nested within. Themes may then be organized within a larger organizing framework of the researcher’s choosing (e.g., categories). RTA

consists of six phases: familiarization with the data, generating codes, constructing themes, revising themes, defining themes, and producing the report. Progression through the phases is an iterative process that involved constantly returning to earlier phases when new interpretations or knowledge are integrated.

This project took approximately 2.5 years to complete. The following breakdown of my time does not equal 2.5 years exactly because many of these processes overlapped but may still be helpful to understand the iterative process of RTA. Reading about qualitative analyses and consensual non-monogamy has been ongoing for years but reading specifically focused on RTA and project planning (e.g., meeting with supervisor and fellow graduate students, applying for ethics, writing the PhD proposal, meeting with committee members) took approximately 12 months. Interviewing, orienting, and training research assistants in transcription and RTA took approximately 3 months. Recruiting, screening, and interviewing participants (conducted simultaneously) took place over 8 months and transcription took place over 4 months. Weekly (Zoom) group coding meetings took place over 4 months. Cyclical movement between individual coding refinement, theme generation, and writing took place over approximately 10 months.

### **2.5.1. Familiarization with the Data**

I conducted all interviews with the 10 eligible participants and to become more familiar with the data, I watched each interview recording at least once and read the completed transcripts multiple times. Throughout this process, I journaled about my experience, my impressions of the participants, and any judgments or assumptions that arose. I also discussed my impressions of each interview with my coding team (described in the next section).

### **2.5.2. Generating Codes**

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that researchers should make several a priori decisions regarding their data analytic plan (i.e., to code inductively or deductively; on a semantic or interpretative level, within a realist/essentialist or constructionist paradigm). First, I coded the data using an inductive, or bottom-up approach where theoretical interest did not drive identification of codes and coding remained aligned with the reflexive nature of thematic analysis. My theoretical interest and training guided my

coding, but I did not aim to fit data into preselected boxes as with a deductive approach. Second, I coded the data at a semantic level by identifying codes in the explicit or surface level meanings of participants' responses without constructing meaning beyond the participant's actual response. Third, I coded the data using a realist/essentialist paradigm, which means I interpreted participant motivations, experiences, and meaning of their responses in a relatively straightforward way, and assumed a unidirectional relationship among meaning, experience, and language. I made these coding decisions because they were aligned with the manner in which I hoped to construct themes (i.e., straightforward, clear, minimally interpretative) and how I hoped the data would be useable to others (i.e., optimally usable for people with minimal specialized training).

To remain consistent in my coding plan, I met weekly with my coding team to discuss the interviews, our experiences reading/watching/listening to them, and any assumptions we were making about the data. Each RA also maintained an independent NVivo project where they coded according to their unique interpretations, wrote notes, and journaled about their assumptions. For this study, the goal of group meetings was not to come to a consensus about the coding or to eliminate bias. Instead, it was to discuss the ambiguities and multiple meanings that might be interpreted in the data, and to provide a venue to articulate our thought process when generating codes for our individual NVivo coding files.

Once all the group coding meetings for all ten interviews were complete, I read each transcript and reviewed codes again to ensure that each code represented a consistent interpretation of the data. I deleted some codes that were not applicable to open relationships specifically (e.g., if a participant described what drew them to their partner, that may have been relevant for why they chose to be in a relationship with their partner but was not specific to why they wanted to be in an open relationship). Throughout this process, I saved multiple versions of the coding file to reflect each iteration of code generation.

### **2.5.3. Constructing Themes**

To construct themes, I first collated participant responses into clusters of codes with thematic similarities (e.g., shame, guilt, and jealousy together as a negative emotion cluster). I then reviewed themes to further refine them (i.e., split themes that had too much diversity and combined themes that were similar in content to ensure adequate

internal homogeneity within themes and external heterogeneity between themes). During this phase, it became evident to me that participant responses involved intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual clusters of information in all three categories (i.e., relationship initiation, maintenance, and challenges). To clarify the most coherent way to present the data, I reviewed relevant literature, and consulted with my supervisor and other members of my research team. I also drafted the results section of this manuscript with preliminary themes to clarify definitions and to consider coherence of relevant examples. In this first iteration of theme construction, themes were simple and repetitive and reflected a basic categorization of codes (e.g., intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual initiation motives; intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual relationship maintenance strategies; intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual challenges).

#### **2.5.4. Revising Themes**

To revise the themes, I continued journaling about my evolving interpretations of the data, and incorporated information from relevant literature and guidance from my senior supervisor. During this phase, I began drawing thematic maps to visualize clusters of codes and their relation to each other. By visualizing the codes in this way and considering how I had labeled and clustered them into themes, I began to realize that my first iteration of themes was insufficiently informative about the codes within, and that there was insufficient internal homogeneity within some themes. Thus, I returned to the previous phase (constructing themes) and began moving through the steps once again.

#### **2.5.5. Defining Themes**

To clarify definitions of themes, I continued refining thematic maps and updating the coding. I also considered multiple potential names for themes (e.g., simple definitions such as “negative emotions” or first-person descriptions such as “I suffer with painful emotions”), and which names best captured the participants’ words and my interpretations of their meaning. For each theme, I defined and describing the codes nested within the theme in a few sentences. If I had a difficult time describing the codes, this was often a sign that there was insufficient internal homogeneity within the theme. If I noticed similar descriptions of themes, this was often a sign that there was insufficient external heterogeneity between themes. I also spent a considerable amount of time thinking about how each theme related to each individual interview and the data set as a

whole. In general, I aimed to develop a story about the experiences of participants in my sample and themes that represented those experiences. During this phase of the analytic process, I also met multiple times with my senior supervisor and fellow graduate students who have expertise in CNM research to discuss my definitions and descriptions of themes to ensure a degree of face validity to my interpretations.

### **2.5.6. Producing the Report**

To produce this report, I followed the steps outlined in my PhD proposal (e.g., organization of introduction and methods sections), and referenced information in Braun and Clarke's descriptions of RTA (2006; 2017; 2021a; 2021b) and in other articles that used RTA (e.g., Trainor & Bundon, 2021). I also aimed to follow the American Psychological Association's reporting standards for qualitative research (2020). I reviewed each version of my coding process (contained within separate iterations of NVivo coding projects), and notes from group coding meetings, consultations with my senior supervisor, and presentations I had given on the topic (i.e., PhD proposal meeting, lab meetings, research conferences).

### **2.5.7. Researcher Identity**

In RTA, the analytic goal is not to unearth the objective truth about the data, but rather to construct meaning from the data. An assumption of RTA is that the meaning one researcher constructs may be very different than what another researcher might construct. For that reason, it can be helpful to understand the identity, training, and orientation of the researcher to better understand the narrative they develop from the data. I am a doctoral student studying clinical psychology in a large Canadian city. I identify as a cis-gendered White woman, as sexually fluid, and am married to a cis-gendered man. My relationship is currently monogamous, but this is a flexible boundary that is open to negotiation. This identity (e.g., my monogamous marriage) separates me from most of my participants while also relates me to them (e.g., despite being monogamous, my husband and I have explored different boundaries and have had many conversations about what feels right for us as a couple). Thus, I have a personal interest in how partners make open relationships work. During the development and implementation of this project, I worked to maintain self-awareness and to clarify the boundary between necessary research questions and those that arose from personal curiosity. Thus, I revised the semi-structured interview script multiple times, and openly

engaged with participants to omit or delve deeper into topics depending on my perceptions of their comfort and the quality of the information I received from them, rather than simply relying on my personal interest in a topic.

In my research, I am interested in how individuals communicate about sexuality, boundaries, and non-monogamy with their partners. As a clinician, I work with clients experiencing anxiety, depression, trauma, grief, and sexual concerns. My research and clinical work are informed by an education in couples communication, attachment, self-expansion, cognitive behavioural (CBT) and dialectical behavioural (DBT) theories. This education provided me with a particular theoretical base to build my understanding. For example, one participant explained to me that when they felt hurt by their partner but wanted to remain connected and in conversation, they practiced deep breathing and reminded themselves that their first reaction is not always the most accurate reaction. This information seemed important to me because as a therapist, I understand the benefits of emotion regulation (i.e., intentionally modulating one's own emotional state) and cognitive restructuring (i.e., identifying and changing maladaptive thoughts) for individual and relational outcomes. Thus, I inquired more about how those strategies were enacted in the moment. Had I not been trained in CBT or DBT, I am not sure I would have found the same strategies important or would have engaged with participants in the same way. My clinical training also fostered basic interviewing skills. I was able to listen actively, reflect, and express empathy without including my opinion, which helped me to quickly build rapport with participants.

In other ways, my clinical training presented a challenge. In this study, my goal was to be an interviewer, not a therapist. This sometimes felt foreign, detached, and uncomfortable. For example, one participant disclosed their experience of sexual trauma. I noticed urges to validate them, to slow down our interview, to ask more questions, to assess symptoms, and to discuss the meaning they drew from that experience. Simply taking in the information and allowing them to share without using my full range of therapeutic skills sometimes felt cold. In other situations, participants shared dialectical strategies to communicate openly while also feeling intense jealousy, shame, or fear. In these cases, I noticed urges to applaud them and to discuss how challenging it can be to hold two truths at the same time. Although I noticed these urges, I resisted acting on them and did my best to maintain my role as an empathic and nonjudgmental interviewer.

At the end of each interview, I asked participants how they felt about the topics we covered, and if they had any feedback for me about the interview process. Some participants provided feedback on my interview style (e.g., “you were neutral” or “it was easy to warm up to you”). Others described their reactions to the questions themselves (e.g., “[the questions] made me think about things I hadn’t in a while”) or mentioned topics that I had not asked about specifically but they wanted to share (e.g., how their sexual orientation was related to their decision to be in an open relationship). Several participants also expressed gratitude because they felt this research project provided validation and respect for their relationship, and they hoped it would provide useful information for others who might be interested in establishing or transitioning into an open relationship.

## **2.6. Measures**

### **2.6.1. Demographic Factors**

Participants provided demographic information (i.e., date of birth, level of education, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and relationship length) during the phone screening interview with RAs.

### **2.6.2. Semi-structured Interview**

The structure and organization of the semi-structured interview was based on guidance from McIntosh and Morse (2015). Interview probes were based on an analysis of literature about open relationships (e.g., Conley & Piemonte, 2021; Hangen et al., 2020) and my specific areas of interest. The semi-structured interview (see Appendix for the full interview schedule) focused on three main relationship experiences: relationship initiation, maintenance, and challenges. Regarding relationship initiation, I inquired about how participants’ relationship began and what motivated them to establish an open relationship. Regarding relationship maintenance, I inquired about what made them feel satisfied in their relationship, and probed specifically about relationship boundaries (e.g., rules or agreements), communication, support, and community connectedness. Regarding relationship challenges, I inquired broadly about what were the most difficult parts about being in an open relationship, and probed specifically about boundary

violations, communication challenges, conflict, and uncomfortable emotional experiences.

## **Chapter 3.**

### **Results**

#### **3.1. Open Relationship Definitions**

In the phone screen interview, all ten participants agreed that their relationship fit the study's definition of open relationships, which I described as a committed relationship that is sexually non-monogamous (i.e., having one committed romantic partner, and an agreement that sexual interactions outside of the dyad are acceptable). This definition focused explicitly on behaviour and the couple's agreement about emotional and sexual experiences with others and did not reference open relationships as a relationship identity, orientation, or belief about how relationships should be. However, when RAs asked participants what label they preferred to describe their relationship, they provided diverse responses. Of the 10 participants, 7 reported they were in an open relationship, 2 said they were in a consensually non-monogamous relationship, and 1 said they were in a hierarchically non-monogamous/progressive swinging relationship. When RAs asked participants to further elaborate and explain what being in an open relationship meant to them during the phone screen, participant responses varied greatly (see Table 2). For example, most participants expressed sexual non-monogamy as a core part of their definition. However, others mentioned freedom, non-ownership over their partner's decisions, not making any assumptions, and prioritizing the dyadic relationship as part of what open relationships meant to them.

#### **3.2. Initiation**

To assess what motivated individuals to initiate an open relationship (or transition to an open from monogamous relationship), I asked participants how their current relationship began, and why they wanted to have an open relationship. I identified two themes within the relationship initiation category: (1) Creating the Life I Want, and (2) It Made Sense Given the Circumstances. Codes are described below, in descending order

of how frequently the theme was represented across all interviews. A summary of initiation themes and codes is in Table 3.

### **3.2.1. Initiation Theme 1: Creating the Life I Want**

The theme Creating the Life I Want includes internally motivated reasons that participants had for initiating open relationships. The common thread between all motives in this theme is that participants described an internal motivation to achieve a certain kind of life (either replete with desirable attributes or devoid of undesirable attributes) that having an open relationship would help them achieve. In other words, participants perceived an open relationship as ideal for them, and they reported a sense of self-determination in choosing this kind of relationship. Codes nested within this theme include (a) Avoid Restrictions of Monogamy, (b) Increase or Maintain Authenticity, (c) Increase or Maintain Autonomy, (d) Have New Sexual Experiences, (e) Connect Intimately with Others, (f) Best of Both Worlds, (g) Avoid Work of Polyamory, and (h) Increase or Maintain Dyadic Sexual Energy.

**Avoid Restrictions of Monogamy.** Some participants perceived monogamy to be monotonous, boring, or unrealistic, and they strove to avoid these qualities in their relationship. Participants also sometimes described disliking the pressure to fulfill all their partners' needs in a monogamous relationship, and they preferred a relationship that allowed for more flexibility in getting their and their partner's needs met. For example, Participant 2 (male, heterosexual) explained that "sometimes the way that we spend our time together, I find to be a little underwhelming. Yeah, we don't have an exciting lifestyle, the two of us together. [...] I recognize that I've got a good thing, and that she doesn't leave me. But there are times, like she's safe... and yeah, there are times where I want to go roll the dice on an explosive person." Similarly, Participant 3 (male, queer) explained that they began to disagree with "the notion that you just depend on this one person for every need. We started to feel like it's just not enough for us. There's something about those friends of ours who are finding complementary interests and desires with [extra-dyadic] others [and] that sounds way more fun than what we have [i.e., monogamy]."

**Increase or Maintain Authenticity.** Some participants reported that an open relationship felt natural or was aligned with their values, preferences, or personality. For

example, Participant 9 (male, gynesexual) explained that open relationships just “made a lot of sense and resonated with me as soon as I heard about it [as a teenager]. And to be clear, I was not really sexually active as a teen. It just sort of made sense to me that you wouldn’t necessarily need those [monogamous] rules to [...] make it the most truthful, deep, and loving relationship possible. And I feel like I’ve had that ideology of mine proven very true.” Similarly, Participant 5 (male, bisexual) explained that “the ability to be more authentically you [was appealing...] I like being in a relationship with a woman who doesn’t find sex between men abhorrent or disgusting, in fact, she celebrates it.”

**Increase or Maintain Autonomy.** Some participants reported that being in an open relationship aligned with their desire for freedom or flexibility in all aspects of their lives. Participant 1 (female, bi/pansexual) explained that in an open relationship, “I am able to prioritize myself. [...] I told [my partner] from the beginning that I am going to be my priority. That I have my goals, I have plans for the future, and I have dreams I want to pursue, and there’s no way I’m going to sacrifice that for anybody from now on, because I did that in the past and I don’t want to do that again.” Similarly, Participant 10 (female, bi/pansexual) reported that what appealed most to them about having an open relationship was “definitely just the autonomy associated with it. I think [...] the longer you’re dating someone, the easier it is to fall into habits of codependence. And I think that open relationships and non-monogamy help support individualism.”

**Have New Extra-Dyadic Sexual Experiences.** Some participants explained that being in an open relationship would allow them to have more diverse sexual experiences (e.g., with new partners, in new places, exploring different kinks). For example, Participant 3 (male, queer) explained that “we started meeting really cool people along the way and I had [sexual] experiences that I would never have with [my partner]. So for me, that’s such a bonus. I only live once [and] I want to have experiences that sexuality can provide.” For example, Participant 6 (female, bi/pansexual) explained “I use bi and pan interchangeably. And when I was monogamous, I’d always been terrified at the idea of dating someone of another gender, because it felt like a really big commitment. I was from a small town, and it was like, if a woman dated another woman, it was like ‘Oh she’s a lesbian now.’ It felt like there was no such thing as being sexually fluid, and it was a commitment. And non-monogamy really let me explore that in a way that felt very

low pressure and helped me figure out how I identified sexually; it helped me figure out things I enjoyed sexually in a way that didn't feel as scary."

**Connect Intimately with Others.** Some participants expressed that they hoped that being in an open relationship would provide them with more connection with others, larger social networks, and a sense of belonging. For example, Participant 3 (male, queer) explained that being in an open relationship provided him with "a much larger network of people. For me, open relationships are not simply about sleeping with others, but I think also about having relationships with others, friends with benefits." Similarly, Participant 8 (male/gender fluid, gay) explained, "I guess the culture around dating and queer dating, especially in college... created a space where monogamy didn't have to be the only option. And I think what mattered to me a lot, and still does, is the belonging."

**Best of Both Worlds.** Some participants reported that they specifically sought an open relationship because they perceived it would afford them the best of both worlds. Specifically, they wanted the stability of a pair-bond relationship while also having sexual freedom and new experiences. For example, Participant 8 (male/gender fluid, gay) explained that "a lot of the world has been built for a pair-bond relationship [...] and so pair belonging [sic] feels like the safest and most satisfying option [...] I don't think open relationships organize in the same way that poly does, and I'm okay with that. I think the fun part about an open relationship is it really operates like a monogamous relationship would, and we both also get to have our independent sex lives if we want to." Some participants also acknowledged that value of their relationship did not necessarily hinge on sexual monogamy. In other words, they could maintain the importance of their dyadic relationship while also having sex with other people. Participant 10 (female, bi/pansexual) explained that she has "this philosophy that caring or intimate friendships or sexual relationships with other people don't take away from the sacredness of your main relationship."

**Avoid Work of Polyamory.** Some participants expressed that they consciously avoided polyamorous relationships because they perceived them as much more work than an open relationship. For example, Participant 8 (male/gender fluid, gay) explained that "the idea of a polyamorous relationship [...] sounds very scary, because it means there's even more needs and jealousy to negotiate, there's even more complexity, and it just feels like [achieving] a clear win-win for every decision you make seems harder and

harder to achieve.” Similarly, Participant 4 reported “the idea of having a whole other partner [...] sounds very tiring really.”

**Increase or Maintain Dyadic Sexual Energy.** Some participants described that they hoped to increase or maintain a sense of excitement, freshness or novelty in their dyadic relationship, and that having sex with others brought more sexual energy to their relationship. For example, Participant 7 (female, bi/pansexual) explained that “it felt really exciting the first time... we [my partner and I] met up right after and it actually made us feel more sexually interested in each other. It was kind of novel and stuff like that. Again, it felt pretty taboo for obvious reasons, and then also kind of felt like our little secret.” Similarly, Participant 6 (female, bi/pansexual) explained that “the kind of novelty of an open relationship really actually helps [my partner] bring more sexual energy back into our relationship as well. And I would say that our sex life is generally at its best and most satisfying when we both have other things on the go. Like our sex has always been great and fulfilling, but we just bring more of that energy back to each other when we have other things on the go.”

### **3.2.2. Initiation Theme 2: It Made Sense Given the Circumstances**

The theme It Made Sense Given the Circumstances includes externally motivated reasons that participants had for initiating open relationships. In other words, participants described establishing or transitioning into an open relationship as necessary or logical to meet the demands of their circumstances at the time. Some participants who opened their relationship for circumstantial reasons said they would not have otherwise chosen an open relationship (i.e., an open relationship was not a part of their ideal life, at least at the time that they initiated the relationship). However, all participants who indicated some external motivation also reported at least one internal motivation. Codes nested within this theme include (a) Coping with Long-Distance, and (b) Aligning with Partner CNM Status.

**Coping with Long-Distance.** Some participants reported that living apart for work or travel was part of the reason they originally established an open relationship agreement. For example, Participant 3 (male, queer) explained that “I moved to a different province by myself because of work. So, we were separate, geographically speaking, for almost a year. So for us it made sense like, ‘You know what? We’re

physically separate, you can do your thing. I'll do mine.” Similarly, Participant 4 (male, sexually fluid) explained that although they and their partner considered other types of consensually non-monogamous relationships, they decided on an open relationship dynamic because “while I was doing a lot of travel [...] it didn't make sense to start developing relationships that were going to be long term, so I was kind of pursuing more long-term [friendship] things. And I was really enjoying that dynamic of being able to be genuine friends with somebody and sometimes we have sex.”

**Aligning with partner CNM status.** One participant reported their partner explained to them when they met that they were only interested in having a non-monogamous relationship. Participant 6 (female, bi/pansexual) explained, “[my partner] and I had done the work going into our relationship. For some context, it started out as non-monogamous. I'd always previously been monogamous, and he'd always previously been non-monogamous. So when we got together, he had a conversation with me like, ‘yes, I'm interested in you, but just so you know, this would be what our relationship would look like.’”

### **3.3. Relationship Maintenance**

To assess how individuals maintained their open relationships, I asked participants what makes them feel satisfied, how they support each other, how they help each other feel comfortable with having an open relationship, and how they manage conflict. I identified three themes within the relationship maintenance category: (1) Individual Effort, (2) Working Together, and (3) Community Support. A summary of relationship maintenance themes and codes is in Table 4.

#### **3.3.1. Relationship Maintenance Theme 1: Individual Effort**

The theme Individual Effort includes relationship maintenance strategies that participants engaged in independently to maintain their relationship. In other words, behaviours that participants engaged in separately from their partners, and that they perceived benefitted their open relationship. Some strategies helped them to make decisions about what kind of relationship they wanted, to improve communication skills,

to maintain their desired balance of closeness and independence with their partner, and to navigate challenges. Codes nested within this theme include (a) Regulating Emotions and (b) Seeking Information.

**Regulating Emotions.** Participants frequently reported that regulating their own emotions (i.e., understanding, labeling, and changing the intensity of their emotional experiences and expressions) allowed them to maintain the quality of their open relationship. Participants described that they regulated unwanted or unpleasant emotions with strategies such as cognitive reframing, taking time apart to calm down, mindfulness, positive self-talk, and acceptance. For example, Participant 1 (female, bi/pansexual) explained, “I try to deal with [the emotion] myself initially and rationalize it. I break down why I feel like this, where this is stemming from, what does it mean, and what can I do about it. Or maybe try to change the narrative of the thoughts I have.” Similarly, Participant 8 (male/gender fluid, gay) explained that when he feels an intense emotion, “I personally try to take time to process and distract myself [...] I don’t get to just bring raw emotion because it’s really hard for someone else to hold it. [...] When your partner hears it unprocessed, they feel all the ways they could be doing wrong, and it’s very easy for your partner to project all the fears and bad thoughts onto it. And so I try to make sure I’m not bringing it too raw, and not to be super reactive, and instead just like ‘Okay, I had this emotion, this hit me, cool, let me think about why that is, what’s going on, what is the need behind it.’ And then when we do talk it through, it’s a lot better to figure out what’s really going on.”

**Seeking Information.** Participants described efforts to learn more about open relationships by reading books, listening to podcasts, and engaging in psychotherapy. Participants reported that these activities helped them engage with their partner more sensitively, design their ideal relationship agreements, and establish reasonable expectations. For example, Participant 6 (female, bi/pansexual) explained, “I had a counsellor I started seeing solo to do the work on my own at a clinic here... and they specialized in therapy around non-monogamy or queer relationships.” Similarly, Participant 4 (male, sexually fluid) explained that “I had just done some reading online about non-monogamy.”

### 3.3.2. Relationship Maintenance Theme 2: Working Together

The theme Working Together includes relationship maintenance strategies that participants and their partners engaged in that exemplified an iterative process of communication, establishing boundaries, and prioritizing growth over sameness. Rather than striving to maintain the status quo in their relationship, many participants described a shared worldview with their partner that prioritized growth, flexibility, and evolution in their open relationship, which helped them to endure challenging experiences. I identified multiple codes within this theme, and ultimately decided that they were best explained within a framework of sub-themes. Thus, the Working Together theme includes three sub-themes: Communication Strategies, Establishing Boundaries, and Cultivating Growth.

#### ***Subtheme 1: Communication Strategies***

The subtheme Communication Strategies includes behavioural and verbal communication between partners. Participants varied in the aspects of communication they valued most (e.g., timing, frequency, tone of voice, mode), but all codes within this subtheme emphasize a process of delivering and receiving information in a particular way, which helped partners maintain their open relationship. Codes within this subtheme include (a) Offering Assurances of Love, (b) Communicating Openly, (c) Communicating Sensitive, and (d) Communicating Frequently.

**Offering Assurances of Love.** Participants reported that they and their partner used various strategies (e.g., physical affection, words of affirmation, gifts) to communicate love and affection to each other, which helped them feel closer, valued, and cherished in their relationship. For example, Participant 10 (female, bi/pansexual) explained, “[My partner] really hits on what my love languages are, which are [...] acts of service and words of affirmation. So, I get a lot of sweet affirming language from him, whether it’s in person or over text, and that has helped to make this relationship very sustainable [and] has made it very satisfying for me that he understands how to communicate to me in the way that I translate love.” Similarly, Participant 5 (male, bisexual) explained, “I don’t think I ever fully understood what the concept of being in love was before I met [my partner]. I think I’ve loved people, but I find myself thinking about her throughout the day. I find myself always wanting to give gestures to her, bringing her little gifts and sending her words of affirmation, doing things for her.”

**Communicating Openly.** Participants reported that openly discussing their thoughts, emotions, hesitations, fears, fantasies, and hopes was integral to the maintenance of their relationship. For example, Participant 8 (male/gender fluid, gay) explained that he and his partner have cultivated “a radical honesty of not being afraid of where a conversation might lead. I think we need to be able to express painful feelings and difficult things, even if they’re not our best selves. And after we express them, we see how our partner receives it, and be like, ‘okay, well what does that mean? Tell me more. [...] We both really value that honesty and openness. I think I mentioned before that we’re both immigrants and we both have a lot of similar values in that sense because we both have had experiences of families that had a hard time opening up about challenges that are very clearly there. So, for both of us, being unafraid to face these conversations is very important.” Similarly, Participant 4 (male, sexually fluid) explained that having open communication helps them cope with the more challenging parts of being in an open relationship: “I think that being able to talk about things is huge. I couldn’t imagine being in an open relationship where it’s... I don’t know the proper term for it, but maybe ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ or something. Where I would have to be worried about her reaction to be talking about something, or vice versa. So I think being open and able to talk to each other about our experiences is pretty huge because our relationship’s solid. And you could still have negative experiences with other people, and yeah, that sucks to deal with solo.”

**Communicating Sensitive.** Participants reported that in addition to openly communicating, they were sensitive to their partner’s emotions and gave each other ample time to consider responses. For example, Participant 5 (male, bisexual) reported that “We use the term ‘rough draft.’ So with conversations between [my partner] and I, we give each other permission to have a rough draft. Because especially for me, I sometimes have a hard time formulating thoughts, so I will just say what I’m thinking. And she understands that they are not set in stone, and then we will talk about it until we come down to what’s actually real.” Similarly, Participant 4 (male, sexually fluid) explained that “We tend to talk quietly and with lots of gaps. Our style for sure is like... one person says something, the other person will sit there, and process it to think about what they have heard and think about what they want to say. And that gap can be seconds to sometimes minutes. [...] And that can be really tough, where you just said something and you’re just waiting for the other person to reply. It can feel like a long

wait. That wasn't something that we talked about how we were going to do. That just seems to be our natural communication style for when something is really tough to talk about. Yeah, volume low and lots of pauses.”

**Communicating Frequently.** Participants reported that communicating often about boundaries, emotions, and expectations (which many referred to as “checking in”) was important for the stability of their relationship. The definition of “frequent” was relative; for some participants, they considered frequent communication to mean checking in before engaging sexually with a new person, whereas for others, frequent communication meant checking in every few months to assess their partner’s comfort with their ever-evolving relationship dynamics. For example, Participant 1 (female, bi/pansexual) explained that she and her partner regularly check in to assess “Are you still okay with that? Did anything change? Is everything fine?’ And then we talk about it, and we talk about the emotions and why we feel the way we feel.” Similarly, Participant 10 (female, bi/pansexual) explained “when something happens, we tell each other within the week if not the next day [...] the best and healthiest thing to do is just talk about it immediately. That’s a big thing I’m still working on because I tend to keep things to myself for a while before I communicate it – and if there’s something that needs to be discussed, he’s really showing me time and time again that the best way to deal with any of that stuff is speak about it as quickly as possible and to trust that even if it’s uncomfortable information, that it’s okay.”

### ***Subtheme 2: Establishing Boundaries***

The subtheme Establishing Boundaries includes types of boundaries or agreements that were identified by participants as important or essential for maintaining their open relationships. Some participants reported vague boundaries such as “be respectful” or “be safe.” However, other participants described detailed mutually agreed upon relationship agreements that they continually negotiated and revised to reflect their changing desires and comfort levels. Codes within this subtheme include (a) Boundaries That Regulate Behaviour, (b) Boundaries That Prioritize the Couple, and (c) Boundaries That Reflect Shared Values.

**Boundaries That Regulate Behaviour.** Some participants shared very specific boundaries that regulated the behaviour of both partners with the intention of protecting

themselves, others, each other, and the relationship (physically and emotionally). Examples of boundaries are how much detail to include when speaking to partners about extra-dyadic behaviour, limits on developing attachment to others, restrictions on specific sexual behaviour (e.g., certain kinks saved for the dyad), limiting extra-dyadic sexual experiences to particular people (e.g., no coworkers), safe sex, and how shared space may be used. To begin a conversation about appropriate boundaries, Participant 5 (male, bisexual) explained that he and his partner “wrote our ideal ethically non-monogamous relationship down just for ourselves without considering the other partner, and then we shared, and then we merged. And then we just kind of fine-tuned it.” In terms of specific boundaries, Participant 3 (male, queer) explained that “We just agreed that if you see someone for more than three times, then we should let [your partner] know who [the other sexual partner] is. If you’re just seeing someone for like a night, for example, and having fun, pshtt, I don’t care [...] the idea’s almost like, ‘Okay, so if you’re seeing someone for more than three times and having sex with that person more than three times, clearly you have something that connects you with that person.’ So we just want to be cautious about what is going on right? And keep that communication very transparent.”

**Boundaries That Prioritize the Couple.** Some participants reported that boundaries highlighting the hierarchy of their relationship were essential. In other words, rules or guidelines that emphasized the priority of the dyadic relationship over any other sexual experiences. A few participants said this prioritization was sometimes met with discomfort from potential extra-dyadic partners, but it helped them feel safe continuing in an open relationship with their partner. This included prioritizing their partner’s schedule and consciously pausing, pacing, and being willing to stop any extra-dyadic involvement according to their partner’s preferences. For example, Participant 10 (female, bi/pansexual) explained, “If I’m starting to see someone, I think the biggest thing that other people are aware of, that I explicitly communicate to them (and he does the same with other people if they want to go on a date), we’re both very good at communicating clearly and early on to people like, ‘This person is my primary partner, and while we really enjoy spending time together, and I would love for this to be a consistent thing, that there isn’t room here for this to develop into a romantic relationship, and making it very clear that my primary partner will take precedence and making sure that everyone is aware of that and okay with that.” Similarly, Participant 3 (male, queer) explained that

“the worst thing that I would never want to do is to give potential people the idea that this can become a long-term relationship because that’s a very clear rule that my partner and I have. That long-term relationship is only the two of us [...] the idea is that we nourish our own core relationship. And again, the prioritizing piece also makes our relationship positive. It still gives the sense of ‘Okay, I’m still number one in this relationship.’”

**Boundaries That Reflect Shared Values.** In addition to explicit boundaries, participants also reported implicit boundaries that were guided by shared values (e.g., fairness, respect, safety). These boundaries tended to be vague and to represent important characteristics that they implemented with extra-dyadic sexual partners. For example, Participant 9 (male, gynosexual) explained that he and his partner simply aimed to “be safe [in their interactions with others],” but did not indicate any specific guidelines for regulating physical or sexual safety. Similarly, Participant 6 (female, bi/pansexual) reported that they felt guided by respect and explained that “people need to respect the relationship, and everyone involved in it.”

### ***Subtheme 3: Cultivating Growth***

The theme Cultivating Growth includes emotional, cognitive, and behavioural strategies that participants and their partners engaged in to support the growth and evolution of their relationship. Participants acknowledged the unstable nature of needs, desires, and interests, and described a fluid way that they and their partners negotiated change. Participants commonly reported that they perceived new situations and challenges as opportunities to learn more about themselves, their relationship, and the world, and they approached them with curiosity and empathy rather than fear. Codes nested within this theme include (a) Orienting Toward Change, (b) Accepting That Open Relationships Take Work, and (c) Accepting the Ups and Downs.

**Orienting Toward Change.** Participants commonly reported a shared worldview that accepted and valued the unstable nature of emotions, needs, and desires. They reported that they and their partner anticipated change in their relationship and sometimes approached challenges willingly because of the anticipated benefits that growth might bring. For example, Participant 1 (female, bi/pansexual) explained that in the face of challenges she and her partner return to “the boundaries and re-evaluate them because [we] know that people change, our needs change, and the more times

goes by, the more we evolve and the relationship itself evolves.” Similarly, Participant 8 (male/gender fluid, gay) explained that when deciding whether to open their relationship, he and his partner asked themselves whether a monogamous relationship was “really worth it, worth all the sacrifices? We [thought] about the sacrifices we’d have to make for this relationship, [and] do we really need to? Is this really a sacrifice worth having? Because for [my partner, the sacrifice] was a less satisfying sex life, and for me, it was a sacrifice of the different experiences I wanted to try. And it dawned on us that exclusivity wasn’t a value that was particularly important, and so we decided to let it go.”

**Accepting That Open Relationships Take Work.** Some participants also acknowledged the time, effort, and patience that open relationships require, and reported that they and their partner actively developed a relationship that felt functional, safe, and aligned with their values. For example, Participant 6 (female, bi/pansexual) explained that “there is a lot of hard work you have to do to unlearn the monogamous programming that you’re brought up with, and feelings of insecurity around the concept of being potentially replaced by someone. [...] Doing the work was interesting because [my partner] had already done that personal work, but then we had to talk about what we wanted our relationship, the two of us, to look like.”

**Accepting the Ups and Downs.** Some participants acknowledged that being in an open relationship introduced benefits (e.g., sexual novelty) and challenges (e.g., discomfort), both of which were framed as expected, understandable, and tolerable. Participants often framed unpleasant experiences as inevitable and a facet of potential experiences in consensual non-monogamy rather problems with their relationship. For example, Participant 3 (male, queer) explained that having an open relationship “can be challenging, [and] we have our share of conflicts once in a while... and conversations don’t always go the way we want or think they will. But I appreciate that we have those conversations, and we are thinking much more about what we like and what the other wants as well [than when we were monogamous].”

### **3.3.3. Relationship Maintenance Theme 3: Community Support**

The theme Community Support includes factors that participants reported as tangentially supporting the maintenance of their relationship but were not necessarily maintenance strategies or behaviours they enacted themselves. In other words, participants reported that receiving support from the broader CNM community (either

having friends within the community or through social media participation) or support from their families helped to maintain their open relationship. Of interest, no participants described support from friends who were in monogamous relationships, which may be because they had not disclosed their open relationship to monogamous friends, or if they had, their friends were unsupportive. Codes nested within this theme include (a) Supportive CNM Community and (b) Supportive Family.

**Supportive CNM Community.** Participants described that having friends or coworkers who were also in CNM relationships was beneficial for the maintenance of their relationship. Although some participants reported having friends and coworkers in similar open relationships, some relied on support from strangers in online CNM groups (e.g., Reddit, Facebook). Participants described these networks as essential outlets for them to communicate their experiences, receive support, feel a sense of belonging that helped them feel less alone. For example, Participant 5 (male, bisexual) explained that “We’re actually part of an online group where people talk and support each other. It’s not a sexual group at all. It’s just a support group.” Similarly, Participant 6 (female, bi/pansexual) explained that having friends in the non-monogamous community provided her with a “community feeling of shared experiences. It’s like, not othering how you might be feeling.”

**Supportive Family.** Although multiple participants reported that at least some of their family knew about their open relationship, only one participant reported that being able to discuss their open relationship with their family was a benefit. Participant 10 (female, bi/pansexual) explained that “I just actually told both my parents, separately and explicitly over the past couple of months that this is my dynamic and lifestyle. My dad totally got it and was like, ‘Oh that makes sense, I actually have a friend who has a dynamic like that. And if I even knew that was an option, maybe I would have flipped that way when I was your age.’”

### 3.4. Challenges

To assess challenges that individuals perceived as relevant in their relationship, I asked them about the downsides of open relationships, about topics of conflict in their

relationship, and if they had experienced violations of their boundaries or agreements. I identified five themes: (1) Experiencing Stigmatization, (2) Difficult Dating Experiences, (3) Figuring Everything out From Scratch, (d) Monogamy Hangover, and (e) Difficulty Managing Boundaries. A summary of challenges themes and codes are in Table 5.

### 3.4.1. Challenges Theme 1: Experiencing Stigmatization

The theme Experiencing Stigmatization includes challenges that were related to being stigmatized (or a fear of being stigmatized) by others. Codes nested within this theme include (a) Judgment From Others, and (b) Being Closeted.

**Judgment From Others.** All 10 participants reported that they felt misunderstood, invalidated, devalued, and disapproved of by others because of their open relationship. Participants described stigmatization from family members, friends, coworkers, therapists, and society at large. For example, Participant 5 (male, bisexual) explained that when he tells people he is in an open relationship, “There’s a whole bouquet of reactions to that, including I’m most definitely gay and [being with a female partner] is just a phase [... or] that you aren’t serious about your relationship. [...] There are no legal protections at all around [open relationships] and there is no acceptance that it’s even a valid relationship structure, so you have to live in secret. It’s a bit like going back to 1962 as a queer person.” Participant 8 (male/gender fluid, gay) also explained “I had to go to [South American country] to visit my family, my home country, and I came out to them as having an open relationship so that I could access health care [...] And it was particularly humiliating and awful. I did not get a very good reaction.”

**Being Closeted.** Seven out of ten participants reported that they keep their open relationship secret from others. Although all participants had at least some friends or family who knew of their open relationship, many did not feel comfortable telling everyone in their lives about their non-monogamy for fear of judgment or unwanted repercussions. For example, Participant 5 (male, bisexual) explained, “We are definitely in the closet for the most part about being non-monogamous, except for some core friends that we’re comfortable with. Our families don’t know. Our children don’t know. [...] We’ve chosen very carefully who we’ve shared with in our friend group. And a lot of that has to do with [my partner] not wanting to be shamed as a woman, and I get that. She doesn’t want to be looked at as a bad mom. She doesn’t want to be looked at as a

slutty woman. She doesn't want to be looked at as all sorts of things. And not that there should be anything wrong with that word by the way, but in our culture there is, and so we've had to be intentional about who we've chosen [to tell about our open relationship]." Similarly, Participant 7 (female, bi/pansexual) explained that "We are kind of closeted... so all of our close friends know about our situation to some extent, but family would not understand it... and certain friends don't think it's okay."

### **3.4.2. Challenges Theme 2: Difficult Dating Experiences**

The theme Difficult Dating Experiences includes challenges related to dating and having sexual experiences with extra-dyadic others. Although some of these challenges might also be reported by individuals in monogamous relationships (e.g., experiencing racism on dating apps), they seemed to be notable challenges in open relationships because participants were consistently and unrelentingly exposed to them. Codes nested within this theme include (a) Difficulty Finding Sexual Partners, (b) Racism on Dating Apps, (c) Difficulty Scheduling, (d) Sexual Health Risks, and (e) Managing Negative Comparisons to Own Relationship.

**Difficulty Finding Sexual Partners.** Participants reported that finding people willing to casually date was often a challenge because of others' misconceptions about open relationships or discomfort with the inherent hierarchical nature of open relationships. For example, Participant 4 (male, sexually fluid) explained that "It became a little bit more difficult for me personally. [Being in an open relationship] lowered the pool of people I can meet outside of my partner [compared to when I was single and monogamous]. Because I will tell people immediately that I'm in a relationship and this is our deal, but especially for women outside of non-monogamy they'll immediately shut it down, which is fine. I'm still gonna put it out there right away. But sometimes there are even women within non-monogamy who were only interested in being with 'single men' because I guess they perceive that as being less drama or something." Similarly, Participant 2 (male, heterosexual) explained that sometimes finding extra-dyadic partners was a struggle, which he thought might be because "from the position of those who would fraternize with one of us, the [open relationship] hierarchy cannot be good for their self-esteem."

**Racism on dating apps.** Participants described difficulties constantly navigating online dating spaces, particularly when they identified as an ethnic or cultural minority

and experienced the added stigmatization of racism. Although racism is not exclusive to open relationship online dating experiences, participants found the intersection between their minority identities particularly difficult because they anticipated unrelenting exposure to racism from potential extra-dyadic partners as long as they continued being in an open relationship. For example, Participant 3 (male, queer) explained that “The apps can be very toxic, and you know, as someone who left the apps for a while and then came back to the apps when we opened our relationship, it’s really sad to see how racist the space can be and how ruthless [...] [my partner and I] both faced fetishism from others in terms of our ethnicity, right. Guys that come to me because I’m the Latino one or who come to him because he’s the Asian one. And people say it. It’s not even a subtle thing. They might say something like, ‘Oh I have never slept with a Latino before.’ So we share some of those frustrations as queer people of colour.”

**Difficulty Scheduling.** Participants described difficulties around scheduling and particularly balancing quality time with their partner, work, and having new sexual experiences. Many participants worked in demanding jobs and had busy social lives, thus when they had free time, they felt tension between dedicating time to their relationship or going on dates with new people. For example, Participant 3 (male, queer) said that “it’s so hard [...] dealing with scheduling.” Similarly, Participant 4 (male, sexually fluid) explained that “you know, if you’ve already got a pretty full schedule and you’re hoping to meet up with somebody, it can be difficult to make that happen.”

**Sexual Health Risks.** Participants described difficulties around maintaining their sexual health in the presence of increased risks. By nature of their open relationship, many participants had sexual interactions with new people relatively frequently, which brought up the issue of how to negotiate their own (and any other sexual partners’) safety. For example, Participant 2 (male, heterosexual) reported that one of the first challenges that came to mind in his own open relationship was the “higher STI risk.” Participant 8 (male/gender fluid, gay) also succinctly explained that one of the “one of the really big problems of an open relationship is STIs.”

**Managing Negative Comparisons to Own Relationship.** Some participants described that having constant new relationship energy (i.e., freshness, novelty, and sexual tension that comes with dating someone new) made their dyadic partnership appear to be monotonous, stagnant, or unfulfilling in comparison. For example,

Participant 3 (male, queer) explained that “When you meet other people you feel so connected to the freshness of it. Marriages are hard to keep fresh and interesting. When you’re married to someone and you’ve been with them for nine years, and you know everything [about] that person at that point, it doesn’t feel fresh. It’s hard to keep the romance going, it’s hard to keep the sexual life going. I think that’s the tricky part, the monotony, there are not as many new things. And then suddenly you meet someone [new] and [...] everything is exciting, everything is the first time.”

### **3.4.3. Challenges Theme 3: Monogamy Hangover**

The theme Monogamy Hangover includes the cognitive and emotional challenges associated with conflicting beliefs of how relationships should be. For example, many participants described the uncomfortable tension between monogamous rules (e.g., one person should satisfy all romantic and sexual needs) and their lived experience (e.g., having needs met by multiple people can be satisfying). Participants described difficult emotional and cognitive experiences arising from socialization in a society that idealizes monogamy, and from their personal history in monogamous relationships. Participants noticed the gap between how they had been taught relationships should be and how their open relationship were, which elicited feelings of distress and was difficult to reconcile. Participants used language such as monogamy hangover, monogamous conditioning, and monogamous programming to describe their experiences being socialized (and now deviating from norms) in a primarily monogamous society. Codes nested within this theme include (a) Difficult Emotional Experiences, and (b) Coping with Shoulds.

**Difficult Emotional Experiences.** Participants who reported this challenge described feeling jealous, fearful, anxious, insecure, shameful, or guilty, which they often conceptualized as arising from their monogamous backgrounds. Participants described feeling jealous of their partner’s extra-dyadic partners, fear of not being included in sexual experiences that their partner engaged in without them (e.g., group sex), and fear that their partner might be happier with someone else. They also reported sometimes feeling anxious, unworthy, or lacking confidence in themselves or their dyadic relationship. For example, Participant 3 (male, queer) explained that “something I’m still trying to negotiate is ‘How do I get rid of feelings of control, or wanting to have a partner just for [myself], or feeling insecure at times?’ Like what if my partner meets someone

much smarter or more interesting or good looking than me, is he still going to come back to me? Those voices... it's really hard to completely get rid of them." Some participants also reported that the misalignment between society's monogamous ideals and their open relationship left them feeling ashamed or guilty, and that they sometimes questioned whether they were still a good person. For example, Participant 7 (female, bi/pansexual) expressed, "I think there is so much social shame about not wanting to be "loyal and faithful" to your male partner [...] It's mostly the shame piece, all of a sudden getting intrusive thoughts like, 'Wait, am I a really bad person for doing this thing that people think is so immoral?'"

**Coping with Shoulds.** Most participants reported having difficulty untangling how they had been conditioned by society to think relationships should be and how they wanted their relationship to be. They described their monogamous histories as influencing how they thought relationships should be, or how they should behave in relation to their partner. For example, Participant 6 (female, bi/pansexual) explained, "the monogamous programming is like 'Okay, what does a relationship look like?' You're supposed to be your partner's one and only, you can fulfill all of their needs, and there is [supposedly] something lacking in you if they want to be with someone else." Similarly, Participant 10 (female, bi/pansexual) explained, "there's a sense of modesty and ethics and how we view ourselves as honourable women, and that sticks with me. I think a lot of that comes from the monogamous narrative that, even though I could sleep with as many people as I want in a year, it's generally only like three or four partners over the year. And that part feels comfortable and good for me [...] but I think part of that does come from the monogamous narrative."

#### **3.4.4. Challenges Theme 4: Difficulty Managing Boundaries**

The theme Difficulty Managing Boundaries includes challenges establishing, negotiating, and adhering to agreed-upon boundaries or relationship agreements. Some participants reported that agreeing on and establishing boundaries at the outset of their relationship was difficult. However, many more participants described challenges adhering to boundaries (i.e., they or their partner violated boundaries, or they disagreed with their partner about whether a boundary was violated) and adapting to changes in desired boundaries over time. Codes nested within this theme include (a) Boundary

Violations, (b) Partners Wanting Different Boundaries, and (c) That's Not Ok Even Though It Used to Be.

**Boundary Violations.** Participants described how violations of established boundaries or agreements presented a challenge in their relationship. For example, Participant 2 (male, heterosexual) explained that despite an explicit boundary limiting romantic attachment to extra dyadic partners, he believes that “the boundary itself doesn't preclude the trespass [...] I'm not personally gonna be like 'hey I enjoy your company so much, therefore bye.' That's not how I operate.” Similarly, Participant 9 (male, gynosexual) explained that “at one point [my partner] had another fairly serious partner for a period of time [...] We had explicitly said that was not within the rules [laughs]. But that is what happened, and I guess the important things to me is that was kind of challenging for me, and then ended up being challenging for her too. [...] I guess to a certain extent trust was violated. And it's been challenging for both of us recovering from that. I think she has held a lot of guilt. And I think in some ways it's been a lot harder for her than for me.”

**Partners Wanting Different Boundaries.** Participants described difficulties arising when their ideal consensually non-monogamous relationship (e.g., open, swinging, poly) did not align with their partner's ideal. For example, Participant 7 (female, bi/pansexual) explained that “if it were fully up to me [and] there was no social stigma about it, I would be polyamorous. [...] trying to balance one another's needs and how to keep each other feeling safe [is difficult]. Like who is the priority or who gets to compromise, right? Whose needs are more important than others?” Similarly, Participant 1 (female, bi/pansexual) explained that “the only downside I would say is that me and my partner, although we are non-monogamous, we have a little bit different ideas about non-monogamy. He is more open sexually, and romantically he only wants to focus on one person at a time... while I am more open to explore with other people even on a romantic intimate level. So for me, it's not just about sex.”

**That's Not Ok Even Though It Used to Be.** Participants described difficulties navigating extra-dyadic interactions when boundaries were in flux, particularly when a behaviour (e.g., sleepovers) used to be acceptable and one partner decided they no longer felt comfortable with it. For example, Participant 8 (male/gender fluid, gay) explained, “I think the tougher boundaries are with each other about things that have

always been perfectly fine that aren't anymore. And that's an important skill to have (to be able to say, 'No, not now' or 'Not for now'). But those have been more challenging than the outside relationship stuff."

### **3.4.5. Challenges Theme 5: Figuring Everything out From Scratch**

The theme Figuring Everything out From Scratch includes challenges associated with not having a script to follow and having to figure out how to have an open relationship with minimal guidance. Participants reported that not having access to good quality resources about open relationships, noticing a lack of academic research on open relationships, and not feeling like they were a part of a supportive open relationship community as contributing to this overarching problem. Codes nested within this theme include (a) Lack of Resources and (b) Lack of Community.

**Lack of Resources.** Participants described challenges finding information (e.g., books, research, trained professionals) relating to open relationships. For example, Participant 1 (female, bi/pansexual) explained, "I know the research [on non-monogamy] is very limited, and I know that the research out there is also highly criticized." Similarly, Participant 3 (male, queer) explained, "we struggled to find resources of how to do this. [...] I just wish there were more resources that reassures people that are trying this for the first time that this can be done successfully, that this can be done in a pleasurable, ethical way. That gives us a bit more of a 'how-to' do it, instead of just allowing people to go by trial and error. I think even therapists are sometimes not trained to do this. [...] I remember one therapist, every resource they gave us was always books about heterosexual couples and the language of the books were heterosexual. And then when we talk about open relationships with those professionals, they don't understand what that is. They don't even know that there is that [option]. They get very confused. They come across as judgmental or they are just unhelpful. So, it's like, you're here to help me, but I feel like I'm educating you about open relationships. That is not the job."

**Lack of Community.** Participants who reported this challenge described feeling alone, like they were the only ones in an open relationship, or not fitting into the larger CNM community, which they felt prioritizes polyamory. For example, Participant 7 (female, bi/pansexual) expressed that it has "been a bit hard sometimes when I feel like I'm the only one living this way. And so many of my friends are in monogamous relationships." Similarly, Participant 5 (male, bisexual) explained that finding space within

the non-monogamy community has been difficult because “for a while we had a hard time because we felt like there was a lot of pressure to be polyamorous. It was almost like, there’s this relationship escalator of monogamy where you date, you live together, you marry, you have kids, you buy a house in the suburbs. It was like that in non-monogamy too, where you have threesomes, you start having sex solo, then you fall in love, then you have a happy polycule, right? And [my partner] and I don’t desire that. We don’t want polyamory. We want a hierarchy, with consent, and we want everyone who’s involved with us to know that up front. And we’ve had a hard time finding our comfort zone there.”

## **Chapter 4.**

### **Discussion**

Open relationships are a common form of consensual non-monogamy that are highly stigmatized within and outside of the CNM community. Individuals in open relationships also tend to experience lower relational quality when compared to other types of relationships (e.g., polyamory, monogamy). However, it is unclear why many individuals choose these relationships, or how individuals might flourish in open relationships despite the challenges. I conducted ten semi-structured interviews to examine how individuals initiated and maintained open relationships, and from their perspective, what were the primary challenges they faced in their relationship. Participants described diverse reasons for initiating their open relationships, most of which were internally (rather than externally) motivated. Participants reporting using some relationship maintenance strategies that have been well-researched in monogamous contexts (e.g., open communication) and strategies that are less well understood (e.g., consciously pacing extra-dyadic experiences) to maintain their relational quality. Of interest, many participants said the most challenging aspects of their relationship included intrapersonal (e.g., monogamy hangover) and contextual factors (e.g., stigmatization), rather than interpersonal dynamics in the dyad (e.g., lack of consent, poor communication).

#### **4.1. Individuals Initiate Open Relationships for Diverse Reasons**

Participants described multiple motives for initiating or transitioning into an open relationship. Although some researchers have suggested that individuals in open relationships might be particularly motivated by external circumstances to establish open relationships (e.g., Conley & Piemonte, 2021), this was not reflected in this study. Most participants reported self-motivated reasons that they perceived would help them move closer to the life they wanted (e.g., with more autonomy or less monotony). A minority of participants described external circumstances that motivated them to initiate their open relationship (e.g., coping with long-distance), but even those participants also reported

internal motives (e.g., maintaining their sense of autonomy) that guided their decision making.

Another useful framework from which to consider individuals' motives to engage in open relationships is approach and avoidance motives (Gable, 2006). People may desire to have an open relationship because they anticipate gaining something beneficial from the experience (i.e., approach motive) or because they hope to avoid an aversive outcome (i.e., avoidance motive). In general, approach motives are positively associated with relationship satisfaction and predict increases in satisfaction over time, whereas avoidance motives are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction and predict declines in satisfaction over time (Gable, 2006; Impett et al., 2010). Some individuals in this study reported a mix of approach and avoidance motives, but the vast majority reported that they wanted to have an open relationship because it would help them create the life that they wanted, which could be conceptualized as approach motives (i.e., they aimed to achieve an outcome that they perceived was replete with benefits, such as autonomy and authenticity). The participants in this study also reported being highly satisfied in their open relationship, and although I did not examine this directly, it is possible a combination of internal motives to work toward a desired outcome (i.e., approach motive) facilitate relationship satisfaction. Internal/external motives and approach/avoidance motives have independent effects in intimate relationships (e.g., Conley & Piemonte, 2021; Impett et al., 2010), and there may be discrete effects of combinations of motives (e.g., internal and approach most ideal, internal and avoidance neutral, external and approach neutral, external and avoidance least ideal). Thus, it will be important to examine which motives are most critical to foster relational quality over time and whether there are interactive effects.

## **4.2. Individuals in Open Relationships Communicate**

### **Openly**

There is a plethora of research focusing on strategies that individuals in monogamous relationships use to maintain their partnerships (see Ogolsky et al., 2017 for review), and many of those were mirrored in this study (e.g., offering assurances of love). However, the importance of one relationship maintenance strategy (i.e., open communication) seems to be particularly magnified in the context of open relationships.

In monogamous partnerships, open communication is well-established as a valuable tool for fostering relational and sexual satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Meeks et al., 1998; Rehman et al., 2011). In this study, participants described consistent, vulnerable communication about their emotional and sexual lives as indispensable to their relationship functioning. Communicating openly about sex is notoriously difficult for many couples (Metts & Cupach, 1989, Rehman et al., 2017), but individuals in open relationships (at least in this study) reported doing so frequently and skillfully. Participants reported an abundance of strategies for communicating sensitively (e.g., texting their partner first, letting their partner know about extra-dyadic sex within 24 hours after it happens, having a 'rough draft' conversation, mentioning the topic and then not talking about it again for 48 hours to give the other partner time to consider the topic), all of which might foster a relationship culture that welcomes complex conversations and might be useful strategies for individuals in all types of relationships (i.e., monogamous or consensually non-monogamous).

It is also possible that individuals with certain characteristics might be more likely to engage in and thrive in open relationships. For example, White men (Rubin et al., 2014; Sheff & Hammers, 2011) and non-heterosexual individuals (Séguin et al., 2017) are more likely to engage in consensually non-monogamous relationships generally. Regarding personality characteristics, individuals in consensually non-monogamous relationships tend to report higher levels of sociosexuality, openness to new experiences and tolerance of uncertainty (de Rivas et al., 2023; Flicker & Sancier-Barbosa, 2022); however, all types of consensually non-monogamous relationships tend to be treated by researchers as if they are a homogeneous group, which might obscure important differences.

### **4.3. Individuals in Open Relationships Establish Boundaries and Are Willing to Change Them**

Participants in this sample reported a wide range of boundaries that were essential because they offered an organizing framework for their relationship. Many participants described having few resources and little sense of community, so establishing boundaries or guidelines may have been particularly helpful in the absence of alternate resources. Some boundaries were more general and reflected shared values

(e.g., practice safe sex, respect each other) whereas others had an astounding specificity (e.g., during the interview, one participant opened a printed 'relationship agreement' that he and his partner had created in couples therapy together and shared the details; the document outlined acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and relationship ideals and was constantly revised when they encountered new situations). However, boundaries were not described as immutable rules, but were working expectations between partners that were constantly being reconsidered and revised, which might be related to a shared value of evolution in their relationships.

All ten participants reported the importance of fostering flexibility, growth, and change in their open relationship. Although participants valued the stability of their dyadic partnership, they also sought continual growth for themselves and their relationship. Changes and challenges in their relationship were often described as inevitable and sometimes welcome because of the perception that challenge leads to growth. Many participants described experiences such as relational conflict or jealousy as uncomfortable and useful in terms of providing information about where they or their relationship had room to grow. In other words, rather than experiencing challenges as evidence that their open relationship was dysfunctional, they incorporated challenges as opportunities to grow as people and to improve their relationship. This mindset likely contributes to a sense of resiliency in successful open relationships because individuals who hold growth beliefs about their relationship (i.e., that problems are unstable in nature and can be overcome with effort) tend to experience higher relational quality over time than those who hold destiny beliefs (i.e., that problems indicate a fundamental flaw in their relationship and that they must not be meant for each other) (Knee, 1998; Knee & Petty, 2013). However, whether being in an open relationship encourages a growth mindset, or whether individuals who hold growth beliefs are more likely to choose to be in an open relationship is unclear.

#### **4.4. Individuals in Open Relationships Feel Stigmatized on all Fronts**

Participants reported many challenging aspects of open relationships. Some researchers have suggested that the primary challenges faced by those in open relationships are interpersonal in nature (e.g., not seeking partner consent for extra-

dyadic sexual experiences, poor communication strategies) (Conley & Piemonte, 2021), but these were the least common challenges reported in this study. By far the most common challenges reported by participants were related to the misalignment between their own non-monogamous relationship and the mononormative culture in which they lived. For example, every participant reported feeling judged or stigmatized, and many reported feeling isolated and lacking community. Some participants also described the compounding effect of stigmatization based on their intersecting identities as gender, sexual, or ethnic minorities, which made their experiences in open relationship even more challenging. For example, some participants described coming out to family and friends about non-heterosexual or non-cis gender identities but did not yet feel comfortable coming out as CNM. This aligns with other research that has found that individuals consider disclosing non-monogamous identities more difficult than disclosing gender identities and sexual orientations because of the fear that they will experience negative interpersonal repercussions (Brown, 2020).

Other participants described perpetual exposure to stigmatization, judgment, and racism on dating apps. Although participants might have experienced judgment or racism prior to opening their relationship, some reported that since becoming non-monogamous, they felt relentlessly stigmatized. There is a plethora of research that illustrates the negative association between experiences of stigma and individual mental health (see Mak et al., 2007 for review), and in particular experiences of minority stress (i.e., the discrepancy that arises between the values of a minority group and the dominant culture) have profound negative effects on mental and physical health (Meyer & Frost, 2013). There is ample evidence that individuals in all types of consensually non-monogamous relationships experience harsh stigmatization and dehumanization from the monogamous community (e.g., Rodrigues et al., 2018), and individuals in open relationships might face added stigmatization because they do not fit into the dominant monogamous relationship structure or the dominant CNM structure (i.e., polyamory). Thus, it is crucial that researchers and clinicians better understand open relationships so that individuals in these relationships can be better supported.

Of interest, many challenges accompanied some of participants' most cherished benefits, which reflects the dialectical nature of open relationships. For example, one participant described that she and her partner enjoyed the taboo of being in an open relationship because it felt like their little secret and increased the sexual tension in their

relationship. However inherent in the taboo was the anticipated stigmatization from others and a sense of isolation. It would be interesting to examine the dialectical balance of benefits and challenges in open relationships. Perhaps it is not the existence of any single benefit or challenge which contributes to the success of these relationships, but rather an equilibrium which is deemed acceptable by each partner. For example, individuals might accept a certain amount of stigmatization if it is balanced by a benefit of equal measure or is appropriately buffered by other valuable benefits. Alternatively, perhaps individuals are willing to tolerate highly stigmatizing environments when they perceive something essential about being in an open relationship that aligns strongly with their identity or preferences.

## **4.5. Implications and Caveats**

The findings of this study have implications for research on individuals on open relationships. First, although there is a growing body of research that focuses on comparing open relationships to monogamous, polyamorous, and swinging relationships (Conley et al., 2017; 2018; Hoff et al., 2010; Levine et al., 2018), there is less research focused on understanding open relationships for their own sake. Furthermore, the imbalance of research which focuses on the deficits of open relationships without also examining the strengths might lead to further stigmatization of individuals in open relationships (Conley et al., 2012; 2013). Although individuals in open relationships may indeed score lower on quantitative measures of relational quality, there are likely unexplored ways in which they flourish. Thus, qualitative studies that broadly examine how people in open relationship function are essential for a holistic understanding of open relationships.

This study may also have implications for clinical work with individuals in open relationships. The lack of research on this specific subgroup within CNM might mean that clinicians rely heavily on research that does not distinguish among different types of CNM, their assumptions about open relationships, or research that positions open relationships as less satisfying, committed, and trusting than other kinds of relationships (e.g., Conley & Piemonte, 2021). There is a risk associated with the murky definitions of types of consensually non-monogamous relationships because clinicians might assume that all consensually non-monogamous relationships are the same and fail to understand

the nuanced strategies employed and challenges experienced by those in open relationship.

This study has several limitations. First, the delineation between open relationships and polyamory may not be self-evident. For example, open relationships have been defined as an umbrella term that describes multiple types of CNM, (e.g., Fairbrother et al., 2019), or defined as a separate type of CNM that is distinct from polyamory and swinging (e.g., Conley & Piemonte, 2021). How researchers define types of CNM can be guided by how participants personally identify, by their relationship beliefs or preferences, their current relationship status, or by their agreements or boundaries in their relationship (Rubel & Burleigh, 2018). In this study, participants used a variety of terms to describe their relationship (e.g., open, consensually non-monogamous, ethically non-monogamous), reported that they and their partners sometimes disagreed about what an ideal relationship structure would be, and that their boundaries often changed over time. This suggests fluidity in boundaries and self-definitions, and that researchers might need to consider not only the validity but also the reliability of their definitions of CNM relationships. In other words, although having unequivocal distinctions between groups is likely appealing to many researchers, it does not seem to reflect the reality of open relationships. Thus, creating artificial distinctions between groups might create more problems than it solves. I did my best to consider the fluidity of identity, behaviour, and orientation in this project (e.g., by asking about boundaries and how they changed over time), but remains a limitation in that was not resolved, and will likely need to be considered by other researchers in future.

Second, my identity as a cis-gendered, White woman in a mixed-sex monogamous relationship may have positioned me as an outsider to this group of individuals in open relationships. This project reflects my interpretations at the time of analysis and writing, and thus, may not reflect others' interpretations. Although I have done significant reading and preparation for this project, I am not part of the CNM community and thus certain words or experiences might be meaningful to others in open relationships but may have no special meaning to me. This might not be a limitation in the traditional sense, but something to be aware of when considering my interpretations of the participants' narratives. In other words, my identity and training as a clinical psychology student let me to interpret the data in a specific way. These interpretations might appear logical to others who identify in similar ways, or who have similar training in

psychotherapy. However, I might have also presented codes or themes and assumed that the meaning was more obvious than it was, or used language which highlights my other-ness in relation to this community. This is a unique aspect in qualitative research and elucidates the inherent subjectivity in reflexive thematic analysis.

When considering the unique ways that individuals in open relationships initiate and maintain their relationships, future research should investigate the contexts in which these motives, strategies, and challenges emerge, and what can be done to better support individuals in these relationships. For example, individuals in long-term relationships (i.e., over 10 years) might be a particularly informative population to study, because to have flourished in an open relationship for so long, they ostensibly must be doing something right, and thus may provide valuable information for those who may be struggling in shorter-term open relationships. Further qualitative studies may also reveal what individuals in open relationships need from the research and clinical communities, which might inform future research.

## **4.6. Conclusion**

Much of the existing literature on open relationships focuses on the deficits when compared to other relationship types. However, in this study, I aimed to examine how open relationships were initiated and maintained to provide a more balanced view. Contrary to stereotypes, participants in this study reported diverse motives for initiating their open relationships, most of which were internally motivated. Participants also reported many strategies to maintain their relational quality; open communication, setting clear boundaries, and cultivating a sense of growth being most indispensable to their relational functioning. Most participants reported that the main challenges with maintaining their relationship came from a sense of internal conflict between monogamous ideals and their own preferences, or from outside of their relationship (e.g., stigmatization) rather than from any dysfunction between them and their partner as a result of being in an open relationship per se. Open relationships are unique; they allow for great freedom and flexibility and come with significant challenges. However, many participants reported that they embraced challenges because they understood them as opportunities for growth. I hope that this project highlights this dialectic, reduces

stigma, and equips researchers and clinicians with much needed knowledge and understanding to support individuals in their open relationships.

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# Appendix A.

## Tables

**Table A.1. Participant Demographics**

ID	Age	Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Trajectory	Relationship Length
1	30.15	White	Female	Bi/pansexual	2	1.5 years
2	38.52	White	Male	Heterosexual	2	4 years
3	33.47	Latinx	Male	Queer	1	9 years
4	34.02	White	Male	Fluid	2	5.5 years
5	49.89	White	Male	Bisexual	1	2.5 years
6	30.47	White	Female	Bi/pansexual	2	4 years
7	28.21	White	Female	Bi/pansexual	1	5 years
8	27.40	Bi/multi racial	Male/fluid	Gay	1	4 years
9	34.41	White	Male	Gynesexual	2	15 years
10	28.35	White	Female	Bi/pansexual	2	1 year

*Note.* Relationship trajectory: 1 = Began as monogamous and transitioned to non-monogamous; 2 = Relationship initiated and maintained as non-monogamous.

**Table A.2. Self-Reported Definitions of Open Relationships**

Participant ID	“What does being in an open relationship mean to you?”
1	“It means freedom. It means open communication. It means that I have the flexibility to meet other people and explore other meaningful connections.”
2	“We’re together but we’re allowed to seek outside sex.”
3	“No matter what, we’re always going to be always together and coming back to each other at the end of the day. But that we’re still allowed to see others and have fun if we desire.”
4	“Being able to pursue sexual connections with people outside our partnership.”

- 5 “We have a primary loving relationship with each other. And we’re not polyamorous. We don’t identify as polyamorous; however, we don’t have ownership on each other’s bodies, and we can make sexual choices for ourselves. So, that includes having sex with other people, together or apart.”
- 6 “Where you have a primary partner that you’re on the relationship escalator with, but you’re sexually non-monogamous. So, essentially emotionally monogamous or at the very least not pursuing any escalator relationships beyond that person.”
- 7 “What we created is a sexually open relationship. One where we are not romantically dating others ongoing, but again it’s not very rigid. So it’s basically non-sexual exclusivity.”
- 8 “To me, it means building a relationship with one person, as monogamy usually does. But, the commitment and what it means to be together is not centered in exclusivity.”
- 9 “Just not assuming anything about the structure of the relationship. So, not assuming that it will go the way previous people or generations have done it, and to make up our own rules.”
- 10 “It really means that no matter how much our lives get intertwined or how deep or serious the relationship gets, that the dynamic doesn't allow for any sort of like possessiveness of the other person. And that you will always want your person to be safe, but that their choices are theirs. Rather than you kind of having any sort of like dictating power over your partner's choices... especially when that comes to intimacy.”
- 

**Table A.3. Initiation Themes and Codes**

<b>Theme 1: Creating the Life I Want</b>	<b>Theme 2: It Made Sense Given the Circumstances</b>
Avoid Restrictions of Monogamy	Coping with Long-Distance
Increase or Maintain Authenticity	Aligning with Partner CNM Status
Increase or Maintain Autonomy	
Have New Sexual Experiences	
Connect Intimately with Others	
Best of Both Worlds	

Avoid Work of Polyamory

Increase or Maintain Dyadic Sexual Energy

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*Note.* Codes are listed in descending order according to frequency of references across interviews.

CNM = Consensually Non-Monogamous.

**Table A.4. Relationship Maintenance Themes and Codes**

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<b>Theme 1: Individual Effort</b>	<b>Theme 2: Working Together</b>	<b>Theme 3: Community Support</b>
Regulating Emotions	<b>Subtheme 1: Communication Strategies</b>	Supportive CNM Community
Seeking Information	Offering Assurances of Love	Supportive Family
	Communicating Openly	
	Communicating Sensitive	
	Communicating Frequently	
	<b>Subtheme 2: Establishing Boundaries</b>	
	Boundaries That Regulate Behaviour	
	Boundaries That Prioritize the Couple	
	Boundaries That Reflect Shared Values	
	<b>Subtheme 3: Cultivating Growth</b>	
	Orienting Toward Change	
	Accepting That Open Relationships Take Work	
	Accepting the Ups and Downs	

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*Note.* Codes are listed in descending order according to frequency of references across interviews.

**Table A.5. Challenges Themes and Codes**

<b>Theme 1: Experiencing Stigmatization</b>	<b>Theme 2: Difficult Dating Experiences</b>	<b>Theme 3: Monogamy Hangover</b>	<b>Theme 4: Managing Boundaries</b>	<b>Theme 5: Figuring it All Out from Scratch</b>
Judgement from Others	Difficulty Finding Sexual Partners	Difficult Emotional Experiences	Boundary Violations	Lack of Resources
Being Closeted	Racism on Dating Apps	Coping with Shoulds	Partners Wanting Different Boundaries	Lack of Community
	Difficulty Scheduling		That's Not Ok Even Though it Used to Be	
	Sexual Health Risks			
	Managing Negative Comparisons to Own Relationship			

*Note.* Codes are listed in descending order according to frequency of references across interviews.

## Appendix B.

### Interview Script

#### Open Relationship Interview

Thank you so much for being part of the project and for sharing your thoughts and experiences about open relationships with me. I'll be asking you some questions and taking notes as I go. During this interview I'm really interested in your perspectives and there are no right or wrong answers. You can take your time to respond, and if there is anything you don't feel comfortable talking about, just let me know and we can move on.

I know you've already read and indicated your consent to participate in this study, but I wanted to check in about whether you had any questions about what you read in the online form?

I'd like to review some of the important points from the consent form. As you know I will be recording the session on zoom, which I will upload to a secure university server and delete from the Zoom cloud as soon as we are done. The interview will later be transcribed, de-identified and coded by research assistants. By de-identified I mean that we will identify you only by a code number and if you say anything in the interview that might identify you, we will remove that from the transcripts.

Although we do all we can to protect your confidentiality, we cannot fully guarantee the confidentiality of any electronic communication. Also, I just want to mention that you might be able to blur your background or use a virtual background in zoom if you would like *[assist them to turn it on if desired]*.

Can you also please change your name to your ID number (xxxx) before we start recording? That way the transcript will identify you only by your ID number and not your name *[assist them to make the change or do it yourself]*.

No one will know that you are participating in this study except me and the other researchers in the lab. We may use quotes from your interview in papers and

presentations, but no identifying information will ever be used, and we will never show the video of the interview to anyone outside the lab.

I'm going to be asking you lots of questions about your relationships and your experiences and you can feel free to not answer any question or to end the interview at any time. I'll also check in with you at the end to make sure you still feel comfortable allowing us to use your interview in our study.

Once the interview is transcribed, we will also send you a copy so that you can review it and correct anything or request any part or all of it to be deleted. You'll again have a chance to let us know if you would like your interview or transcript deleted or not used in the study.

Everything you tell me today is confidential except where required by law. If you reveal information that there is a serious threat of harm to yourself or someone else, then I may be required by law to disclose that information to the authorities. For example, if you tell me you are seriously suicidal, or if you tell me about current or past child abuse or neglect – this could include hitting hard enough to leave a mark, using an object, a closed hand, or hitting above the shoulders) – I may have to make a report. Also, although we are not mandated to report elder or adult dependent abuse or neglect, we may feel morally obligated to report such information if we become aware of it during our interview today.

You are under no obligation to tell us about anything like this whether it has happened to you or someone else, but I want you to know that if you do reveal this kind of information, we may be required to notify the authorities.

Do you have any questions about any of this before we begin? [if they haven't yet indicated consent on the Qualtrics survey, ask them to do so now -paste link into the chat]

**Ok, I am now going to START THE RECORDING, is that ok with you? [start recording]**

The interview should take us about two hours, and we'll stop halfway for a break, but let me know if you need to stop at any point.

### **General**

I'd like to start by ensuring that that the information I have on file is all correct. Can you confirm yours and your partner's pronouns?

And how long have you been together?

Now I'd like to ask really broadly - what does it mean to be in an open relationship?

What would you say are the benefits of being in an open relationship?

What would you say are the downsides of being in an open relationship?

In what ways do you think monogamy norms have impacted your own relationship? (e.g., pressure to marry, stigma around non-monogamy, lower satisfaction in own relationship)

### **Relationship Initiation**

Can you tell me a bit about how your current relationship began? (How did you meet, how did you get together, how has your relationship changed over time)

What drew you to be in a relationship with your partner?

Why did you want to have an open relationship (i.e., was it motivated by something external like becoming long-distance, or an internal desire to explore or connect with others)?

How did you decide to have an open relationship? (Who initiated, when did this happen?)

Can you tell me a little bit about how you have met some of your other sexual partners?

What boundaries or rules are explicit in your relationship (i.e., that you have talked about with your partner and both consented to)?

What boundaries are implicit, or just “understood” without needing to be talked about?

How comfortable were you initially with these boundaries? How comfortable are you now?

Are there any parts of your open relationship that are a secret from your partner? (i.e., that they have not consented to? Do you think they have things that are secret from you?)

### **Relationship Maintenance**

How are you satisfied about your relationship and what makes you feel satisfied?

In what ways is your relationship dissatisfying, or what do you want to change?

Do you see any changes happening in your relationship in the future (near or distant)?

How do you and your partner help each other feel comfortable with having an open relationship?

Can you tell me a little bit about how and your partner support each other?

What topics do you think you and your partner can communicate really well about?

What topics do you find difficult to talk to your partner about?

What do you do when you need to talk to your partner about sensitive things, or if you need to bring something up that you know might hurt their feelings?

Are you happy with your communication (generally, and about their open relationship particularly)?

Can you tell me about how you and your partner communicate when you're in conflict (e.g., yelling, blaming, sarcasm, contempt, stonewalling)?

How much do you share with your partner about your sexual experiences with others?

How do you manage feelings of discomfort? (e.g., jealousy, insecurity)

Have boundaries ever been violated and can you tell me about that? (What happened, how discovered, how revealed)

### **Community**

What sort of contact do you have with each other's sexual partners?

Do you feel like you are a part of an open relationship community (i.e., do you have friends who are also in open relationships, do you have people you can go to for advice?)

What do you feel like you need to feel supported in your open relationship (from your partner, or from others?)

What do you wish people knew about open relationships?

### **Final Questions**

How did you feel about the kinds of issues that we've been talking about in this interview?

Do you have any feedback for me about this process or what we talked about today?

Do you have any questions for me before we end the interview?

### Closing Comments

Thank you so much for talking with me today about your relationships, this will be really helpful for us to better understand open relationships and I appreciate the time you've taken to do this interview.

I do want to check in now that we are done and make sure you are still comfortable with us including your interview in the research study? Are there any parts of the interview you'd like us to leave out of the transcription? *[if seem hesitant, ask about their concerns]*

Also are you comfortable with us including de-identified quotes from your interview in our presentations or papers?

Even if you decide to let us use your transcript, video, or de-identified quotes, you can change your mind and let us know at any time if you prefer for things to be deleted or not used in papers/presentations. If we have already used your quotes in papers/presentations we cannot remove them, but we wouldn't use any going forward. Also, once we upload all the de-identified data to an online repository, we can delete the file that links your transcript and your contact information, but we won't be able to remove the de-identified data in the online repository because once it has been anonymized, we won't be able to identify which information belongs to you. Do you have any questions about this?

Just as a reminder, I will be asking Dr. Cobb to send you a payment of \$50, which you will receive as an email money transfer. The answer to the secret question is relationships.

We will also be transcribing your interview within the next couple of weeks, and you will then have a chance to review it and comment on anything or indicate if you'd like any parts removed from the transcript, and if you are still comfortable having us use your interview in the study.

*[if asked, we will create a shared folder on a secure university cloud space for them to access their interview – SFU Vault – and they can provide comments on the transcript document and upload it to the vault folder, or if they prefer, we can call or zoom to discuss].*

Great, if no more questions, then thank you again and we will be in touch within about two weeks. *[end call]*